

In Spirit and Truth:
Toward a Theology Without Walls

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Abstract

Theology Without Walls seeks to understand the nature of divine reality through an exploration of all the world's religious traditions, without confining itself to any one in particular. This essay discusses why theology has traditionally been done “within walls,” i.e., within the boundaries of specific traditions and suggests that, in our time, we are called to a new, more expansive and comprehensive, theological approach.

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 rival, 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. “Spirit” – *pneuma* in New Testament Greek – refers to that which animates life and gives it meaning. “Truth” – *aletheia* in Greek – might better be rendered “truthfulness.” It refers here, not to the correctness of abstract propositions, but to the earnestness that is the mark of the true spiritual aspirant. Jesus is saying that the true worshiper of God is not one whose primary allegiance is to one or another religious institution, but one who genuinely seeks the divine in heart and mind. Whether on the Samaritan

mountain or in the Jerusalem Temple, the one who worships in “spirit and truth” worships rightly.

Those of us pursuing a “theology without walls” aspire to do theology in “spirit and truth”; that is, in a manner not confined to any particular religious institution or tradition, but grounded, simply, in an earnest search for the divine. This aspiration constitutes a new, and distinctive, way of approaching theological pursuits; one forecast by Jesus in the above passage but fully realizable only in our time.

To make this clear it will be helpful, first of all, to consider why theology has traditionally been done *within* walls, and then to consider why and how some of us now feel called upon to pass beyond such walls in pursuit of a fuller approach to the divine.

II. Theology Within Walls

We might begin by considering 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. Religion as a communal and spiritual practice is prior to theology as an intellectual discipline. 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, indeed, 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, sense of the word: Just as the messenger-god Hermes was charged with the task of communicating divine messages to human beings, 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 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 some understanding 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).

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 many of us 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 more fully. 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. In all these cases, we see that our encounter with other traditions helps us to broaden, deepen, and solidify our experience and understanding of the divine.

I use the word “see” here because I do not believe these recognitions are 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 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, at the level of *first-order knowledge*, there are similarities, complementarities, and correspondences between the spiritual state one enters when one feels oneself in touch with 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 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. These

correspondences, in other words, do not imply that religions should shed their distinctions and merge into one. But they do give us a new understanding of the relationship of the religions to one another, and to the divine ground that is their source. We come to see the different religions as brethren rather than rivals, and are able to recognize the commonality of purpose – of ‘spirit and truth’ – underlying all genuine religious pursuits.

Thus, theology without walls entails a new understanding of the relationship of the religions to one another and to the divine ground from which they spring. We can further explore the nature of this new understanding by examining what I will call “the three suspicions” of theology without walls.

IV. Three Suspicions

Theology Without Walls (or what has also been called ‘trans-religious theology’) is, as I see it, predicated upon three assumptions, or what we might better call three “suspicions,” about the nature of the religions to one another, and to the divine.

The first suspicion is that there is indeed a singular divine reality to which human beings respond and have responded variously throughout their history. As noted earlier, we mean by ‘divine reality’ 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 divine reality is conceived, and indeed experienced, differently in different cultures, different religions, and different historical epochs. Indeed, as even a superficial review of the world’s religions makes clear, profound differences are to be found even within the *same* religious tradition: Protestant and Catholic Christians, Mahayanist and Theravadin Buddhists, Sunni and Shia Muslims, each have distinctive, and often conflicting, views of the meaning and import of their common

religious heritage. It seems to be the very nature of the divine to become *refracted* upon entering human experience, somewhat as white light is refracted when passing through a prism. Some will see the light as blue, some as red, some as yellow – but all are experiencing aspects of the same white light.

