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Tale of a Theologian without Walls

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P R E C I S

This article provides a detailed autobiographical account of two oddly coupled things. On the one hand, the author has been firmly committed to theology without walls since early childhood, including high school publications in a church newsletter and coming down to a three-volume philosophical theology based on world religions, vulnerable to all perspectives. On the other hand, the author has been actively and deeply religious, including ordination in the United Methodist Church and being the dean of the United Methodist School of Theology at Boston University. Being religious in a particular way is compatible with pursuing theology without walls.



I was raised from the beginning as a theologian without walls, and my maturation has consisted in expanding the territory over which I have some engagement. This maturing process has proceeded for over seventy years with a number of startling advances. I have been active in religious participation as well as cross-cultural theology. I am an ordained United Methodist minister, but my reputation is greatest in China, I am told, where I am known as a contemporary Confucian philosopher and the author of *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World*.¹ As a Daoist I taught *taijiquan* for nearly a decade. In all these years of active religious and theological life, I have never had a conversion, leaving one religious or theological position for another. I have only deepened positions, expanding to others, adding layer upon layer of theological and philosophical analysis, and having

¹Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).

the truly great good fortune to be engaged by an ever-wider circle of serious theological conversation partners.

My theological education began in kindergarten at Mason Public School in St. Louis, Missouri, when a classmate told me that God is a person. I checked with my father who said that, although Jesus was a person, God was more like light or electricity. In my five-year-old way, I understood those metaphors and could understand how God's creating the world was like dawn coming up in the morning. Also, at that age I was afraid of the dark and was comforted by the thought of God as light. God as light is one of the grand metaphors for God in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, the Neo-Platonic tradition of Western philosophy/theology, and the cross-cultural Perennial Philosophy, although I did not learn that until after kindergarten. My father, a very wise chemist, thought of himself as an atheist yet raised his children in the local Methodist Church because he believed that moral education does not come naturally and needs institutional social cultivation. The local Methodist Church did not wall him out but, rather, persuaded him to teach the adult Sunday School class for years. At the age of five I was set on a course as a naturalist theologian, a course I have kept to this day.

As a teenager in that congregation, I had the job of editing and mimeographing the church newsletter. It was a lower-middle-class congregation (although I did not realize this at the time) with few authors, so I wrote most of the newsletter myself. I ran a series of 500-word articles on the Great Religions of the World: Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Mohammedanism (as I called it), doing my research in the *World Book Encyclopedia*. I also had an article on Christianity, one religion among the many. The people in the congregation were charmed, or so they told me, and no one said there was anything wrong with representing many religions in a large field with no walls between them. So, my very first publications were on history of religions and comparative religions, however naïve I was at fifteen. Eight years later I published my first article in a peer-reviewed philosophy journal, but I have no evidence that any of my articles have been read by more people than read the newsletter in that congregation in St. Louis.

That same year when I was fifteen and a sophomore in Southwest Public High School, I was having a serious conversation with my English teacher who remarked, "You know, Bob, that God is not in time." I was thunder-

struck by two things. First, I understood it in a moment. Time is contingent and God creates it. Therefore, the act of creation could not be in time. Years later, I wrote a book about this, *Eternity and Time's Flow*, explaining it in proper academic fashion, playing off Whitehead and Kant,² but I got the main point that day in high school. Second, I realized right away that this was a very peculiar kind of thing to think about, nontemporal creativity, and that very few people could think that way. I knew then that thinking about these kinds of things is what I wanted to do with my life, although it was not until college that I discovered that this was philosophy, or philosophical theology. I had the strong sense that this kind of idea is very important for living life and believed that ministry was the way of life for pursuing this. Though still very naïve, at fifteen my mind was set on learning that could sing with the highest abstractions of time and eternity while applying the abstractions for the discernment and guidance of life.

Formation

For college and graduate school I went to Yale University and swam into formal training as a philosopher and theologian as a fish takes to water. Yale at the time was the only major American college or university to give American pragmatism a prominent place in the philosophical firmament. My principal teacher of pragmatism was John E. Smith, but I also studied with Paul Weiss and Richard Bernstein. Pragmatism remains the philosophical tradition with which I have most identified ever since. Pragmatism is an extremely complex philosophy with a rich set of variant traditions, but several elements of it are part of my tale of theology without walls.

