

## Is Transreligious Theology Possible?

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# Theology Without Walls: The Future of Transreligious Theology

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**Abstract:** Transreligious theology is possible. The question we now face concerns *how* to do it. With that question in mind, this paper discusses five interpretative angles on transreligious theology, five resources for transreligious theology, and five challenges facing transreligious theology.

**Keywords:** transreligious theology; Theology Without Walls; comparative theology; Comparative Religious Ideas Project

## Introduction

Transreligious theology is possible. We have a manifesto in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Toward a World Theology*.<sup>1</sup> We have a large number of books and articles (including several of my own<sup>2</sup>). We even have a systematic theology in the form of Robert Neville's three-volume *Philosophical Theology*.<sup>3</sup> The question is no longer *if* transreligious theology can be done; now we need to talk concretely about *how* to do it. With the latter issue in mind, in what follows I briefly discuss five helpful interpretative angles on transreligious theology, five valuable resources for transreligious theology, and five daunting challenges facing transreligious theology. I conclude with reflections on what it might mean for transreligious theology to transcend religion altogether, to become postreligious theology or even nonreligious theology.

## Five Angles on Transreligious Theology

One way of interpreting the nature and scope of transreligious theology is to examine it from the angular perspectives afforded by neighboring disciplinary ventures.

## What Transreligious Theology Is Not

First and foremost, transreligious theology is not confessional theology. Confessional theology defines the purpose and scope of theological inquiry explicitly in relation to a specific religious confession, or combination of sacred texts, traditions, and confessions. Those limitations afford focus and tractability,

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1 Smith, *Towards a World Theology*.

2 For the relevant works among my books, see the six volumes of the Religious Philosophy Series: Wildman, *Religious Philosophy; In Our Own Image; Science and Ultimate Reality; Science and Religious Anthropology; Religious and Spiritual Experiences; Effing the Ineffable*.

3 Neville, *Existence; Ultimates; Religion*.

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opening confessional theology to large numbers of people. Transreligious theology does not enjoy those benefits and participating in transreligious theology is markedly more difficult as a result. But the difficulty of transreligious theology is inherent in its aspirations to do theology without walls—not in thrall to specific sacred texts, not limited to specific confessional documents, and not on behalf of concrete religious traditions. Whatever else it may be, therefore, transreligious theology is *decidedly not* confessional theology.

## What Transreligious Theology Can Be

Confessional theology will survive as long as there are concrete religious traditions that expect their leaders to acquire theological expertise and that invest resources in sustaining specialized discourse communities dedicated to training such leaders. Even now, however, awareness of religious diversity and multiple religious identities often relativize individual traditions in the minds of adherents and theological students alike. Budding theologians frequently seek forms of theology that are adequate to the reality of many co-existing religions whose worldviews are similar in the degree of plausibility existential potency they can be felt to possess by insiders, and even empathic outsiders. This is the transreligious theological impulse at work. As more people embrace this way of doing theology, the loss of tractability associated with refusing to take sacred texts, traditions, and confessions for granted is compensated for by the increase of systematic engagement with all relevant sources of information. In this way, transreligious theology has the potential slowly to become the superior way to do theology, at least in some settings. Furthermore, transreligious theology may ultimately be regarded as the *only* way to do theology in the full range of secular academic contexts. For this to occur, secular academic contexts would have to come to regard all forms of confessional theology, including comparative theology operating within a confessional framework, as embracing institutional commitments and an approach to inquiry ill-suited to the fundamental morality of inquiry prevalent in secular academic institutions. This transformation strikes me as quite likely to occur, unevenly at first, but eventually comprehensively, all other things being equal.

## Transreligious Theology and Comparative Theology

Transreligious theology naturally has affinities with comparative theology. Indeed, comparative theology helped to inspire transreligious theology in the first place. Moreover, there is no question that the problem of religious diversity inspires both comparative theology and transreligious theology as responses. Despite these commonalities, transreligious theology and some forms of comparative theology must be sharply distinguished. This is because comparative theology can operate either as confessional theology (e.g. Francis X. Clooney at Harvard University and Catherine Cornille at Boston College) or as transreligious theology (e.g. Neville and Wildman, both at Boston University), and also in hybrid forms that are difficult to classify because they move between the two types (e.g. John J. Thatamanil at Union Theological Seminary). Transreligious theology is a distinctive theological path and it brings that distinctiveness to everything it does, including comparative theology.

## Transreligious Theology and Religious Studies

Transreligious theology naturally has affinities with the academic study of religion. Working theologically across religious traditions calls for deep knowledge of those traditions, particularly of their core motifs and internal intellectual debates. The field of religious studies supplies precisely that kind of knowledge, and in intricate detail. Religious studies rarely sets out to make itself useful for theology, of course, but it is nonetheless extremely useful for transreligious theology—and also for confessional varieties of comparative theology, it should be noted. As transreligious theology becomes better known and understood, it is likely to become acceptable as a partner for the academic study of religion, recognized as the home of the *specialists in religious ideas*.

