

Theology Without Walls: Beyond Pluralism

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I put “Beyond Pluralism” in the title but, looking again at Griffith reminded me that there are many pluralisms, hence many anti-pluralisms, hence many potential beyond-pluralisms.

So it is best to set that concept aside for the moment, and just pay attention to the proposal. By the end, you will see in what sense it is “beyond pluralism.”

Let’s start with a story ...

At a Theology Without Walls panel several years ago, Christopher Denny told the story of a student he dubbed “Derek.” In a course on Catholic Theology, Denny had presented the exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist triad of options, challenging these Catholic students to think about the standing of their own faith.

Derek was not a star student. Rarely speaking, he slumped by the window with his feet propped up on a chair. Yet, on this topic, Derek spoke up in a way that, Denny says, “transformed the trajectory of the class.”

From Derek: Who cares? People choose whatever religion they want, or none at all. Who’s to judge anyone else? The class seemed to agree.

Denny challenged them: Doesn’t that reduce religion to the level of a commodity or consumer good?

“But, lo and behold, they seized upon this analogy, which I had intended to be derogatory, and agreed enthusiastically with this comparison: yes, professor, that’s it, religion is a lifestyle choice just like that.”

Many of us are disturbed to learn, from sociological studies, that “there are many Dereks now.” But, instead, Denny turned the challenge back to us.

“But I ask you,” he said, “doesn’t Derek have a point? If we are to appreciate the value of individual autonomy in religious inquiry, shouldn’t we recognize that, ... in both cases [choosing a religion and shopping for a commodity], there is a human agent making the choice?”

He went on: The “great religious traditions are in large part the result of choices ... Now more democratic forms of politics and more egalitarian social structures make these choices less constricted for a wider segment of the ... population.

“Unlike relativism, a Theology Without Walls need not concede that all religious preferences are equal in existential value or ... soteriological efficacy.” In fact, “the recognition of preferences and choices provides theology with a new starting place from which to engage the bewildering array of religious options available to us as we push our existential shopping carts down the aisles of reality.”

Having heard from Derek, let’s leave him aside for the moment.

When I first introduced Theology Without Walls at the American Academy of Religion in 2010, I made the basic argument for it – **the Syllogism**, as I sometimes call it – and followed with the question, what do we do now?

Here is the Syllogism:

If the aim of theology is to understand Ultimate Reality as fully as possible; and if evidence about, and insight into, that Reality is not limited to a single tradition, then what is needed is a Theology Without Walls, without confessional boundaries, without blinders, as it were.

One way of putting it is that, in addition to “Christian theology, Hindu theology, etc., there is just Theology.” It is a question of subject matter. Theology Without Walls proposes that the subject-matter should be Ultimate Reality, not one’s own tradition. And not just,

ala the Perennialists, reality as represented in some common thread through all the major religions.

That does not mean that we do not stand somewhere, but that our sense of our goal is not limited to where we stand at the outset.

Although *Theology Without Walls* can be seen as having grown out of comparative theology, its goal is not comparison. It does not share the common assumption that one must be rooted in one's own tradition, or that one must cross over and then return home. Rather the Theologian Without Walls is engaged in a search for truth wherever it can be found.

Restricting theology within confessional boundaries, and much comparative work as well, rests on an overly simplified picture of what religion is. To treat the world as containing a number of block phenomena called "religions" is useful for textbooks, but we know it is not quite accurate. It treats religions as more unified, more coherent, unchanging, sharply defined, and impermeable than they are. "No religion is an island," said Abraham Joshua Heschel. They are all syncretisms.

Wilfrid Cantwell Smith spoke of "religion in the singular," a complex, cross-cultural, never-neat set of phenomena. He gives the saga of St. Josaphat as an example.

Martin Luther King Jr. was influenced by a story Gandhi had gotten from Tolstoy. In his *Confession*, the great Russian reported that his spiritual awakening was sparked by reading the Lives of the Saints, especially the story of St. Josaphat. It is the story of a young prince who renounces wealth and power, and wanders in the wilderness in ascetic piety.

