# 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 were the centers of 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, rather, to a mode of being, a mode of 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, way of approaching religious pursuits; 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, we first need to consider the peculiar relationship of theology to religion. Religions do not arise in response to theological reflection, rather theology arises as an attempt to understand and apply religious experience. Theology as an intellectual discipline is subsequent to religion as a communal and spiritual practice. 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 – what Paul Tillich calls 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 ordinary life. This, I would say, is what distinguishes theology from philosophy. Philosophy begins with mundane experience and seeks to arrive at universal truths through rational reflection, extrapolation, and generalization. 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: Just as the messenger-god Hermes was charged with the task of communicating between gods and humans, so the theologian seeks to "hear" the divine message and translate it into conceptual terms for reception by our cognitive faculties.

This 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 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, beyond this, faith requires understanding in order simply to fulfill itself as faith. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants because a servant does not *know* his master's 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 with the divine – "friendship" with the divine – requires an understanding of the divine and of the divine purpose or *telos*. Indeed, flawed understanding can imperil faith itself. 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, inchoate, immature, 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 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 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 speak to, or awaken, a dimension of ourselves – of our "ultimate concern" – that our home tradition does not touch upon 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 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 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 promoting religious tolerance, but much more fundamentally, as a way of more fully apprehending the divine ground from which the diverse religions spring. In this respect, it is the spiritual drive itself that calls 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 merge into one. 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 world's religions come to recognize themselves as different responses to the same ultimate truth, this would transform religion in general. It would bring us that much closer to an appreciation of the divine Oneness proclaimed at the heart of all the major religions.

And in this way, again, we can see a revelatory aspect to theology without walls. If, indeed, ultimate truth is One, then religious rivalry and antagonism must be seen as a symptom of our failure to fully grasp this truth. Theology without walls, then, may be seen as inspired by a new

moment of divine disclosure, a moment that calls us to come out of the cave of our narrow parochialism and witness the wide expanse of the divine-human encounter.

My suggestion, in other words, 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 its own soteriological power: in this case, the power to resolve the tribalistic rivalries and hostilities that have plagued *homo religiosus* for so long, and thereby bring us closer to a recognition of the unity of truth.

And, as we have seen, we find the seeds of this new moment already present within the traditional religions themselves. God's spirit and God's truth transcend the boundaries that condition religious hostility. Those who would worship in "spirit and truth," Jesus suggests, will come to see the contingent nature of such boundaries, and rise above them toward a more genuine encounter with the God of All.

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[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.