## Transreligious Theology and Philosophy

Transreligious theology also has close affinities with philosophy, and especially with the type of philosophy of religion that does what its name suggests: takes religion (rather than theism or a specific religion such as Judaism or Christianity or Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism or Jainism) as its object of study. The axiological depth structures of reality and the existentially intense dynamics of human experience have inspired many philosophers to prodigious feats of phenomenological description and conceptual analysis that are, let's say, *virtually theological*. This is the philosophical playground of transreligious theology. To formalize such insights in traditions of debate is one way to stabilize the venture of transreligious theology, and that can happen within the scope of contemporary philosophy. Indeed, existentialist, phenomenological, and pragmatist forms of philosophical work frequently pursue precisely such forms of inquiry.

## Five Resources for Transreligious Theology

The following five resources are particularly relevant to transreligious theology.

### The World's Religions

Studying the world's religions makes a huge difference to the theologian because it opens up parallels and contrasts that deepen our awareness of the landscape of possibilities people navigate in relatively independent theological traditions. When we try to do theology without the landscape awareness afforded by studying world religions, our theology is needlessly parochial in a way that is contrary to the ideals and standards of transreligious theology. Nothing disrupts such comfortable parochialism more effectively than deep knowledge of the world's furiously diverse religious beliefs and practices.

### Multidisciplinary Engagement

Multidisciplinary engagement across the natural and social sciences influences the way we interpret every part of reality, from nature to human beings. This places adequacy and applicability demands on any theology, yielding expectations that theology should be sufficiently richly voiced to make sense in intimate connection with the social and natural sciences. Transreligious theology is often particularly well suited to meet such demands because of the landscape awareness mentioned above. But it is also the case that multidisciplinary awareness drives toward a transreligious theology: the sheer breadth and variety of data quickly manifest the relative implausibility of tradition-specific confessional theology by comparison with transreligious theology. While it is possible to be deeply situated in a confessional tradition without being closed to the results of other forms of human inquiry, it is difficult for such confessional theological outlooks to compete for plausibility with transreligious outlooks that handle the crosscultural and multidisciplinary data simply and directly.

### Scientific Study of Religion

As a specific instance of multidisciplinary engagement, consider the scientific study of religion. This network of fields is producing theoretically powerful, empirically robust theories concerning the origins and functions of religion, including isolating the cognitive patterns in our phylogenetic heritage that predispose us to religion, and render belief in supernatural beings a maturationally natural response to our religiously ambiguous life situations. Such results are inherently cross-cultural because they address the entire human species (in a way that allows for wide cultural variation and individual differences), so it is precisely transreligious theology that best comprehends them. For example, the sociological analysis of human groups, the psychological analysis of cognitive biases, and the biological analysis of evolutionary stabilized patterns of human behavior forge profound bio-cultural links among all religious phenomena,

and these links beg for transreligious theological treatment. In my view, the scientific study of religion is potentially the single most important aspect of multidisciplinary engagement for inspiring and supporting transreligious theology.

## Comparative Religious Ideas

I mean comparative religious ideas in the sense of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project at Boston University.<sup>4</sup> This enterprise is vital because of its ability to produce categories for interpreting religious phenomena that distort as little as possible. These categories are essential parts of the toolkit of the transreligious theologian because they facilitate avenues of discourse that register with reasonable accuracy the perspectives of the multiple wisdom traditions to which transreligious theology seeks to represent fairly.

## Secular Academic Context

Any intellectual activity requires and in fact presupposes a social and institutional context. If transreligious theology is to flourish, it needs to find a home within the modern academy, probably in philosophy or religious-studies departments. Fascinating forms of religious sociality for which transreligious theology may be a natural fit are beginning to develop, but these are not (yet) well suited to sustaining the technical discourse community gathered around the goals of transreligious theology. Thus, there is currently no meaningful venue for high-level theological development of the transreligious kind other than the modern secular academy. Outside the secular academy, for example in universities with a specifically religious mission, the confessional mode of comparative theology might well be pursued by communities of scholars, each of whom remains deeply rooted in one or another particular religious tradition while engaging with other confessional orientations (something like this currently exists at Boston College, the Graduate Theological Union, and the University of Virginia, for example). This confessional-dialogical hybrid model for comparative theology is extremely valuable but is not yet transreligious theology and it is difficult to see how this or any confessional theological activity could properly be at home in a fully secular university religious-studies or philosophy department in the way that transreligious theology is.

## Five Challenges Facing Transreligious Theology

In light of these five interpretative angles on, and five promising resources for, transreligious theology, the following five challenges present themselves.

