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Follow the Women: Freeing Dialogue

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Follow the Women:
Freeing Dialogue

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The 43rd Distinguished Faculty Lecture, 2018
Graduate Theological Union

Every November since 1976, the GTU's consortial faculty nominates one of its own to be the distinguished faculty lecturer. The laureate embodies the scholarly and teaching excellence, as well as the ecumenical spirit, that characterizes the GTU. The 2018 lecturer is Dr. Marianne Farina, CSC, who is Professor of Philosophy and Theology at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology and a core doctoral faculty member of the GTU. A member of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, she is also a faculty member of the GTU's Center for Islamic Studies, and is heavily involved with interreligious and interdenominational dialogue.

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Women speak, women listen, women connect, and they lead—this is a historical fact. However, the impact they have on the theory and practice of interreligious dialogue nearly remains undocumented. In hearing women's stories though, we recognize pathways to "free dialogue" so it becomes an inclusive and empowering forum for theological reflection and interreligious cooperation. The title for this talk emerges from these stories.

Tri Hastuti Nur, a teacher of Universitas Muhammadiyah University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and I, were delegates for Legacy International Organization's 2008 Indonesian-USA exchange program focused on promoting interreligious cooperation between our two countries. While in

Palembang, Sumatra, we met one evening with a United Nations representative who had just returned from visiting Aceh. Frustrated by the inability of diplomatic initiatives to sustain long-term peace after GAM (Geurakan Acèh Meurdèka) the separatist movement seeking independence from Indonesia, he asked our group saying, "How can win the peace—put an end to local conflicts continually erupting? Tri responded immediately, "follow the women." Referring to grassroots groups that were breathing new life into these troubled communities, Tri identified for him the Acehnese women who have created avenues for dialogue.

Tonight, I invite you also to "follow the women," as I explore aspects of women's contribution to interreligious dialogue. I divide this lecture into three parts. The first part asks, "Where are the Women?" and examines one of the earliest explorations of this question and the theological task of "freeing dialogue." The second part showcases women doing dialogue, with examples that emerge from conflict-ridden contexts. The last section offers recommendations for our dialogues based on these examples.

As I begin this exploration, let me offer my definition of interreligious dialogue: interreligious dialogue is a praxis that fosters mutual enrichment between religions. Through the cultivation of deep listening and ongoing learning new meanings emerge in the theological claims we hold and contextual realities we share.

Where are the Women?

From the mid-20th century, world religions began exploring ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, both in theory and practice. Today these efforts remain—to a large extent—a male enterprise and this exclusion of women's voices negatively impacts the effectiveness of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue praxis.[1]

Reflecting on this history, women have continually addressed this failure to include them in these dialogues—and to acknowledge their

[1] Catherine Cornille and Jillian Maxey, ed., *Women and Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 1. This is a volume five in the Interreligious Studies Series and is a follow up to the 2012 Conference about Women and Interreligious Dialogue that took place at Boston College.

research and writings in this field. I offer here two examples of this critique: a conference that took place in Asia and a theological essay describing the challenges between feminism and the dialogue of religions.

Thirty years ago, the First Asian Women's Consultation on Interfaith Dialogue took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.[2] Thirty-five women from 17 countries gathered to discuss the status of women in their religious traditions and to identify women's contributions to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue so as "to rediscover and redefine aspects of religion which are affirming and liberative."[3] In addition to keynote presentations by women scholars from each tradition [such as Amina Wadud, a GTU colleague who was one of these scholars] participants reflected on various works—writings of women artists and theologians. Breakout sessions provided additional opportunities for consultation and ritual sharing among the attendees.

The women recognized that their religious traditions varied, the earliest teachings of these traditions were inclusive and liberative of the human person. However, the patriarchal cultures and social contexts in which these religions originated distorted the teachings.[4]

The participants at the conference adopted a new, more inclusive and constructive vision; a richer theological and spiritual understanding of the goal of interfaith dialogue

> … [t]hat of a new creation in which women and men together enjoy the wholeness that makes them partners in the stewardship of God's creation. In this new order of equality, justice, and peace, socio-economic and political structures are free and just, and the necessities of all are met. The liberative and human aspects of the existing original cultures of our communities will be reclaimed, nurtured and preserved.[5]

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[2] Asian Women's Conference, Faith Renewed Volume I: A Report on the First Asian Women's Consultation in Interfaith Dialogue November 1-8, 1989 (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resources Center for Culture and Theology, 1990).