First, in an early paper (1877), "The Fixation of Belief," Charles S. Peirce argued persuasively that the method of fixing belief that consists in appealing to authority, especially in matters of doubt, is inherently unstable and is undermined by evidence in the long run.³ It is far better, Peirce said, to engage in inquiry about evidence, treating our beliefs as hypotheses that could be brought into doubt by the reality of things when the beliefs are mistaken.

²Robert Cummings Neville, *Eternity and Time's Flow* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

³Charles S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, eds., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: 1867–1893 (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), chap. 7, pp. 109–123.

Doubt arises when reality interrupts our expectations, and imaginative inquiry with empirical tests is the best response for amending our hypotheses. For theology, this means that no confessional authority can trump free inquiry on the basis of its authority alone. Therefore, although one can do theology in and for a particular religious community using the tradition's language, that community's confessional language has no trumping authority. Theological inquiry ought to range over whatever territory might help it to arrive at better hypotheses about ultimate matters, including other religions, science, and secular forms of inquiry. In fact, a serious religious community should never be the last to know that something in its theology is mistaken and should work hard not to let its inherited tradition be a bias leading to cognitive error. This is theology without walls! In our time, much theology has been biased in the direction of confessional authority because of problems of religious identity. But, from pragmatism we learn that problems of religious identity should be solved some other way.

Second, in a late paper (1908), "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," Peirce argued that the best hypothesis to explain how there can be a world with complex things in it, which he described as the "three universes" of "Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness," is that God just creates them to be together.⁴ He said theologians get in trouble when they try to explain what God is, but the important thing is the creating. This explains my adolescent understanding that the act of creating is not being in time, because it creates time. Moreover, it allows that anything we discover to be true can be created. So, any of the claims of religion can be allowed as long as they can justifiably be claimed to be true. The same is true for any of the claims of science. Whatever the world contains is a matter for empirical inquiry. The metaphysical hypothesis is that anything determinate is created. In 1973, I published a paper called "A Metaphysical Argument for Wholly Empirical Theology,"⁵ which was an important step in my theology without walls.

⁴In *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2: (1893-1913), ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 434-450.

⁵In Robert J. Roth, ed., *God Knowable and Unknowable* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), pp. 215-240. Republished as "The Empirical Cases of World Religions," in Robert C. Neville, *The Tao and the Daimon: Segments of a Religious Inquiry* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982), pp. 111-129.

In addition to pragmatism, my experience at Yale was the context in which I was helped to work out my philosophical theology of divine creation, giving properly professional expressions to my kindergarten and high school theology. As a philosophy major, I had many courses in the history of Western philosophy and in subjects such as metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, courses in which my interest in creation was always on the margins. My doctoral dissertation started out to be about the creation theory of John Duns Scotus, but it quickly morphed into my own theory of creation. The dissertation was radically rewritten and published as my first book five years after graduation, under the title *God the Creator: On the Transcendence and Presence of God*.⁶ The last third of the book is a somewhat naïve but well-intentioned attempt to show how the book's thesis about the divine ontological act's creating everything determinate, even its own nature as creator of this world, could be applied across several religions. This was a deliberate attempt to do theology without walls (though without that title, of course). Although the dissertation's first reader, Smith, was a Christian, the second and third readers, Weiss and Bernstein, were Jews. So, I never wrote just for Christians—another part of my theology without walls.

After two years as a post-doctoral instructor at Yale, I moved to Fordham University to teach in the philosophy department as well as some courses in Protestant theology in the Theology Department. Thomas Berry was teaching in the department at the time, and once, when we were standing side by side in the men's room, he asked me what I was teaching. I responded, "history of philosophy." "Oh, what texts are you using for Chinese and Indian philosophy?" he asked. It had never occurred to me that these traditions had serious philosophies; no Indian or Chinese philosophy was taught at Yale during my time there. So, before I had a chance to zip and escape, Thomas got me to agree to teach courses in those subjects, which I have done many times since. He taught me rudimentary Sanskrit and arranged for me to study a year of Chinese language, where I acquired my Chinese name, Nan Lo-Shan. I moved on to State University of New York at Purchase and then SUNY Stony Brook, teaching mainly the Chinese side. I

⁶Robert C. Neville, *God the Creator: On the Transcendence and Presence of God* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968; rev. ed. with a new preface: Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

began publishing in these areas, and these early scholarly writings are collected in *The Tao and the Daimon*.

