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Just last year a student came to my office after the second session of my "Hindu-Christian Dialogue" course. Needless to say, I was surprised that any student would come to office hours so early in the semester, but her question to me was more surprising still. She had recently decided to become a minister because she thought it would be a good job that would allow her to work in a leadership capacity. But she wanted to know which of the Christian denominations might be most likely to accept that salvation is available not just to Christians alone. That would be the right denomination for her.

I am not able to convey with vividness the sense of bemused disorientation I experienced as I listened to her, in part, because I cannot recall her precise words. Nonetheless, several things became clear: 1) She was denomination shopping, a hardly surprising phenomenon. What was surprising is that she was shopping not as a would-be congregant but rather as a would-be clergyperson. Searching for a job in the right denomination was not unlike looking for a position in a firm or company that shared her values. Plainly put, she was on a job hunt, and even talked about ministry as a good career that would allow her to work with people in a leadership capacity; 2) She was absolutely lacking in any of the traditional nomenclature or patterns of meaning-making that come from denominational or ministerial formation. Words like "discernment," and "calling" were not in her vocabulary. We might once have taken for granted

such formation in students entering seminary or divinity school but no longer; 3) Although she had some familiarity with general notions of spirituality and some knowledge of other religious traditions, she did not know much about Christian traditions. In fact, her rudimentary knowledge of Buddhism and Hinduism were in some ways deeper than her knowledge of Christian traditions; and 4) For her, ordained ministry could not come at the price of exclusivism: openness to other religious traditions was a fundamental and non-negotiable value.

As it happens, my student is one of a growing number of students that come from nondenominational churches. Perhaps this is a gross simplification that approaches caricature, but if I am to take many of my students as any indication, it seems safe to say that the Christianity of such churches is equivalent to whatever the pastor in question declares Christianity to be. Precisely because these churches are nondenominational, there is no clear and self-conscious sense of connection to any particular historical trajectory within Christian traditions. So, it is hardly surprising that students from such churches have no access to a historically deep theological vocabulary even at a rudimentary level. I suspect that this particular configuration of theological illiteracy may be less common at denominational seminaries, but it is not uncommon in a nondenominational divinity school such as Vanderbilt.

But it is not just students from nondenominational megachurches that are lacking in even a rudimentary level of biblical and theological knowledge. As Stephen Prothero has shown, religious illiteracy is a widespread phenomenon, and entering seminary students are not exempt. Moreover, instructors cannot safely assume that most of their students will come to seminary after completing a religious studies major. Moreover, a fair number of religious studies majors come from departments where Christian theology is not emphasized or is even entirely absent.

The question I want to take up here is this: how does such theological illiteracy bear on the work of those who teach theologies of religious pluralism and comparative theology? I suppose the sharpest and most playful way to put this question might be to offer a riff on Max Müller's old dictum, a sacred mantra for comparativists: "He who knows one knows none." If Müller is right, then what do we say about those who don't even know one? Just how does one teach comparative theology and theologies of religious pluralism to students who lack a minimal command of their home tradition?

It is not my intention to offer comprehensive answers to that question so much as to spell out how and why the question is a serious, even daunting, matter. My primary practical intention is to describe and map out just those junctures in which theological illiteracy presents itself and then to offer some proposals about how to move forward. In fact, as I proceed, I will attempt to

demonstrate that every problem I identify is also a source of promise.

Illiteracy about Spiritual Disciplines

As a comparative theologian who works to bring Christian traditions into conversation with Buddhist and Hindu traditions, I find that my teaching of the latter traditions is impeded by the fact that most of my students know very little about spiritual disciplines within Christian traditions. The standard claim that non-Christian traditions tend to be more orthopraxic than orthodoxic, while simplistic, enjoys considerable merit. Hence, it is impossible to have any adequate appreciation for Buddhist traditions without having at least a rudimentary and felt appreciation for basic forms of Buddhist meditation. I can and do remedy this lack by incorporating meditation into the classroom. What I find more difficult to attenuate is my students' sense that such practices are alien and akin to nothing in their own tradition.

