Is Transreligious Theology Possible?

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Myself, Only Moreso

Conditions for the Possibility of Transreligious Theology

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Abstract: Transreligious theologians are posed with a number of difficult questions. First, how can I understand the beliefs and practices of a worldview I do not share? Then, once I begin to construct and synthesize truth claims, how normative are the source traditions? Finally, how do we transreligious theologians judge truth claims as better and worse? By offering answers to these questions using a model of critical interreligious appropriation, we may find a basis for a critical transreligious theology that avoids naïve syncretisms and pernicious incommensurability.

Keywords: comparative theology; interreligious dialogue; interfaith dialogue; hermeneutics; Gadamer; Ricoeur; transreligious theology

The question of transreligious theology’s possibility is puzzling; it already happens in classrooms, in coffee shops, and over social media. Clearly it is possible, but a better question is whether it is useful, enlightening, capable of progress toward truth, or failing that, whether it can produce novel truth claims by ethical means. As more theologians become comfortable with interreligious theology, it is increasingly important to distinguish it from transreligious theology. The former, as I understand it, involves a theologian engaging in dialogue with those outside of her own tradition and then applying that new understanding back onto her own tradition. A Christian theologian might, for example, take Ramanuja’s (d. 1137 CE) view that the plurality in the world is the result of deity (Brahman) deciding to become manifold, and so all creation is distinct yet dependent upon the deity. She then uses this as a lens for understanding the creation narrative in Genesis 1. The Christian theologian has appropriated a non-Christian concept to enrich Christianity while at the same time attempting to cohere with some version of the Christian tradition.

Transreligious theology on the other hand involves a theologian encountering the other and, rather than applying the fruits of that encounter to her own tradition, proceeds in a process of collaborative inquiry that transgresses the boundaries of what can be accommodated by the tradition. Coherence with any particular tradition is not strictly necessary.

Transreligious theologians are posed with a number of difficult questions. First, how can I understand the beliefs and practices of a worldview I do not share? Then, once I begin to construct and synthesize truth claims, how normative are the parental religious traditions? Finally, how do we transreligious theologians judge theological truth claims as better and worse? By offering answers to these three questions, we may find a basis for a critical transreligious theology that avoids naïve syncretisms and pernicious incommensurability.

1 Ramanuja, Sribhasya, chapter 1, 25-26.

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Understanding the Other

There is no theology outside of history. Every person, catechism, teaching, and text has arisen as the negotiated expression of a massive and largely invisible accumulation of meaning in a community. This accumulation contains multitudes, and is full of intersectionality and internal inconsistency. When I ask my students to imagine what God looks like, the most common answer is “an old man with a long white beard.” Usually they imagine he is wearing Birkenstock sandals. The second most common answer is “a glowing ball of light.” The students’ mental images of deity are not the result of deliberate ratiocination, but arise spontaneously from the historical sedimentation of meaning that has been impressed upon the students in countless subtle and unsubtle ways—in television, books, and formal education. The students themselves may have not heard the term “patriarch” or read Plato’s analogy between the sun and The Good, but the enduring symbol of those two cultural artifacts (bearded man and ball of light) continue to echo in 21st-century imaginations long after the images’ origins have been obscured in the worldview received by the students.

I argue, along with Gadamer, that “history does not belong to us; we belong to it.” The thoughts we are capable of thinking, the possibilities we might imagine, our criteria for sense and nonsense are for the most part delimited by the historical-cultural milieu in which we develop. This sets up the first critical worry for transreligious theologians. How can a theologian who cannot escape her Christian categories truly understand the truth claims of Islam or Buddhism, and vice versa? If my mental categories are too constrained by my tradition, then there is no possibility of bridging to an unfamiliar concept in an unfamiliar tradition. Luckily for theologians, and anyone else who enjoys learning new things, the limits of our conceptual schemes are not fixed.

The question of whether my understanding of an unfamiliar religion matches the understanding of an adherent cannot be easily answered. I cannot step outside of myself to check that the shape of my “nirvana” matches the “nirvana” of my Buddhist friend. Nevertheless, we certainly are able to detect, through persistent and bona fide conversation, when we mean the same thing, and when one of us is working with an unrecognizable concept. Luckily for us, the task of understanding is not to accurately reproduce the exact shape of the Buddhist’s “nirvana,” but to appropriate an analogous “nirvana” that is as close to the Buddhist’s as possible—and this closeness is achieved through continual revision of the concept via the to and fro of conversation. At the same time, the appropriated “nirvana” cannot exist in consciousness without relation to our other thoughts, concerns, or views. Understanding the other is not a matter of escaping our own tradition or “going native,” but of continually constructing approximated conceptual models that begin within my horizon of meaning, but push at its margins.

