

The Seminar on God and the Human Future

A Report on the 2016 Fall Meeting

E. Maynard Moore

God as Sovereign

What does it mean to say “God is Not King?”

Stunned silence.

That is not the usual response from a room full of theologians. Yet that seems to have been the visceral response of many in the room in San Antonio, at this day-long session of the God Seminar. Of course, the hesitation was only momentary. David Galston and Joe Bessler kicked off the four-part session with an overview of where the Seminar has been in the previous sessions, starting with the Spring Westar Institute meeting in 2015.

But on this day we witnessed something of a departure from previous discussions. Not only was the topic itself somewhat more of an “outlier” than those previous, these discussions on November 19 were framed by the contemporary social/racial context in which we find ourselves in the United States in 2016–17. In this context, what does it mean to consider God without the framework of sovereignty?

The entire discussion was opened with a keynote statement by J. Kameron Carter, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Black Church Studies at the Duke Divinity School. Carter works in the field of African American Diaspora studies, with considerable attention to issues facing the black church in the United States, and brings to the table historical, literary, and poetic concepts from a broad range of cultures. Let it be said—it took a while for many in the room to “catch on” to what Carter was saying, thus the initial “stunned silence” reaction.

But Jay (as he likes to be called) has a winsome manner, and we were soon fully drawn into the presentation. At the outset, Jeffrey Robbins, Chair and Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Lebanon Valley College, had reminded the room: “We claim the right to think about God differently; and in this session of the God Seminar, we’re haunted by the wedding of race and Christian theology—more spe-

cifically, by the theological problem of whiteness, or the ways by which the construction of the Christian identity has been racialized.” That statement represented the very core of the day-long discussions in San Antonio.

Early in his remarks, Jay tapped into common ground: Anselm of Canterbury. Every theologian in the room has studied Anselm’s pivotal place in church history, mostly around doctrinal issues. But Jay was not talking about doctrine. He proceeded to “peel the onion” to lay bare Anselm’s assumptions, which were grounded in medieval Christendom’s concepts of property and lordship. Inherent in the concept of lordship, of course, is ownership; the lord of the manor owned not only all the land but technically all of the people (who were his subjects) and all that they possessed. This was justified with analogy from the bottom up: the earth is the Lord’s, says the Psalmist, and thus we are God’s subjects. It is also justified from the top down: the king is lord of the realm, and thus all are subjects to the king, who reigns as God’s vicar on earth. Either way, God is the sovereign at the pinnacle of this hierarchy.

Any number of creedal statements and previously unquestioned theological concepts are based on this hierarchical concept, including the justification for slavery, which is deeply encased in the whole concept of ownership. When the slave is considered to be the owner’s property, the slave’s humanity disappears, and when the slave decides to become a fugitive, the slave is actually stealing the rightful property of the owner. The slave becomes a thief by affirming his own selfhood. As Jay points out, for Anselm it was the work of the devil that inspired the fugitive, and redemption is only realized when the rightful property of the master is recovered and restored to its owner.

Anselm’s concepts of the fugitive and ownership became the structure within which his whole creedal theology was fashioned: just put your previously unexamined assumptions aside and think about (go back and re-read) Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Human). Words like redemption, atonement, and restoration, with which we have been struggling for all these years, suddenly come bursting into the sunlight. Now, taking it one step further, which is the whole point of the God Seminar: what does this mean for your concept of God? Suddenly divine sovereignty looks like an empty shell. And next time that you pray to “God Almighty” think about what you are saying. Clearly, Jay Carter’s point must be taken seriously, for, as he says, “The medieval is still with us.”

