

## Is Transreligious Theology Possible?

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# Interspiritual Theology as a Radical Potential for New Vistas in Theological Thought

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**Abstract:** Is a transreligious theology possible? A theology that is not beholden to any particular religious tradition? If so, what would it be? What would it look like? How would it be done? Perhaps more importantly, why would it be done? That is, whom would it be for? Is it a part of a larger (and perhaps privileged) pursuit of human philosophical wisdom and progress? Or are there real world communities in need of such a thing? Could it be helpful to religious traditions themselves? These are some of the questions pursued here. In response, I offer the possibility of an “interspiritual theology,” a theology that opens widely—in the spirit of exploration and hypothesis—to such questions, while aiming not to lose the heart of the theological endeavor, articulated by Evagrius of Pontus as, “The one who truly prays is a theologian; the one who is a theologian, prays truly.” As one possible strand of transreligious theological thought, interspiritual theology finds resonance with contemporary academic scholars Robert Neville, Wesley Wildman, John Thatamanil, Beverly Lanzetta and the late Raimon Panikkar, as well as real-world movements on the ground springing up outside of academia. Interspiritual theology is explained as being inter-religious, interdisciplinary, pragmatic, contemplative, and prophetic. An academic endeavor that is in partnership with (but not beholden to) religious traditions, in service to spiritual communities outside of academia, in dialogue with secular sciences, partaking of transformative wisdom, and committed to the prophetic task of service to humanity and the transformation of all of its social, cultural, political, and economic structures to reflect the deep human values of dignity, equality, compassion, love and wisdom—while also pursuing the transreligious project of understanding “as fully as possible the nature of ultimate reality.”

**Keywords:** transreligious theology; interspiritual theology; Raimon Panikkar; prophetic; Bede Griffiths; spirituality; John Thatamanil; Wesley Wildman; Robert Neville; contemplative; pragmatism; Wayne Teasdale

*The one who truly prays is a theologian; the one who is a theologian, prays truly.*

Evagrius of Pontus

Is transreligious theology possible? A theology not beholden to any particular religious tradition? If so, what would it be? What would it look like? How would it be done?

Perhaps more importantly, *why* would it be done? That is, whom would it be for? Is it part of a larger (and perhaps privileged) pursuit of human philosophical wisdom and progress? Jerry Martin speaks of the transreligious theological project as trying to understand “...as fully as possible the nature of ultimate reality” using “evidence and insights from multiple traditions.”<sup>1</sup> This is a noble goal, one that resonates with my own desire for traversing boundaries.

<sup>1</sup> Martin, “Theology”.

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Certainly philosophy has no need to close off its borders of reflection within arbitrary walls, but what about *theology*? Traditionally theology is understood to be in some sense beholden to a community of practitioners, part of the lifeblood of a larger and more encompassing religious endeavor. A *theo-logy*, or “discourse on the divine,” includes an expanded awareness of its pastoral vocation. This larger community I suppose might be envisioned as the whole of the human family for transreligious theology, or it could be oriented more particularly towards emerging communities of a cross-religious nature—“spiritual but not religious,” “multiple-belonging,” “interspiritual,” “new monastic.” Or perhaps it could also serve as a fulcrum of intimate encounter and mutual fecundation among the religious traditions themselves, a dynamic space for the creative encounter of humanity’s religious wisdom. Whether one or all of these, I do believe it fruitful for transreligious theology to think of itself beyond the world of philosophers and professional theologians, as having the ability to cater to communities outside of academia as well. This brings an added dimension to the project from a purely philosophical endeavor into the nature of the ultimate.

## “Interspiritual”?

When I think of “transreligious” theology a thought of theology “beyond” religion flits through my mind. While transreligious theology has not been defined this way by Jerry Martin, I wonder if the connotation remains, and question if it may be the best name. I believe a sense of the contemplative or spiritual journey as well as a partnership with traditional religions and a desire to learn from secular sciences and naturalist approaches are all key aspects that should be captured by whatever name is used for this endeavor. I propose here using the term “interspiritual.”