The Russian version of his life was taken from a Greek source. The Greek source was borrowed from a text in Georgia, where it had been transformed into a Christian version from an Islamic source. The Moslems had gotten the story in Central Asia from the Manichees, who had absorbed the stories of several traditions, this one from the Buddhists.

It was, in fact, the story of the Buddha. And the name Josaphat derived, by transpositions in several languages, from the word, Bodhisattva. Thus, Smith concludes, “for a thousand years, the Buddha *was* a Christian saint.”

Smith is not debunking St. Josaphat. On the contrary, he is asserting the historical *fact* that the living truth of this story is woven into the texture of many religions. Facts of this sort have normative implications.

“Religion in the singular” provides a vast repository of spiritual data and resources. John Thatamanil has likened religion to a highly diverse spice cabinet from which you could make either Indian or Italian dishes. Or create fusion recipes, or combine ingredients in ways that do not fit any established cuisine. What he calls spices, we might think of as apercu – revelations, enlightenments, epiphanies, inspired practices, and iconic lives -- through which we glimpse the Ultimate.

When people think about a Theology Without Walls, it can strike them as quite impossible: Wouldn't it require mastering the omni-corpus of the world's religions? That is one route and people like Robert Neville have shown that it can have impressive results. But, in our TWW discussions, Mark Heim has suggested a different picture: people sorting through evidence that comes their way, like Scully and Mulder in the X files, and piecing together an account of the Ultimate. In real life, that is how most of us work. We study our tradition and its texts, as best we can, but it is our own spiritual journey of epiphanies, encounters, and illuminating experiences that rightly guide our thinking.

Theology Without Walls looks, not only at the plurality of religions, but at the diverse ways human beings have of encountering divine reality, or finding insight into it, including apercu or epiphanies, not all of which arrive under the auspices of a religion. These experiences have epistemic efficacy. They are revelatory of the ultimate. Hence, there is a match between the mode of engagement and the nature of the divine reality we discover. We might say: The divine reality *is* as you find it.

I speak of the “divine” reality because we are not talking about the Boson particle, a kind of physics ultimate, or Locke’s substance – *his* metaphysical ultimate. We are talking about that ultimate that guides the meaning of our lives and our purpose in the world, that ultimate that defines True North for us.

At the end of my 2010 remarks, I posed the question, Where do we start? I explored some ways of going about doing Theology Without Walls, but quickly concluded:

“We start where we are.”

And I added:

“We will learn the best methods by engaging in the process ...”

Theology, the investigation of the divine reality, has been tethered to religious traditions, their texts, concepts, traditions, doctrines, debates, practices, and norms, which guided theological inquiry.

Suddenly, we are on our own.

That means we need to locate where we are or, rather, where each of us is. Instead of starting “from above” with a vast architectonic provided by our tradition or some great synthesis of traditions, we might try starting with our own lives, the epiphanies that come our way, our efforts at spiritual discernment, sorting chaff from grain, and the intellectual framings that work for us from those that don’t. We would be Theologizing From the Ground Up.

Just to think free-form for a moment: Suppose, in your spiritual journey, you discover that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the light,” and that the Dao is the Way and the Power, and so are, say, the Stoic logos and the hodos of the Socratic life, then you might well see emerging a theology of the Way that stands on its own terms and would not have to be either an amendment to a single tradition or an effort to encompass all traditions. That is one possible pattern of epiphanies, but there are countless others that might be well worth exploring.

Let me give you a real life example: John Thatamanil's excellent study, *The Immanent Divine*. He chooses Sankara and Tillich for comparison. But, somewhat under the radar, there is a third, methodologically instructive, theology present -- that of the author himself.

We see his theology at work in explaining his choice of thinkers:

“Might it be possible to frame a non-dualistic Christian theology in which a stronger” – more optimistic – “account of human possibilities (such as those offered by Sankara) is combined with a realistic assessment of the depth of estrangement?”

“Is it possible to remove the element of distance that Tillich felt compelled to preserve and thereby mitigate the note of inevitable tragedy that hangs over the whole of Tillich's theology?”