The operations of the understanding occur so quickly, and usually on the margins of consciousness, that the features that permit a concept to be understood are rarely perceived. Nevertheless, several properties of the ontology of interpretation facilitate “bridging” to unfamiliar worldviews. By drawing attention to them, we dissolve worries that transreligious theology is doomed to misunderstanding or pernicious conceptual distortion.

The first bridge is the calculating functions of the imagination. Our minds can take the ideas already present to consciousness and perform various mathematical functions on them—concatenation, multiplication, subtraction—to produce “new” ideas. Thus, I can imagine a reverse centaur with a horse’s anterior and a human’s posterior. Likewise, I can imagine God by imagining a person like myself, only moreso ad infinitum. Hume treats these examples of a priori understanding as trivial, useful only for building fairy tale monsters and objects of religious devotion. He could be wrong. Due to the vast number of ideas

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2 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 289.
3 Gadamer is insistent that authentic dialogue must involve a release of self-determination, allowing the conversation to unfold according to the logic of the matter at hand, i.e. the topic. Attempts to steer a conversation have unhappy results, from trivial misunderstandings to the cult of the Führer. See Gadamer, “Myth in the Age of Science,” 97.
4 Paul Ricoeur names the moments of this hermeneutical circle as “guess, validation, and comprehension.” See Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, 75-88.
available to consciousness, imbued as they are with contrasting gradients of consciousness and clarity, these operations could be quite powerful. The field of complexity science has demonstrated that given a sufficiently complex system of individual elements, those elements can combine to produce emergent effects, which are not reducible to the component elements. Properties emerge that defy reductive teleology, even while maintaining unidirectionality. A complex system takes on a life of its own, demonstrating auto poiesis. Thus life emerges from molecules, and consciousness emerges from tissues. It is not difficult to imagine that the millions of beliefs, sentiments, and hunches lurking in the mind could implicate an emergent effect that cannot be reduced to its parts. In other words, the imagination’s ability to combine and transpose concepts may be sufficient to produce novel conceptual structures that unfold beyond the horizon of a religious tradition’s possibilities. This would go a long way toward explaining how unfamiliar theological ideas are grasped. My own imagination may indeed be powerful enough to complicate aspects of my own conceptual scheme to contain something similar to the Buddhist’s own scheme. This is not a divinatory leap into an alien consciousness but an enlarging of the self. Hume’s operations of the understanding, reinvigorated by the insights of complexity theory, may offer much more to our mental life than Hume himself imagined.

The second bridge between alienated religious systems is poetics. The poetic devices of metaphor and analogy work together to expand the self’s horizon of available meaning. Metaphor is more than a rhetorical flourish. It is a mode of thinking that possesses the power to fracture the linearity of logical discourse so that new relationships and meaning might emerge. By entertaining the image that “The mind is a lotus,” one discovers a surplus of meaning. The similarities between the tenor and vehicle—e.g. growth, delicacy, cultivation—disclose some aspects of the tenor. The contrasts between the two—e.g. density, materiality, complexity—disclose a second layer of meaning. Finally, the juxtaposition of the unities and disunities offers a third layer of meaning, albeit one less readily expressed in language. The resulting paradox of similarity, dissimilarity, and interaction thereof is an “irreducible intellectual operation . . . beyond the scope of any paraphrase.” In metaphors like mind is a lotus or imagination’s horizon, we experience meaning projected past the limits of logical possibility. As a result, metaphorical thinking fractures the sedimentation of a habit and tradition, revealing that the imagination is finite due to the meaning present in the metaphor outstripping what we can understand.

