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Before removing himself from the presidential race, Texas Governor Rick Perry released a commercial where he said, “I’m not ashamed to admit I’m a Christian, but you don’t need to be in the pew every Sunday to know there is something wrong in this country when gays can serve openly in the military, but our kids can’t openly celebrate Christmas or pray in school.” Perry’s brief declaration rehearses a recurrent polemic where queers are figured as antithetical to the ideals of religion. Such political rhetoric promulgates the image of religious people as antigay and queers as antireligion. Yet, many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people do see themselves as religious and as active participants in religious communities. So where and how, then, do queers fit within the contemporary religious landscape of the United States?

Last summer, along with fifteen other graduate students in religion, I travelled to Nashville, Tennessee, to participate in a weeklong institute focusing on LGBT scholarship in religion coordinated by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a leading gay-rights advocacy group that was hosted at Vanderbilt Divinity School. The institute, which is in its second year, was comprised of religion scholars from across the country who served as instructors and mentors to graduate students whose research interests include a focus on queer(ing) religion. At a time when mainstream media continues to perpetuate the idea of religion and queer bodies as incompatible, the HRC Summer Institute provided a time for those of us in the academy and in seminaries to explore how LGBT people are claiming space within religious traditions without abrogating sexuality, gender expression, or religiosity.

The week opened with a lecture by Janet Jakobsen, professor at Barnard College and director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women, in which she reminded us that to belong to a religious minority is to de facto be suspect of embodying and practicing non-normative sexuality.

As simple examples illustrate, historically and recently, Jewish women (the “Jewess”) have been labeled as seductresses of Christian men, Muslim men have been imagined as barbaric sexual predators, and Mormons as unwilling to adhere to coupled monogamy. In the United States especially, the Protestant sexual ethic of limiting sex to heterosexually-married couples remains the sexual and religious norm against which all non-Protestants and non-heterosexuals are judged. Indeed, people become sexual outsiders not just because of their sexual practices, but also because of their religious affiliations.

Later in the week, Mary Hunt, feminist theologian, lesbian Roman Catholic, and cofounder of the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), discussed reasons why some LGBT people remain committed to religious traditions that continue to condemn and ostracize them. For many, one’s religion of origin has a deep hold. The foods, rituals, sights, and sounds are profoundly evocative, engendering both nostalgia and a desire for a rooted connection to a religious community. For decades, feminist theologians have remained committed to their religious communities while striving to change the patriarchal language of liturgy and to creating leadership opportunities for women. In a similar move, queers are also staking claims to their religious traditions in ways that allow for their inclusion as well as for a subversion of heterosexual norms.

Responding to a question after her lecture, Hunt declared, “Religion is dynamic. People are dynamic. No one fits perfectly. People are religious agents who are allowed to name their own religiosity. All of us should be able to think imaginatively about how to be religious.” Being free to “think imaginatively about how to be religious” is quite possibly at the heart of queer issues in religion, and is certainly what queers bring to religious institutions: the opportunity for everyone — gay, straight, bi, transgender, or something else — to envision and to carve out space within religious spheres that allow for a full embrace of the dignity of each person, without needing to hide any aspect of our multiple identities.

As the institute progressed with lectures on topics such as Asian gay male spirituality and queer issues in Islam, religious difference emerged as one of the prevailing themes of our discussions as we became frustrated by the ways in which the term “religion” frequently implies “Christianity” and how, as queer scholars and theologians, we seek to not only deconstruct the gender and sexual orientation hierarchies that endow straight men with tremendous cultural capital and clout, but also to escape the trap of Christianity as the authoritative standard by which all religious and spiritual lives are judged. “Queer,” for many of us, then, became not just an identity, but also a verb, a process, and a methodology for challenging norms and their associations to power, for dismantling rigid authorial structures, and for intervening with new possibilities. As queer scholars of religion, our goal, however, is not to disrupt the status quo for the sake of havoc or to destroy religious institutions. Rather, as Emilie Townes, associate dean at Yale Divinity School, and Laurel Schneider, professor at Chicago Theological Seminary, said

in a joint presentation, “deconstruction strives for the sake of giving new life.” Queer scholarship in religion, therefore, opens up possibilities for reimagining religious bodies, institutions, rituals, and traditions.

Near the close of the seminar, while reflecting on the week’s lectures and discussions, Ellen Armour, professor at Vanderbilt University, said, “Crafting a life is at the heart of what it means to be queer.” Roadmaps do not exist for how to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender in the United States, and many LGBT youth grow up unable to imagine how queer families and relationships are constructed and lived. Yet, many of us do manage to navigate the confusing and rocky terrain of renegotiating and reconfiguring gender norms and sexual expectations — a process that never fully ends, but that generally leads to a greater sense of freedom and authenticity. And now, for the second year in a row, queer scholars in religion gathering in the southern United States, convened by a political lobbying organization, uniting the academic and the activist, are offering interpretations, analysis, and ideas for how queer religious lives are crafted, and in turn, how religion can be transfigured because of the transformative presence of queer bodies. To be sure, this is not entirely new work; several of the scholars participating in the HRC Summer Institute began the work a few decades ago in reconceptualizing religious traditions from queer perspectives. And so the work continues, as more LGBT people claim religious identities, and as an increasing number of queer religion scholars and theologians imagine and create new possibilities.