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**THEOLOGY, WALLS, AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY:
A REVIEW ESSAY**

Leo D. Lefebure

Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative.
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Walls play many different roles in our lives: some walls mark boundaries; some defend borders from invaders or unwanted immigrants; some enclose prisoners lest they escape; some protect hillside land from erosion and agricultural crops from animals; and some walls support the roofs of buildings to make shelter and habitation possible. Given the variety of walls, the destruction of a wall can mean various things in different contexts: it can be part of a program of liberation or an expression of conquest. Ronald Reagan famously stated, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall”; and many Germans later rejoiced at the destruction of the Berlin Wall. The Letter to the Ephesians compares the hostility between Jews and Gentiles to a dividing wall that Jesus Christ has broken down (2:14), and Pope Francis has called for the removal of walls of separation: “How can we make it so that the welcoming of the other person and of those who are different from us because they belong to a different religious and cultural tradition prevails in our communities? How can religions be paths of brotherhood instead of walls of separation?” (See: Pope Francis, “Address at the Meeting on the Theme ‘Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the Context of the Mediterranean,” Naples, June 21, 2019). On the other hand, destroying a wall can be an act and symbol of domination: in the ancient world a conquering empire would destroy the walls of a defeated city to humiliate it and render it defenseless. The title of this volume uses the impersonal, military-political image of walls as a metaphor for defensive protective barriers that need to be taken down. Asian and Asian American women have more commonly followed Rita Nakashima Brock in using the biological

metaphor of interstitial integrity, based on organs that overlap. Most of the authors in this volume view the destruction of walls as liberating; however, chaos theory advises us that any organism that does not have boundaries of some sort will not have a lasting identity but will flow into its environment.

Given the various forms of walls and of religious traditions, it is not surprising that the research program of Theology Without Walls (TWW) as a transreligious imperative takes many diverse forms. The volume, *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, edited by Jerry L. Martin, brings together a wide variety of authors who approach transreligious theological reflection from different angles. Many authors who do not identify with any religious tradition assume that they have the right to appropriate aspects of all the world's religious traditions and use them for their own ends. Paul Knitter self-identifies as both Buddhist and Christian. Peter Feldmeier, S. Mark Heim, and Francis X. Clooney are rooted in the Christian tradition and open to learning from other traditions. Jeffery D. Long enters the conversation as a Hindu in the lineage of Ramakrishna.

Interreligious borrowing is as old as recorded religious history. Ancient Israelites borrowed religious images and practices from their neighbors. In many contexts in Asia, there is a long history of interreligious practice, as in the traditional Chinese practice of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religions. In the first centuries of the Common Era there were significant numbers of Jewish Christians or Christian Jews. Many Hindus view Shakyamuni Buddha as a Hindu, but most Buddhists do not share this perspective.

Interreligious borrowing can be very creative, but borrowers have not always respected the integrity of the tradition being utilized. In traditional societies around the world, religious worldviews made strict demands upon practitioners, often with threats of dire consequences in the afterlife if religious and ethical norms were violated. Many persons in the United States

and Europe feel entitled to experiment by drawing aspects of various religious traditions into their own personal synthesis. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues interviewed an American woman named Sheila who described her practice of borrowing, appropriating, and forming her own personal tradition, which she called “Sheilism.” Many critics questioned the legitimacy of Sheila’s practice; but in *Theology Without Walls*, Christopher Denny defends Sheila and accepts the metaphor of religious appropriation as putting items into a shopping cart: “the spiritualities we carry forth in our lives are there because we placed them in our carts. . . . In that sense, we are all Sheilas.” Denny rejoices in the freedom of choice of each individual to invent a new, personal-style religion according to one’s preferences.

Many persons in Europe and North America who do this type of spiritual shopping feel little commitment to any tradition. Jeanine Diller compares religious affiliation to being a sports fan, as she claims that “identifying oneself with a religion is as easy as becoming a fan of a sports team. Nobody except me decides that I am an University of Michigan football fan, and I can choose to live out my fanhood with as much or as little devotion as I please” (173). Diller has little sense of a religious tradition making strong demands upon a person’s identity or of any role for religious leaders to decide on a person’s entrance into the tradition. As a philosopher, Diller plays with the question of how to proceed if there are three Ultimate Realities (theistic, acosmic, and cosmic, 179-80). One wonders what the word “ultimate” means in this instance. But the inevitable Trinitarian-sounding question emerges: are the three so-called Ultimate Realities at the end of the day manifestations of One Ultimate Reality (183)?