Interspiritual has the advantage (and disadvantage) of being a term growing in popularity in the general population outside academia while still being fairly amorphously defined.<sup>2</sup> Real world communities and respected organizations are in the nascent stages of using it (e.g., the *Parliament of World’s Religions* in 2015 explicitly called for “interspiritual” programs as one of the main components of its programming). This may be a disadvantage as well, in that some groups using the term may be more shallow in depth and thought. However, if it can come to denote the deep level of theological and philosophical reflection that is needed to ground these communities for the long term, it could find both a home within academic life as well as serve broad and ever growing communities outside of academia. This would be a potent gift for the academy to offer this growing edge of religious experimentation.

“Interspiritual” was first used by Brother Wayne Teasdale, a lay Catholic monk ordained as a Christian *sannyasi* (an ascetical monk in the Hindu tradition) by Father Bede Griffiths.<sup>3</sup> Griffiths, an Englishman and also a Roman Catholic monk, ran a Christian “ashram,” Shantivanam, in southern India for many years. The ashram maintained a Christian spirituality but lived a Hindu lifestyle while developing liturgies that used scriptures from multiple religious traditions. In a stunning outward symbol of transreligious solidarity, they also wore the orange robe of a Hindu *sannyasi*. Griffiths had followed in the footsteps of Catholic priest Henri Le Saux, from whom he took over the running of Shantivanam, who later went by his Indian name of “Abhishiktananda” (“the bliss of Christ”). Together they founded the tradition of the Christian *sannyasi*, a quasi multi-religious monastic endeavor with numerous initiates today, and left behind extensive written reflections on their endeavors, which included a profound engagement with the Hindu *advaitic* (nondual) Vedanta tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Teasdale, who did his doctoral work at Fordham under Ewert Cousins, coined the word “interspiritual” in his 1999 book *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions*. He used it to denote a “new mysticism” which was emerging out of the “sharing of ultimate experiences across [religious] traditions.”<sup>5</sup> Teasdale described it as an “an enhanced understanding of the inner life through assimilating the psychological, moral, aesthetic, spiritual, and literary treasures of the world’s religions ...

<sup>2</sup> Cf. McEntee and Bucko, *Monasticism*, 56-68, for a history and outline of the contemporary interspiritual movement.

<sup>3</sup> For a short description of the Christian *sannyasi*, see [www.skyfarm.org/Prayer.htm](http://www.skyfarm.org/Prayer.htm).

<sup>4</sup> There are many works widely available. In particular see Abhishiktananda, *Saccdiananda*, and Griffiths, *Marriage*.

<sup>5</sup> Teasdale, *Mystic*, 26.

deeply concerned with the plight of all those who suffer” and following “a strict adherence to ecological justice.”<sup>6</sup> It called for each religious tradition to redefine itself in relation to every other “viable tradition of the inner life.”<sup>7</sup> “Viable” is a key word here, as Teasdale did not mean that “anything goes,” but rather that each tradition had to take account of and be in relationship with the depths of other traditions, particularly the contemplative, transformative wisdom carried on by sages in each tradition.

Teasdale, Griffiths, and Abhishiktananda are important examples for transreligious theology because they represent an engagement into the depths of multiple religious traditions that was lived out in profoundly committed, mature, and deeply spiritual lives. While not academic writers in the strict sense (nevertheless, their writings are highly theological and philosophical), their example helps give real credence to the transreligious theological endeavor. While each remained within the Roman Catholic tradition, they showed the possibility for expanded insight and fully committed religious lives “in the flesh” that go beyond traditional religious boundaries, and opened possibilities for yet more radical steps to be taken. Increasingly, contemporary religious lives are being lived outside of these traditional religious boundaries all together.