[3] Ibid., 117.

[4] Ibid., 118.

[5] Ibid., 119.

They then identified nine commitments to fulfill this vision, including education and leadership training for women; development of skills for organizing; and creating networks of men and women, at all levels—local, national, global, that will continue to advocate for women's presence in religious, cultural, and political dialogues.[6] This initial gathering created the Asian Women's Resource Center for Culture and Theology. Today the Center continues to organize conferences, workshops, training, and to publish women's research in books and a peer-reviewed journal.

Ten years after the Asian Women's Consultation, and in concert with the outcomes of this conference, Ursula King claimed feminism missing dimensions in the theology of religions. She identified a double challenge when considering the inclusion of women in interreligious dialogue: (1) the challenge of feminism for interreligious dialogue and (2) the challenge of interreligious dialogue for feminism.[7]

First, regarding the continual absence of women in formal dialogues, King discovered that men perceive a "compounded difficulty" in these endeavors because women represent a "double other" persons of different faiths and gender. [8] Thus, because of their discomfort level, they resisted women's inclusion in dialogues.

The lack of feminist perspectives in the theology of religions leads to androcentric interpretations that "dominate the hermeneutics of these discussions, falsely assuming universal application and comprehensive categories in dealing with relationships between different religions."[9] Moreover, religious leadership in these endeavors was limited, narrowly understood, as male-clerical leadership. King summarizes this concern stating "Women's great invisibility, marginality, and voicelessness in world religions parallel women's invisibility, marginalization, and voicelessness in interreligious dialogue.[10]

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ursula King, "Feminism: The Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions," in *Pluralism and The Religions: Theological and Political Dimensions*, ed. John D'Arcy (Herndon, VA: Cassell 1998), 43.

[8] Ibid., 45.

[9] Ibid., 47.

[10] Ibid., 52.

Second, King claims that secular feminism has not fully wrestled with religious pluralism, nor she notes, as does Rita M. Gross in her essay, that feminist thinkers have not been eager to engage in interreligious dialogues. Some do not see these dialogues as "gender urgent" when considering racial and cultural debates.[11] Others see the importance of challenging sexism present in many religious traditions and recognition of women's voices as critical to envisioning and developing a post-patriarchal theology of religions and dialogue.[12]

Fully integrating women's perspectives into interreligious dialogue theory and practice requires a project similar to Catherine Mowry LaCugna's *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspectives*.[13] Just as this project sought to address androcentric bias of religions and theology by "doing theology" from a feminist reconstruction of Christian theology, so too can we speak of "freeing dialogue" from the androcentric bias by reconstructing the theology of religions and dialogue praxis from a women's perspective.

Such efforts, I maintain, reveal how dialogue becomes a truly liberating and mutually enriching encounter between people of different faiths and cultures. By "following the women" we discover that the insights of women scholars and practitioners of dialogue are essential to all forms of dialogue and theological study. It is to this inquiry I turn next.

Women in Dialogue

Women's participation in the theology of religions, interreligious dialogue, and comparative theology has produced substantial resources that go beyond the initial query, "Where are the women?" and illustrate the importance of feminist perspectives in these areas accompanied by fields of theology, textual studies, spirituality, sociology, ethics, post-colonial theory, and epistemology.[14]

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[11] Rita M. Gross, "What do Women bring to the Table?" in *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornell and Jillian Maxey (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 237.

[12] King, 52.

[13] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspectives* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 2-3.