Linda Mercadante studies persons who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), proposing that they “are not really an integrated identifiable group. Instead, they are more of a ‘demographic’ or ‘gerrymandered set’” (190). She notes that what they have in common is largely their rejection of religion and

religious institutions; many shape a “hybrid or syncretic assembly of spiritual practices and beliefs” (190). Mercadante finds some common threads that reflect continuing religious influence on SBNRs, including notions of transcendence/immanence, as well as perspectives on human nature, community, and the afterlife. She notes a paradox that many stress individual thoughts and choices, but they also seek a sense of community at least from time to time. Many seek a spiritual experience that yields an awareness of “cosmic consciousness” as “the location of internal divinity” (195). She suggests that theologians could “help SBNRs excavate their buried beliefs,” but she also acknowledges the formidable obstacles to creating an SBNR theology in “the focus on self-authority, individualism, and distrust of institutions” (198).

Welsey Wildman proposes a transreligious naturalist approach that rejects all claims of supernatural revelation. He explores the biological basis for human love and desire, arguing that all norms are simply human constructions. In a related essay, Wildman joins with Jerry Martin in offering a case study of transreligious theology that surveys the options of viewing ultimate reality (agential being, ground of being, or subordinate god). Wildman and Martin defer to the alleged expertise of “the most sophisticated philosophical understandings in the various traditions as offering a kind of religious ‘expertise’” (126). This alleged expertise yields a quest for pluralism but little sense of any religious community in which transreligious theology would be grounded.

One danger in the appropriation of religious traditions is the hegemony of a particular agenda dictating the terms of the relationship. Followers of religious traditions who are vulnerable and historically marginalized, such as Native Americans and Jews, may see the appropriation of their tradition by others as a violation and humiliation. Christians have a long history of taking over Jewish texts, beliefs, and practices, transforming their significance, and then telling Jews that they never understood their tradition from the beginning. The history of Christian

interpretation of the First Testament of the Bible is for the most part a history of appropriating in an atmosphere of hostility [See: Leo D. Lefebure, *True and Holy: Christian Scripture and Other Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 50-98].

Some Jews have expressed concerns over Christians celebrating Seder Services. Some European Americans have celebrated American Indian practices and rituals, but American Indians are often wary of others appropriating their traditions and putting them to very different uses in other contexts with other agendas. Ritual practice is a particularly sensitive area because it expresses the central identity of a community; many communities restrict full participation in their rituals to those who are fully initiated.

In *Theology Without Walls*, J.R. Hustwit acknowledges the danger of malappropriation and comments: “Appropriation itself is inescapable and only a vice if we fail to validate the meaning we have guessed against the structure of the text” (160). Hustwit prizes an outsider’s perspective on what constitutes the structure of a text; he does not discuss the historic violations of the integrity of the persons in religious communities subjected to appropriation, such as Native Americans. Kurt Anders Richardson points out that most practitioners of TWW “are Western, mostly ‘Christian’ in terms of theological traditions and their institutions of learning, quite ‘Western’ in terms of sociopolitical models of human and communal ethics—insofar as the latter reflect theological reasoning” (37). He proposes TWW as a form of open-field theology in the sense of offering a level playing field to rival approaches, resisting any domination by religious or political authorities.

One of the major questions for the open-ended practitioners of TWW is what type of dwelling place is under construction and who will dwell there: Will it have walls of its own? What type of community would be shaped by TWW? Jonathan Weidenbaum approaches these questions from the individual-oriented heritage of William James as a “Pluralistic Mystic” (98), but he concludes by acknowledging the insistence of Josiah Royce that authentic

Christian experience “*must* be social” (105). Paul Hedges suggests that the traditional experience of East Asia of strategic religious participation in a shared religious landscape provides a venerable precedent for contemporary Westerners.

Paul Knitter provides an example of identifying with both Buddhist and Christian traditions, stressing the apophatic element in each. Knitter proposes functional analogies between these traditions with the result that “Jesus saves in essentially the same way that the transcendent Buddhasaves,” by revealing ultimate reality (67). Knitter assimilates the two traditions so strongly that the profound differences between the traditions lose their importance.