Next we were introduced to Keri Day, Associate Professor of Theological and Social Ethics and Black Church Studies, who was participating in her first (not the last, she said) Westar meeting. Rather than a formal paper, she had submitted a shorter document which she called “Musings,” and she continued in this conversational vein. She picked up on the fugitive theme that emerged from

Red = strongly agree
Pink = generally agree
Gray = generally disagree
Black = strongly disagree

God Seminar Fall 2016 Ballot Item

Given the problematic associations with property, possessory closure, and mastery, the concept of sovereignty should no longer be used in reference to contemporary conceptions of God.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Anselm's theology as outlined by Jay Carter, remarking that she now sees how Western theology simply organized itself around these hierarchical concepts in its creation of church structures. Keri asked us to think about spirituality, pointing out how easily (given our assumptions) spirituality gets transformed into religiousness.

But Keri took the fugitive theme one step further, to talk about insurgency. Her point of reference was the Azusa Street Movement that came out of the 1906 revival in Los Angeles. This phenomenon is often referenced as the birth of the Pentecostal movement, at that time led by the African American preacher William J. Seymour. It all began with a revival meeting on April 9th that year, and flourished in Southern California until 1915. The revival was characterized by ecstatic experiences, amazing physical healings, worship services characterized by glossolalia, and racial intermingling in social activities. Many of these aspects of the movement were widely criticized in the secular media and among Christian theologians alike, but today

the Pentecostal Christians number perhaps as many as 200 million around the world.

Few of us, even when we recognize the power and influence of Pentecostalism, have ever thought about the movement as an insurgency, but that is what Keri was asking us to do. WOW! That transforms the whole perspective, doesn't it? And, as Keri told us, this was the first time in America when the concepts of blackness and spiritual embodiment (in her words "enfleshment") took on a new meaning for those who participated. The whole movement can then be seen as a celebration of "spirit-in-flesh" terms. More than that, it was a movement that rejected the entire sovereign logic: the spirit could come upon anyone, even the lowliest who was suffering under the racial apartheid of the time. As the movement has spread internationally, the limits of blackness have been transformed, but the appeal even today is compelling for those who want to step out of the hierarchical class structures built around ownership and to affirm their own spiritual worth in a kingdom without a king.

Keri's remarks opened up a broad discussion. Jay had earlier used the term "para-theology," a phrase that he picked up from Michael Hart, a colleague at Duke. He said he found this a better construct than the notion of "a-theology," as used by John Caputo in, for example, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Polebridge, 2016). And para-theology avoids all the trappings of the term "anti-theological" that characterizes so much contentious rhetoric today. Carter advised that "anti-theological" has to be viewed as a "photo-negative"—turning the whole notion of God inside out—because "it over-emphasizes the literal with the loss of the poetic," and we all want to avoid the trap of literalism. "Para" is the Greek word for "alongside of," so the notion of para-theology allows us to work alongside of the tradition, even alongside Anselm, to get below the cultural assumptions that blind us, and to deconstruct the tradition while creatively forging relevant metaphors for our age.

Keri picked up on this: "para" calls us to deconstruct the whole hierarchy around the concept of "the human" and build (for example) a whole new notion of the Incarnation. She points out that the Azusa Street movement rejected the Trinitarian God, and there are places (mostly small black churches) where the Trinitarian creed is not recited. This caused some to label Azusa as un-Christian, but that mattered very little: "black pneuma" was too powerful in the experience of the participants. Spirit took on an entirely new reality, and in this sense, Azusa was forging a "para-Christianity." Spirit could not be contained in the structure of the Trinity; Spirit becomes real when it is "enfleshed" in each believer.

The entire movement can be viewed now as a political expression, rejecting the established church structures that

Christian Origins and Freelance Experts

by Heidi Wendt

What can we learn, asks Wendt, by examining the behavior and persecution of early Christians, like Paul, alongside the experience of other non-Christian experts in the first centuries CE?



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characterized Protestantism and Catholicism in the United States. By and large, Christianity in the United States had been (and continues to be) domesticated, and Azusa was a movement “beyond control.” The Spirit could be manifest anywhere, enfleshed in anyone. In Keri’s words, Spirit is “beyond category.” It signaled an insurgency that was taking shape as a new collective, looking not to the past with ancient creeds but to the future with new hope. However, she also pointed out that today we witness a “neo-Pentecostalism” that has the effect of undermining its own origins, as many Pentecostal churches slip back into a literalistic scriptural mindset.