This observation leads us to our second suspicion: that the divine reality expresses itself, for the most part, *through* human beings, rather than directly *to* human beings. Thus, what we see when we look at the scripture, creeds, and practices of any given religious tradition are *products* of the divine-human encounter, not the divine as it is in and of itself. If you pour ocean water into a vial, the ocean water will, of necessity, take upon itself the shape of the vial. Similarly, the religions of the world are manifestations of the divine as “poured into” a particular people at a particular historical moment, shaped by the specific concerns and conditions that characterize that people at that moment. This is what *accounts* for the great diversity we see across religious traditions, and, indeed, within them.

The third suspicion, a correlate of the second, is that the various religions of the world are *imperfect* products of this divine-human encounter; ‘imperfect’ in the sense that they do not afford us an unmediated and unmitigated view of the divine *as such*, but rather contain, in their diverse and limited ways, what we might call ‘evidences’ of the divine, evidences that we must tease out, sort through, and make sense of in order to achieve a fuller understanding.

This way of thinking about religion stands in decided contrast to the view that some one religion has been directly, and uniquely, revealed by God, and that, therefore, all other religions are, at best, pale reflections, or, at worst, demonic imposters, of the one and only true religion.² Our suspicion is that this exclusivist view is itself but one way of experiencing the divine; a way shaped by the particular interests and concerns of the people who have adopted it.

I believe that there are strong arguments that can be made for these three suspicions; arguments that appeal not only to religious phenomena as they have appeared throughout the centuries, but also to the authoritative writings of many of the traditional religions themselves, when we read them with discernment. William Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and other religious pluralists have cogently presented such arguments, and so I won't rehearse them here. What we might next consider, however, are the implications that acceptance of these suspicions has for the practice of theology. How do we engage in a 'theology without walls'?

V. The Practice of Theology Without Walls

The purpose of theology in general is to provide the cognitive framework for our spiritual pursuits. If, again, we understand spiritual life as the endeavor to put us in touch with the object of our "ultimate concern," then we turn to theology in order to answer three basic questions regarding this endeavor. *First*: What is the true character of our 'ultimate concern,' i.e., what is the need or aspiration within us that we seek to fulfill in seeking 'the divine'? *Second*: What is the true nature of the *object* of our ultimate concern? What is it that actually satisfies this need or aspiration? *Third*: In what way (or ways) can genuine communion with the divine be achieved? How can our ultimate concern be fulfilled? Clearly, the purpose of answering the first two questions is for the sake of answering the third.

As we have discussed, the way these questions have been traditionally approached is through appeal to the authoritative teachings of whatever religious tradition one happens to subscribe to. Thus Theravadin Buddhists, appealing to the Four Noble Truths, will identify our ultimate concern with the need to overcome the suffering (*dukkha*) that arises from clinging to the ephemeral; they will identify the object of ultimate concern with the nirvanic state in which such

clinging is eradicated; and they will identify the way to communion with the object of ultimate concern (in this case, the way to nirvana) as the Eightfold Path.

Likewise, Christians, appealing to Scripture, will identify our ultimate concern with the desire for eternal life; they will identify the object of ultimate concern as the triune God, revealed through Christ; and they will identify the way to communion with that object as faith in Christ, however this may be envisioned.

The underlying assumption of these theological approaches is that the authoritative teachings and writings of one's particular tradition are, indeed, *legitimately* authoritative. This is an assumption that is, for the most part, accepted on the basis of faith. The theologian's aim is not so much to question, or even evaluate, the legitimacy of these authoritative teachings and writings, but to interpret them cogently and apply them effectively. Of course, one may also question their legitimacy, but to do so is generally to step outside the theological circle of one's own tradition and risk being labeled a heretic or apostate.

But if the suspicions of theology without walls are correct, this approach, though appropriate within its limits, will tend to obscure the greater picture of the divine-human encounter. What is needed, then, is a sea change – or what John Hick has called a “Copernican revolution” – in the way we think about religion and approach theology. As Hick expresses it, traditionally each religion has tended to see itself as at the center of the religious universe. The Copernican revolution he calls for involves recognizing that the divine itself is at the center, and that each religion revolves around this center, receiving what light it does in a manner accordant with its distinctive orientation to it.