During those years at Fordham, when I was in my twenties, my wife Beth and I had a daughter who at the age of four months died of heart disease. This was the worst thing we had ever experienced. At the time, I was numbed so much that thinking was hard, but I did spend some mindless time after her death going over a copy-editor's suggestions for *God the Creator*. In that book I had mentioned, with approval, Job's line, that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord. Could I leave that line in the text? After some of the most serious theological thinking of my life, I chose to leave it in. Who says theology is not existential? What could be the meaning of such a short life? Certainly not temporal accomplishments! After some decades, I published *Eternity and Time's Flow*, the result of my thinking about a four-month life. For me, eternity is the link between the most important issues of life and the metaphysics of philosophical theology. There were no religious walls around this existential thinking: Job was not even Jewish.

So, by the time I was thirty, my character had been formed, at least in my intellectual life. I was a pragmatist, a seriously abstract metaphysician, a hard-working comparativist, aiming to address the publics of all religions and secular mentalities, and devoted to making my philosophical theology relevant to existential, very personal concerns. It was not part of my character to tolerate theological walls.

Program

During my thirties I consolidated my scholarly life, both practically and intellectually.

In my various academic and administrative positions at Fordham, SUNY Purchase, and SUNY Stony Brook, I was a Confucian scholar-official, which was a serious implementation of being religious without denominational walls. Intellectually, I realized that the metaphysics of *God the Creator*, claiming that everything whatsoever that is determinate is created by an ontological creative act, set me up to be regarded as a Calvinistic denier of human freedom. So, I wrote *The Cosmology of Freedom* to argue that any alleged kind of freedom depends on what kinds of determinate (and in-

determinate) things get created.⁷ Any religious view of freedom—from any religion or from the scientific world or from secular perspectives—is compatible with the ontological creative act, although perhaps not with alternative perspectives on freedom.

In *The Cosmology of Freedom* I began the development of a cosmology that represents people as being faced with real choice among alternatives that have embodied value. Under the heading of personal freedom, I sketched out a theory of freedom as external liberty, intentional action, free choice among possibilities, and freedom in creativity. Under the heading of social freedom, I sketched a theory of freedom of opportunity, freedom of social pluralism, freedom of integral social life, and freedom of participatory democracy. While working on freedom relative to ontological creation, I also developed a theory of spiritual freedom, referring to the major world religions as I understood them at the time. This was published as *Soldier, Sage, Saint*.⁸ I took the models for those spiritual types from Plato's discussion of the three types of soul—the aggressive, rational, and appetitive, respectively—in *The Republic* but illustrated them with figures from various religions.

When I was twenty-eight, I moved from SUNY Purchase to SUNY Stony Brook. On the drive from our home in Yonkers to the job interview at Stony Brook, I concocted a project in my head that turned out to be the *Axiology of Thinking* trilogy, which I then sketched for my future colleagues.⁹ It took fifteen years to complete the trilogy, though the project was brought to mind in the hour and fifteen minutes of the trip to the interview. The *Axiology of Thinking*, in three large volumes, argued that all thinking is some form of valuation, and it treated imagination, interpretation, theorizing, and practical reason or the pursuit of responsibility. Although this seems to be an epistemological project, in fact it was also a cosmological project, because it took thinking to be a natural process within nature largely construed. Consequently, it argued that nature is in-

⁷Robert C. Neville, *The Cosmology of Freedom* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1974; new ed.: Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

⁸Robert C. Neville, *Soldier, Sage, Saint* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978).

⁹The trilogy consists of Robert C. Neville, *Reconstruction of Thinking* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981); Robert Cummings Neville, *Recovery of the Measure: Interpretation and Nature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1989); and idem, *Normative Cultures* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

trinsically valuable in ways relevant to the four families of thinking. This naturalistic approach to nature, value, and thinking is in the line of American philosophy from the pragmatists and process philosophers, but it is quite distinct from Continental philosophy that tries to construe nature on the basis of transcendental conditions of subjectivity and also from analytic philosophy that so often thinks that conceptual clarity counts as evidence. So, by the age of forty I knew that what I would work on philosophically and theologically would not be within the dominant communities or discourses of the academic philosophy of my time. But, I had no more perplexities about where I wanted to go—only the perplexities of getting there.