[14] For example, the work of our colleagues Rita Sherma, Judith Berling, Gina Hens-Piazza, Ghazala Anwar, Amina Wadud, Snejzana Akpinar and the research of Maura O'Neill, Catherine Cornille, Rita M. Gross, Diana Eck, Kwok Pui-Lan, Aysha Hidayatullah, Racelle

I wish tonight to add to these resources three examples of women's theory and practice of dialogue that emerge from conflict-ridden zones. These stories I believe are proof that women's voices are indispensable to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

First Example*: Women's Religious Peacebuilding — Nigeria*

In *Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding: Illuminating the Unseen* (2015) Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall edited a volume of case studies examining women's peacebuilding efforts around the globe.[15] These studies illustrate how throughout the globe women make vital contributions to peacebuilding. Without essentializing feminist approaches to conflict resolution such as women are natural nurturers, protectors, or relationship builders, the case studies present multifaceted portraits of women's leadership. The stories highlight women, deeply rooted in their faith traditions, becoming empowered by interreligious cooperation. Nigeria provides such an example.

Deep-seated conflicts exist in many regions of Nigeria and especially between Muslim and Christian communities in Kaduna State. They arise from the perpetuation of local and regional divisions based on ethno-religious identities; battles over limited resources [land]; and the relationship between, and function of, Islamic law and civil law at state and federal levels.[16] The Nigerian Interreligious Council (NIREC), the body formed to address these conflicts, has limited success in bringing about sustained resolution to them. Several factors hinder their effectiveness, such as:

1. Government support and sponsorship of NIREC restricts this organization's ability to critique government actions. As a body, it lacks the authority to speak truth to power.

Weiman, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Asma Afsaruddin, Siti Samsuddin, Rosemary Ruether Radford, Sue Levi Elwell, Maryann Cusimano Love, and Mara Brecht to name just a few.

[15] Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall, *Women Religion and Peacebuilding* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2015), 17-18.

[16] Bikisu Yusuf and Sr. Kathleen McGarvey, "Women, Religions, And Peacebuilding in Kaduna State, Nigeria," in *Women Religion and Peacebuilding*, ed. Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2015), 170-173.

2. NIREC does not fully represent the leadership in Muslim and Christian communities; women are underrepresented, for example. Membership consists of 47 male clerics [imams, bishops, priests] and three female representatives.

3. NIREC's peacebuilding efforts employ hierarchal approaches due to its clerical membership. Though NIREC provides opportunities for those closest to the conflict to voice grievances, the deliberative processes remain within the NIREC's leadership circle.[17]

Two Nigerian women's organizations, the *Women's Interfaith Council* of Kaduna and the *Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria* (FOMWAN), address NIREC's limitations.

1. The *Women's Interfaith Council* of Kaduna[18] (WIC) provides a forum for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, which focuses on promoting interreligious understanding; women's leadership; conflict resolution; and gender-inclusive economic development. WIC also promotes networking between religious communities, government, and Non-Government Organizations. It partners with the Women Opinion Leaders Forum that coordinates reconciliation workshops for women and youth leaders, leaders of cultural groups and town unions and ABANTU, a gender-focused organization promoting women's leadership training.[19]

2. *The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria* (FOMWAN) is a faith-based umbrella organization dedicated to promoting the welfare of Muslim women and children throughout Nigeria, primarily through education and health services.[20] It is active in 34 states and operate schools, adult education programs, four hospitals, skills centers, dialogue forums, pharmacies, and small

[17] Ibid., 178.

[18] Women's Interfaith Council of Kaduna State, Nigeria, accessed October 15, 2018, http://womeninterfaithcouncil.org/.

[19] Yusuf and McCarvey, 184.

[20] "Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria," Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, acc. October 15, 2018, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/organizations/federation-of-muslim-women-s-associations-in-nigeria.

businesses.[21] FOMWAN engages in conflict resolution efforts in various contexts and has developed programs for the healing and rehabilitation of girls abducted by Boko Haram.

WIC and FOMWAN joined forces to create a comprehensive program about Islamic law that far surpassed previous efforts to address the implications of applying this law in Kaduna state. Though the law applies only to Muslims, women recognized the need for both Christians and Muslims to understand better Islamic law. They organized conferences, dialogue-educational seminars, and media opportunities for local communities, including youth…

1. … to correct false ideas about Islamic law such as the misuse of the term "sharia" and that Islamic law consists solely of criminal laws and penal codes (*hadud* law).

2. … to focus on the principles of Islamic law that provide a foundation for prioritizing justice, equality, and human rights for all people, Muslims, and non-Muslims. From the time of the Prophet, these priorities were intrinsic to the formation of the Ummah, the Muslims community that included non-Muslims. ([Medina Charter] Covenants of the Prophet).