When we take the assumptions, or suspicions, of theology without walls seriously, we realize that we must change our understanding of both the *locus* and the *weight* of religious authority.

These changes entail a shift from what might be called ‘dogmatic faith’ to what I have come to think of as ‘Socratic Faith.’ Let’s take a closer look at the nature of this shift.

VI. The Locus and Weight of Religious Authority: Toward a ‘Socratic Faith’

Let’s first consider the *weight* of religious authority. If religious scripture is now understood as the imperfect product of the divine-human encounter, we must abandon doctrines that claim the inerrancy or infallibility of scripture. A theology without walls must advance a doctrine of scriptural and doctrinal *fallibility*. This does not mean that we must cease to regard scripture as inspired in some sense. But we must recognize that inspired scripture will partake of the flaws and limitations of the inspired human beings who produce it.

Such a doctrine would lead to what might be called a *dialectical*, as opposed to a dogmatic, engagement with scripture.

In a dialectical approach we wrestle with scripture, question scripture, challenge scripture, and allow what we find in scripture to challenge and question us. The aim of the dialectic is not to finally reconcile ourselves to whatever we find in scripture, but to allow the dialectical process itself to conduct us into a fuller communion with the divine. Perhaps, in the course of this, we will find passages that we must reject as inadequate, or even perverse. We may reject such passages after due consideration, understanding that our final allegiance is to the divine and not to this or that imperfect reflection of the divine.

Such an approach naturally opens one to engagement with religious traditions beyond one’s own, through which one can expand and enrich one’s dialectical practice. Thus, one might consider the relationship between the Buddhist idea of *tanha* (craving, clinging) and the

Christian idea of *concupiscence*, or the relationship between *nirvana* and *eternal life* as spiritual aspirations.

The purpose of such comparisons is not merely to promote understanding between religions, but, more fundamentally, to seek the nugget of divine truth that may be contained in these different traditions, and thereby achieve a more complete apprehension of that truth.

But it may be asked: Where are we to find the *locus* of authority in such an approach? How are we to know, what criteria are we to bring to bear in deciding, whether or not we are moving closer to truth or farther away?

This question, it might be noted, is as salient for traditional theology as for theology without walls. How does the traditional theologian know that his or her theological interpretations are apt? Even the dedicated dogmatist will have to give an account, if she is at all reflective, of the grounds upon which she accepts what dogma she does. Such an account, if it is to avoid tautology, cannot simply appeal to dogma for its justification. Ultimately, then, it is *we* who must function as the locus of authority for the truth-claims we accept; that is, our intuitions, our discernment, our analyses, our honest assessments of what is true and good – which, ideally, we do not adhere to uncritically, but submit to the dialectical process through which we hope to make them progressively better.

But it may be asked: How can we trust to our fallible selves what is of *utmost* importance, of *ultimate* concern?

It is here, I would say, that something like *faith* comes in. Just as theology without walls entails a particular understanding of the locus and weight of religious authority, so it entails a particular kind of faith. The faith demanded by a theology without walls is what I have come to think of as *Socratic faith*. At his trial, Socrates was accused of denying the gods of Athens, a

charge leveled against him in response to his skeptical questioning of traditional Athenian beliefs. But he disputes this charge. He responds, “I do believe that there are gods, and in a far higher sense than that in which any of my accusers believe in them.”³ But what can this mean? Are there higher and lower ways to believe in the gods?

I suggest that the ‘higher sense of belief’ to which Socrates here refers is not belief as *affirmation* of this or that propositional claim, but belief as *dedication* to what is ultimately true and good; a dedication that entails, at the same time, the humble admission that one’s apprehension of the true and the good, at any given moment, is incomplete and fallible, and therefore in constant need of critical evaluation and correction.