Progress

The decade of my forties was filled with the work of my chosen and lucked-upon directions. As a scholar-official I was dean of fine arts and humanities at Stony Brook but moved when I was forty-eight to Boston University as chair of the Religion Department and Director of the Division of Religious and Theological Studies; the next year I became dean of the School of Theology and realized that I was at home for the service I wanted to render to philosophical theology without walls. The Boston University School of Theology was indeed a United Methodist theological school and, in this sense, denominational. But, it was the founding school for Boston University in the nineteenth century because its then-dean, William Fairfield Warren, believed that theological, or ministerial, education should be within the walls of secular education in the largest sense, not walled off from it. The School of Theology has had professors who belonged to religions other than Christianity (let alone Methodism) on its faculty since the beginning and down to this day. William Fairfield Warren was himself the first professor of comparative religions to teach in an American theological school, so I fit in handily to the theology-without-walls traditions of the School of Theology and, for fifteen years as dean, took joy in carrying those traditions down into our time.

Early theology itself at Boston University, famous as “Boston Personalism,” was unabashedly metaphysical, deeply committed to the importance of science, and friendly to the ways that metaphysical ideas could cross reli-

gious differences, all of which picked up on my interests even though I am not a personalist. Furthermore, the Boston University approach to theology, while happily metaphysical, was also deeply practical, orienting parish ministers and preaching well across the Methodist connections and in other Christian denominations as well. I am astonished and deeply grateful that I lucked into a denominational seminary that advocates theology without walls, insists on the rigor of philosophical theology, and embraces the engagement of as many of the world's religions as could be managed.

During this decade of my forties I finally figured out for whom I should write, a truly difficult conundrum because I was not part of any established philosophical school or confessional theology group. I decided to write for Paul Tillich in heaven, and that orientation point has stood me in good stead. At Stony Brook and Boston University I continued to pour myself into the study of South and East Asian religions. I published *The Tao and the Daimon*, which contained essays on creation in Chinese religions, Nagarjuna, and Wang Yang-ming, as well as on comparative theory. I also published a collection of essays on moral and political theory, *The Puritan Smile: A Look toward Moral Reflection*, which ends with a dialogue modelled on the *Kathopanisad*. In 1989, when I turned fifty, I published *Recovery of the Measure*, the second volume of the *Axiology of Thinking*, which most fully elaborates my version of pragmatism in epistemology and cosmology, providing a theory of interpretation to undergird my philosophical theology.

So, by the time I was fifty, I knew what I was supposed to do—the “Mandate of Heaven,” as it were. I had a leadership role in a place that promoted theology without walls at the same time that it fostered the concrete practices of religion.

Work

The decade of my fifties was true “middle age,” with responsibilities in all directions according to the Mandate of Heaven. The School of Theology was rebuilding itself after some bad times. As dean, I was automatically a religious bureaucrat in the United Methodist Church and in the national accrediting process of theological schools, but it was my intellectual work that was most pertinent to being a theologian without walls.

As dean of the School of Theology, I taught the introductory theology course for master's students and wrote a text for it, *A Theology Primer*.¹⁰ The book runs through a traditional list of Christian doctrines, interpreting them according to my philosophical theology and in comparison with other religions. In the same year, 1991, I published *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay toward Comparative Theology*, which contains chapters on comparative theory, on creativity across religions, on creation *ex nihilo* and kenosis as unlikely comparative categories, and on specific comparisons of Buddhist, Christian, and Confucian figures.¹¹ This book allowed me to enter into the vigorous development of comparative theology as an emerging discipline. The following year I published *The Highroad around Modernism*, a book of essays generally devoted to defending my kind of philosophical theology against the postmodern criticisms of metaphysics.¹² That book explicitly builds on Peirce and Whitehead and explains how metaphysics is hypothetical but systematic and subject to feedback criticism within experience. Then, in 1993, I published the monograph, *Eternity and Time's Flow*, mentioned earlier as my existential coming to terms with my infant daughter's death. That book presents a theory of time and attempts to show that we cannot acknowledge moral responsibility through time without presupposing that, in some sense, the past, present, and future are together. They are together as constituting eternity, but they are not temporally together. Moral responsibility presupposes eternal identity in this sense. But, the togetherness of the modes of time can only be in the ontological creative act. Therefore, within theistic metaphoric systems, the divine "life" can be construed as the togetherness of the modes of time with a dynamic that is far richer than the mere dynamic of spontaneity in present time. The book ends with a discussion of eternal life as the reality behind the metaphors of immortality.