## Interspiritual Theology: Four Orientations

I will offer my vision of interspiritual theology through the lens of four situating *orientations*. I include *interspiritual* as one of these orientations, which in this context can be thought of as “inter-religious / inter-disciplinary,” with the other three being *pragmatic*, *contemplative*, and *prophetic*. In a certain sense, interspiritual theology itself may be thought of more as an orientation than a rigid discipline, taking to heart my previously mentioned penchant for transgressing boundaries. Each of the four orientations situate interspiritual theology around a shared center of gravity from which it can then orbit. This center of gravity is more apophatic than a specifically defined structure, one that allows for a galaxy of interspiritual theology to come into being with varying solar systems. Like a black hole, it may remain “unknown” in certain respects, but nevertheless exerts tremendous influence and structure around it. This apophysis is also a locus of the ever percolating “creative advance into novelty,” and a pragmatic opening towards the future. It is semiotic but not semantic, and the orientations described below are meant to pull us into its gravitational field. They aim to ground interspiritual theology in academic life, religious communities, and the larger culture, especially in its struggles for social and ecological justice. Charles Pierce, an American philosopher whose evolutionary semiotics and pragmatism are important resources for interspiritual theology, was fond of describing the strength of a theory as more analogous to the durability of a rope—a function of many threads woven together—rather than the strength of a chain, which is only as strong as its weakest link. Apropos, these orientations weave into one another and only together form an overall “center of gravity” for interspiritual theology.

By *interspiritual* I mean to connote both inter-religious engagement—taking into account insights, philosophical reflection, and existential experiences (particularly of the contemplative variety) from all wisdom traditions—as well as interdisciplinary engagement with secular sciences, including hard sciences and the humanities (e.g. theology, philosophy, social sciences, anthropology, neuroscience, psychology, ethics). This must be done carefully of course, but is not an impossible task by any means. Much progress has already been made both academically and in the larger public as to how such an open orientation can function in both theory and praxis. For instance, Wesley Wildman’s *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry* offers a promising methodology for working both inter-religiously and inter-disciplinarily within a theological context. Wildman’s colleague at Boston University, Robert Neville, has given an impassioned argument for the project of an inter-religious philosophical-theological constructive metaphysics, and then carried out his own version of such a project in his three volume *Philosophical Theology*, addressing ultimate reality, the human predicament, and how religions mediate symbolically the

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 238-240, 243.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

relationship between the human condition and ultimate reality.<sup>8</sup> I am amenable to Neville's overall project, though may differ in the development of my own metaphysics. It is nice to note the creative tensions and freedom that can exist in interspiritual theology.

The breaking down of boundaries between religious traditions finds further resonance in the ongoing theological work of John Thatamanil. Thatamanil has begun to complicate the very idea of "religion" itself, as a term that delineates separate worldspaces. Using postcolonial theory to disrupt the "reifications and homogenizations" that come with the term "religion," Thatamanil asks, "What might it mean for theology to think beyond and after 'religion'?"<sup>9</sup> He answers it would be a call for "reflection that lives into and thinks out of the inherent creative multiplicity of tradition(s), a multiplicity that already bears within it the mark of tradition's encounter with difference."<sup>10</sup> Yet Thatamanil is not satisfied with a pure turn towards postcolonial or poststructuralist theory. He aims to move beyond poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postcolonialism to allow for a more "nondual" framework which "bespeaks an encounter, a presence, a relation," the Holy Other as opposed to the wholly Other.<sup>11</sup> Thatamanil's notions end up closer to Martin Buber's *I-Thou* relationship than any postmodern emphases on radical otherness, and entangle with our contemplative orientation below.

Neville's work also counters a postmodern hunkering down "into micro-perspectives because of the evils of logocentrism."<sup>12</sup> The postmodern turn to particularity is something that any trans-religious theology will need to come to terms with. Neville, for his part, sees the cutting edge of theological reflection actually moving in the opposite direction, towards affirming a universality in the recognition that "ultimate reality" sets the "agenda for religious symbols," and we can come to understand this ultimate reality better through insights from all human cultures and religious traditions.<sup>13</sup> If Neville is right, the religious traditions then become a shared heritage of investigative data into what "ultimate reality" is and what are the most pragmatically fruitful ways of orienting our lives towards it. Thatamanil has made in some ways an analogous effort in his nascent inter-religious trinitarian development of "God as ground, contingency and relation,"<sup>14</sup> as well as in the final constructive chapter of *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament*, where he points towards a "dynamic nondualism."<sup>15</sup> In both of these Thatamanil uses insights from multiple religious traditions to construct more encompassing and penetrating vistas of religious understanding.