3. … to highlight that Islamic law offers important protections of women's rights, which includes women's consultations in the implementation of Islamic law.

4. … to develop strategies for monitoring the implementation of Islamic law in various regions and to continue the interfaith dialogue about this implementation.[22]

The dialogues that accompanied these programs produced several positive outcomes including:

[21] AbdulGafar Olawake Fahm, "Muslim Women and Social Responsibility in Nigeria: Contributions of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN)," *Alertnation,* Special Edition 19 (2017): 175-181.

[22] Yusuf and McCarvey, 182. See also AbdulGafar Olawake Fahm, 181.

1. The exchange of important knowledge about Islamic law helped to reduced fears of non-Muslims and Muslim women about the application of Islamic law in the state.

2. Strategies for monitoring the implementation of Islamic law in various regions.

3. And opportunities for empathic learning. Moving beyond the acquisition of information, or procedural knowledge, the dialogues were mutually enriching. Participants pledged to foster and expand dialogues.[23]

In *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, Catherine Cornille claims religions do not possess a natural inclination for interreligious dialogue.[24] Religions must realize within themselves obstacles to and motivations for dialogue so that dialogue becomes an internal necessity rather than an external obligation. Cornille describes certain conditions – humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, hospitality – that if met create the possibility for dialogue capable of discovering the distinctive truth in another's religion. Such dialogues become an internal [to the tradition] necessity rather than an external obligation. Using Cornille's thesis as a critical lens with which to analyze the Nigerian women's dialogues brings into sharper focus the quality of these exchanges.

Though the dialogues had clear goals for achieving better understanding between religious communities, the motivations for these engagements, and the commitments to continue the dialogues drew from the teachings of each tradition concerning what it means to be a community. Intrinsic motivations for these programs come from the African Traditional Religions, Christian, and Islamic teachings. Community life is essential to common growth in holiness, which is integral to human flourishing.

In Islam, community life fosters supportive relations between Muslims and all groups. As it is stated in the Qur'an though differences exist between communities, God calls each to "come to know one another,

[23] Yusuf and McGarvey, 183.

[24] Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2008), 1-8.

"to discover a "common word" and learning about God and knowing others is critical.[25]

Ubuntu is a word from African Traditions expressing the depth of interconnectedness. It describes an actual metaphysical link between people: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," or "a person is a person through other persons." [26] In Africa, people might say persons "have Ubuntu" because from an interior-ontological conviction they seek ways to benefit the community.[27] Christian theologians in Africa have reflected the meaning of Ubuntu and maintain that it conveys the belief that all persons possess human dignity as persons created in God's image. It is this conviction that becomes a basis for forgiveness, reconciliation, and peaceful communal co-existence. As Priscilla Mtunga Ndlovu stated, "Africans consider fellowship and sisterhood serious business" and as she shows in her book, *Discovering the Spirit of Ubuntu Leadership: Compassion, Community, and Respect,* this deep sense of interconnection is the basis for mutual learning and empowerment.[28]

Acknowledging this depth of understanding about, and commitment to, community, the women sought ways to foster the life they shared. As Asma Afsaruddin has observed, "…dialogue is ultimately about the dissolution of epistemological and cognitive boundaries that separate us from one another, and thus ultimately God"[29] It was this goal that moved the women into dialogue and gave shape to ongoing interreligious learning.

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[25] *Surat al Hujra: O humankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted (49:13).*

[26] JK Khomba, "The African Ubuntu Philosophy," accessed October 10, 2018, 126-129, https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/28706/04chapter4.pdf? sequence=5.

[27] Priscilla Mtunga Ndlovu, *Discovering the Spirit of Ubuntu Leadership: Compassion, Community, and Respect* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 136.

[28] Ibid., 136-148.

[29] Asma Afrsaruddin, "Discerning a Qur'anic Mandate for Mutually Transformational Dialogue," in *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 121.

