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The comparative expansion of confessional theology

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Is it possible to do a “Theology Without Walls” (TWW) in any meaningful sense while existentially or conceptually committed to a particular religious path? Is it not precisely the limitations of such adherence that free-range religious inquiry seeks to escape? Such incompatibility is certainly the case, if we conceive of TWW as an omnibus totality, an “all at once” performance that somehow combines awareness of and openness to all religious data with a simultaneous, impartial, and comparative assessment of it. Stated so flatly, this theoretical extreme seems as unrealistic in practice as an extreme particularist approach seems uninterested in principle.¹ Who knows what all the data are and what it means to consider them appropriately? Jerry L. Martin says “ideally the theologian without walls gives full credit to all religious data, to all spiritual epiphanies, whatever their source or auspices.”² Does this mean that such a theologian treats all such data *ab initio* as grist for the mill of assessment, all boundaries as only circumstantial artifacts, on the way to reaching some specific and located spiritual conclusion? Or does it mean that such a theologian must end as well as begin with a perspective that resembles or relies upon no existing religious perspective more than another? A settled religious conviction can bring a distorting lens to unfamiliar sources and perspectives. But the fragile innocence of an intensely interested but entirely undecided approach to the complete set of religious phenomena is both hard to attain and difficult to preserve.

If we apply the “full credit” assumption in the candidacy phase of personal decision making, it describes a necessarily transient phase of spiritual and intellectual practice – one that must quickly give way to at least some working judgements and theories reflecting one’s own experiences and reasoning. TWW stands apart from strictly descriptive and academic comparative study by virtue of its frank normative interests and personal engagement. Its major purpose is to seek to make sense of and give meaning to the data from a specific interpretive stance, one that implies personal application and commitment. Any emerging TWW would build by selection and evaluation. Its practitioners end by themselves constituting part of the “data,” adherent to and participant in some particular religious approach, however traditionally or nontraditionally defined. From this

view, TWW is a novelistic religious journey, more about the traveler than the destination.

What of those who cannot pretend to approximate a blank slate starting point or a dramatically composite one? It would be odd if a search whose premise is an unrestricted field of religious hypotheses and sources were in some way to exclude those already seriously practicing any of the particular paths within that field or those whose quest had led them to some operative conclusions. We could take the “full credit” dimension of TWW as pointing not so much to a departure point as to a horizon. It is an aspiration to integrate all of the religious data within the most maximally comprehensive and practicable religious understanding. What distinguishes TWW from exclusivists in current religions or individuals with a definitive syncretic solution to religious diversity is the conviction that this maximal integration does not yet exist. It is not evident that it can be had simply by making a choice among existing religious options as they stand, nor among academic interpretations as they stand. TWW is energized by the possibility of a new, collective, religious option for thought and practice. It seeks an interpretation that sees or elicits something new in the religions, a perspective of understanding and practice not fully on offer elsewhere, one that is unrestrictedly open for all to adopt. In this sense, it is not only an additional perspective on the religious data but a new addition to them. This is TWW as pioneering discovery, more about the destination than the traveler. In this respect, it is parallel to the origination of certain religions, like Ba’haism or Sikhism or (by some historical accounts) Islam, which explicitly understood themselves to be an integration of other existing religions (as known in their context).³ In fact, there is no reason that the horizon point should not turn out to be a new version of an existing faith: a revitalized Ba’haism, an inclusive Hinduism, an expanded Christianity or Islam.

If we consider TWW in this light, it need not preclude participation by people as soon as they have drawn any religious conclusions. Some of the most developed works of thought prototypical of TWW – the writings of Robert Neville, or Keith Ward, or Raimon Panikkar – have a particularist profile (their thought begins from a Christian background) but “come down” on many controverted issues among the religions without necessarily conforming to Christian authorities. Such works have a somewhat indeterminate constituency, in that their thought does not “belong” to a specified religious community or correspond to the practice of any. The key emphasis in TWW is not on neutrality, but on the effort to build thicker, deeper, and presumably more comprehensive religious perspectives. This constructive work can be done from a specific location, because its constant effect (and aim) is to produce a more richly specified religious perspective from which the process then continues. We need not exclude confessional forms of TWW if we think of TWW less in terms of a binary state that is on or off and more in terms of incremental approximations.⁴ No theology lacks walls, as no complex organism lacks a body plan and no cells lack

membranes. Many theologies may be distinctive and fruitful by virtue of their removal of *some* walls.