While metaphor points to the limits of imagination, analogy offers a means of expanding those limits. Like metaphor, analogy describes by maintaining a similarity-in-difference. By describing the strange in terms of the familiar, what is familiar is qualitatively transformed and enlarged. When I teach a student about the Buddhist concept of trṣṇa, I do not simply emphatically repeat “Trṣṇa!” while maintaining uninterrupted eye contact until the student understands or flees. I must make the term relevant to the student’s concerns. Understanding is always a translation, not just from Pali to English, but from one conceptual scheme to another. I may start with “addiction,” or some other familiar analogue. Once that toehold is made, we return to the unfamiliar for further articulation. The result of this repeated to-and-fro interpretive exercise is not that the student now obtains her conceptual scheme + trṣṇa. The meaning of new trṣṇa analogue interacts with other familiar concepts as well—ambition, career, appetite, family—all now seen in a new light. The result is that the student’s conceptual scheme is qualitatively transformed at every event of understanding, and not simply enlarged one idea at a time. Metaphor disrupts the everyday constellation of meaning, making space for analogy to enlarge and transform it. This occurs by making comparisons that straddle the horizon of possible meanings, again and again, in a process of conceptual refinement.

Ricoeur’s term for analogy’s semantic smuggling operation is “appropriation,” which has come to have a pejorative connotation, as when I insensitively appropriate a sadhu’s robes or Buddhist malas as fashion accessories. This pejoration has roots in a serious philosophical worry: that when two cultures meet, there will be conceptual violence—which frequently leads to political violence—instead of an

5 Funtowicz and Ravetz, “Emergent Complex Systems,” 571.
6 Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, 80-88.
7 Ibid., 87-88.
8 See Tracy, The Analogical Imagination, 408-413, 447.
intended enrichment. Post-structuralist thinkers like Jean Lyotard argue that when any two constellations of meaning (e.g. conceptual schemes, cultures, language games, or even religions) come into contact, they are incomparable unless one submits to the meta-narrative of the other. The dominant meta-narrative acts as an “instrument of terror” as it enforces commensurability for the sake of efficient discourse. Because there is no neutral narrative ground from which to appeal, transreligious theology, according to Lyotard, would always result in an unhappy voice who is assimilated and therefore powerless—a differend, “where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.” I agree with Lyotard (and the hermeneutic tradition) that there is no neutral ground available to persons. All meaning belongs to a particular history. And certainly many instances of transreligious discourse could end in an unhappy assimilation. But “appropriation” is, philosophically speaking, a neutral term. Not all assimilation is pernicious or homogenizing. The (largely Ricoeurian) model of appropriation I have sketched here is centrifugal, not centripetal. That is, the negotiations of meaning in the conversation push outward toward otherness of the event being discussed, rather than pulling meaning inward toward the familiarity of the self, i.e. what already makes sense. Though appropriation involves a cycle of assimilation, that assimilation is simply a feature of how expanding horizons occurs. As long as the process of expansion is guided by the topic-at-hand rather than the will of one of the interpreters, tyrannies large and small can be checked and corrected.

The third bridge between radically different religious worldviews is one that has already been implied: pre-linguistic ontology. The previous discussion argues that appropriation is not pernicious because it is centrifugal. It gravitates toward an event—a materiality that exceeds and is partially concealed by each person’s finite perspective. Nevertheless, this material event anchors and delimits what may be said about it. These constraints can be found in the natural similarities between sign and signified. Signs are rooted in a pre-linguistic “capacity of the cosmos to signify.” For example, an oak tree commonly signifies strength.

Although religious language functions in different ways—expresses, condemns, proclaims—a good deal of religious language is made up of old-fashioned truth claims. These refer beyond the sphere of discourse to an event in the world. Christian catechisms and creeds, Buddhist “right views,” and the Jewish yigdal offer contestable descriptions of the world, each demanding consideration, pregnant with the potential for truth. To put this in explicitly philosophical terms, I hold that most religions presume—generally without deliberation—a correspondence definition of truth. Correspondence (and thus truth) occur when a belief or proposition “p” matches a fact p found in the world. “Atman is Brahman,” is true if and only if atman really

9 Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, passim.
10 Lyotard, The Differend, 9, 13.
11 Ricoeur, Interpretation, 62.
12 Hustwit, Interreligious Hermeneutics, 12-14, 97-103.
13 Interestingly, many Buddhist traditions insist that correct views of the world are only an instrumental good, intended to transport the novice to an ultimate detachment from all opinionated views. Thus, some Buddhisms do undermine truth claims. Nevertheless, even in these ametaphysical traditions, though the teachings are not to be held with finality, they do function as truth claims in the earlier stages of Buddhist practice.
is Brahman. The difficult bit for theologians and laypersons alike is that while correspondence generally operates as the definition of what “truth” means, correspondence utterly fails as a criterion for detecting truth. We can never escape our own perspective to verify the correspondence relation. Truth ascription is always a prognostication. Redeeming the claim can never happen in the present—there is never sufficient evidence. Truth must be projected forward infinitely. But given our own historical mediation, we must resort to less direct criteria by which to judge a claim’s truth or falsity. We may observe that some religious truth claims cohere rather elegantly with other commonly accepted beliefs, or they allow humans to flourish better than competing beliefs. These pragmatic criteria for detecting truth are another example of how pre-linguistic ontology manifests itself in the languages to which we belong. An event-in-itself cannot be seen immediately, but it does constrain discourse, becoming a semantic center of gravity. By triangulating the perspectives of different religions, it may be possible to converge on the truth, if only the truth would stay put, and not outrun our investigations.