By *pragmatic*, I denote a general orientation that looks to sensibly and reasonably assess the practical dimensions of any theory, practice, or movement as well as a methodological leaning towards a pragmatic framework. In terms of methodological leaning, I refer to the pragmatic framework based on the semiotics of Charles Pierce, within which both Neville and Wesley Wildman situate their work. Wildman, in *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry*, combines a pragmatic theory of inquiry within an interdisciplinary framework specifically for religious philosophy, developing what can function in many ways as a foundational methodological text. Wildman's work articulates a pragmatic theory of inquiry as a hypothesis-based endeavor that exists "within a fallibilist epistemological framework."<sup>16</sup> Within this framework assertions can be made, but "To assert is not necessarily to control; a ceaseless quest for correction of [the] fallible hypotheses prevents them from becoming coercive, oppressive, or blind to their intellectual or moral weakness."<sup>17</sup> In this way, religious philosophy involves "formal inquiry into ultimate concerns and ultimate realities" and is "inherently cross-cultural and comparative in character."<sup>18</sup> Existentially potent

<sup>8</sup> Neville, *Ultimates, Existence, and Religion*.

<sup>9</sup> Thatamanil, "Comparative", 246.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>12</sup> Neville, *Ultimates*, 165.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Thatamanil, "God".

<sup>15</sup> Thatamanil, *Immanent*, 169-204.

<sup>16</sup> Wildman, *Religious*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 234.

questions about the meaning of life can be pursued “drawing on insights from numerous wisdom traditions and all relevant academic disciplines, and penetrating into the very ground of nature and experience in search of the most compelling answers.”<sup>19</sup> Wildman goes on to articulate an academically rigorous methodology allowing for first-order hypotheses to be put forward in a vulnerable and humble manner that then submits them to critique and reformulation through constructive dialogue, new evidence, and further critical reflection. It is even possible to begin to make normative claims, though in a hypothetical and fallibilistic key vulnerable to correction. This type of methodology is crucial for interspiritual theology as it attempts to navigate such a capacious landscape.

Within this type of pragmatic framework, Neville’s *Philosophical Theology* is able to break with sociological and postmodern studies of religion by taking “religious revelation” seriously, yet not uncritically. Neville allows for direct revelation from divinity, the Dao, God, Buddha-nature, etc., yet none are given “ultimate” authority or the ability to deny other revelations, at least not without critical reflection. This last part, “not without critical reflection,” is key. Part of what Neville is putting forward is the ability to make encompassing normative claims through comparison and critical reflection within a pragmatic model.<sup>20</sup> Neville aims to speak “to and for the religious locations ... but not from any of them.”<sup>21</sup> His envisioned “theological circle” includes as many as possible “claims to revelation and authority,” scriptures, practices, liturgies, institutions, as well as other approaches to religion, such as sociological, biological, and cognitive.<sup>22</sup> This pluralism expects and demands discussion of theological issues to now be “global in context,” multidisciplinary, and interreligious in practice.<sup>23</sup>

Neville’s project then is radical in two different and divergent ways. First, by doing theology in a way that takes seriously the revelations of many traditions, as well as scientific and sociological approaches to the study of religion, Neville challenges the traditional norms of theology being done confessionally (within a particular religious tradition for the adherents of that tradition) or in an apologetic mode. Secondly, by actually agreeing with traditional religious adherents in their claims that the ultimate reality of which they speak (Yahweh, God, Jesus, the Great Spirit, Brahman, Buddha-Nature, the Dao, etc.) is true not only for them, but in some sense for all people, Neville critiques much of the sociological and postmodern approaches from the other side (while also taking their partial truths into account). By “subverting the social construction view of order making” and replacing it with a pragmatic methodology, Neville challenges these discourses to take seriously the claims of ultimacy that religions, and religious people, make.<sup>24</sup> At the same time he relativizes each and every tradition, so that they now have to be reaffirmed through critical reflection on how they orient us towards symbolic engagement with ultimate reality.<sup>25</sup>

Let us now look at interspiritual theology’s *contemplative* orientation. By *contemplative*, I mean to refer to a human potential for undergoing a transformative process of spiritual maturation, one that results in expanded expressions of love, wisdom, and compassion. This is not the traditional Christian definition of contemplative, where contemplation refers strictly to an act of grace. Here I mean to include both human effort and grace, religious experience as well as ordinary experiences of life, suffering as well as love—as all possible elements within what is meant by *contemplative* as a process of spiritual maturation. Neither is this the same as the traditional Buddhist understanding of contemplative, which is used to describe deep discursive reflection (*meditatio* in the Christian tradition). Nor am I using it as a type of mood or atmosphere. Rather, I mean specifically to refer to a “transformative process.” This does not mean it is the same for any two people, but perhaps could be seen as a “vague category” in the comparative sense. I submit that such a transformative process has been attested to by human beings in essentially all cultural and religious milieus throughout human history, whether ancient Greece (Socrates and Plato), 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century India (Chandrakirti and Sankara), 13<sup>th</sup> century Persia (Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi), 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain (St. John

