

“Theology Without Walls” Facing the Ultimate’s Ineffability

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I wholeheartedly agree with the premise of TWW as formulated by Jerry Martin in his general introduction:

The coming wave of thinking about ultimate reality is transreligious. [...] If the aim of theology is to know and articulate all we can about the divine or ultimate reality, and if revelations, enlightenments, and insights into that reality are not limited to a single tradition, then what is called for is a theology without restrictions, a Theology Without Walls... (Martin 2020: 1)

This is actually the same basic argument that I expounded in my 2004 study *Gott ohne Grenzen* (Schmidt-Leukel 2004), now also available in English (Schmidt-Leukel 2017b). If God is beyond or without boundaries, and if we have good reasons to assume that knowledge of God is not restricted to one small section of humanity, then theology will also have to be without boundaries and shall, ideally, be based on all relevant data from the whole history of humankind. This premise of TWW has, of course, been first and most powerfully developed by the fathers of pluralist theology, such as – in Christianity – Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1989) and John Hick (e.g. 1985: 26-34).

The premise of TWW raises two fundamental questions: *First*, what are the good reasons to assume, in Jerry’s words, that “revelations, enlightenment, and insights” into the divine “are not limited to a single tradition”? *Second*, what kind of knowledge or insights can we, as human beings, hope, or reasonably trust, to achieve regarding divine or ultimate reality?

On the first question, I suggest that the reasons for assuming that knowledge of the divine is not restricted to one particular tradition need to come, on the one hand, from the traditions themselves, and, on the other hand, from human observation. The scope of TWW is therefore universal, its starting point however is inevitably local, while in the process of doing TWW this locality will progressively expand and become multi-, trans- or interreligious.

Today, I shall focus on the second question, which is, in terms of logical order, of first priority. What kind of knowledge can we reasonably hope to achieve of ultimate reality? Here I am not speaking on the *epistemic* certainty of such knowledge. In this respect, I suggest that all our knowledge of the Ultimate remains – under pre-eschatological conditions – fallible. I take the term “the Ultimate” to refer to a reality that transcends the limits of time and space in an *un*-limited, *in*-finite or *un*-conditioned way. Or to use the fine words of John Hick: it refers to “that putative reality which transcends everything other than itself but is not transcended by anything other than itself” (Hick 1993: 164). As long as we cannot establish conclusive evidence or proof that such a reality indeed exists, all our supposed knowledge about this reality must remain as “putative” as the existence of this reality itself. Hence, we cannot have certain, infallible knowledge of it – and as long as claims to infallible knowledge remain an expression of faith, such claims remain themselves fallible.

Yet this is not what I want to talk about today. I rather like to reflect on the *hermeneutical* nature of our claims to have some knowledge of the Ultimate. If ultimate reality necessarily

exceeds human understanding, human concepts, and therefore human language, if it is inconceivable, transcategorical, and ineffable – as many mainline theologians and philosophers of all the major religious traditions in the world have affirmed – how and what can we then learn about the ultimate? Or more precisely, what can we reasonably *say* about the Ultimate as part and parcel of such learning? So, my question is about the *logos* in *theology*, including Theology Without Walls, if the *theos* in *theology* is unspeakable.

That a reality, which transcends all limitations, needs to be inconceivable has been densely and compellingly expressed by Anselm of Canterbury in *Proslogion* 15: If God is that “than which nothing greater can be conceived,” God must be necessarily “greater than anything that can be conceived.” Or as Holmes Rolston III summarizes the findings of his comparative study of Augustine, al-Ghazali, Shankara and Nagarjuna: “the comprehensive ultimate is, almost analytically, incomprehensible. Comprehended by it, we cannot comprehend it” (Rolston III 1985: 136). Among others, Rolston cites Augustine’s famous statement: “if you do comprehend, he is not God.” Referring to Thatamanil’s recent book (2020), we could paraphrase Augustine and say: If you can circulate the elephant, it is not the elephant you’re circling. Or in more plain speech: If we can circulate it, it is certainly not the Ultimate, because ultimate reality circles us.

Is that then the end of the TWW project? Of the project to increase our knowledge and articulation about ultimate reality by going beyond the boundaries of confessional restrictions? I don’t think so, although the ineffability of the Ultimate sets indeed some real limits to what we can transreligiously learn about the Ultimate, and it constitutes a serious caveat not to transgress such limits. To quote Rolston once more: Religious inquiry must be marked by “humility and reverent mystery, which is often read by the proud or puzzled as a dodge and put-down” (Rolston III 1985: 136). These days, it has become somewhat fashionable to begin publications on interreligious topics by a hasty rejection of John Hick’s affirmation of the transcategoriality of “the Real *an sich*”, which – it is said – results from his Kantianism and would contradict all major religions’ self-understanding. I do not know which classic thinkers in the major religious traditions such critics have in mind – but as far as I can see, the ineffability of ultimate reality has been affirmed almost everywhere for basically the same type of argument, namely as a logical implication of unlimited transcendence, which – by the way – does not exclude but include unlimited immanence.

