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Week One of Cohort Three of the Luce/AAR Summer Seminars in Theologies of Religious Pluralism (TRP) and Comparative Theology (CT) was held at the Georgia Tech Conference Center in Atlanta from May 30–June 7, 2012. As has been true of each Cohort, the distinctive interests of the Fellows gave shape to the content and character of our weeklong conversation. The two new members of the Teaching Team, Devorah Schoenfeld — herself a Fellow from Cohort One — and Najeeba Syeed-Miller also brought new questions and research interests to our conversation.

This year’s reflections were also enriched by a stronger representation of Jewish colleagues and the questions they brought to TRP and CT. These include questions about: 1) The particular histories that communities bring to interfaith encounter; for example, the relatively uncomplicated history between Jews and Buddhists versus the fraught history between Jews and Christians; 2) The varying priority of practice and doctrine across religious communities and the way that difference shapes the comparative theological task; and 3) The relatively easy way

some thinkers and religious communities can speak about hybridity and fluid boundaries whereas other minority communities often find these realities far more challenging.

Another area brought into novel focus by our Fellows concerned the ethics of interfaith engagement. How is interfaith engagement shaped by the power of the convener or convening body? Who sets the table and why? How can trust be created between communities such that interreligious study and comparative theology can even take place? What are the effects of the asymmetries of power between communities under study? What happens when the study of a community leads to (mis)appropriation of that community's practices by persons of another tradition? These challenges notwithstanding, there seemed to be a general sense, if not a consensus, that the work of bringing to explicit self-consciousness one's implicit theology of religious pluralism is crucial work. It is hard to revise and amend what has not been rendered explicit and vulnerable.

On a related matter, John Makransky, a member of the teaching team, argued that many religious traditions are caught in a self-contradiction; they seek in principle to see reality clearly — to see reality as it is — but what religious traditions often say about others can be rooted in error and even verge on caricature. Hence, Makransky suggested that formulating and revising theologies of religious pluralism may be understood as part of the core truth-seeking work of religious traditions — to speak truly and accurately about religious others is at the very heart of the work of the traditions themselves.

Ethical and formational questions were also raised around questions of identity and teaching: What does it mean for a Jewish professor to be teaching Judaism to Catholic students in a Catholic university? Equally challenging are questions about how a non-Christian might teach Christian traditions — including historical-critical approaches to those traditions — to Christian students. How is religious identity performed and interpreted in such situations? How does the very fact of such teaching situations give rise to questions of TRP and CT?

Questions were also raised about the marginal position of comparative theology in the academy. CT thinks of itself as a bridge discipline extending between the work of systematic theology on the one side and history of religions on the other. However, both of these fields are uncomfortable with CT. Systematic theologians wonder whether CT is legitimate since it employs resources from more than one tradition in a normative key, rather than confine itself to Christian tradition alone. Thus, its positive theological interest in the history of religions puts CT into question. Scholars in the history of religions have long exercised suspicion towards theology as such. Historians regard the very existence of their field as the result of liberation from theological constraints. Hence, the comparative theologian's normative and constructive

interest in the material of the history of religions is a source of unease. Comparative theologians are therefore caught between two fields, both of which are vital to the future of comparative theology. Fellows and members of the teaching team explored possible arguments to address the challenges posed by the fragile and liminal status of comparative theology.

Our trip to the Hindu Temple of Atlanta also raised a multitude of questions about the religious meaning of such a visit for non-Hindus. If Hindus go to the temple to “see and be seen” by the temple deity, then is it possible to regard a temple visit as a religiously neutral ethnographic activity? Questions about whether it is proper for Orthodox Jews to enter a site of image worship — is it *avodah zarah*? — let alone to accept *prasad* from the temple priest, made it plain to all that there is a qualitative difference between an ethnographic visit and a theologically-engaged visit. The promise of both TRP and CT rests precisely in the fact that these disciplines are committed to engaging such vexing questions rather than eliding or repressing them. The Teaching Team and Fellows engaged in substantive discussion after the site visit about the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of bringing students to religious sites during courses in which the students’ religious convictions are taken seriously. Should site visits be required in a comparative theology class, especially if such a visit might be regarded as religiously impermissible by a student’s home tradition? What precisely is the difference between an ethnographic visit and a visit by comparative theologians?

The conversation provoked by the temple visit was part of a larger discussion later in the week about interreligious ritual participation. Here, the Seminar was guided by the work of one of our Fellows, Marianne Moyaert, who raised a whole host of questions about the relationship between ritual practice and theologies of religious pluralism and comparative theology. Moyaert contended that questions about interreligious ritual participation are distinctive in character, not least because of the role of affect and the body in such participation. She noted that one might well have an inclusivist theology of religious pluralism but may still be reluctant to engage in interreligious participation. Moyaert’s presentation and the unfolding discussion raised important questions for both comparative theology and theology of religious pluralism as both fields have been quite textualist in character to date.

Fellows also raised related questions about the “non-cognitive” dimensions of interreligious teaching and learning that are often insufficiently registered given the heavy attention to doctrine and texts in CT and TRP. Emotions, complex histories, and commitments to meditative disciplines — all these and more are present in the bodies of students and teachers who do the work of TRP and CT in the classroom. Many felt the need to theorize these dimensions of the learning and teaching environment more fully.

Cohort Three also explored a number of points that have been raised by other Cohorts. The most compelling of these had to do with whether comparative theology can be practiced by persons who do not belong to and/or strongly identify with any particular tradition. Given the growth of persons who speak of themselves as being “spiritual but not religious,” committed from the first to more than one tradition, or being “nones” — that is belonging to no tradition in particular — what might comparative theology look like if it is practiced by persons from such sites of origin? In some fashion, this question has been raised, and often quite insistently, by Fellows from every Cohort.

The three Cohorts of the AAR Summer Seminars have already yielded abundant fruit. New AAR groups — like one on Hindu theology — are emerging, a variety of book projects are under development, and new courses in TRP and CT are being taught in seminaries and religious studies departments across the country. But in addition to these rewards, the Teaching Team and Fellows are grateful for the creation of a growing community of inquiry and collaboration generated by these Seminars. At the very least, this means that there are many more scholars now engaged in the work of TRP and CT than there were before these seminars; at the very most, the AAR as a whole will benefit from and be transformed by the scholarship and teaching generated by this new scholarly community. The AAR and its Theological Education Committee are grateful to the Luce Foundation and the staff of the AAR, in particular Stephanie Gray, for the support that makes all of this possible. The formal work of these Seminars will conclude after our final week this coming summer, but conversation and the collaborative research of the Teaching Team and Cohort Fellows will likely continue for decades to come.

For a list of these year’s Fellows, see http://www.aarweb.org/Programs/Summer_Seminars .