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>20</sup> Neville, *Ultimates*, xv.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 165.

of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila), or 18<sup>th</sup> century Ukraine (Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer, commonly known as the Baal Shem Tov), to name but a handful of testaments to this transformative potential of the human being. We also have today a large and growing body of neuroscientific studies that compliment the claims of contemplatives.

I do not posit all of these journeys as going to the same “place” necessarily, and hence do not equate this contemplative orientation with the so-called “perennial philosophy.” I do put forward here, as a vulnerable pragmatic hypothesis open to correction, that there is ample evidence for a human potential that can best be described as a transformative process resulting in the embodiment of what might be called various divine attributes, and that such a process seems to be attested to across human cultures, time periods, and religious milieus. Again, this does not mean that the “process” is the same in differing cultural contexts. I allow for true diversity and do not separate the actual journey (and uniqueness of it for each person) from any eventual attainment or embodiment of divine attributes. These are complex and subtle points, and require a greater fleshing out. However, going into them further here will only take us away from our current trajectory, so let me just say they represent a dynamic and creative impetus for deep reflection at the edge of interspiritual theology.

At a recent talk at the American Academy of Religion’s 2015 annual conference, John Thatamanil argued that the theological endeavor must be inherently contemplative, partaking of the transformative wisdom contained within our religious traditions and orienting others towards it. Recalling the quote with which we began, “The one who truly prays is a theologian; the one who is a theologian, prays truly,” Thatamanil captured the heart of the theological undertaking—the need for theology to always remain beholden to a deeper wisdom. A humble but steadfast commitment to a transformative contemplative journey is perhaps one way for interspiritual theology to begin to carve out its own space within a larger theological world, by explicitly naming this as one of its essential aspects. This would also help to connect it to religious communities outside of academia, e.g. the growing “spiritual but not religious,” contemplatives of all religious stripes, new monastic groups, and “multiple-religious believers.”

The mystical and contemplative lineages embedded in our religious traditions hold a vast heritage of wisdom cultivated by our human family and honed over millennia. Often operating as pragmatic communities of inquiry themselves, these lineages have passed on through generations their knowledge and experiments of the inner life—the potential depths and transformative potentials of the human being, and their realizations and insights into Ultimate Reality. They have experimented with different practices, modes of interpretation, and ways of teaching, refining them over thousands of years. This knowledge base is a treasure chest for any spiritual seeker today, *especially* for those who find themselves not embedded in any particular religious tradition. The need then is not for a theology that aims to be beyond the religious traditions, but to be in serious *partnership* with them. In this way it can serve the real-world interests of people on the ground. It must exist *among* our religious traditions, as opposed to outside of them. In other words, as found in both Neville’s and Thatamanil’s work, we are in some way beholden to the wisdom within religious traditions, but not beholden to the (perhaps imaginary) boundaries of the traditions themselves.

Two examples of a contemplative interspiritual theology can be found in the work of modern scholars Beverly Lanzetta and Raimon Panikkar. Lanzetta has written extensively on an emerging spiritual impulse beyond the borders of any particular religious tradition. She describes a “‘global spirituality’ or ‘global theology’ ... breaking through traditional religious categories and disciplinary boundaries, that is affecting all life studies and systems.”<sup>26</sup> It is a “new type of religious experience—what we might call multi-religion or interspiritual” that “emerges as a faith experience of the utmost seriousness” and “is calling contemporary pilgrims—many of whom never thought about leaving their traditions—to a deeper experience of the sacred that is related to but may be outside of formal religious community.”<sup>27</sup> While “individual in the context of life experience” it is also a “global spiritual movement [that] shares common spiritual processes and virtues.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Lanzetta, *Emerging*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