Second Example: *Indian Women in Solidarity — Baatein Aman Ki (Things of Peace)*

In India last year, as papers have reported, 111 people were killed and at least 2,300 injured in 822 cases of sectarian violence, the highest figure in three years.[30] Women have taken various actions to protest the rise in sectarian intolerance and violence. This past September the women's protest took the form of a nation-wide campaign to promote constitutional freedoms and protections. One hundred women of different faiths began a journey—that is *yaatras* entitled *Baatein Aman Ki* or Talks of Peace on September 20 that ended in Delhi on October 10, 2018.[31]

Five caravan groups[32], comprising 20-25 women, and taking five different routes passed through hundreds of towns, cities, and villages with messages of peace and unity. As they journeyed, they formed local coordination committees to help with the organization of events, talks, public meetings, dialogues, and performances. These events stressed the importance of democratic values, especially tolerance for all people regardless of their gender, religion, ethnicity or caste.[33] In these venues, various types of dialogue occurred; they emphasized that democracy requires different types of civil discourse: political, cultural, social and religious.

This insight is not new to those engaged in interreligious dialogue. The research and practice describe many types of dialogues (human experience, spirituality, theological, social justice action). However, as the Indian women have shown, these circles of conversation need to expand so to include cultural and political dialogues and that these dialogue circles need to intersect.

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[30] Indian News Service, accessed October 15, 2018, https://www.ucanews.com/news/indian-govt-admits-rise-in-religion-based-hate-crime/81477.

[31] Indian News Service, accessed October 18, 2018, https://www.mid-day.com/articles/baatein-aman-ki-campaign-to-gun-for-peace-and-harmony/19800154.

[32] The campaign took different (5) routes: Maitrey Yatra from Kashmir to Delhi, Ekjuta Yatra from Kerala to Delhi, Ekta Yatra from Tamil Nadu to Delhi, Samanta Yatra from Delhi to Delhi, and Nyaya Yatra from the North East to Delhi. Indian News Service, accessed October 31, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZMFzWPW RuM&t=3s.

[33] Ibid. See interview with Shabnam Hashmi.

Outcomes:

1. Personal donations, nationally and locally, from ordinary people, funded the campaign making it truly a "people's movement" for a people's government, namely democracy.

2. Responses from these communities were enthusiastic, and over 500 local groups have pledged to continue the networking and dialogue.

3. A powerful symbol, the journey, evoking the depth of commitment in Hindu, Christian, and Islamic traditions. A journey represents a conversion experience or a search for enlightenment that results in greater self-understanding or spiritual growth.

4. The campaign points to ways that interreligious dialogues are a type of journey…
   a. … to another tradition, and then back to one's own with new insight.
   b. … from limited knowledge and freedom to deeper understanding and greater religious and civic freedom.
   c. … within and across intersecting intra-inter cultural, faith, political dialogues.

The vision, plan, and execution of the women's campaign "frees-dialogue;" social, cultural, and religious motivations, values, and goals coalesce to form a vital force with which to re-found democracy in India. The *Mahila-yaatra* provides an inspiring example for liberative-transformative dialogue.

Third Example: *Compassionate Listening Project*

The Compassionate Listening Project is a training program that teaches conflict resolution skills and critical competencies for interreligious dialogue. Founded in 1997 by Leah Green and the late Gene Knudsen Hoffman, the training emerges from Buddhist teachings and the experiences of Israeli and Palestinian reconciliation leaders in the Middle East.[34]

Through the project, nearly 700 American citizens in 32 delegations have journeyed to Israel and Palestine to listen to grievances, hopes, and dreams of religious, political, and community leaders, settlers, refugees, peace activists, citizens, soldiers, and extremists from both sides. As journeys continued in the Middle East, the project began receiving local and national publicity. Communities around the globe have requested Compassionate Listening (CL) training.[35]

The Compassionate Listening Training describes its process as:

- *A personal practice*—to cultivate inner strength, self-awareness, self-regulation, and wisdom
- *A skill set*—to enhance interpersonal relations and navigate the challenging conversation
- *A process*—to bring individuals or groups together to bridge their differences and transform conflict
- *A healing gift*—to be fully present to a person who feels marginalized.[36]

At the center of this training, learning participants become aware of their vulnerability and need for healing in the process. As Buddhist monk Pema Chodron says:

> Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.[37]

As Leah Green states:

> The first premise for compassionate listeners is that we must acknowledge that every party in the conflict is suffering…We

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[34] Compassionate Listening Project, accessed October 15, 2018, https://www.compassionatelistening.org/.