Normative Cultures came out in 1995, concluding the *Axiology of Thinking* trilogy. Its title means that cultures are conventional and yet also normative, a point that does not make sense in most Western views, but it is

¹⁰Robert Cummings Neville, *A Theology Primer* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

¹¹Robert Cummings Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

¹²Robert Cummings Neville, *The Highroad around Modernism*, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

perfectly sensible within the Confucian theory of ritual according to which the valuable elements of high civilization are made possible by conventional rituals that themselves are subject to criticism. The topic is approached both as a matter of theory and as a matter of practical reason. At the heart of the argument is the claim that symbols, particularly religious symbols, can be true in a profound sense while being literally false, even off-topic, if interpreted in a literal sense. This claim was worked out in *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, published the following year.¹³ This monograph took up the task of demonstrating Paul Tillich's argument that religious symbols participate in that to which they are referred even when they are properly broken, an argument he did not develop well. The book is copiously illustrated with symbols from a variety of religious traditions and is the theoretical base for claiming that all religions might make indexical reference to ultimate realities, even though the iconic reference of their symbols might be only superstition. Now, I could be a theologian without walls with an explanation of the walls.

When I was sixty, in 1999, I published a book of sermons, *The God Who Beckons: Theology in the Form of Sermons*, that had been preached in a variety of venues, mainly in and around the School of Theology and Marsh Chapel, but also in Cambridge, U.K.¹⁴ I was at ease with the fact that a specifically religious presentation could reflect my metaphysical philosophical theology on the one hand, scriptural attentiveness on the other, and a fairly constant reference to symbols from many religions that could be immediately meaningful, literally false, and indexically true and effective. I was at ease in responding to any criticisms to the effect that I should attend to parochial walls.

Flourish

The decade of my sixties saw the productive results of the previous decades, as far as my academic work went. At sixty-four I transitioned from the deanship of the School of Theology to the deanship of Marsh Chapel, where I was

¹³Robert Cummings Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, SUNY Series in Religious Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

¹⁴Robert Cummings Neville, *The God Who Beckons: Theology in the Form of Sermons* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999).

chaplain of the University, superintending the ministries of all the religions represented on campus. *Preaching the Gospel without Easy Answers* contains the sermons from the first year in the pulpit of Marsh Chapel.¹⁵ The sermons from the second and third years are collected in *Seasons of the Christian Life and Nurture in Time and Eternity*.¹⁶ At sixty-six I became executive director of the Danielsen Institute, a part of Boston University that ran a mental health clinic and training program for clinicians, a job that overlapped for a year with the chaplaincy, while I continued to teach full time as I had since coming to Boston University in 1987. I felt fulfilled as a Confucian scholar-official and was extremely grateful to have the energy to carry on this public life.

My scholarship was also reaping the harvest of previous work. In 2000 I published *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World*, which reworked previously written essays into a cumulative argument that Confucianism is not tied to East Asian culture but can be in a critical, dialectical relation with any culture—or at least contemporary Western cultures (how better symbolized than by Boston?). The book provides a contemporary interpretation of Confucianism as part of a global conversation. Most satisfying to me is that Tu Weiming in his Foreword acknowledged me as an authentic contemporary Confucian. So much for the wall between East and West! In 2001 I published the monograph, *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement*, which self-consciously did for the central Christian symbols what *Boston Confucianism* did for the Confucian ones.¹⁷ *Symbols of Jesus* explicitly exemplifies the theory of broken symbols developed in *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, with a contemporary interpretation of Christianity as addressing fundamental human problems that need addressing by any religion.

In 2002 I published *Religion in Late Modernity*, a collection of essays that returned to the theme of metaphysics, cosmology, and the temporality and eternity of religious life. They especially took on the issue of how to interpret symbols in various religions that represent the ontological creative act

¹⁵Robert Cummings Neville, *Preaching the Gospel without Easy Answers* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005).

