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Two weeklong meetings were held this summer as part of the continuing work of the AAR/Luce Summer Seminars in Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology. The first of the seminars (week two for Cohort One: May 30–June 6, 2010) was held on the campus of Catholic Theological Union in Hyde Park, Chicago, Illinois. The second week (week one for Cohort Two: June 13–June 20, 2010) took place at the Georgia Tech Conference Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Both sessions proved to be rewarding for the AAR/Luce Fellows.

Readers of RSN will recall that these Summer Seminars were created to introduce theological faculty teaching at seminaries, divinity schools, and theology and religious studies departments to the latest scholarship on theologies of religious pluralism (TRP) and comparative theology (CT). Although a handful of our Fellows enjoyed a measure of expertise in one of these two fields, for most attendees these seminars offered the first sustained scholarly encounter with TRP and CT. Fellows reported considerable excitement that their introduction came from some of the leading figures in these fields. The teaching team members were:

- Francis X. Clooney, Harvard University
- Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University
- S. Mark Heim, Andover Newton Theological School
- Marcia Hermansen, Loyola University, Chicago
- Steven D. Kepnes (Cohort 1), Colgate University
- John Makransky, Boston College
- Peter Ochs (Cohort 2), University of Virginia
- Anantanand Rambachan, Saint Olaf College
- John Thatamanil, Vanderbilt University

Beyond the formal curriculum of the Summer Seminars, Cohort One evaluations report several soft features of the seminars that have proved especially valuable. These include a deep appreciation for the ways in which the teaching team embodied the deepest values of the traditions to which they belong, the inclusion of optional morning sessions in which contemplative practices from the various traditions were taught, and the fostering of deep collegial relationships generated by meeting three times over the course of the year.

Concluding the Work of Cohort One

The week at Catholic Theological Union was the third and final meeting of Cohort One. Hence our time was largely given to hearing reports from Fellows about the research and teaching

work they had undertaken over the course of the year, as well as plans for future teaching and research. The Fellows did more than offer reports; presentations included discussion of complex case studies of interreligious tensions (Karla Suomala on cases that she has written for Interfaith Youth Core); the use of hevruta study as a model for interreligious dialogue (Devorah Schoenfeld and Julia Watts Belser); the practice of scriptural reasoning (Homayra Ziad); and a presentation on the use of Islamic Christology in the seminary classroom (Miriam Perkins). Fellows also offered drafts of research papers that will eventually be brought to publication.

From the beginning, the teaching team had hoped that the work undertaken by our Fellows would not only transform their classrooms and the schools in which they teach but might also transform the fields of TRP and CT as such. Judging by the long-term projects that Cohort One Fellows have set for themselves, there is ample reason to believe that these expectations will not only be met but will be exceeded. What's more, the robust inclusion in the Seminar of a diversity of religious voices means that both TRP and CT will gradually cease to be identified as exclusively Christian ventures.

Long-term projects now underway include attention to new work on theologies of religious pluralism emerging out of Latin America (Michel Andraos); approaches to religious/cultural pluralism and conflict in Africa (Edward Phillip Antonio); the ethos of hybridity and pluralism that marks the Pacific Northwest (Sharon Betcher); theory and practice in interreligious spiritual care and pastoral counseling (Kathleen Grieder); and a book-length commentary on the Gospel of John and the Kena Upanishad (Gregory Walter writing with Anant Rambachan). These are just a sampling from the considerable wealth of new research emerging from Cohort One.

This is to say nothing about the remarkable variety of new syllabi prepared, new courses taught, and, indeed, the implementation of substantial changes to the curricula of departments and seminaries in which our Fellows teach. It is safe to say that the legacy of Cohort One will be considerable.

Questions from Cohort Two

Each new Cohort of scholars brings with it novel questions for theologies of religious pluralism and comparative theology. One key question from Cohort Two has to do with how the term “theology” functions when it is preceded by the term “comparative.” Several Fellows noted that members of the teaching team took great conceptual care in defining and, when necessary, contesting and revising the standard vocabulary of the field when engaging terms such as “exclusivism,” “inclusivism,” “pluralism,” and “particularities approaches” — and yet, when it came to thinking through clearly what theology might mean when done comparatively, the Fellows suggested that more work remains to be done. They argued that the matter is particularly urgent because no consensus has been reached regarding the meaning of the

terms among Christian theologians. For that reason alone, there must be more rigorous attention to the possible meanings and uses of the term “theology” in the context of comparative theology lest some unthematized but nonetheless fixed and singular conception of theology become inscribed as the de facto model for how comparative theology must be done.

A second set of questions from Fellows had to do with the nature of comparative theology itself. To date, comparative theology has been a textual discipline often focused on comparing selections from key scriptures. What might comparative theology look like as it begins to shift away from a focus on texts alone? What might a comparative theology that begins closer to the ground look like? How might comparative theology be changed by the traditions under study, especially when dealing with primarily oral Native American and African traditions?

Yet another question that took hold had to do with the relationship between scriptural reasoning (SR) and comparative theology. Is SR a kind of CT? At one point, Frank Clooney quipped, “Scriptural reasoning is comparative theology for extroverts,” acknowledging that, to date, our framing of comparative theology has not been as robustly dialogical as the scriptural reasoning project. That said, the work of comparative theologians such as Clooney, James Fredericks, and myself routinely emerges from deep and sustained dialogue, sometimes over the course of years, with persons from other traditions, even if comparative theological writing gives the impression that the dialogue in question is primarily one of texts. Perhaps the robust sociality of comparative theology has not received sufficient theoretical attention. More careful scrutiny of the practice of comparative theologians prior to the work of writing suggests that they, too, may be extroverts.

What is exciting about these questions is that those who raised them are the ones best suited to answer them! As the Summer Seminars bring new voices to the table of TRP and CT, dynamic and productive change becomes inevitable. Fellows and the teaching team alike share a sense that we are witnessing the transformation of these fields as new scholars take the reins.

The Summer Seminars and the Future of TRP and CT

As the work of the Summer Seminars matures and as the formal work of Cohort One concludes, Cohort One Fellows began to identify their field, level, and structural challenges that need to be addressed. How are Fellows to keep this newly inaugurated and vital conversation going? What publishing venues exist for scholarship in TRP and CT for scholars working in the various theological fields, especially when some of these fields are not yet prepared or equipped for the interreligious turn?

In order to address such concerns, Cohort One Fellows have put in place plans for the creation of a Society for Comparative Theology that will supplement the work of the AAR Comparative Theology Group. The Society will emerge under the leadership of the Fellows and is meant to cultivate and sustain the growth of what remains as yet a fairly new and fragile field.

The fragility of the field is most evident to Fellows who are practical theologians and sometimes find it difficult to publish interreligious work in disciplines that have been to date almost exclusively grounded in Christian resources. Customarily, denominational presses publish work in these fields. Such presses are only slowly beginning to address questions of religious diversity. Moreover, the relevant journals, too, are just now starting to publish interreligious work. Even when such work is welcomed, it remains the case that these venues must create editorial boards and identify external reviewers who are qualified to assess interreligious work. Such changes necessarily take time to implement. Fellows realize that the emerging Society for Comparative Theology will have to address such issues soon if the new scholarship emerging from these Seminars and beyond is to find publication and if junior scholars are to be supported toward tenure. Thankfully, that work now lies in the very able hands of an energetic community of scholars steeped in the ethos of community and collegiality that has marked the AAR/Luce Summer Seminars.