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**Response to the Distinguished Faculty Lecture**

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## **Response to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Distinguished Faculty Lecture**

**Rita D. Sherma**

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I would like to thank Sister Marianne Farina for inviting me to be her respondent tonight. It is a privilege to be in dialogue with Professor Farina. Her words have given voice to women who would otherwise remain unheard and allowed their work to distinguish the unique gifts women bring to vocation of solidarity, sisterhood, sweeping transformation. My response emerges from many years on interreligious dialogue and collaboration grounded in academic, faith-based, and global women's interreligious forums.

Dr. Farina's lecture has shown us that women are not just women but creative agents with innovative approaches to communitarian and societal healing. The women whose work has been highlighted tonight have intersectional identities. They may be Muslim or Christians, African or Asian, Workers or Professionals, Activists or Organizational Developers. These intersectional points only lightly touch the surface of the far deeper complexity of these identities. Sister Marianne notes that:

Catherine Cornille, in her book, *the Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (2008), describes certain conditions [humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, hospitality] that if met create the possibility for an interreligious dialogue capable of discovering distinctive truth in another's religion. Such dialogues become an internal [to the tradition] necessity rather than an external obligation.

But Cornille's premise that "such dialogues become an internal necessity rather than an external obligation" misses the obligation for dialogue incumbent upon women and men of minority religions who must remain in dialogue lest they be completely misunderstood, misrepresented, mistreated. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists in America do not have the privilege of choosing dialogue—or not. It is imperative that they engage the majority tradition, its culture, its worldview. From the viewpoint of minority women in pluralist societies, worldwide, Interreligious Exchange is not elective therapy but, increasingly, an emergency intervention.

Thus, for women of minority religious traditions, in face of a crisis of compassion, Interreligious Connection has been rendered, practice seeking theory. Sister Marianne has rightly noted that Dialogue requires developing certain competencies like deep listening. She explains the Compassionate Listening Training process as:

- A personal practice—to cultivate inner strength, self-awareness, self-regulation and wisdom.
- A skill set—to enhance interpersonal relations and navigate 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.

To this, I would add that during our quest for liberative theo-ethics across faiths—a broad and deep inquiry—we keep in mind the requirements of a just and fruitful interreligious engagement. These include (1) critical examination of the discourses of "Othering"; (2) the conscience of solidarity; (3) the need for women minority faiths to drink

deeply of their canonical, authoritative, normative traditions before critiquing and transforming the same; (4) the importance of allowing non-Western cultures and traditions to seek solutions to injustice from within their own resources; (5) the acknowledgement of the possibility of a woman's absolute fidelity to faith and, at once, a complete commitment to a critical stance towards scripture and practice and, (6) the importance of "reciprocal illumination" without "mutual appropriation."

Sister Marianne has mentioned the work of the Centers in relation to interreligious discourse and practice. She notes, however, that:

[E]ven 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 own teaching [esp. syllabi] and research. A list of faculty experts for various topics exists on the GTU website—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...

There is no doubt that we still have much work to do. However, I would like to share briefly where we are now. Through the development and co-teaching of two of the four departmental seminars, my co-instructors and I faced a struggle to integrate interreligious methods with the need for precision of approaches specific to given traditions. With academic guest lectures; multimedia resources; practitioners and ecclesiastical personnel modeling the theories and approaches that we presented to the class, a path to creating a truly interreligious learning space presented itself.

For example, in preparation for the Seminar in the Sacred Texts and their Interpretation department, which I co-teach with Rebecca Esterson, we began by several interreligious inquiries: What is a sacred text? Can the practitioner's gaze turn an icon, a pilgrimage route, or a complex ritual into a sacred text? What makes a text sacred? How does a community form a "canon" from original narratives? The course explored diverse ways in which sacred texts are read, understood, interpreted, embodied, experienced and enacted. We undertook a journey of discovery of the many ways in which sacred texts serve lived religion. We considered their

variegated functions within the tradition (theological, contemplative, liturgical, ritual, pastoral, spiritual formation, ethical, legal, aesthetic, performative). We examined the diverse hermeneutical principles that guide textual interpretation across traditions and found that we needed to integrate not only textual hermeneutics, but semiotics, ritual and liturgical studies theory, visual and material culture approaches, religion and law, methods from contemplative studies, and more. Interreligious Studies, therefore, presumes the capacity for Interdisciplinary Studies. Many GTU students whom I have interacted with seek to engage interreligious research—not multi-religious, nor comparative, but critical-creative-constructive and, at once, intersubjective.

The “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity” is an approach, that I developed that assumes that the “Other” is not just an object of study, but also a subject from/with whom we can learn. Thus, it starts with the assumption that understanding and the bestowal of human dignity are both aided by, and dependent on, scholars’ perceptions of the Other not merely as object of investigation, but also as subject; and not only as subject” but as “subject with whom we are in conversation.”

There are eight primary steps to the Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity:

1. Self Analysis to identify where our prejudgments lie.
2. Epoché
3. Entering the construction of the Other to understand what has been composed and why.
4. Eschewal of strategic deployment of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion to indict the construction not yet understood.
5. Immersive encounter with alternate means of experiencing sacred text and sacramental context.
6. Seeking the key to open the door to the reflective, contemplative, embodied, performative experience of the Other’s traditions of both thought and practice.
7. Risking not only transformation but annihilation of prior cognitive paradigms,
8. Interrogation of the experience of the Self in relation to the Other’s lifeworld.

Intersubjective interreligious encounters allow us to seek the luminous space of mutuality between the cry of oppressed minority religions seeking to find their theological voices and the struggle of tradition to seeking to break free of a patriarchal past and surge towards freedom founded on its highest principles. In our quest, we find that adherence to academic rigor helps the activist mind to structure itself and fidelity to service and solidarity helps the academic mind to remain relevant.

My positions and pedagogy are indebted to the news lenses I received upon the study of Christian and Jewish Liberative and Constructive thought and practice during my years in graduate school. I gazed into the eyes of my mentors and peers of another tradition, and saw the faces of friends and companions on my journey. May our students know the beauty of friends who can clarify the allegiances and approaches of other faiths without fear.

As Dr. Farina avers: “Application of Compassionate Listening to our GTU experience is fundamental.” Indeed.