

Theology Without Walls:
A New Mode of Spiritual Engagement?

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I. Introduction: 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.”

The first suspicion is that there is indeed a divine reality to which human beings respond and have responded throughout their history. Let us understand 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 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 a supernal state of awareness, religions have their origin in some encounter, or purported encounter, with this divine reality.

The second suspicion is that this 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 this divine-human encounter, not the divine as it is in and of itself. This would account 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, 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.¹

I believe that there are strong arguments that can be made for this trans-religious view; arguments that can 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. Indeed, I would be inclined to argue that either this view – or a view that would deny verity to religion altogether – are the *only* ones that make sense of religious phenomena as we find them.

My purpose today, however, is not to argue for this view, but rather to consider one of the questions that arises from it. This question is: How must theology proceed given these basic assumptions, or suspicions.

In order to answer to this question we must first consider the function theology plays in religious life in general. This, of course, is a big question and we won't be able to consider it in any great depth, but perhaps we can make a few suggestions that can serve as a spur for further thought.

II. The Role of Theology

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 the ultimate concern that motivates us? Second: what is the true nature of the object of our ultimate concern? And third: In what way

(or ways) can genuine communion with that object be achieved? Clearly, the purpose of answering the first two questions is for the sake of answering the third.

The way these questions have been traditionally approached is through appeal to the authoritative teachings of whatever religion one happens to subscribe to. Thus Theravada 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 would involve each recognizing that the divine 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.

IV. Toward a Trans-Religious Theology

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 what might be called the *weight* of religious authority.

Let’s first consider the *weight*. 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, in some sense, inspired. 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 without qualm, 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?

But 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 understanding 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.” 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 also 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.”

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.”

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 open to the divine but more, for it frees us from the idolatry of taking our own, limited, representations of the divine as sacrosanct.

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 traction, 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 religions.

And in this way we can see something of a *prophetic* dimension to theology without walls. If we posit that there is indeed a divine truth of universal import, then the 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 divine truth to communicate itself effectively to human beings. Theology Without Walls, then, invites us to a new mode of engagement with the divine with the potential to address this failure; a mode that opens itself to the whole range of human religious experience without privileging any one set of experiences, a mode that is, therefore, and

paradoxically, both more grand and more humble at the same time, with the power to heal the rifts that have impeded human communion with the divine for so long.

¹ 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*, I/2, p.357), as quoted in Hick, *God has Many Names*, p. 8)