Thatamanil is looking for a theology that provides: (1) a more optimistic account of human possibilities, (2) a full acknowledgement of the “depth” of our estrangement, (3) a non-dualism (to overcome the estrangement), and thereby (4) a vision that is “non-tragic.”

More broadly, he wants a theology that accounts for: the human condition, with its failings, incompleteness, and suffering; a healing relationship with the divine; the way in which the divine is both transcendent and immanent; robust human freedom alongside our oneness with the divine; and a way of achieving these things without rejecting the world of experience and of loving desire.

These are the desiderata that he regards as important for theology to accommodate, and that reflect his own best insights into the ultimate reality and our relation to it.

Toward the end, Thatamanil addresses “the constructive task of assessing the meaning, importance, and truth-value” of theologies compared. “Theological conclusions have to be argued out.”

A variety of sources will go into this assessment: “Antecedent commitments, creative readings of figures and traditions, ... personal transformations ...” And also: “Much will depend on what transpires in the life of the theologian”

Once one moves outside one’s home tradition, writes Thatamanil, “the very criteria for theological construction may be transformed”

“Is the resulting theology Hindu or Christian?” he asks. Or is it a “hybrid Hindu-Christian theology” that “might appeal to both communities.”

Finally, he concludes: “Does it even matter whether a position is recognizably Christian, or does it matter only that a given position appears to be reasonable, attractive, compelling, and true?”

In real life, our theological thinking grows out of a series of spiritual, intellectual, and personal turnings, prompted by certain studies, experiences, epiphanies, and encounters. It is natural for us to sweep all those up into our home tradition, even when the insights were gathered elsewhere, and there is nothing wrong with that. But there is another possibility. If we want to be open to the Ultimate on, you might say, its own terms rather than insisting that it conform to our familiar framework, we might proceed in a more open-ended, exploratory fashion.

In its fullest sense, theology is not merely a single faith or confession seeking understanding; it is all spiritual insight -- wherever found and however acquired -- seeking understanding.

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In light of our own agency in the search for truth, and the availability of experiences and epiphanies that involve encountering, or responding to, the divine reality in multiple ways, spiritual-intellectual testimony should have a larger part in theology than is invited by theological discourse devoted to doctrines and debates within established traditions. If our experiences and epiphanies are evidential, then they should be explored in much the same way we explore the insights and encounters of Jeremiah and St. Paul, and of Gautama and Ramakrishna.

Their spiritual lives are evidential; so are ours.

Here is a sampler, from our own time.

In "Tales of a Theologian without Walls," Robert Neville reports, "My theological education began in kindergarten ... when a classmate told me that God is a person. "I checked with my father [a chemist] who said that, although Jesus was a person, God was more like light or electricity. ... At the age of five, I was set on a course as a naturalist theologian, a course I have kept to this day."

His father, though an atheist, raised his children in the Methodist Church, and Neville stayed the course there too, to which he later added Confucian commitments. As Neville's naturalistic faith sought understanding, he turned to metaphysics, where it struck him that the explanation of determinate being must be something indeterminate, namely, the sheer creative act itself.

Hence, the sacred canopy of religious symbols – including those of the Methodist and Confucian traditions with which he identifies -- point to, and enable connection with, that Creative Act.

Neville's journey is not just autobiographical; it also gives us data, to the extent we regard it as veridical, about ways divine reality can be encountered, understood, and lived out.

I have a friend, not an academic, whose access to the divine reality is two-fold, from the inside, from profound probing of what she calls her “deeps,” and from the outside, from an affinity with nature strong enough to be called love. Ralph Waldo Emerson had a similar deep-inside resonating to the cosmic.

This dual but intertwined access is her source of knowledge about the divine, and it shapes her understanding. The divine as known by her is both the vibrant surround, in which one is immersed, with its own meaning and resonances, and also the inner core of the self, which one most authentically is, with its deep soundings. For her, the connection between the two, almost an identity, is, one might even say, salvific.

My own epiphany came in an experience before I had any religious beliefs or interests at all. I was a philosopher, an epistemologist. Much like George Fox, my encounter came in a divine voice who spoke to me and responded to my questions.