Rory McEntee, whose spiritual journey was guided by the late Trappist Thomas Keating, recounts the monastic encounters at the Trappist Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, where Catholic and Buddhist monks meditated together in silence and then shared their spiritual journeys as individuals without pretending to speak for their traditions. One outcome was a statement of eight points of agreement about ultimate reality and the human condition. McEntee respects the traditions to which the Buddhist and Catholic monastics belongs, but he confesses that his only tradition is interspiritual, arising in the interchange of the monastics (96).

There are moments of intense irony along the way. John Thatamanil teaches at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, one of the most distinguished Protestant schools of theology in the United States. The Protestant Reformation is usually understood to have been launched by Martin Luther’s critique of works righteousness in Roman Catholicism, and most Protestants throughout history have followed Luther in rejecting the notion that humans can achieve salvation through their religious practices. Thatamanil proposes an interreligious form of achieving knowledge of God through meditation practice: “First-order religious knowing, the kind that Evagrius commends, is acquired only by means of spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation.

Without proper comportment, there is no true *knowledge of the real*” (58, emphasis in the original). Thatamanil commends the binocular vision of practitioners who gain interreligious wisdom through practicing more than one therapeutic regimen. Thatamanil also proposes that “ultimate reality is a multiplicity and not just an undifferentiated simplicity” (60), a thesis long accepted by Christians but contrary to Islamic faith.

Other authors in this volume seek to remain rooted in the traditional path of a particular religious community, while being open to learning from other religious paths. Catholic theologian Peter Feldmeier praises openness to goodness in other traditions, citing the 1974 affirmation of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference that the religions of Asia reveal that God’s Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures (110). He notes the methodological challenges faced by both inclusivists and pluralists, and he poses the question of whether the scope of TWW may be too wide (114-15). He also notes the challenge from the late George Lindbeck of whether we can translate between religions at all without profoundly changing their meaning. Feldmeier insists that boundaries or fences can be permeable, but they remain necessary for a community’s identity. He cautions that it is not clear that TWW has a community to address.

S. Mark Heim proposes the image of a home with large windows, exemplified by Gothic cathedrals which consist more of windows than walls (210). Heim questions the possibility in principle of Jerry Martin’s call for theologians to discuss all religious experience from whatever source equally. Heim warns that an undecided sampling of the entire range of religious experience is unmanageable in practice and unlikely to be fruitful. He questions how TWW will proceed in making selections, evaluations, and judgments of so wide a range of material. He compares the quest of TWW for something new in religious history to the claims of the Sikh and Ba’hai traditions that seek to integrate all other traditions into their own horizon, and he notes the Christian origins of many of the practitioners of TWW. Heim forthrightly asserts: “No

theology lacks walls, as no complex organism lacks a body plan and no cells lack membranes” (206-07).

In a similar vein Francis X. Clooney presents his understanding of comparative theology as requiring a firm structure rooted in the Catholic tradition. Clooney reviews aspect of the Catholic tradition, with particular attention to Jesuits who were active in Asia and who were open to learning from Asian religious traditions. Clooney rejects the quest for “unlimited verbal and mental fluidity” and defends the importance of doctrines in interreligious studies and warns that without doctrines we may lack direction and aim (220). He proposes that religions should not be seen as properties with fences but rather as homes with walls that make possible windows and doors (223).

Jeffery D. Long proposes that Ramakrishna anticipated TWW through his journey through multiple religious traditions and his presentation of both the Buddha and Jesus Christ as avatars. For Ramakrishna and his followers, the Hindu belief in one Supreme Reality manifesting itself in multiple avatars resolves the challenge of religious diversity.

The volume closes with an intriguing essay by Hyo-Dong Lee, who was raised in a diffuse religious landscape in South Korea, influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, and Seondo (Korean Daoism), and who was later baptized as an evangelical Protestant Christian. Writing his dissertation on Hegel and the *Daodejing*, Hyo-Dong Lee drew on the Neo-Confucian metaphysics of Zhu Xi to propose *qi* (psychophysical energy) and *li* (pattern) as dynamic structures of all reality. What emerges is not the ambitious project of Jerry Martin to draw upon all religious traditions, but a more focused reflection drawing on certain aspects of East Asian and Christian reflection.

While there are many questions about the viability of the project of TWW as proposed by Martin, this volume contributes to the discussion by juxtaposing differing voices on what of the most important issues of our time.