

In Spirit and Truth:
Toward a Theology Without Walls

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I. Introduction: Spirit and Truth

In the Gospel of John we are told the story of a Samaritan woman who asks Jesus whether the proper place of worship is on the holy mountain of Samaria or in the Temple of Jerusalem. These referred to two competing, antagonistic, religious institutions. Jesus responds: “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father . . . an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:21-24).

“Spirit and truth,” of course, are neither places nor institutions. The phrase refers to authentic engagement with the divine. Those of us pursuing what has been called a “theology without walls” aspire to do theology in a manner not confined to any particular religious institution or tradition, but grounded, rather, in “spirit and truth.” What I would like to suggest is that this aspiration itself constitutes a new, and distinctive, mode of engagement with the divine; one forecast by Jesus in the above passage but realizable only in our time.

To make this clear it will be helpful to first of all consider why theology has traditionally been done *within* walls. What is the reason for this and what is its justification?

II. Theology Within Walls

To answer this question, I believe, we need to consider the peculiar relationship of theology to religion. Theology as an intellectual discipline is subsequent to religion as a communal and

spiritual practice. Religions do not arise in response to theological reflection, rather theology arises as an attempt to understand and apply religious experience. This priority of religion to theology is reflected in the classical designation of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” If we say that faith *seeks* understanding we imply that faith exists prior to understanding. Theology is not the basis of faith, rather faith is the basis of theology.

What, then, is the basis of faith? The religions of the world have emerged, not from theological reflection, but from an encounter, or, anyway, a perceived encounter, with the divine. I use the word ‘divine’ here to refer to that which is ultimate in meaning and value; in Paul Tillich’s terminology, that which presents itself to us as the object of our ultimate concern. This might be a personal God, as in the Abrahamic religions, or it might be an exalted or awakened state of being, as in Buddhism. Nevertheless, whether we think of divine reality as a highest person or as a supernal state of awareness, religions have their origin in some direct encounter, or purported encounter, with this divine reality. Theology, then, emerges as the endeavor to reflect upon this encounter, to appropriate it cognitively and work out its implications for mundane life. This, I would say, is what distinguishes theology from philosophy. Philosophy begins with mundane experience and, through rational reflection, extrapolation, and generalization, seeks to arrive at universal truths. Theology begins with an experience of the divine, or reports of such experience, and seeks to make sense of that experience at the cognitive level.

In this regard, theology is rooted in what John Thatamanil has called “first-order knowledge” of the divine. First-order knowledge is direct knowledge, experiential knowledge; it is ‘knowledge of’ rather than ‘knowledge about.’ As Thatamanil puts it, a person who never swims can nevertheless acquire a great deal of information, i.e., ‘second-order knowledge,’ *about* swimming, but only the swimmer can have first-order knowledge of what it *is* to swim.¹

It is such first-order knowledge, reflected in a particular body of revelation – as recorded in scripture and/or passed down by tradition – that constitutes the primary source material for theology. The theologian who takes up the task of interpreting a given body of revelation does so, presumably, because he or she has had a taste of such first-order knowledge in respect to it. In Tillich's language, the theologian is "grasped" by an ultimate concern, and feels called to the task of making cognitive sense of that by which he or she is grasped. In this respect, theology is 'hermeneutical' in the most basic, etymological, meaning of the word: Like the messenger-god Hermes, the theologian "hears" the divine message and translates it into conceptual terms for reception by our cognitive faculties.

This, then, makes it clear why theology has traditionally been done 'within walls.' It emerges in response to a particular body of revelation and thus, quite naturally, confines itself to that body. Theology is done within the walls of a given revelatory tradition because it is born within those walls, and within those walls has its meaning and function.

But one thing more needs to be added. We might ask *why* faith seeks understanding. Why isn't faith content with itself, *sans* understanding? There is, of course, an important practical reason for this. Encounter with the divine seems never, or rarely, to be an experience whose purpose is fully consummated in itself. The divine makes demands upon us concerning how we are to live, what we are to value, how we are to relate to one another. Theology is needed to understand the tenor of these demands and to work out how to apply them to the concrete circumstances of life.

But I would say that faith also requires understanding in order simply to fulfill itself as faith. In the Gospel of John, for instance, Jesus says to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants because a servant does not *know* his masters business. Instead, I have called you friends, for

everything I have learned from my Father I have made *known* to you” (Jn. 15:14-15, my emphasis). Consummated relation to the divine – “friendship” with the divine - entails some understanding of the divine and of the divine purpose or *telos*. Likewise, flawed understanding of the divine can imperil true engagement with the divine. Again, in the words of Jesus: “Whenever someone hears the message about the kingdom and fails to *understand* it, the evil one comes and snatches away the word that was sewn in his heart” (Mt. 13:19, my emphasis).