[35] Ibid. Workshops have taken place in United States, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the U.K., Bosnia and Croatia, Cuba, India and Kashmir, Guatemala, South Africa, Uganda, Rwanda, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Spain.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Pema Chodron, MeetMindful, accessed October 18, 2018, https://www.meetmindful.com/pema-chodron-heart-lifting-quotes/.

> have to find ways to bring conflicting parties to listen to one another—not to dialogue at first, not to argue or debate—just to listen. We must drop any arrogance of thinking that we know how it is for another.[38]

In this way, the suffering caused by separation and conflict becomes transformed into an opportunity for connection, healing, and peace.

Compassionate Listening is a practice that integrates cognitive awareness with the wisdom of the heart, a deeper illuminative knowing that emerges in environments of safe self-disclosure. In the Compassionate Listening training participants learn "speaking from the heart" and "listening with the heart" not to be equated with a sentimental experience.[39] Compassionate Listening training emerges from a belief in the dignity of all persons because each person bears the essence of goodness and a capacity for compassion. Still, because of separation and alienation persons and communities have "armored" themselves. The polarization between groups or persons has at its core "woundedness," and the goal of this deep listening is "wholeness."

The practice begins with creating safe environments for listening, so that, with greater openness and trust, participants learn to speak in a non-violent, non-discriminatory way. Through the practice of deep listening, persons acknowledge each other's history—especially the values expressed by each person's story. There emerges a depth of connection between persons so that even in when involved in the midst of conflict, this deep listening helps us to see conflict as our teacher, providing opportunities to learn from one another.[40]

My own experience of Compassionate Listening Trainings (22 workshops in India, Ghana, Uganda, Indonesia, and the United States) has proven critical to interreligious dialogue and learning.[41] It is a skill that

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[38] Leah Green, "Listening: Key to Healing Wounds in Mideast," in *Compassionate Listening, and Other Writings by Gene Knudsen Hoffman* (Torrence: CA: Friends Bulletin, 2003), 321.

[39] Andrea Cohen, *Practicing the Art of Compassionate Listening* (Bainbridge, WA: Compassionate Listening Project, 2011), 12-13.

[40] Ibid., 21-33.

[41] As research director for the Center for Women's Intercultural Leadership at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, IN, I invited Leah Green, Eryn Kalish, and Linda Wolf to offer

facilitates a contemplative-deep engagement with religious others. Using Compassionate Listening in dialogue helps to realize another person's dignity, depth, and complexity. Ultimately, these conversations bring participants face to face with holiness, exposing human consciousness to the undefined and the indefinable in the religious-cultural Other, a meeting that makes us whole.

Following the Women

In the accounts cited above, we see specific examples of how these dialogues, movements, and training sought to create liberating and transformative interreligious engagements. The women formed dynamic alliances to foster interreligious learning and collaborative action capable of broadening their spiritual and socio-political horizons. They developed key competencies that enabled them to strive for justice, reconciliation, and mutual empowerment even in the midst of protracted conflicts. Moreover, each of these endeavors evinced a type of teleology—interreligious understanding was not just a means to certain outcomes but commensurate with the goals themselves.

1. From the Nigerian women, we learn the importance of the fusion between interior motivations for interreligious dialogue and desired outcomes—the external factors. Cognizant of both dimensions creates a type of internal dialogue within each person and the religious community. At the center of these encounters is learning. Mara Brecht has observed in *Virtues in Dialogue: Belief, Religious Diversity and Women's Interreligious Encounter* that dialogues are "Virtuous-Doxastic [belief-forming] Practice(s) (VDP)," that forms epistemic communities.[42] In such communities, as in the case of the

trainings between 2003-2005. The workshops focused on training students, faculty, and alumnae. After these initial workshops, the CL Trainers began offering sessions to Holy Cross sisters and brothers who continue the praxis with our various Christians and interfaith groups in Asia, Africa, and here in United States.

