

Some Comments on Jerry L. Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls:  
The Transreligious Imperative*

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Due to what I think was a misunderstanding on my part, I didn't think I would be a respondent on this panel until a couple of days ago. That means that I had only a couple of days to read the volume, which, regrettably, I was forced to read more quickly than I'd like, and only a couple of hours to cobble together a few comments. As a result, my remarks will be a bit impressionistic and unpolished. I will also focus on only one of the many questions this thought-provoking volume raises, and that is the relationship between Theology without Walls (TWW) and Comparative Theology.

Like Comparative Theology a couple of decades ago, and pluralist theologies of religion a couple of decades before that, TWW presents itself as a new theological endeavor. I would argue, however, that TWW simply fills a space in the interreligious theological landscape that Comparative Theology ceded when the latter defined itself, sometime in the early 2000's, in more confessional terms. When I was studying under Frank Clooney in Boston in the later 1990's, Comparative Theology was a more capacious term, basically standing for any theological engagement with multiple religious traditions that was empirically based. It was understood that both Clooney and Bob Neville were doing comparative theology, despite their distinctive approaches. In the years since, the discipline has achieved more definition, but at the price of excluding more "meta-confessional" approaches. Since I personally identify more with those meta-confessional approaches, I have found myself less and less able to identify with Comparative Theology. I was therefore very curious to see how the contributors to this volume would define TWW vis-à-vis Comparative Theology.

In his opening programmatic statement, Jerry Martin defines TWW over and against traditional theologies "with confessional restrictions." He defines TWW on the basis of a distinction between a concern with ultimate reality, on the one hand, and what a particular tradition teaches, on the other, a distinction that recalls W.C Smith's famous antithesis between "faith" and "religion." The former names the 'vertical' relation between human beings and Ultimate Reality; the latter refers to the 'horizontal' sociological relations among particular religious communities. The parallel with Smith raises the possibility that TWW might be vulnerable to some of the well-known criticisms of Smith's pluralist "world theology" -- that it unwittingly seeks to universalize the particular standpoint of its proponents, or that it fails to appreciate the role of a particular religious community in shaping the outlook of the pluralist theologian. Notwithstanding its vulnerabilities to this line of critique, I would say that TWW's insistence on maintaining a distinction between "saying what you think is true" and specifying what a particular religious community believes might provide a healthy corrective to the postmodern commitments that undergird Comparative Theology. If I may, let me make this point by way of a brief

autobiographical reminiscence. A formative moment in my own theological education was my first encounter with the postliberal critique of pluralist theologies of religion that were dear to my heart. I remember being impressed -- unduly impressed, as it turns out -- with George Lindbeck's argument, in *The Nature of Doctrine*, that experientially based pluralist theologies were out of step with the "cultural-linguistic approaches" that were ascendant in the humanities and the social sciences. I must confess to feeling some vindication when I later discovered -- belatedly -- that the radical social constructionism that forms the theoretical basis of Lindbeck's postliberal program has become as out-of-date as the experientialism of the liberal theologians and phenomenologists that Lindbeck criticized. In this connection I especially appreciate Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz's effort to reflect on the theological implications of the recent cognitive scientific approach to religion in their contribution to the volume. More broadly, I wonder if TWW might be envisioned as a mode of interreligious theological reflection that rests on a critique of some of the theoretical commitments undergirding Comparative Theology, namely, a postmodern rejection of human universals, the Gadamerian celebration of hermeneutically productive "prejudice," and Lindbeck's Geertz-inspired conception of a religion as a comprehensive interpretive scheme.

I welcome TWW as a mode of theological reflection that is responsive to the situation of many people in today's society who do not identify with any single religious tradition. As indicated above, however, I do question its claim to represent a new approach to theology. In the 1990's and early 2000's comparative theologians were saying the same thing about Comparative Theology. It was Tomoko Masuzawa's 2005 book, *The Invention of World Religions*, specifically, the chapter on the Comparative Theology of the late nineteenth Century, that disabused me of this view. When one looks at this much neglected, indeed forgotten body of literature, one finds statements that are disconcertingly similar to those made by pluralist theologians of religion in the '60's, '70's and '80's, comparative theologians in the '90's and early 2000's, and now the proponents of a TWW. Each of these projects has regarded itself as the vanguard of an expansive theological vision based on an unprecedented world situation emerging with the dissolution of long-standing cultural and religious boundaries. This outlook has the effect of obscuring the continuities that link the latest theological proposal with the invariably dated and discredited interreligious ventures of the past.

I suspect that this curious tendency on the part of each successive theological generation to view itself as embarking on a new and largely unprecedented endeavor might evince a failure to confront a disconcerting truth that lies at the heart of modern theology, rather in the way that an intractable contradiction, according to Levi-Strauss's theory of myth, continuously generates a stream of variations on a mythical theme. The truth I have in mind -- if it is in fact a truth -- is that the transformative spiritual disciplines that the contributors of the volume affirm presuppose particular forms of religious community (as some contributors contend) that are necessarily constituted by a moment of exclusion (as only hard-core exclusivist theologians, it seems, are willing to affirm). A convenient focal point

or “phenomenological site” to examine this thesis is religious doctrine. Doctrines are not simply first-order truth claims or “beliefs” that can be assessed and compared “philosophically.” As contributors like Feldmeier and Clooney recognize, following the influential work of Lindbeck, religious doctrines function to maintain and regulate particular religious communities. I would go further, however, and argue that in addition to their descriptive, regulative, and expressive functions the identity-sustaining doctrines of a faith tradition function “politically” to mobilize oppositional identity. I would argue that this political function belongs to the essence of religious doctrines; it is not somehow adventitious to them.

I suspect that the heart of the anti-institutional bent that Linda Mercurante notes in those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) is an aversion to precisely this “political” moment of exclusion -- a moment which forms an inescapable component, whether actively countenanced or not, of “religious” commitment. Against the patronizing attitude that professional theologians sometimes exhibit towards this group, the SBNR perspective might ultimately rest not on a superficial dilettantism or consumer mentality, but rather on an honest insight into the necessary connection between religious community and a continuing history of religious exclusion. If so, giving theological shape to the SBNR outlook might not simply be a matter of equipping this putatively theologically illiterate group with, as Mercurante eloquently puts it, the “theological tools” needed to excavate their buried beliefs and overcome the contradictions there that inhibit spiritual growth (198). More disconcertingly, it might be that SBNR types are simply unconvinced by the specious distinctions through which theologians have sought to isolate a core of religious commitment from the exclusivism, chauvinism, and intolerance that are its more unsavory historical concomitants.

To the extent that TWW regards itself as the theological expression of the SBNR demographic, perhaps an honest acknowledgment of the “inescapability of the political” -- an awareness which I am suggesting lies at the heart of the SBNR attitude -- will set the agenda for future ventures under the Theology Without Walls rubric.