

Jeannine Hill Fletcher
Fordham University

The volume *Theology Without Walls* makes a compelling case that who/what God / Ultimate Reality / is far bigger and more expansive than any singular religious claim or tradition of claims could accommodate. This theological premise forms the backbone of the many and diverse explorations presented by the most eminent scholars of our day. And the foundational affirmation, something like the idea “that all these experiences of the divine have their roots in a common ontological ground” (17) opens the space for the insights and experiences of the everyday to be a part of this journey, affirmed especially with attention to the ‘spiritual but not religious’ (LM) and glimpses of personal experience as a resource for exploration (JRH 157). This theological commitment to (a) the expansiveness of ultimate reality and (b) the accessibility of the divine reality fundamentally grounds the range of projects in the volume that invite the reader to consider the many ways this reality might be encountered, conceptualized, thematized and responded to. The theological commitment that “the religions of the world have emerged...from an encounter...with the divine” (RO, 15) gives the clear impulse to transcend the limitations of a particular ‘religion’. With analytic precision and decades of knowledge (both academic and practical/spiritual) on display, the authors together mount a most persuasive case that God/Ultimate Reality/is infinitely more interesting than a single tradition could capture. Thinking theologically transreligious *is* an imperative, and we are in a critical moment for theologizing without walls.

As the project continues to unfold, we might be invited here to “concentrat[e] on methodology” (JW, 99). Clarity and precision as hallmarks of the approaches in this volume recommends situating TWW within the tradition of philosophical theologies working to address competing claims to truth reflected in the religious traditions of the world. “Because it is about

seeking truth, TWW focuses on the propositions associated with religions” (JD, 172) The care with which our authors approach this as a philosophical and theological task is enhanced by interdisciplinary discussion in conversation with sociology (WW), cognitive science (JDS and HDC) and linguistics (JRH) among others. A method that consults a range of experts expands toward the practical when “contemplative life...[is] seen in some sense as a professional area of expertise of human encounter with ultimate reality.” (RM, 92) “Systematic thinking” (RN, 8), “comparative analysis” (WW, 121) and attention to cross-cultural patterns of “cognitive dispositions” (JDS and HDC, 132) present to the reader clear and precise data, from professional practitioners aiming to produce clear and precise knowledge that might break down the walls that have been *imaginatively* constructed around ‘the religions’ by earlier generations of professional practitioners (in the academy and in the community). Yet, if “the goal is to know God” (JM, 49), why would experts have a monopoly and why would we think that the professional class who built the walls in the first case would be our best guides?

While walls are being torn down, it may be the case that this volume (and TWW methodologies) remain structured by underground foundations that reveal an indebtedness to expertise in theology as a rational discipline, truth-seeking and scientific, speculative and drawn toward what can be known with clear and distinct ideas. That is a hallowed approach to our discipline. But, how might the growing edges of our field dissolve the walls even further to remind us of the messiness of actual human existence and a God who might meet us there? Might a more robust incorporation of the insights of psychoanalysis and the approach of theo-poetics ask us to consider the affective dimensions of our project in which even our own experience is unknowable to us.

“Theology of course frames the widest enigma as God. But when I repeat that word I feel the thud of an old enclosure. I hear Georges Bataille: “If I said decisively: ‘I have seen God,’ that which I see would change. Instead of the inconceivable unknown—wildly free before me, leaving me wild and free before it—there would be a dead object and the thing of the theologian—to which the unknown would be subjugated.” Oh that thing. We do admit that even the apophatic edge of theology, the very source of the discourse of the inconceivable and the unknown, can be paraphrased as: it is a mystery—do not question! Cliché, conquest, or commodification: the frame freezes. Really, though, “the theologian”? Must one still picture, say, the cleric of Bataille’s seminary sojourn? Has the theologian not in the intervening century been broken and distributed into bodies of divergent colors, sexes, voices? Hasn’t she said and unsaid “the thing of the theologian”? Hasn’t she spent decades at His deathbed? The “death of God” reflects back to her, in enigma, the deadened things of a world subjugated to the godly. And to the godless. But in the subdued light of this hospice, what do we actually see dying—besides just what we are able to see? These images appear, with Feuerbachian precision, as mirrors of ourselves, diffracted. If we linger, if we are not afraid of this dark, this dying, another liveliness suggests itself. “The insistent stirring of the event” begins dimly; in, as Jack Caputo insists, “a thought that perhaps all this really is through a glass, in the dark, and perhaps the darkness goes all the way down. Perhaps we really do not know at all what we mean.” (Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*)

The turn to God-talk with theo-poetics asks us to think not only with our minds and with what our minds cannot conceive but with our bodies as well. While lots of very smart thinkers were consulted throughout the exploration of *Theology Without Walls*, very little of their bodies came into the picture. What would Theology Without Walls look like if more of our bodies were

present – how would we see spiritual practices not only reaching out to interface with the divine but also practices that discipline the body; what difference does gender, sexuality, sex, race, racism, white supremacy, hunger, pain, bodies clawing their way to security on a planet that dissolves beneath their feet make within TWW. Some of the methods in TWW inch us toward bringing in bodies – (WW), (JRH), (LM) – but what if our bodies in those places of uncontainable desire were the site of our Theology Without Walls in the tradition of Marcella Althaus-Reid: “Using the theological memory of unsettling loving experiences, we should be able to think about an experience of God in movement as expressed by the rhetoric of an erotic overflowing of the divine.” (Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 44) She continues by insisting that the place to let God loose from the walled-in expressions of Totalitarian Theology is to find God in the queer (and trans) experience of the thus-far unspeakable sexualities on the margins. From her Christian perspective she writes, “this would mean that all these suppressed, displaced embodiments of knowledge could feel at home in the Trinity, just as the Trinity should feel at home in gay bars and S/M scenes, dis-placing temporary hegemonies and allowing a real plurality of religious experiences and theological practices by giving hospitality to strangers, in the most radical way.” (Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 75) Where is the God of the gay bar and where are the gay bars in a Theology Without Walls (or does TWW still participate in T-Theology, a totalitarian and totalizing discourse in which some human experiences *are* off limits?) Might I suggest that the transreligious theology of TWW would benefit excitingly from a different orientation toward the trans in religion; or might I ask what does the transreligious imperative have to do with the *trans*-religious experience? As for the horizons of TWW, I can’t wait for these two transreligious expressions to meet!

