Introduction

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The coming wave of thinking about ultimate reality is transreligious. The transreligious turn follows ineluctably from the discovery, profound in its depth and implications, of divine or ultimate truth in multiple traditions. At the forefront of this turn are scholars associated with Theology Without Walls. This approach is based on the following syllogism: If the aim of theology is to know and articulate all we can about the divine or ultimate reality, and if revelations, enlightenments, and insights into that reality are not limited to a single tradition, then what is called for is a theology without confessional restrictions, a Theology Without Walls (TWW). Any approach that omits the insights of traditions other than one's own falls short of being adequate to the ultimate reality. Any approach that insists on translating those insights into the terms of one's own tradition risks narrowness, distortion, and misappropriation.

It is a question of subject matter. The subject matter of theology is ultimate reality, not one's own tradition. One way to put it is that, in addition to Christian theology, Hindu theology, Islamic theology, etc., there is just Theology, the *logos* of *theos*, of ultimacy. It is not that we do not stand somewhere, but our sense of our goal is not limited to where we stand at the outset. All available terms, including "divine or ultimate reality" and "theology" itself, must be provisional, giving a sense of direction to thought without precluding surprising advances and revisions. In TWW, works of literature, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and the natural and social sciences, as well as personal experience, may become important sources of theological insight. A major achievement of the past half-century has been the development of increasingly adequate concepts and methods for comparison and dialogue conducive to theologizing across traditions.

Is TWW a form of religious pluralism? No, pluralism is a concept within confessional theology of religions. It is a thesis about the religions, not about ultimate reality. It is an answer to the question that arises within a tradition about the status – particularly the soteriological effectiveness – of other traditions, about whether they can deliver what "our" religion does. TWW poses questions more radically: What should our soteriological aim

be? What is the fundamental human predicament that soteriology should address? Indeed, is soteriology even the central concept in our relationship with ultimacy?

Is TWW a form of comparative theology? Yes, if it is understood as a Comparative Theology Without Walls. But it is an alternative to those forms of comparative theology that are essentially confessional, seeking to enhance one's own theology by studying another tradition. The most natural mode of TWW may not involve comparison or side-by-side reading. Whereas comparative theology tends to anchor studies in the religions, TWW is open to taking evidences wherever they are found, including sources quite outside religion as historically defined. Its theologians can look to literature or to psychology or to evolutionary biology for insight into the human condition and, from there, into the soteriological solution to that condition. The familiar metaphor for comparative theology in a confessional mode is "passing over" and "returning home." For TWW, "returning home" is a possibility, not a necessity. Any place truth can be found is home.

Is the aim to find what is common among all the major religions? No, noting commonalities may make a useful contribution, but the aim is to understand what is truly ultimate and, hence, in the end, to be selective. There is no guarantee that every religion dubbed as "major" is, even in essential aspects, right on target with regard to ultimate reality. Or that those religions not identified as major lack evidential value. We have to use spiritual discernment, philosophical reflection, personal experience, and transreligious insight to sort that out.

Is it possible to sort out or evaluate insights from traditions not our own? In fact, we do this already. When we seriously study other traditions, we frequently find deep insights there. We do not find them in every aspect of every tradition, but in certain texts, practices, spiritual disciplines, and iconic figures that strike us as revelatory or evidential. However accounted for, this is a human spiritual capability, without which religion itself would hardly be possible.

Is the aim of TWW to arrive at a single, encompassing theological worldview? No more than any other field of inquiry. Disagreement is fruitful.

Is engaging in TWW compatible with a commitment to one's own confession? Yes, just as a Jungian psychotherapist can take in insight from other thinkers and acknowledge that psychology itself is a wider field of inquiry, one can, like Huston Smith, be a participating Presbyterian while holding a much wider religious worldview. Some essays in this volume discuss how the spiritual life might be lived in a transreligious context.

TWW might, however, have an impact on religious traditions. They might come to regard themselves as offering truth, but not the only truth. Participants may become willing and interested to learn from other traditions. The religions themselves could evolve toward greater spiritual openness.

That Theology Without Walls is necessary – if theology is to live up to its goal of explicating ultimate reality as fully as possible – does not ensure that it is achievable. Theology as we know it has been, almost by definition, the articulation of religious truths as held by a particular tradition. It is that tradition that provides the canonical texts, hermeneutical strategies, theological questions, proffered answers, methods for assessing and modifying them, and even institutional authorities for ruling certain answers in or out. In addition, such traditions provide the full-bodied religious life that their theologies serve.

What are, for TWW, the theological issues, debates, and methods of interpretation and of resolution? These issues are already being sorted out in interreligious scholarship and discussion of such matters as the role of mystical and other religious experience, the role of religious authorities, which spiritual practices are effective and what they achieve, alternative ontologies, and rival hermeneutical strategies. More fundamentally, theologies must address the enduring questions of human life and death, felicity and suffering, love and compassion, justice and mercy, and so on.

This volume explains and argues for this new approach to theology. It includes scholars from a range of religions and spiritual orientations and of disciplines whose research clarifies the scope and conditions of valid religious theorizing. Some contributors make the case for transreligious theologizing or for their own approaches to it. Some discuss particular issues, such as dual religious belonging or the relation of TWW to confessional commitment. The volume includes sympathetic critics whose serious concerns indicate challenges TWW must face. Finally, to ground the project in examples, the volume includes emerging models of transreligious inquiry.

TWW presents an obvious challenge to traditional theology, but its importance is not limited to scholars, or even to religious professionals. The wider public is involved. We no longer live in villages or neighborhoods where everybody has the same religion. There are ashrams and mosques in the same towns as churches and synagogues. Global communications bring the full range of religious ideas and practices into our homes and offices. Moreover, the growth of the “nones” and those who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” creates a pressing need for theological thinking not bounded by prescribed doctrines and fixed rituals, yet subject to the rigor of a search for truth. TWW responds to this vital need.

At the outset, transreligious theology should be considered an exploratory program, at best a “research programme” in Imre Lakatos’s sense. “One must treat budding programmes leniently,” he writes, since, early on, the obstacles will be more obvious than their fruitfulness. Meanwhile, we must exercise “methodological tolerance.” We cannot allow procedural worries to block the path of inquiry. Models are beginning to emerge. Concepts for transreligious discourse are increasingly well-developed. We will learn the best methods by engaging in the process.

TWW calls upon each theologian to seek truth, wherever it can be found, and to articulate it even when methods and concepts are still in the process of being developed and are not, or not yet, ready at hand. Consider these essays forays into ultimacy. Gandhi named his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. That is what all our lives are, including our theological lives. They are experiments with truth.