As a first learning result, inter- or transreligious inquiry, that is TWW, can reconfirm and mutually reaffirm the soundness of such negative theology or apophatic insight. It is not the case, as Jeanine Diller states in her contribution to the TWW book, that according to Hick “no religion has true claims about the Ultimate as it is in itself” (Diller 2020: 179). On the contrary, as Hick himself has repeatedly emphasized: All the major religions are true in their claims that ultimate reality necessarily exceeds human concepts and categories. On the basis of broad and correct observation, Hick rightly states “that all serious religious thought affirms that the Ultimate, in its infinite divine reality, is utterly beyond our comprehension” (Hick 1995: 58). However, as we all know, the theology and philosophy of the major religious traditions is not confined to the proclamation of apophatic truth. The big question is how the religions’ true affirmation of the Ultimate’s ineffability can be reconciled with the many cataphatic statements which also abound in the religions. Actually, the major religious traditions have developed various hermeneutical devices on how to combine the truth of apophatic negation with the truth of cataphatic affirmation, such as the theories of

satyadvaya (two truths or realities) in Hinduism and Buddhism, the concept of *upāya* (skillful means) in Mahayana, the theory of *analogia entis* in Christianity or the dynamic correlation of *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* (resemblance and removal) in traditional Islamic discourse on the Divine Names.

I suggest that John Hick's creative and peculiar reception of Kant has led to a valuable solution regarding the relationship between apophatic and cataphatic language, a solution which far from an anaesthetizing interreligious dialogue (Cheetham 2020: 96, 100) actually enables and fosters interreligious learning without abandoning the crucial apophatic insight of the great traditions and surrendering it to the modern human hubris of allegedly comprehending the Ultimate.

According to Hick the cataphatic language of the religions refers to what he calls the divine *personae* and *impersonae*, that is, to the Ultimate or Real “as humanly thought of and experienced.” The “Real *an sich*,” that is the Real in its infinite transcendence, cannot be perceived as such and adequately expressed in human terms, because human perception is inevitably limited by our finite cognitive capacities which cannot properly comprehend the infinite and transcendent nature of the Real. This is a position that Hick had already taken long before he became a religious pluralist (Hick 1988a [1957]: 190; 1988b [1961]: 88f). He is not using Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal in order to substantiate the apophatic dimension. He rather uses Kant's distinction as a model for making sense of the cataphatic aspect. In order to do so he draws on one specific interpretation of Kant, as Hick emphasizes in *An Interpretation of Religion*: “the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness” (Hick 1989: 241). Different from Kant, Hick applies this view to religious experience. That is, according to Hick we *do* experience the Real, but always in our limited and specifically human ways. The *personae* and the *impersonae* of the Real, that is, the personal deities and impersonal absolutes, are thus interpreted by Hick as phenomenal manifestations of genuine human experiences of ultimate reality preserved and further developed in collective human memory. Going even further beyond Kant, Hick holds that we are able to experience the Real because the transcendent is simultaneously immanent “within our own nature.” He underlines that this insight avoids one of the crucial problems of Kant's epistemology, namely that “the thing in itself causes its own phenomenal appearances, although causality [...] is one of the categories in terms of which we form that phenomenal world” (Hick 2006: 164). According to Hick, the Real is present to our mind because it is immanent in our nature. Hick is far away from creating that kind of hiatus between the noumenon and the phenomenon of which his critics accuse him.

Hick's conception has given rise to the question of whether the cataphatic talk as we find it in the religions is reflective only of our human nature (including our cognitive capacities) or whether it is also, at least to some extent, reflective of the Real in its ultimate, infinite, transcendent nature, the Real in itself. Hick has consistently denied the latter alternative, because this would contradict the truth of the apophatic insight and would undermine the transcendent nature of the Real. But from this it does not follow that cataphatic talk is *only* about human nature – especially if we consider Hick's view that religious experience is possible in virtue of the Real's “immanence within our own nature” (Hick 2006: 164). According to Hick, cataphatic language—as related to the manifestations of the Real—is about the experiential interface between the Ultimate and the human. In this realm we are

dealing with genuine and significant knowledge: “We cannot know it [the Real] as it is in itself, but we do know it as it affects us” (Hick 2006: 206). Cataphatic language gives us a clue of what happens when human beings genuinely experience ultimate reality, of how such experience transforms human lives and how it sheds new and significant light on human existence and the nature of the world in which we find ourselves. For if a reality that transcends the limits of time and space really exists, and if its transcendence also implies immanence, the world in which we live is not confined to its limits. They rather appear as a kind of veil which in some way hides and in other ways reveals the light that shines from beyond and within. In this way, Hick’s hermeneutics of religious insight and religious language leaves ample space for interreligious learning (Schmidt-Leukel 2017a: 109-46, 222-45). It is a perfect foundation for a Theology Without Walls. The elephants that we can successfully and rewardingly circle are the manifestations of the Real in human existence, experience and reflection.

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