A Theology Without Walls might measure itself by the assumptions that it removes, dropping exclusive appeal to scriptures from one religion, or definitive appeal to reason and logic as defined in one cultural tradition rather than another. But it can also develop through the expansion of horizons. The impetus within a confessional religious perspective that drives toward consideration of the full range of religious data stems from the intrinsic universal intent in that faith. On one side, that universal intent expresses itself in a mode of witness, the missional conviction of Buddhists or Christians or Muslims that the truth they know is available and relevant to all people. On another side, that universal intent is expressed as "faith seeking understanding." This is less the sharing out from the tradition to others than the working in of the truth, beauty, and wisdom whose reality "outside" the tradition requires connection with that inside. The God believed in is the God of all. Understanding of that God through revelation and reflection extends to all aspects of the world. A living confessional faith hopes to more fully understand truth that one already partially grasps, to understand new things that one had not previously grasped, and to discover coherence across a more and more comprehensive field of human and natural phenomena. In fact, this hope is part of a larger eschatological imagination and expectation for what is not yet manifest. An existing life of faith can throw up barriers of prejudice. But it is also a powerful instrument of tacit knowledge in the process of understanding others, a defining part that suggests an unrealized whole.

Christian revelation and faith are understood as integral steps in the flourishing and realization of the world meant (in addition to their healing and liberating effect) to make the world more intelligible and to be most fully intelligible themselves in the most comprehensive context of human experience. This conviction is often a matter of tension, but theology has largely been defined by the universal project it defines, whether the wider context was provided by Greek philosophy, historical analysis, or modern science. Though people often speak of religious faith "walling itself off" from the results of, say, historical study or scientific investigation, theology in principle holds there can be no wall between truths in one area and those in another. Religion might be thought to be the one exception to this, the one area where Christian theology has all the answers and no questions. But the matter is quite different if one understands the religious sphere as a realm of God's providential engagement. "In many and various ways God spoke of old" and "The Spirit blows where it will."⁵ Before the rise of separated distinct disciplines of historical or scientific study, what we call religion and philosophy were the primary realms in which this search for universal breadth and correlation was exercised. To leave the religions aside would be to default on the "faith seeking understanding" conviction about the comprehensive character of that understanding.

Plainly, the extension of the theological quest into the religions depends in major part on convictions adopted within that part of theology called the theology of religions. There are theological teachings that discourage any expectation of value in the study of other religions and those that encourage or even mandate it. Even theological authorization or encouragement of such learning is no substitute for the actual demonstration of it. This vision of a permeable framework is what John Cobb called a picture of “mutual transformation” between the religions. The horizon of universality can only be approached by transforming engagement with the other religions. And if “universality” itself is a dangerous ideal without diversity and complexity, then the effort to approach it comparatively from various located, confessional spaces has a decided virtue: it works with and honors that diversity.

Comparative theology is the best current concrete demonstration of that learning and the best example of TWW as an expanding confessional perspective.⁶ It might be considered a bilateral Theology Without Walls, a “reading together” of sources from two (or more) religious traditions, typically one from a “home” tradition and one from another tradition in which one has some level of learning or participation. A comparative theologian embraces their confessional location, seeking to enrich and expand the truth found there. One “passes over” into immersion in the study of another and returns with enriched perspectives to be shared with the home community.⁷ What distinguishes such activity from TWW is clearer in theory than in practice, largely defined by the hypothetical depth of the change that may result from comparative study. In its contemporary form, comparative theology practitioners are predominantly Christians, operating from an acknowledged Christian confessional or even institutional standpoint, but scholars from other traditions increasingly take part as well.⁸

A comparative theologian typically identifies with one religious tradition and undertakes intensive study of a particular source in their own tradition and some particular source in another. For a Christian, this work is part of a search for the most universal shape of Christianity. It is animated by confidence that Christian understanding can expand to accommodate and be transformed by insight and truth in other religious sources.⁹ And it is animated equally by humility: the recognition that this fuller understanding does not yet exist. God’s nature far exceeds our categories, and the religions resist assimilation into our existing forms precisely because they contain truth about the divine and the world not sufficiently grasped by our operative terms. Such comparative theology is driven less by the apophatic conviction that God so exceeds description as to make distinctions between religions meaningless and more by the positive impetus suggesting that what we have known of God draws us to the expectation of a fuller coherence.

Comparative theology is a kind of “retail” TWW. It does not address walls in general, only in particular. Its most common format is concrete and limited. It does not compare Christianity and Hinduism, but reads together two specific texts – for instance, the *Essence of the Three Auspicious*

Mysteries by the Hindu writer Śrī Vedānta Deśika and the *Treatise on the Love of God* by St. Francis de Sales, to take an example from the work of Francis X. Clooney.¹⁰ This encounter is impossible without some attention to the fact that de Sales is a Catholic, not a Protestant; French and not English or Spanish; and that this text is both similar and different to his more famous work *Introduction to the Devout Life*. All these bear upon an understanding of the text. Likewise, one must attend to the fact that Vedānta Deśika was a Vaishnavite, not a Shaivite; wrote in a variety of Indian languages; and was an artist as well as a teacher. In other words, there are countless specific things that distinguished each of these writers from others of the same “religion” in their time and after, as well as the things that united them. And there are elements – images, topics, language – that resonate with each other across the two texts, as well as things that contrast or that simply fail to connect. These mazes of similarity and difference disarm our conceptual generalities.

