

Is the argument for TWW persuasive, and are the methods promising?

I am honored to be invited to offer a brief response to the Theology Without Walls project, and in particular the recent edited volume *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*. To begin, I offer a preliminary note in response to the first question posed: “is the argument for TWW persuasive?” After reading the volume, it seems that there is no one singular argument, but perhaps several. Thus, I’m not sure how cohesive a singular overriding argument there is. However, that should probably be of no concern given the project is – after all – an argument for doing away with walls. Perhaps it is appropriate the project doesn’t confine itself within the walls of a singular argument.

I will proceed by offering a series of comments and questions that I find provocative, intriguing, and important as they relate to the overall project, its method, and arguments. Given my limited time, I am not able to speak to all of the points I like to, nor am I able to mention every chapter. After reading the volume in its entirety, many of my comments and questions are generated from all of the contributions. My comments here are what rose to the top in light of the questions posed by organizers. Overall, it seems, I come to this project as a kindred spirit. I am not out to tear down the walls of the TWW project. I am on board with the spirit of the project and, I would hope, my comments come from a place of genuine curiosity; my questions sometimes come simultaneously from a place of self-reflexive critique as I think through my own work.

I’ll center my response on an overriding question about the very nature or spirit of TWW. This question perhaps then spawns a few secondary questions, though no less important. The following questions more-or-less lay at the back of my mind as I read the volume:

1. Do the contributors to this volume, or the scholars involved in the TWW walls project, have a general and shared understanding of TWW?
2. Is there a general or shared definition of the term transreligious, and thus transreligious theology?
3. How ought one to distinguish TWW from interreligious theology? Does the term transreligious help in answering these questions?
4. Does the lopsided gender ratio shape TWW and the responses to the questions above, and how?
5. What implicit (and explicit) social forces play into socializing such a project? Is the very question about “walls” to begin with a uniquely Western one? [Likewise, how does my implicit socialization contribute to the very questions and observations I raise in this response?]

John Thatamanil offers a clear definition of the theologian without walls as one who seeks “to know ultimate reality not by rejecting spiritual disciplines of their home tradition but by supplementing those disciplines with others responsibly borrowed from other traditions.” (55). If this is the case, then is a theologian without walls also a comparative theologian in the sense that they are venturing beyond their home tradition (but they do still indeed have a *home* tradition) in order to learn, but then perhaps breaks with the comparative theological tradition by then borrowing from non-home traditions to supplement their home tradition? This borrowing – as I understand it – is generally not something most Comparative Theologians talk about or do, but rather they tend to put more stress on learning more about their home tradition by crossing over into non-home traditions – and returning with new eyes to see and generate new insights; but those insights come from their home tradition in light of other traditions [please correct me if I am over-simplifying or casting too general of a statement on the discipline of comparative theology].

Interreligious Theology

In a similar vein, the question comes up: how do we relate doing theology without walls to doing interreligious theology. Perry Schmidt-Leukel defines interreligious theology as “the form that theology assumes when it takes religious truth claims seriously, those of one’s own religious tradition and those of all

others. Taking them seriously means to search for possible truth in all of the religious testimonies.”¹ So it would seem that John Thatamanil’s definition of theology with walls is strikingly similar here (perhaps the same, I don’t know?). Thatamanil writes TWW seeks “to know ultimate reality not by rejecting spiritual disciplines of their home tradition but by supplementing those disciplines with others responsibly borrowed from other traditions” (55). Might we conclude that doing theology without walls is akin to, or perhaps an exercise in, doing interreligious theology but doing it without a home or a need to return home? I realize Thatamanil recognizes the theologian without walls does have a home tradition. Perhaps this is another way to say “Where every you go, there you are,” bound by whatever self-imposed or socially constructed walls, whether you are conscious of them or not. This relates to my question of whether we are all bound by walls that we’ve been implicitly socialized into.

Transreligious?

An operative word in the subtitle is *transreligious*. What is the relation of theology without walls to transreligious theology? Again, I quote John Thatamanil since he addresses it most explicitly. He says that “a theologian without walls or the transreligious theologian is one who seeks to know the truth of ultimate reality by faithfully engaging in the spiritual disciplines of more than one religious tradition.” Two questions come up: 1) does this make the theologian without walls a multiple religious believer or, at the very least, a multiple religious participant or observer? Likewise, 2) as a “transreligious theologian,” does the theologian without walls *transcend* the traditions, practices, and disciplines being drawn from in order to create a novel perspective?