At his trial, Socrates tells the famous story of being designated the wisest man in Athens by the Oracle at Delphi, but only because he is the only one who “knows that he doesn’t know.” Socrates says, “The truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing.”⁴

But it must be immediately pointed out that this conclusion does not lead Socrates to a resigned skepticism or nihilism. On the contrary, for Socrates, the continual pursuit of a wisdom that can never be perfectly seized is itself a form of worship; a sublime mode of engagement with the divine. And indeed, he does admit to having what he calls “a certain sort of wisdom. . . . If you ask me what kind of wisdom, I reply, such wisdom as is attainable by man, for to that extent I am inclined to believe that I am wise.”⁵

The sort of wisdom attainable by human beings is approximate wisdom, tentative wisdom, wisdom that must be ever open to review, reevaluation, supplementation, and correction. For Socrates, this confession of uncertainty does not make one less but more open to the divine, for it frees us from the idolatry of taking our own limited representations of the divine as sacrosanct.

Socrates, thus, takes it to be his divinely ordained mission to probe and question, critique and scrutinize: “For this is the command of God, as I would have you know, and I believe that to this day no greater good has happened to the state than my service to the God.”⁶ His faith is that the divine endorses this (necessarily) error-prone approach, and accepts us in our limitations and fallibilities. It’s demand of us is not that we cling to this or that dogmatic formula in denial of our limitations, but that we humbly pursue the true and the good in an honest and genuine way.

Finally, it might be noted that this mode of faith does not at all exclude full-fledged involvement and investment in one particular religious path. To recognize that there are many paths is not at all to imply that one should abandon the path one is on. But it does entail a new understanding of the status of one’s path, especially in its relation to others. Should this new understanding gain acceptance, should the religions of the world come to see themselves as different movements in response to the same divine reality, this itself would have a transformative effect upon religion in general. It would bring us that much closer to an appreciation of the universality of truth proclaimed by all the major religious traditions.

VII. Conclusion: In Spirit and Truth

Let us conclude, then, by recalling the story of the Samaritan woman who asks Jesus whether the proper place of worship is in Samaria or Jerusalem. The Samaritans and the Jews were hostile religious antagonists, each group claiming exclusive possession of the divine truth bequeathed to the ancient Israelites at Sinai, each accusing the other of distortion, corruption, error, and bad faith. Of course, the rivalry between the Samaritans and the Jews is but one instance of a great legion of such religious rivalries; rivalries that have plagued humanity over the long course of its religious history.

But if we posit that divine truth is *One*, at least in its ultimate nature, then these antagonistic schisms between (and within) the different religions – violent antagonisms that have led such critics as Christopher Hitchens to deem religion itself “poisonous” – must be seen as some indication of revelatory failure; i.e. the failure of revelation to communicate itself effectively to human beings. Such religious rivalries and antagonisms appear symptomatic of our failure to orient ourselves rightly to the divine.

From this perspective, theology without walls may be seen as inspired by a new revelatory moment; a moment that calls us to abandon our narrow parochialism and open ourselves to 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 revelation of the divine; one that, like all such revelations when they are authentic, has its own soteriological power: in this case, the power to resolve the tribalistic rivalries and chauvinistic hostilities that have plagued religious humanity for so long, and thereby bring us closer to a recognition of the divine as *One*.

And, as we have seen, we can find the seeds of this new moment already embedded within the traditional religions themselves: “An hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . ,” says Jesus, “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.”

To worship in spirit and truth is to transcend the boundaries that condition religious hostility. Those who do so, Jesus suggests, will come to see the contingent nature of such boundaries, and rise above them to a fuller and more genuine encounter with the God who would be “All in All.”

Notes

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.

² Karl Barth writes, for instance, that only Christianity has the authority “to confront the world of religions as the one true religion, with absolute self-confidence to invite and challenge it to abandon its ways and to start on the Christian ways.” from *Church Dogmatics*, as quoted in John Hick, *God has Many Names*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 8.

³ Plato, “Apology,” in *The Republic and Other Works*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 464-465.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 452.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 450.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 459.