Understanding the beliefs of radically different religions is possible because of emergent novelty in imagination, poetic appropriation, and the constraints of pre-linguistic ontology in and through language. But the possibility of understanding the other, while necessary, is not a sufficient condition for the possibility of transreligious theology. At least two more questions must be addressed. Though there is not space here to fully explore these problems, I hope to give some very cursory remarks about where transreligious theologians might turn for answers.

### Adhering to the Traditions

First, careful thought must be given to the authority given to known orthodoxies and traditional consensus in established traditions. Some may imagine “transreligious” means that the theologian pursues truths without regard to the historical contingencies of their manifestations. Given the ever-increasing partisan violence in the world, this hypermodern idea—that one may shed all flawed historical traditions and synthesize the world’s religious truths according to raw and immediate individual experience—is alluring. A number of new religious movements attest to this. Ra Uru Hu (née Alan Krakower), founder of the Human Design movement, claims to have received a revelation from a “vast intelligence,” leading to a “logical, empirical system” that blends “astrology both eastern and western, the Hindu-Brahmin Chakra system, the Zohar or Kabbalah, and . . . the I’Ching,” as well as neutrinos and quantum physics.¹⁴ Human Design, in many senses, could be classified as a transreligious movement. But is Human Design a role model for would-be transreligious theologians? Probably not.

On one hand, we must acknowledge the contingency and arbitrariness of what is considered orthodox. Traditions are not clearly delineated and the best arguments do not always win. The result is that the judgments of the transreligious theologian may deviate significantly from a tradition’s “mainstream”—even despite the centrifugal pull of material events. Authorities must be interrogated. On the other hand, we should be suspicious of transreligious projects as breathtaking in scope as Human Design. Comparative inquiry between two traditions is difficult enough, synthesizing seven or more traditions without distorting or colonizing the others is an unlikely feat. Transreligious theology cannot begin by naively positing that similar-sounding language—“energy” for example—refers to the same constraining event. Identities must be won through painstaking comparative inquiry, which is nearly impossible when comparing to seven or more worldviews—each disclosing potentially separate constellations of constraining events. The signal to noise ratio would be far too low. I would caution transreligious theologians to progress slowly, working with as much traditional context as possible, and frequently revisiting comparisons for further articulation.

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¹⁴ Jovian Archive Media, “About Ra Uru Hu.” Hu’s International Human Design School licenses and certifies a number of “Jovian Professional Partners,” who will use the synthesis to analyze a client’s personality.
Cobbling Criteria

In addition to negotiating transreligious theology’s parental relationships, it must also hammer out how to adjudicate competing truth claims. Such claims are frequently correlated with benchmarks like scripture, tradition, and reason. But whose criteria for intelligibility will the transreligious theologian use? This is perhaps the most difficult obstacle for the transreligious project. I don’t know that much can be said in the abstract about this. Each particular inquiry will emerge from a unique host of material conditions, which offers idiosyncratic constraints on discourse. The Aristotelian-Gadamerian virtue of phronēsis, the talent for adjusting means to ends, is certainly relevant. And many of the criteria I have already mentioned may be used: coherence with other widely accepted beliefs, fruitfulness, predictive value, etc. But no matter how many experts agree, or how elegantly a theological hypothesis coheres, in the end, truth claims can never be verified with finality. I suspect that the best we can do are “better” and “worse” judgments, cobbled together from various indirect and worldview-contingent truth criteria. Although the certainty of these judgments is modest—more like probabilities—their breadth need not be modest at all. That is, after all, the nature of a truth claim: to be true independent of a worldview and true for all persons. Transreligious theologians ought not to shy away from a confident assertion about the concealed world-event, as should more traditional theology. Though none of us can escape our own historical conditionedness, we can enrich our own horizons in order to more fully disclose the contours of events that bind us together.

References