Are the terms transreligious, interreligious, and “without walls” synonyms” or can we make useful distinctions? Some contributors, it would seem, perhaps use the terms “interreligious” and “transreligious” interchangeably (and sometimes I recall “interreligious” used synonymously with “multireligious”). I’ll make the calculated assumption that most contributors do not consider these terms are synonyms and can be used distinctly. I raise this issue here because the task of discerning whether the overall argument for a theology without walls is persuasive can be frustrated by or complicated for me by, what appears to be, some disagreement over (or lack of clarity) the use of language with regards to how the “interreligious” “transreligious” (and sometimes “multireligious”) qualify the doing of theology. In my view, “transreligious” probably can be distinguished from “interreligious” in some sense, or at least it can infuse the term “interreligious” with the reminder that:

1. as Anne Hege Grung often writes about: that religions are not stable entities with fixed boundaries, but rather they are dynamic internally diverse and ever-fluid movements with moving and porous boundaries; and also that transreligious thought more properly recognizes intrapersonal multiple religious belonging and representation (as John Thatamanil alludes to); that is, transreligious can helpfully place more focus on the individual than on the collective institutions.
2. The prefix *trans-*, in my view, *can* signal the generation of something novel that goes beyond – that transcends – the sum total of that which is being integrated or synthesized. So, the possible (and perhaps necessary) output or outcome of transreligious theology might be the generation of something new that didn’t previously exist in the same way.

I generally prefer the term transreligious to interreligious for many of these reasons. I spent just about over a year to get the academic center that I direct to change its name from the center for “Interfaith Learning” to the center for “Interreligious Studies.” I’m not sure how popular I would be if I took up the mission to rename the center again to the center for “transreligious studies.” However, within the academic ranks, I tend to agree with Oddbjørn Leirvik, who foresees that “university theology will be done in the third space between established faith traditions – that is, interreligiously. ... [and] beyond that, in response to the

¹ Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures – An Extended Edition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 13.

complex reality of fluid identities and multiple belongings, theology must also increasing by done *trans*religiously.”²

In any case, perhaps this imperfection of language and frustration over terms is not too problematic at all. Maybe it is fitting, and only further drives home the commandment that “thou shalt not do theology with walls,” even with regards to being walled-in by language.

Antecedents?

As I read this volume, I wondered what projects or movements already exist or have existed in the history of religious and spiritual traditions that do, or set out to do, what TWW does? This is not a criticism of TWW, rather I wonder what precedent is there already for this type of project? Are there are forerunners or examples of individuals who do this? Are there examples of this spirit for unbridled unwalled thinking beyond the so-called “major world religions,” say for example in the indigenous and Native traditions? Nicholas Black Elk comes to mind, the Lakota Catholic spiritual leader whom some have argued that his immense spiritual sensitivity came from his Native Lakota tradition and taught him to remain open to spiritual nourishment wherever it might be found and thus, in a way, to do spirituality without walls... and hence, when he encountered Catholicism (as fraught with colonial oppression and power imbalance as it was), Black Elk was open to entertaining ways to incorporate its elements of truth (as he perceived them) into his Lakota worldview and lifeway.

What historical individuals, events, communities, or even traditions might you suggest we look to as embodying the spirit of TWW? Maybe volume 2 can focus on this question? In other words, are there already traditions or movements out there now or in history that we might interpret as, or perhaps they self-identify as, as implicitly (or explicitly) doing TWW?

Leaving Home (the House)?

Finally, I was struck by the concluding lines of Fr. Clooney’s chapter in which he rewrites Jerry Martin’s words.

- Whereas Martin argues that “what is needed is a theology without walls,” Clooney argues that “what is needed is a theology with walls.”
- Whereas Martin pleads for “no confessional boundaries or blinders,” Clooney advocates for “a home with foundations and walls and windows and doors, and a roof held up by the walls, and a welcome mat at the entrance.”
- Martin affirms the widely recognized self-implication of theology in that “we stand somewhere,” but “our sense of our goal is not limited to where we stand at the outset.”

I read these juxtapositions and wondered whether they might be reconciled. I haven’t worked it out, and perhaps it is not my job to do that. Maybe one can have their theological home with walls, windows, and welcome mat as Clooney reminds us, but does that limit our goal of venturing outside the walls of our home to explore the world. I suspect not, Clooney would argue. Afterall, most of us grow up and leave the house (but perhaps not the “home) in which we were raised. We go on to inhabit other houses and even build new ones (some of us inhabit multiple houses and homes). Many of us also return to our childhood home or family frequently. Maybe I don’t appreciate this divide between walls or no walls. My intuition is that we all have walls that we’ve been socialized into, whether we like it or know it or not. But I’m not sure that ought to keep us from trying to identify those walls get beyond them. So, might the juxtaposition offered by Dr. Martin and Fr. Clooney be reconciled somehow? Is it possible for us to “eat our cake and have it too?”

² Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Pluralisation of Theologies at Universities: Approaches and Concepts,” *Pluralisation of Theologies at European Universities*, edited by Wolfram Weisse, Julia Igrave, Oddbjørn Leirvik, and Muna Tatari, (Munster, German: Waxman Verlag, 2020), 33.