What Lanzetta seems to be articulating is an emergent divine revelation that is not confined to, or emerging out of, the religious traditions themselves (“This call to religious openness is initiated not by religions or masters, but by the action of the divine in the souls of people around the globe”).<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, if true this would seem to add an additional dimension to the work of someone like Neville or Thatamanil, who take divine revelation seriously and as such it would necessitate further investigation into what this contemporary revelation might be. This of course must be done critically, and one way to critically evaluate such claims is through dialogue, particularly with spiritual adepts within traditions side-by-side with those who are experiencing what Lanzetta refers to as this “new type of religious experience.” Myself being involved for many years in such dialogues I can attest to their fruitfulness and revealing nature. One important point to make is that just as one would look to the so-called “sages” of various religious traditions to understand their contemplative experience, one must also engage the most mature expressions of this emerging revelation if one is to responsibly reflect upon it. In other words, evaluating the authenticity of an emergent revelation through the lens of, for example younger or immature expressions of “spiritual but not religious” folks, would not be so different from judging Islamic spirituality through the lens of radical jihadist groups. While mature expressions of this emergent spirituality may remain more rare, it does not mean that they can’t be found or thereby excuse us as committed theologians working inter-religiously from engaging them if we want to responsibly discern their meaning.

Raimon Panikkar’s work is magisterial in scope, and while methodologically different shares similarities with Neville’s and Thatamanil’s. Panikkar’s method was one of “mutual inhabitation” within the mystical traditions of numerous religions, and the articulating of a non-systematic, philosophical-theological vision which emerged. Panikkar had remarkable cross-cultural experience, holding doctorates in philosophy, chemistry, and theology, speaking eleven languages, and writing in six of them. He once famously remarked, “I ‘left’ as a Christian, ‘found’ myself a Hindu and ‘return’ a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.”<sup>30</sup> It is worth mentioning that Panikkar spent considerable time at Bede Griffith’s ashram, Shantivanam, mentioned previously.

Spanning the “mystical languages” of Greek philosophy, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Secularism—languages Panikkar felt confident “speaking with proficiency”—he developed what he called his “cosmotheandric vision,” a unique Trinitarian vision of reality that is described with language from all of the traditions.<sup>31</sup> Panikkar’s development here in seed form of a pluralistic yet unified reality consisting of non-hierarchical, co-constituent dimensions that includes both the eternal and infinite, as well as the finite and contingent, is an intriguing integrative metaphysical vision for our times, and his adamant championing of the contemplative dimension of life is an inspiration for interspiritual theology. Further, Panikkar’s work on a methodology he called the “dialogical dialogue” is an important supplement to Wildman’s pragmatic framework. Described most clearly in Panikkar’s *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, the dialogical dialogue is a way of engaging in intimate conversation that becomes transformative. It is contrasted with a more oppositional dialectical method. Panikkar describes it as proceeding from the basis of a Buberian *I-Thou* relationship, from a recognition that the *other* is not really ‘other’ (correlating nicely with Thatamanil’s “Holy Other” as opposed to the postmodern “wholly other”).<sup>32</sup> Ilia Delio describes it as, “The crossing over into the religious world of the other [which] can be a moment of revelation or enlightenment in which the encounter between different religious or cultural [or individual] worlds reaches a new stage of being. Such dialogue ... is not only a growth in human consciousness but ‘the whole universe expands.’”<sup>33</sup> Ewert Cousins spoke of it as “evoking and nurturing the complexified form of religious consciousness that will be characteristic of the global community of the future. We will discover that this kind of interreligious

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Panikkar, *Cosmotheandric*, v.

<sup>31</sup> Panikkar, *Mysticism*, 212.