By now, many in the audience and those scholars around the table were getting into the discussion. Yvette Flanders of the Fellowship of Ministries pointed out that congregations that are “open and affirming” (not just on issues around sexuality but across the board) have the potential to redefine even the most basic orthodox categories. For these congregations spirituality is not continuous with “church” and they are concerned less about the purity of doctrine than they are about moral formation.

Professor Art Dewey pointed out that for Paul, *pneuma* was not a Trinitarian concept. It had to do with the power and presence of God at work in people’s lives. Dr. Stephen Bray called on folks to move beyond the distinctive language of the church (which is paralyzed in concepts of sovereignty), and identify those that can be released into the twenty-first century to gain new meaning. Jay Carter reminded everyone that sovereignty is the framework within which creeds are calcified, and always allows for authoritarian control, even brutality in the treatment of human beings. He spoke about the Middle Passage on the slave ships where people are thrown into the hold, with no windows, no horizon, and only a vain hope for a destination. It is the ultimate tool for dehumanizing the individual—for weeks on end one can only stare into the abyss. One comes out of that situation without a history, without a sense of community, without much mental capacity, and with little initiative. Sarah Brubaker, Assistant Professor of Theology at Phillips Theological Seminary, suggested that the time is ripe, perhaps long overdue, to transcend the categories coming out of the twelfth century. “It would be better that countless worlds pass away than that God be dishonored,” she quoted.

The afternoon discussion picked up where we left off. The foundation was set with a formal statement by Carter on “The Color of God.” He drew on themes outlined in his paper “Paratheological Blackness” which had been distributed to all seminar registrants ahead of time, and also his shorter draft article on the “poetics” of Negritude. Once again it took a while and some focused listening for the seminar participants and audience to get into sync with what Jay called “messy poetics.” The whole concept of “ne-

gritude” emerged out of “*le negre*” in French culture, which was often described as surreal and even “mad.” It emerged at a time when the whole concept of colonialism was being questioned, with all of its brutality and cultural suppression. So even as “blackness” is being discussed as a cultural category, the concept of “whiteness” is being defined, even enshrined in the constitution of the United States when slaves are being counted in the population as three-fifths of a person. In Jay’s words, whiteness then becomes “a God-term for the ruling collective.”

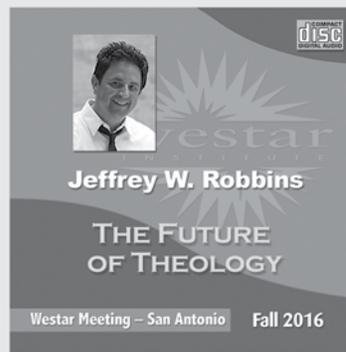
Jay spent a good portion of his presentation elaborating on his “theory of fecal poetics,” articulating instances of the brutality of spirit, his critique of colonialism, his notebook of scriptural inerrancy, and his image of the slave ship as a sacramental vehicle for forced baptism. Sarah Brubaker, as one of the afternoon interlocutors, asked “When does the eucharist cease to be eucharistic?” Referring to Aquinas, she pointed out that in any sacrament, “accidents” are separated from the “essence” of the elements, and thus the sacrament is supposed to bring us closer to the divine. How does that happen?

Jay responded that the flesh is where the substance-accident dynamic happens, so when the flesh is brutalized, there is little or no material of the body left to be redeemed. The only option is to resort to a conceptual dualism that talks about a redeemed spirit. This allows for the black body to be dismembered with impunity, because it is ultimately worthless anyway. It allows for the ruling collective to access and utilize all the natural resources to maintain the dominance of the sovereign establishment. It is not only expedient economically, it is justified theologically.

The Future of Theology

by Jeffrey Robbins

Is theological thinking still viable in a secular culture where individuals define themselves as “spiritual but not religious”?