Rather than erasing an entire border between two entities, “Hinduism” and “Christianity,” the theologian has pierced one specific wall: the one separating the backyards of these two individuals, the convention that had meant the readers of one text were never readers of the other. Despite their irreducible specificity, each of the writings is also woven into a wider framework, looking back to earlier texts in their traditions and drawing upon prior commentators and practices in forming their own voices. A Christian reader who wants to follow Vedānta Deśika’s line of thought must look sympathetically with him through the lens of prior Hindu writers toward the Vedas and their assumed subjects. In both traditions, reading is itself a religious act. To attentively take up the *Essence of the Three Auspicious Mysteries* is in some measure to participate in that act with its writer. Francis X. Clooney called his early studies “experiments,” whose results could be gleaned only after the fact, in assessing how his Christian attitudes and insights had been permanently shaped by exposure to the comparative text.¹¹

A different work of comparative theology, by Clooney or another scholar, will lower yet another specific wall and beat a small path of conversation and questioning back and forth across that line. And so on. This process may or may not be accompanied by an extensive theological statement on the principle of treating revered texts of other religious traditions as theological sources. As liberation theology puts primary emphasis on praxis, so, too, does comparative theology in its way. Its practice is focused on repeatedly crossing very concrete boundaries, breaching small walls. Clear where it is working *from*, such comparative theology has no predetermined limit on where it might go or on how much the theology and faith of the home tradition may be transformed.

Comparative theology will necessarily include work of wider scope than I have just described, though more limited than the large-scale projects of writers like Neville. An example would be my own recent work drawing upon a classic Buddhist text to develop an extended comparison between

the path of Christ and the path of the bodhisattva (Heim 2019b). Such “middle-level” discussions are necessary if key learnings are to be incorporated into the doctrinal source code of a religious tradition and that tradition transformed into a more universal version of itself by means of the TWW dynamic.

Comparative theology is not, in practice, the omnibus enterprise that TWW can appear to be. It is never global, in the sense of addressing “all religious data” at once. It addresses that “all” in a slow, cumulative manner. It is dialogical and concrete, considering not what all religions, or even two traditions, as such have to say about divine–human relationships, but what it is like to read particular Christian hymns to Mary in connection to some particular Hindu hymns to specific goddesses or what it is like to see the work of Christ in light of the path of the bodhisattva.¹² This concreteness is further specified in that one end of the comparison is always located closer to “home,” in one’s own tradition, though not necessarily in what one has hitherto taken as its most prominent or central sources. Comparative theology is particular theology seeking a steadily greater universality.

A TWW could be taken to be a theology with no “inside,” no shape or structure to frame it or to order a life lived in accordance with it. But in truth as TWWs develop – whether in individual scholars or as collective endeavors – they will necessarily either take on some such structure or inherit and maintain it. A comparative Christian theology is a home with plentiful windows, and new ones being constantly added. Such an expansive confessional theology, one that seeks its newer and more universal form, could be taken by those outside to be “walled in,” with no true access to the widest religious world. And critics within the confession in question will warn that the expansion constitutes a drastic renovation and threatens the load-bearing integrity of the entire structure. My hope is that these cautions prove to be similar to the assumptions of a pre-gothic architecture, assumptions that could be definitively reversed only with the actual realization of buildings that are more window than wall. Comparative confessional theologies of this ilk have an important role to play in the TWW discussion.

Notes

- 1 More could be said about this as a reservation or question for TWW as a whole. See Heim (2016).
- 2 Jerry Martin, in a personal communication, August 10, 2018.
- 3 On Islam, see Donner (2010).
- 4 In this chapter I focus on the extent to which Christian theologians might participate in a Theology Without Walls, but many of the observations may hold for other locations as well.
- 5 Heb 1:1 and Jn 3:8, respectively.
- 6 For a summary, see Heim (2019a).
- 7 Some scholars appreciative of comparative theology challenge this paradigm, in that they question whether one needs a “home” location to engage in it, or

whether the location might be defined other than by identification with an existing communion. This is clearly relevant to the TWW discussion, but because I want to focus here on the possible role for explicitly confessional theology, I limit my discussion in this chapter to comparative theology of that type. For more on comparative theology without a “home” tradition, see the Introduction in Brecht and Locklin (2016). Also see Corigliano (2016).

- 8 See for instance the essays by Muna Tatari and Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia on Muslim and Jewish examples in Clooney and von Stosch (2018).
- 9 That search can be seen to have an implicit apologetic dimension – expressed in John Cobb’s hope for a fruitful competition among religions over which could prove most adept at honoring and incorporating the truths of others. See Cobb (1990).
- 10 See Clooney (2008).
- 11 See Clooney (1993).
- 12 The former example is from Clooney (2005).

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