<sup>32</sup> Panikkar, *Intra-Religious*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Delio, *Christ*, 101.

dialogue is itself a spiritual process, it is the characteristic collective journey of our time.”<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, I have written more extensively on this methodology.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, the *prophetic* orientation of interspiritual theology refers to a passionate embrace of the world. This includes within it the naming of individual acts and structural evils in the world, as well as theoretical and practical work for its transformation. In his classic work *The Prophets*, Abraham Joshua Heschel captures the prophetic spirit through the existential experience of the Judaic prophets: “Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. ... [N]o subject is as worthy of consideration as the plight of man. Indeed, God Himself is described as reflecting over the plight of man rather than as contemplating eternal ideas. His mind is preoccupied with man, with the concrete actualities of history rather than with the timeless issues of thought.”<sup>36</sup>

The *prophetic* tempers our theoretical-philosophical thought and individual, contemplative journeys from becoming either too self-involved or too far removed from life as it is lived in its existential reality by the majority of humanity. It immerses us in the tragic circumstances of life, in the plight of the poor and oppressed, and even provides the fiery impetus for our theological undertaking. It entices—even demands—of us to reach beyond religious and spiritual boundaries into partnership with all who are struggling to build a better world. In this, it once again leads us into dialogue with modern social theory, critical theory, cultural critiques, hermeneutical contexts, politics and economics. It expands our religious quest to heartfelt conversation and collaborative action with oppressed peoples, with those from religious traditions other than our own, with secular humanists, scientists, atheists and agnostics—with all those united in a common yearning for a more just world. Cornel West has described one form of this prophetic impulse as an aspiration to be “organic intellectuals ... participants in the life of the mind who revel in ideas and relate ideas to action by means of creating, constituting, or consolidating constituencies for moral aims and political purposes.”<sup>37</sup> The prophetic grounds interspiritual theology in particularity, asking us to situate ourselves within our own historical and embodied contexts, and to remain relevant to social, religious, and political movements outside academia.

## Concluding Thoughts

Those practicing interspiritual theology will have to choose which areas to work within interdisciplinarily, and then use intuition, creative reflection, and critical judgment as to what resources will be fruitful. Communities of dialogue can greatly expand our interdisciplinary reach, and should be employed more often. We must also engage in mature discussion as to what resources are appropriate. That is, it cannot simply be an anything goes endeavor, but one’s choice of resources must be well-reasoned and open to thoughtful criticism and correction from the community of theologians and fellow academics, as well as input from those working outside of academia all together.

Inter-religious engagement is strongly on the rise both within and outside of academia (at least in the Western world), and this is both a challenge and an opportunity for contemporary theologians. Comparative theology has given us numerous methodological resources upon which to build, however it still remains beholden for the most part to a paradigm of one who is established within a particular religious tradition and then “crosses-over” to another tradition, finally returning to one’s home tradition with new insights and gifts to offer. What if one is not returning to a “home” tradition? What if one is at “home” in more than one tradition? What if one has no “home” tradition?<sup>38</sup> These different ways of being “interspiritual” bring different challenges to the theological community, ones that we are only beginning to grapple with. What I have offered here is but a tentative first step in attempting to do so.

I have introduced “interspiritual theology” as one possible strand of transreligious theological

<sup>34</sup> Cousins, *Christ*, 118.

<sup>35</sup> McEntee and Bucko, *Monasticism*, 76-82.

<sup>36</sup> Heschel, *Prophets*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> West, *Evasion*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> In McEntee and Bucko, *The New Monasticism* (p. 26-29), we speak of these as three different ways of being interspiritual.



thought. It found resonance with contemporary academic scholars Robert Neville, Wesley Wildman, John Thatamanil, Beverly Lanzetta and the late Raimon Panikkar, as well as real-world movements on the ground springing up outside of academia. With this I believe interspiritual theology has the potential to be a viable, life-giving theology with transreligious sensibilities that has roots beyond the academy. At the same time, I believe these movements outside of academia are also in great need of the depth of theological thought and reflection academia can provide. Interspiritual theology as a theological pursuit can be a natural fit within broader academic sensibilities, as Wesley Wildman's work has shown, while still retaining the heart of the theological endeavor with which we began in our quote from Evagrius of Pontus. Importantly, interspiritual theology has been described here as engaging in respectful, profound and lasting partnerships with current religious traditions.

In short, interspiritual theology is meant to be an academic endeavor in partnership with (but not beholden to) religious traditions, in service to spiritual communities outside of academia, in dialogue with secular sciences, contemplative and committed to the prophetic task of service to humanity and the transformation of all of its social, cultural, political, and economic structures to reflect the deep human values of dignity, equality, compassion, love and wisdom—all without losing the pursuit of the transreligious project of understanding “as fully as possible the nature of ultimate reality.” Indeed, they may be one and the same.

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