Of course, the sense that the meditative disciplines of Buddhist traditions are altogether alien is due to the fact that the vast majority of my students know little about Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions. Hence, it is not surprising that their basic reactions to such practices are often expressed in a fashion that unwittingly echoes traditional forms of polemical Protestant anti-Catholicism. "Might not this focus on meditation be a form of works righteousness? How is it that a tradition that seems so acutely interested in teaching selflessness is so obsessed on turning inward in meditation?" If my students were familiar with Catholic traditions of contemplative prayer and Orthodox understandings of hesychastic prayer, some of these objections might be reframed and recontextualized. To know that Christian traditions too have emphasized practices of calming, concentration, and analysis would make Buddhist practices seem less exotic even if the Protestant question of works righteousness is likely to persist. At the very least, issues that seem, at first glance, to be entirely interreligious might be reframed as also intrareligious ones.

The promise in engaging this problem: Putting Christian traditions into conversation with Buddhist and Hindu traditions generates in my students an interest in homologous phenomena in Christian traditions. Indeed, it is often the case that it is precisely by introducing the role and meaning of meditative disciplines in other traditions that one can generate in students a desire to investigate Christian traditions more carefully in search of intra-Christian resources.

Illiteracy about Intra-Christian Diversity

The lack of knowledge about Christian spiritual disciplines points to a larger problem generated by theological illiteracy. Many of my students do not have a genuine appreciation for theological

diversity within Christian traditions. We have already seen how this lack of appreciation bears on questions of spiritual discipline. At a more fundamental level, my students tend to project their sense that Christianity is internally homogenous onto other traditions. Because they lack an appreciation of diversity within Christian traditions, they assume that Christianity is fairly monolithic. It then follows by extension that other traditions too must be likewise homogeneous or monolithic.

The promise in engaging this problem is multiple: I tackle this problem by teaching the fundamental conflicts that are internal to other traditions. When I teach Buddhist traditions, I make some time to talk about internal tensions within Buddhism as between Madhyamika and Yogacara Buddhists or at a still more subtle level the debates within various forms of Madhyamika schools. Such teaching allows me to invite my students to ask just what a tradition is. They come to see that a tradition cannot easily be depicted as a historical community grounded in consensus! I suggest that perhaps we know that we stand within the “same” tradition precisely because we understand each other well enough to know when we agree and when we disagree. A challenge in much interreligious conversation is that often we do not know just when we are in agreement. Ultimately, presenting debates within other traditions not only helps me to broach questions about what constitutes a tradition, but it also provides fertile ground for discussing abiding tensions internal to Christian traditions. In sum, teaching the conflicts within other traditions can prove to be a safe way of moving students toward a deeper appreciation for the varieties of Christianities.

Illiteracy about Christian Attitudes toward Other Traditions

Because many of my students are largely ignorant about their own traditions in historical depth, they assume Christians are obligated to be exclusivists. Not knowing about Justin Martyr’s notion of the *logos spermatikos* or even Vatican II, they assume that inclusivist positions are the novel and idiosyncratic creations of liberal Vanderbilt professors. Not that they mind. They are happy to hear more open positions on religious diversity. What is problematic from my standpoint as a theologian is that they might assume that such positions lack grounding in ancient strands of Christian witness.

The promise in engaging this problem: Taking up questions about the meaning of religious diversity for Christian faith allows me to talk precisely about the ancient and modern uses of the *logos* doctrine in Justin Martyr as well as in key Vatican II documents, most especially *Nostra Aetate*, also known as the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. In so doing, I am able to find yet another way to teach that Christian traditions are subtle, complex, and internally variegated.

Theological Illiteracy and the Temptation of Uncritical Eclecticism

Yet another challenge posed by theological illiteracy is the temptation of uncritical eclecticism. The challenge presents itself when a certain segment of incoming students enter as unreflective perennialists. Let me affirm explicitly that I take a reflective perennialism as worked out in the writings of Huston Smith and John Hick to be a live philosophical option. I myself don't hold to that position, but some of my students accept an easy rather than hard-won perennialism. They believe that Yoga is essentially the same as Buddhism, which is essentially the same as Daoism, which is essentially the same as Hinduism. Paraphrasing Hegel, in the East it is always night and all cows are black. For such students, Christianity is the problem. While Eastern traditions can be taken to affirm some materially identical version of monism, Christianity is the tradition that cannot be thought in comparison to the religions of the East.