If we brought bodies and sex and sexual acts and gender and genders into this volume, we'd have to ask what are the conditions of Theology Without Walls that make it a project largely produced by male bodies. And it would be good methodologically for us to ask, why is this the case? Not only is it the case on the surface that 19 out of 22 contributors to the volume are identified with the pronouns 'he' and 'his' but also that the expert perspectives consulted and the genealogies traced render the volume a largely male-voiced enterprise. I did not recognize *every* name in the Index, but of those I did the gender imbalance was 7 to 1, counting a mere 10 women within an extensive index. Thinking through an emerging set of methodologies, we might borrow from another cutting edge to our field with anti-racism activist and scholar Ibram Kendi who recommends that we assess projects as racist if they produce the outcome of products that further the privilege of White persons; by analogy if TWW has produced a product with the contours that privilege male voices, is it a sexist project determined by ideologies and practices of male supremacy? There is something functionally amiss in a discipline that produces work with such gender imbalance.

But the gender imbalance of the volume (and maybe the field) may not be unrelated to the issues of bodies and messiness and a divine-human reality that the experts cannot contain. Case in point is poor Sheila. Apparently known as the disparaged (White middle class?) woman from Robert Bellah's imagination who picks and chooses her spiritual practices undisciplined by the guidelines of (male) authorities. While the olive branch of inclusion is extended to Sheila as a specter – "we are all Sheilas" (CD, 32) – she lingers as a fringe element as experts and professionals mobilize ever greater certainties about who/what God/Ultimate Reality is from our learned locations. Locations attained by resources of time, money, home, food and status granted to us. TWW while knocking down its imaginary walls nevertheless remains enclosed in

the practices of an academy that has disparaged the Sheilas who I suspect are the vast majority of humanity. Humans whose bodies are conditioned by stress, and suffering, and seeking, and who come crawling to the unknown on their knees not from a place of power and privilege but when everything else has failed. We go to the yoga studio and call out to Durga because we are broken and in need of healing and we think, why not, maybe this will work; we light candles on our knees at the feet of Mary because our babysitter really did just give birth in a bathroom and leave her newborn on the steps of her boyfriend's home; we give God the glory when finally a job comes through after months of scraping and borrowing and gasping for breath under bills; and when our walled-in traditions fail us again with male power and abuse and disrespect, f*ck-em we seek a path through the wilderness of our lives that might sustain us in any way possible.

“My body is like a religious pantheon” (Kyung, cited in H-DL, 235). The human body is fed by a religious smorgasbord because we are desperately seeking food that we need to survive, very often because male-constructed systems of power have kept that food from us. Does this count as “strategic religious participation” (PH, 165). How does religious scavenging for sustenance compare with theologians “who seek to know ultimate reality not by rejecting the spiritual disciplines of their home tradition but by supplementing those disciplines with others responsibly borrowed from another tradition.” (JT, 55) TWW may be tearing down walls but presupposing past authorities that leave the foundations in place. Thus, the volume exhibits a tension: we want the esteemed practices and insights of our traditions, yet we believe Ultimate Reality cannot be bound by any one. But, if “the sacred, whatever its form(s), is a natural presence, equitably available to all human communities” (JRH, 153) it is *not* the monopoly of “advanced” practitioners (RM, 85) and expert scholars. What kind of ultimate reality would give a sh*t about whether one is following the hallowed paths of predecessors who constructed the walls in

the first place, when desire draws us out fumblingly to find the divine in whatever places we might?

What if TWW took seriously the proposal that “God is equally mediated to human beings.” (JRH, 155) A pulling down into the messiness of actual human lives might press Theology Without Walls to announce more directly the point of all this transreligiosity, with the experiences of regular humans, encountering agents and agency that may or may not be “supernatural” (JDS/HDC, 130), blurring the boundaries of the human/divine / the natural/supernatural. The great ranges of liberation theologies ask us to direct our spiritual and mental energies not to academic debates but to the transformation of our world and the wilderness of our survival. But, womanist narrative theology reminds us that while “Hagar dared to give a name to the God she met in the wilderness. In a sense this God is her God and possibly not the God of her slave holders Abram and Sarai.” (Dolores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 109). TWW indeed has the foundations to be transformative, but this reader would have liked to hear more directly – what’s the point of it all in relation to the 50 or 80 years that my body will be making its way through this world of injustice, rape, deception, COVID, police brutality, systems of White supremacy, children in cages and their mothers deported, corporate wealth and the incessant progress of capitalism, oceans filled with plastic – and what’s the possibility that some of the Gods we meet are not the God of liberation. How might we mobilize the impulse to tear down imaginary walls and direct mental energy into tearing down actual ones, and might this adjudicate between the Gods of our studies? How do the methods of TWW connect to the world of poverty, policies, possibility and political activism? How might TWW help us as a planet which doesn’t have the luxury of seeking truth in the abstract when what we are really seeking is “survival” (LM, 189).