

Is Transreligious Theology Possible?

Open Access

Editorial

Jerry L. Martin*

Introduction to the Topical Issue “Is Transreligious Theology Possible?”

DOI 10.1515/opth-2016-0021

Transreligious theology is impossible yet inevitable. It is impossible because theology is almost by definition the articulation of religious truths as held as by particular tradition. It is that tradition that provides the canonical texts, hermeneutical strategies, theological questions, an array of offered answers, and methods for assessing and modifying them. In addition, the tradition provides the full-bodied religious life that its theologies serve.

Nevertheless, transreligious theology is inevitable, in the sense of necessary if theology is to reach its goal. For surely the goal of theology is to provide, as best we can, the *logos of theos*, the fullest articulation of the divine or ultimate reality we can achieve. The exclusivist can avoid transreligious theology, but the more we study various traditions, in a scholarly and spiritually open way, and come to know their adherents and their practices, the more truth about divine reality we find there and, consequently, the more urgent the task of thinking across religious divides.

The theology of religions and comparative theology are important steps in this direction. If developed in a way that is sufficiently robust, they might be able to shed light on the divine reality in its wider scope. Those approaches look beyond their traditions, but keep intact sufficient elements to provide compasses and rudders. However, it might be necessary to go further and to consider the total spiritual resources of humankind, every source of revelation and enlightenment and insight anew, without dragging our traditional anchors behind us. Some thinkers – among whom one would certainly number Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, Ramon Panikkar, and Robert Cummings Neville – have begun to explore the divine terrain through a very wide lense indeed.

In the United States and Canada, issues of transreligious theology have been the focus of the Theology Without Walls Project, which meets under the auspices of the American Academy of Religion. Hence, some of the papers in this volume refer to this form of transreligious inquiry and cite remarks I have made defining and defending this project. Those presentations can be found online at the Theology Without Walls Forum.¹

At this point, transreligious theology should be considered an exploratory program, at best a “research programme” in Imre Lakatos’ sense. That it is necessary – if theology is to live up to its goal of explicating the divine reality as fully as possible – does not ensure that it is achievable. The only way to discover that is to begin the exploration, put the concept itself to the test, explore the most promising precedents, methods, and lines of inquiry, and see what illumination our best efforts can attain. That is exactly what this special issue of *Open Theology* proposes to do.

¹ www.freeforums.net

*Corresponding author: Jerry L. Martin, Coordinator of Theology Without Walls Project, American Academy of Religion, USA, E-mail: jerry.martin@verizon.net