As a result, my own understanding begins with a God who is intensely personal, at least in the face turned toward me, a God whose love is not generic but particular to each individual human being, a God whose concerns and sufferings are quite real and who is not to be treated as a metaphor or postulate. The personal face of God is not, however, the only face or aspect of the divine reality.

A few years ago, I gave Francis Clooney a brief account of my experience. Knowing that priests and ministers are supposed to receive a call, I asked how his came to him.

“In my case, it wasn’t a voice; it was more like a finger,” he said, stretching out his finger as if to poke me in the chest.

The rest he explained circumstantially. “If you were a Catholic kid, this meant to become a priest.” Clooney grew up in the Church, and it was, for him, the conduit of the divine.

His Jesuit service took him to the Indian subcontinent. He found the divine accessible in Hindu texts, especially Tamil poetry, and also at a temple dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi.

“I used to stop in and stand there for a few minutes” he writes. “I felt oddly, entirely at home” in the “dark, quiet, attractive shrine.” “I was face to face with a reality – a kind of real presence I knew that according to Hindu tradition I was also being seen by Her. I did not have ... easy words by which to explain this concrete and in some ways very foreign moment of encounter.”

A divine encounter invites a response. “I suppose I might have even worshipped Her ... as it were seeing and being seen. But Christians do not worship Goddesses, so I did not. I just stood there, looking.”

Here Clooney was stopped short by confessional constraints. A theologian without walls might have responded differently.

The point of these spiritual reports is not that “anything goes.” To be evidential, an encounter must be veridical. It must be subjected to spiritual discernment.

And to argument. For example: Are Clooney’s and/or my experiences incompatible with Neville’s naturalism? If so, are the experiences invalidated or is the naturalism disconfirmed? If not, how are they reconciled?

In his recent book, *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, Clooney asserts that love is particular, and his love is Jesus Christ.

He recognizes that there are other loves close at hand that may also be worthy.

As Clooney writes in an earlier book, “To love deeply and affirm deep truths in a world where many loves flourish in the particular, we need first of all to be grounded in the specificity and particularity in our own enduring love – for this author, in Jesus Christ.”

He suggests that “a true love is supposed to exclude all others” but not in a way that prevents us from being aware of particular loves and of the truths they make available – it “does not deafen us to other such words of love, ... as if one love defeats all others. What theology cannot tolerate, the imagination will not forget.”

Clooney's devotion raises the theological question: Can one only have *one* divine love or can one respond to multiple divine condescensions? Paul Knitter writes in *Without Buddha I Couldn't Be a Christian* that his students accuse him of being married to Jesus but sleeping with Buddha. He has to contend with holding both in his affections and in reconciling intellectual tensions between the two traditions.

In any case, the bias of Theology Without Walls is in favor of the experience, the encounter, the divine manifestation, not the fixed doctrine or banked tradition.

We must each respond to the divine reality as discloses itself to us. And then theologize from there.

In the process, one seeks one's own synthesis of truths that may or may not recognizably belong to a particular religious tradition or traditions – a synthesis that meets the standard of being an informed, serious, well-reasoned, and spiritually sensitive response to human experience and divine presence.

Is any of this relevant to Christopher Denny's Derek?

Yes, not only relevant but urgent.

As Denny notes and sociologists confirm, "Today there are many Dereks."

They are not so likely to line up for catechism. Give them a creed, and they walk away. Tell them, even in a theology class at a Catholic university, that they must take a stand for or against transubstantiation, and you are met with blank stares.

But they may still be interested in having a meaningful life and in relating to whatever ultimates they can glimpse in their own lives.

We need to encourage young people especially, but of course not only them, to trust, or at least probe, their most meaningful experiences. To note them, describe their contours, examine their effects, trace out their implications, to see what happens if they act on them.

Theology is not just an intellectual puzzle; it requires spiritual sensitivity, openness, and discernment.

It grows out of our earnest efforts to orient ourselves properly toward what is truly ultimate.

Gandhi named his autobiography, "My Experiments with Truth," and that is what all our lives are, including our theological lives – they are experiments with truth.

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