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Clayton Crockett, Professor and Director of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Central Arkansas and the second interlocutor in the afternoon session, pointed out that the treatment of nature as a resource to be exploited allows for the dominant collective to treat minorities in the same way. He referred to the concept of “animality” in Derrida (rooted in Heidegger): “all sovereignty shatters against death.” Jay responded that what was at stake in the French colonial imperial project was to cut people into a pattern ... it is the same thing taking place today in the settler movement. It is the wild that has to be enclosed—the power of landscaping the mind. That is the only way for sovereignty to maintain control. But, he asked, what if nature is not an integral unity but entangled? Then we are not living in a closed society but in an open system. That changes everything.

Ken Bray offered the metaphor of WonderBread: to make it digestible, it has to be refined to the point where all blackness is removed. The attraction is the expulsion of color. Thus, the only redemption in our relentless use of resources is compost, which is the only way for waste to become generative. Jay responded that the white sovereign collective would do well to draw on some of these generative metaphors, because many now realize that a “feeding frenzy” is self-defeating when resources are finite. It is also the only way for blackness to become an integral part of the new future. We might have a new opportunity ahead of us for a creative new future, but only if we banish the concept of sovereignty from our theological vocabulary.

The afternoon began to wind down with Joe Bessler’s pointing out that the political aspects of these discussions can’t be overlooked, implying that these themes must be retained in future discussions. Others commented that in spite of our several books and publications, the work of the God Seminar remains unintelligible to the general public, even to the seminaries. The challenge remains for us to define a comprehensible “public post-theology,” even when

truth has become an elusive concept in the national political discourse.

Art Dewey pointed out that few people in the national debate even take data seriously, so when the “absolute” is banished from discourse, it is hard to make any lasting impact on the public consciousness. What we cannot succumb to is the tendency to make claims that don’t offend anyone. Jeffery Robbins, who is assuming the role of Chair of the God Seminar, concluded with remarks that drew on the earlier discussion. He said that in light of the discussion from Carter and Day, Westar may embrace its status as a “para-institution.” Further, he insisted, in an age of false equivalency, the makeup of the people involved in critical discussions about religion matter as much as what is being discussed or whatever conclusions reached. In his words, “Who is here, who comes, matters.” Our challenges will continue.

Here is my final footnote. When we accept the task to redefine the human (in any age), we must redefine the concept of God. Otherwise we are staking our life on propositions from the past. This challenge is exactly what the ancient Hebrews faced when they came out of exile: based on what they discovered about the cosmos while captive in Babylon, they reconceptualized God. As a result we have Genesis 1, etc. But theirs was still a three-tiered universe. That cosmology no longer holds true in the twenty-first century, and we, like them and others through history, must develop our theology to be consistent with our cosmology. To do this, we draw on the best options available in philosophy and science, and we must do it with language that fits our age. This is not an easy task, and making our concepts understandable to the churches (and the public) is even more difficult. But we must not shrink from the task. This doesn’t happen all at once, and it seldom depends on one individual. But it is our responsibility nevertheless, those responsible enough to come to the table. As Robbins reminded us at San Antonio, “Who’s here matters.”

The Christianity Seminar

A Report on the 2016 Fall Meeting

Hal Taussig

At its November meeting in San Antonio, the Christianity Seminar took two more major steps in writing a new history of early Christianity. In many ways this meeting was even more surprising than the previous four. In those meetings assumed truths fell apart and new images of what those

early movements did and thought came together. The idea that Christianity came into being through the triumph of orthodoxy over gnostic heresy fell apart. The notion that thousands of Christ followers were martyred turned into savvy stories with few deaths. The heroic Jesus became the paradigmatic immigrant. And the early families in these Christ movements ended up more works-in-progress than idyllic mommies, daddies, or celibate loners.

Not Judaism, Not Christianity

In San Antonio the Seminar took on the huge issue that has haunted the Seminar’s first three years: when and how did Judaism and Christianity become separate religions?