¹⁶Robert Cummings Neville, *Seasons of the Christian Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); and idem, *Nurture in Time and Eternity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

¹⁷Robert Cummings Neville, *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement* (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

as a person-like intentional agent. In 2006 I published the monograph, *On the Scope and Truth of Theology: Theology as Symbolic Engagement*, which was a systematic elaboration of my pragmatic approach to theology, extending Peirce's theory and providing a prolegomenon to a systematic theology.¹⁸

In 2008, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* collected essays that developed the Confucian notion of ritual and carried on further discussions of comparative theology.¹⁹ In 2009, when I was seventy, I published *Realism in Religion: A Pragmatist's Perspective*, which collected essays from the whole of my career that dealt with issues of metaphysical and epistemological realism in theology.²⁰ It also addressed comparative theory in more detail. This was a decade of harvesting the fruits of the many dimensions of developing a theology without walls.

Freedom

"Confucius said, 'At fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty my character had been formed. At forty I had no more perplexities. At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven (T'ien-ming). At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing moral principles.'"²¹ My telling of the tale of a theologian without walls has followed Confucius's scheme, stopping short of his claims for himself at age seventy. There is no way that my moral instincts have been so honed that I desire only the righteous. Thus, at seventy I resolved to hold no more administrative offices so as to minimize the damage I might do. As a scholar-official I like to think that I have done helpful and productive things about fifty-one percent of the time; but I rue the forty-nine percent of mistakes. Now, I have little power to do much harm!

However, passing seventy has given me a new freedom with regard to intellectual life. I had long planned to write a three-volume systematic the-

¹⁸Robert Cummings Neville, *On the Scope and Truth of Theology: Theology as Symbolic Engagement* (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2006).

¹⁹Robert Cummings Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

²⁰Robert Cummings Neville, *Realism in Religion: A Pragmatist's Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009).

²¹Analects 2:4 in Wing-tsit Chan, ed. and tr., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 22.

ology in my old age, and I began that project less than a month after my seventieth birthday. My secret fear was that this project would be little more than a summary in systematic form of ideas I had developed and published earlier. How astonishing, then, to discover that the writing process prompted an outpouring of new ideas! Religion, I argued, should be defined heuristically from our current standpoint as the human symbolic engagement of ultimacy in cognitive, existential, and practical ways. Of course ultimacy needs to be defined, and the first volume, *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology Volume One* does just that, reaching back to the ideas of ontological creation in *God the Creator* while orienting and expressing them in quite new contexts.²²

Ultimates also details the theory of engagement that found its prolegomenon in *On the Scope and Truth of Theology*. The ontological creative act is immediately creative and thus cannot have a structure for which there can be symbolic icons. So, *Ultimates* argues that there have been three main symbol systems that have developed ways of indexically but not iconically referring to the ontological creative act: transformations of the ideas of personhood, or personification, in West Asian religions; transformations of the ideas of consciousness in South Asian religions; and transformations of the ideas of spontaneous emergence in East Asian religions. Each of these symbol systems has many alternative and sometimes contradictory expressions. None is literally true, but each with its variants has helped religious people engage the ontological creative act. This point gave me an exciting new perspective for studying the symbols of the great and small religions.

Existence: Philosophical Theology Volume Two analyzes existential ways by which people are defined by their engagements with ultimacy.²³ Taking the ultimate traits of determinateness as expressed in *Ultimates*, *Existence* relates them to human beings as providing ultimate boundary conditions for human life, resulting in the near-universal problematics of righteousness (its difficulties and failures); wholeness (with brokenness and suffering); engagement with other people, institutions, and nature (with estrangement and alienation); the meaning of life (or meaninglessness); and radical con-

²²Robert Cummings Neville, *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology, Volume One* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013).

²³Robert Cummings Neville, *Existence: Philosophical Theology, Volume Two* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014).

tingency of existence (with gratitude or negativity). Each of these problematics provides existential predicaments as well as venues for ecstatic fulfillments, with expressions across the religions of the world. *Religion: Philosophical Theology Volume Three* provides a theoretical analysis of the practice of religion, including how it is to be understood and studied—themes distinctive to the historical religions, religious values, and “religionless religion” when religion itself is not ultimate.²⁴

I am confident that *Philosophical Theology* in three volumes is a large systematic theology without walls. Of course, it has the peculiarities of its own historical location, but it has an uncommonly broad and interconnected theoretical structure across historical religions and many points of continuity with existential and practical life. These create a sacred worldview that I think we can live by today so as to be religious, that is, to engage ultimacy well—without walls.

²⁴Robert Cummings Neville, *Religion: Philosophical Theology, Volume Three* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).