[42] Mara Brecht, *Virtues in Dialogue: Belief, Religious Diversity and Women's Interreligious Encounter* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014), ix-x. The model emerges from her case study of a women's interreligious dialogue group in greater Pennsylvania, who shifted from traditional approaches to dialogue, i.e., sharing of teaching and practices, to deeper interpersonal exchanges. Mutual enrichment between believers flowers when dialogue partners cultivate the capacity to remain attentive to the personal dimension of the encounter, as they

Nigerian women, learning broadens and strengthens horizons for thinking about one's spiritual life and practice.[43]

2. Through the example of the women in India, we realize that dialogue is truly about dialogues-plural and that no single "center," or central conversation, can host all the perspectives needed for promoting mutual understanding between cultures and religions. The effectiveness of any single dialogue requires partnering with other discourses.

Studies in the theology of religions have identified four critical types of dialogues: human experience, spirituality, theology, social justice action. But we have yet to identify intersections within and between these forms, i.e., the depths, overlapping, and complexities within each of these types. Such considerations would produce new types of dialogues and opportunities for dialogues to intersect.[44]

3. Compassionate Listening Training connects to the lessons we glean from Nigeria and India in that it highlights the importance of non-violent communication. Compassionate listening requires attentiveness to the deep, under-the-surface wells of values that persons and communities possess. Vital for reconciliation and healing in conflict zones, this training also aligns with recent strategies concerning human rights education. Recent UNESCO publications stress both the development of intercultural competencies as essential to promoting and protecting human rights.

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seek to promote social-economic-political wellbeing in the society.

[43] Ibid., 76.

[44] A good example of this is Islamic Networks Group. Founded in 1993 Maha Elgenaidi, Ameena Jandali and their team created a network to promote better understanding of Muslim populations in the Bay Area. For 25 years now, this network has never ceased to develop new programs and dialogues critical to pursuing peace and countering all forms of bigotry. ING provides education curriculum, social outreach programs, webinars, trainings, online book discussions and interfaith dialogues for schools, colleges, youth and civic groups who use these resources to supplement their own programs. The network continually responds to and searches for venues to host the programs and to create new networks. Right now, ING has generated similar programs throughout USA and recently in England. See Islamic Networks Group (ING), accessed November 1, 2018, http://www.ing.org.

UNESCO states that readiness to exchange at the value-level "goes far beyond mere negotiations [and to promote]… open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage…" [45]

Compassionate listening training would provide an important resource for the success of such exchanges.

Looking at possible applications of these lessons let me offer a few suggestions I believe will help us to "free dialogue"—and in doing so create liberating and transformative engagements.

Suggestion 1: *Following Women in Nigeria: Introspection*

As the Nigerian women have shown, we can improve our interreligious dialogues by paying close attention to the internal reasons individuals and communities possess when they remain engaged in these encounters. Situations change and motivations shift. Therefore, we constantly need to evaluate our reasons for interreligious dialogues and collaborations. Our evaluations can identify new conditions and reasons for dialogue.

Likewise, such reflections would surface an awareness concerning power differences between groups and communities and within them. Through reexamination, relationships we assumed were fair-reciprocal exchanges may perpetuate hegemonies. Moreover, how do such power relationships operate in the construction of knowledge? If we desire to "free dialogue" from asymmetrical power models, like those of patriarchy, then we must be attentive to unequal power differentials and dominative tendencies in our dialogues.

Judith Berling in her book, *Understanding Other Religious World: A Guide for Interreligious Education* [46] notes that imperialist tendencies exist in our interreligious exchanges and that we should ask ourselves, "have we treated the religious others as a less mature version of ourselves…have we set the categories for ways to interpret another's tradition?" [47]

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[45] United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework,* https://en.unesco.org/interculturaldialogue/resources/132. Manual is PDF file.

[46] Judith Berling, *Understanding Other Religious World: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2004), 45-46.

As a type of transformation analysis, we may ask questions about the models of our dialogues and the nature of our GTU union. For example, what are the reasons for participation in this union? What are the current power dynamics operative in this union? How do we see a presence in this union and interreligious learning as constitutive of doing theology and ministry practice? The answers may well free us — shake us up — to consider our present conditions and renew our energy to imagine future directions.