### Training Modalities

How does one train to be a transreligious theologian? At present, the only way to do this on purpose is to find a transreligious theologian and study with her or him. It is also possible to do this accidentally by unwittingly finding oneself in an environment influenced by transreligious theology and to become persuaded that this is the best way to do theology. Theology is still conducted in tradition-specific ways virtually everywhere and there are few venues for rigorous training in transreligious theology. This should not be surprising: few living theologians are comfortable working across religious traditions or know enough about other domains of human knowledge to put themselves forward as able to design and lead advanced programs of training in transreligious theology. This will change in the future but it is a problem that will take some time to solve. The solution will likely take the form of networks of scholars with different forms of deep expertise who work in concert to cover the enormous variety of forms of knowledge relevant to transreligious theology; we see this kind of collaborative, networked expertise in the natural sciences and political activity.

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<sup>4</sup> Neville, ed. *The Comparative Religious Ideas Project*.

## Supportive Audiences

One of the reasons theology is conducted in tradition-specific ways almost everywhere is that its most supportive audiences come from specific religious traditions. Synagogues, churches, mosques, and temples need leadership minimally trained in theology so there is natural economic and demographic support for tradition-specific theology in a way that there is not for transreligious theology. In fact, transreligious theology benefits from tradition-specific theological support. Most transreligious theologians are like me: they do transreligious theology in a context that is centrally identified as offering tradition-specific theological training. While there is nothing preventing a transreligious theologian from teaching theology in a way that is relevant to the interests of audiences in a specific religious tradition, there is not yet a popular following for transreligious theology sufficiently large to constitute a supportive audience.

## Credibility in the Academy

If the institutional home of transreligious theology needs to be the secular academy, and specifically philosophy and religious-studies departments, then there is going to be a serious academic credibility problem. Imagine a debate in a research-university philosophy department faculty meeting over what kind of transreligious philosophical theologian or transreligious philosopher of religion should fill their next open faculty position. While I don't find this impossible to imagine at some point in the remote future, it is virtually unthinkable right now. The very word "theology" is suffused with parochial flavors, as is the phrase "philosophy of religion" (thanks to a heritage of this being approximately Christian or theistic philosophical theology). *But theological questions arise naturally and inevitably in the modern academy, in a host of disciplines, and the expert answers to those questions will be neither the amateurish exertions of historians or sociologists, nor the monocular efforts of tradition-specific theologians, but the creative products of transreligious theologians.* In fact, apart from transreligious theology, I see no way for theology to gain any widespread credibility in secular academic contexts.

## Battling Anti-Religious Intellectuals

Part of the puzzle of situating transreligious theology in the institutional home of the secular academy is the presence of anti-religious intellectuals who associate all theology, even transreligious theology, with religious commitment and thus with a kind of bias that contradicts the ruling morality of inquiry in the secular university. The enlightened way forward for human cultures, according to these folk, requires the marginalization and elimination of theological discourse, which helps to create circumstances under which religions simply wither on the vine. The implicit denial of my claim that questions with theological import spontaneously arise within human experience is a deep challenge to transreligious theology. It can be met, but only by concrete instances of transreligious theological work that win respect in the wider academy over the long term. Tradition-specific forms of theology struggle to meet this burden in secular academic contexts but transreligious theology can by employing what passes for public reason in secular academic settings. So-called natural theology that employs public reason and does not privilege particular sacred texts, traditions, or confessions can also meet this burden and, in that respect, is typically an incipient form of transreligious theology.

## Generating Technical Discourse Communities

The final challenge I will mention is the building of technical discourse communities for transreligious theology. Tradition-specific theology has been good at this, creating communities of debate within which extremely technical distinctions and argumentative moves are preserved and remembered for centuries. This makes confessional theological discourse efficient and precise, as well as elegant and fruitful. Currently, the transreligious theologian either tends to be parasitic on the technical discourse communities

of tradition-specific theology or blazes a trail with only a few companions on the way. It will take some time, but transreligious theology needs the same kind of stability, precision, and fruitfulness of debate that characterizes the tradition-specific confessional theological activities that it seeks to augment (or, perhaps, displace).

## Conclusion

Suppose for a moment that transreligious theology eventually takes its (rightful, I think) place in the secular academy as an intellectual venture with impeccable scholarly credentials, adhering to the morality of inquiry within the secular academy (with which confessional theology is in flagrant contradiction), and contributing to other disciplines profound insights into and precise analyses of our best thoughts about whatever passes for ultimate reality and the human existential situation. Is it not then the case that transreligious theology is welcomed and sustained within the secular academy with such wholeheartedness that its parasitic relationship with positive religious traditions falls away? I think so. In that situation, we arrive at postreligious theology, or nonreligious theology—that is, theology that makes intellectual sense with no specific religious tradition at its root and remains socially viable with no living religious institution for support.

In my view, transreligious theology would be no less existentially potent or intellectually gripping for being postreligious or nonreligious in character, in the sense just defined. It would also be no less useful for interpreting the ideas and practices of concrete religious traditions. But its ties to religion can attenuate and we can take for granted its institutional home in the academy to such a degree that transreligious theology takes on a life of its own, separately from any and all concrete religious institutions. Even if now-familiar organized religious traditions were to vanish from the earth, as almost all bodies of religious belief and practices have in the past, transreligious theology would naturally persist as the venue for the highest-level thinking about ultimate reality and the human condition.

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