The promise in engaging this problem is comparative theology: Learning about other traditions in rich detail interrupts uncritical perennialism. One of my students this semester was brought up short by his first introduction to the Buddhist idea of anatta

, no-self. He found himself utterly unwilling to face up to that demanding denial and insisted in class, "I know that I have a Self!" Henceforth, that student and others will find it impossible to speak of Eastern religions in undifferentiated ways. He now knows about the millennia-long debate between Hindus and Buddhists about the status of the self. More importantly, he also knows that the body-soul dualism is a contested issue among contemporary Christian theologians. He also knows now that Ancient Israelite tradition had no such dichotomy. Matters have become complex indeed! Teaching comparative theology interrupts a theological illiteracy that stands prepared to equate any idea or practice found in one tradition with ideas that seem similar in others. It also prevents my students from borrowing practices from other traditions in haphazard fashion. As a provocation, I compare such uncritical borrowing with raiding one's neighbor's medicine cabinet. Her pills work for her, but that does not mean that they will work for you. I give conceptual rigor to this metaphor by introducing a medical model for comparison. I invite my students to ask how particular traditions — and even strands within them — diagnose the human predicament, offer etiologies, prognoses, and ultimately, therapeutic regimes for addressing that predicament. I urge them to appreciate what careful comparison shows: traditions are marked by robust internal debates on just these matters. Even agreement about diagnosis need not eventuate in agreement about what therapeutic regime is best suited for addressing the ailment at issue.

The Anxiety of Theological Illiteracy

Among a small but noteworthy segment of my students, I find that a fundamental existential anxiety presents itself: How can I safely engage Buddhist or Hindu traditions in some depth when I don't really know my own? What will become of my own untested faith? On rare

occasions, that anxiety has led some students to drop my comparative theology classes in the first week or so. For this challenge, I have no ready solution. All I can do is offer an empathetic and pastoral presence. I can acknowledge the difficulty that often comes with a compelling introduction to a winsome and profound tradition when a student is not rooted in his or her home soil.

This past semester, in a move that I found both surprising and illuminating, my co-instructor, who is steeped in various forms of Buddhist practice, invited our students to work with this anxiety in practice. During meditation, my co-instructor invited my students to note where in the body they experience their anxiety. They are invited to sit with it as we do elementary breath work. Such mindfulness enables students to register their own discomfort and resistances. Students report that such awareness enables them to cope better with the psychological stress of encountering traditions that challenge much that they hold to be sacred. At the intellectual level, it also becomes evident that knowing another tradition in depth and detail need not lead one to minimize commitment to and passion for one's own tradition.

One final note: As a comparative theologian, I find that theological illiteracy generates one especially persistent pedagogical difficulty: I must simultaneously teach three very different bodies of knowledge and skill sets in a single course. In addition to introducing Buddhist or Hindu traditions. I must also teach the craft of comparison. But in order to do that, I must also introduce students to Christian traditions. I cannot take for granted that students are well grounded in any of these three areas. Striking the right balance between these three tasks is enormously difficult. That challenge notwithstanding, I find that such work is doable: comparative theology generates a richer and more nuanced appreciation in my students for their own traditions as well as the traditions of others. It may be possible to envision some putatively ideal program of study that would have students immerse themselves in their own tradition before they encounter another, but such a venture would surely be quixotic. The contingencies of American life in the twenty-first century — a life often marked by multiple religious participation, intermarriage, and routine interreligious interaction — make any neatly linear regimen improbable if not impossible and perhaps even undesirable.

As noted in the example above, an encounter with Buddhism in serious depth compels my students to think hard about theological anthropology and most especially about the nature and status of the self or soul. That question would not take on the same urgency if inquiry about the status and nature of the self were framed solely in intra-Christian terms. It is precisely the encounter with Buddhism that makes students ask especially subtle questions about body-soul dualism in Christianity. That question in turn generates important questions about strands of the Hebrew Bible in which no substantialist notion of the soul is to be found. The discovery that some Buddhist anthropologies are closer to some Ancient Israelite perspectives than many contemporary Christians are to a past that they are all too eager to claim is just the kind of

subtle knowledge that motivates me to teach comparative theology despite the demands generated by theological illiteracy.