Suggestion 2: *Following the Women in India: Expanding Intersecting Circles.*

Based on reflections about the health of our union, we can explore ways to improve our relations between our theological seminaries, colleges, the University of California, and various educational centers and programs in the Bay Area, and elsewhere. Recalling that the quality of one dialogue depends on expanding dialogues, we could explore ways that GTU can enter into social and civic conversations. Certainly, our centers have promoted this type of engagement to broaden the conversation between GTU and other constituencies. For example, the Center for Dharma Studies' Rita Sherma's initiative, Towards a Sustainable Societies, Interreligious, and Interdisciplinary Response, gathers scholars from various constituencies (55 at the last conference) to address the ecological crisis.[48]

However, even though the centers provide important forums for theological research and dissemination, we have not placed enough emphasis on connecting the work of these centers directly with our teaching (especially syllabi) and research. A list of faculty experts for various topics exists on the GTU website,[49]—a type of distribution solution—but conversations about the nature and structure of our interconnections could offer us pathways to engage more directly with social and political dialogues beyond the GTU and, moreover, to view these conversations as critical to all theological and ministerial study.

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[47] Ibid., 47.

[48] Rita Sherma, *Sustainability Initiative,* accessed November 1, 2018, https://www.gtu.edu/sustainability-initiative.

[49] "GTU Experts List—By Topic," Graduate Theological Union, accessed November 19, 2018, https://www.gtu.edu/directory/faculty/gtu-experts-list-topic.

Suggestion 3: *Following the those who offer Compassionate Listening*.

Applying Compassionate Listening to our GTU experience is fundamental. Dialogue requires developing certain competencies like deep listening. As my colleague Barbara Green has claimed, "compassion is a muscle, not a secretion"[50] and as such its exercise fosters greater interreligious understanding between individuals and communities. Compassionate Listening could enhance interreligious learning on our campus. Just as we have seminars for research and writing, we need seminars for learning Compassionate Listening. Every story, every text was written by a person who has a story, has the depth of meaning and we need to discover this whether we are engaged in dialogue, classroom discussions, research or writing. In this way, Compassionate Listening empowers us to address the polarization we might experience in the classroom and create safer environments for listening and speaking.

Conclusion

Tonight, I have profiled women speaking, listening, writing, engaging and leading. I maintain that their stories have provided resources and models to create liberating and transformative interreligious engagements.

I began this talk with my colleague Professor Tri Hastuti's recommendation concerning the conflict in Aceh. It was "to follow the women." Ten years later, violence between religions has once again erupted in Aceh because of the government's unpopular implementation of Islamic law that is violating the human rights of people. We would be left to wonder if Tri's advice has any bearing today were it not for women's leadership.

Flower Aceh,[51] one the many Muslim women's groups in Aceh, just celebrated its 29th anniversary. Their work focuses on building the capacity of women's groups in North Aceh Regency to fully participate in economic development, conflict resolution and peace building in their region. Integral to this work is their School for Human Rights which has responded to

[50] Barbara Green, "Can we do that? Reading Sacred Texts as They Read Us," 26th Annual Lecture of Sacred Texts, accessed October 15, 2018, https://www.gtu.edu/events/reading-sacred-texts-barbara-green-op.

[51] Flower Aceh, accessed November 1, 2018, http://floweraceh.or.id/.

recent tensions by starting a series of "Interpolitical Dialogues." The women have identified a critical first step to protecting human rights and re-building communities, which is to surface competing ideologies that create tensions between groups and limit the power of any group to work toward government reform. Though reports about these dialogues are still coming, there is hope that they will foster needed change.

In closing: when I traveled the roads of Bangladesh people would call out, "আপা কোথায় যাচ্ছনে?" (Sister, where are you going) The question was a friendly greeting, similar to our own "Hi how are you?" My response was usually, "A little farther"— আমি একটু এগয়িে যাচ্ছি

In light of what we have explored tonight, could we not ask women engaged in the research and practice of interreligious dialogue the same question I was asked on the roads of Bangladesh? Leaving patriarchal patterns and biases of dialogue, we ask: "আপা কোথায় যাচ্ছনে?"

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