Faith seeks understanding, then, in order to secure itself and fulfill itself as faith. Faith *sans* understanding is half-formed, incomplete in itself, and subject to distortion and error.

III. Theology Without Walls

If this is an accurate account of the roots and purposes of traditional theology – theology *within* walls – we might next ask: what are the roots and purposes of a theology *without* walls? Does theology without walls also have its roots in an encounter with the divine, a revelatory experience, or is it more like philosophy, examining the particular religions as they appear to mundane experience and, through comparative analysis, extrapolation, and generalization, seeking to extract from them something of universal import?

I would like to suggest that theology without walls *also* has its basis in revelatory experience; a revelatory experience more and more of us are having in the context of the global encounter of the world religions with one another. What we are seeing – and I do believe “seeing” is the right word here – is that insight into divine truth is to be found outside the bounds of our “home” tradition. In some cases, we see that the revelations of another tradition shed a light on our own that allows us to understand our own with more penetration than ever before. In other cases, we see that the teachings or practices of another tradition speaks to, or awakens, a dimension of

ourselves – of our “ultimate concern” - that our home tradition does not touch or speak to as profoundly. In still other cases, we see corrections for the distortions and limitations of our home tradition in the traditions of others.

I use the word “see” here because I do not believe that these recognitions are primarily the result of a purely intellectual calculus. They do not arise from a simple, conceptual, contrast and compare. On the contrary, at the strictly conceptual level many of the world religions would seem to have very little in common. Steven Prothero makes this point convincingly in his book, *God is Not One*. There is nothing, or very little, that would allow us to conceptually identify the attributes of the God of Abraham as presented in the Bible, for instance, with the attributes of the state of nirvana as presented in Buddhist tradition. When we confine our thought to this level we find more differences than commonalities, even apparently irreconcilable differences.

But many of us – more and more of us – have sensed, or intuited, or directly experienced, that at the level of encounter or engagement, at the level of *first-order knowledge*, there are similarities, complementarities, and correspondences between the spiritual state one enters when one feels oneself in relation to the God of Abraham, and the spiritual state of the Hindu bhaktic or the Buddhist arhat. This is not to say that such states are identical, but rather that they bear, or seem to bear, a meaningful correspondence to one another, such that we are led to believe, or perhaps, stated more cautiously, to suspect, that all these experiences of the divine have their roots in a common ontological ground.

This is an exciting thought. The religious pluralist John Hick analogizes it to the excitement Newton must have felt when he suddenly recognized that the same force that makes an apple fall to the ground also makes the planets revolve around the sun. The excitement itself, I would say, has a certain revelatory import and power. It calls us forth, it bids us on, it impels us to seek to

make sense of these correspondences and commonalities, not merely for the sake of sociological insight, but as a way of more fully apprehending the divine ground from which they spring. In short, it impels us to do theology without walls.

Of course, a planet revolving around the sun and an apple falling to the ground are not the same thing. That they are both manifestations of the same force, or of the same natural law, does not make them identical, nor does it imply that apples should “convert” to planets or planets to apples, nor that both apples and planets should somehow, impossibly, become gravity. It does not, in other words, imply that the religions should shed their distinctions and become identical. But it does give us a new understanding of the relationship of the religions to one another, and to the divine ground that is their source. Should this new understanding gain traction, should the religions of the world come to see themselves as different movements in response to the *same* divine reality, this would have a transformative effect on religion in general. It would bring us that much closer to an appreciation of the universality of truth proclaimed by all the major religions.

And in this way, again, we can see a revelatory dimension to theology without walls. If, indeed, there is a divine truth of universal import, then the violent antagonisms between and within the estranged religions must be seen as some indication of revelatory failure; i.e. the failure of divine truth to communicate itself fully and clearly. Theology without walls, then, may be seen as arising from a new moment of divine disclosure seeking to overcome such failure, a new moment that invites us to open ourselves to the whole range of human religious experience without privileging any one religion in particular. Such a theological approach may be seen to be, paradoxically, both more grand and more humble than traditional theology – with the power to heal the rifts that have impeded human communion with the divine for so long.

My suggestion, then, is that theology without walls, as a practice, and, indeed, as a commitment, *itself* betokens a new mode of engagement with the divine; one that, like all such modes when they are authentic, has a certain soteriological power: in this case, the power to resolve the tribalistic rivalries and hostilities that have plagued *homo religiosus* for millennia.

And, as we have seen, we find the seeds of this new moment already embedded within the traditional religions themselves. God's spirit and God's truth transcend the religious boundaries that condition religious rivalries and hostilities. Those who would worship in "spirit and truth," Jesus suggests, will come to see the contingent nature of such boundaries, and rise above them in their devotion to the God of All.

¹ John Thatamanil, "'True To and True For': The Problem and Promise of Religious Truth for a Theology Without Walls," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4, Fall 2016, 456.