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Spotlight on the Women's Studies in Religion Program

Reflections on the Imperative of Feminist Theological Scholarship and Practice by the Former Program Coordinator of the Women's Study in Religion (WSR) Program at the Graduate Theological Union

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Through its long and varied history, the Women's Study in Religion (WSR) Program has grown at the heart of the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), opening abundant pathways for the contributions of women within the various fields of scholarship and faith traditions. I have had the privilege of serving as the WSR Program Coordinator over the last three years (2021—2024). During that time, I have witnessed many impactful transitions at the GTU. From navigating the challenging road through COVID, the space transformations of the Flora Hewitt Library, to the many transitions of leadership, the Women's Study in Religion Program – fueled by the talented, brilliant, and passionate faculty advisors – has taken hold of the mission of the GTU with grace and grit, guiding this magnificent heritage and legacy forward into the storms of our times. Through mentoring and growing friendships, the WSR faculty calls forth students to cultivate courage and fortitude, fostering scholarship filled with hope and purpose that ignites transformational change and the relevancy of the work of women in religion today.

The long history of women's studies at the GTU goes back to the founding of the Center for Women and Religion (CWR) in 1970.³³ After the CWR closed in 2004, the Women's Studies in Religion program was established to carry on the work through a certificate program and a robust array of courses, conferences, workshops, and symposia. For more than half a century, the faculty and students involved in these groundbreaking programs have explored the interface of religion and gender with creativity, critical reflection, and a strong sense of mutual support. Their efforts have greatly enhanced scholarship across disciplines and traditions throughout the GTU and in the wider academic community.

During my time at the GTU, I have been the beneficiary of many WSR program offerings. My scholarship has been profoundly shaped, and my faith has been strengthened while witnessing the remarkable growth of many of my peers. I have come to see the WSR as an embodiment of the core values of the GTU, which includes interdisciplinarity within an interreligious context and community – the makings for a distinctive and vital center for theological studies in our times. Dr. Valerie Miles Tribble, WSR Faculty Chair Emeritus and long-time WSR Faculty advisor, expands on the significance and the potency of the WSR's contribution, stating:

The strength of multicultural women from all walks of life must be utilized to become civic leaders and community

³³ Keep in mind that the Graduate Theological Union was founded just six years earlier in 1962.

organizers for such a time as this. I read or heard it recently said that in this nation/world, we are witnessing a Kairos moment of changing times that call us to move from silent docility to collective action. The outcome is unknown - but this is when we step out on faith. Women have typically been the ones to raise their voices to confront injustice and challenge the status quo. I believe the WSR and like programs must help to cultivate female scholars and leaders, for now is the time to strategically become co-conspirators for justice.³⁴

Throughout my course of studies, I have been able to witness firsthand the commitment and creativity of the scholarship of the WSR Faculty Advisors, who, like Dr. Miles-Tribble, bring scholarship to activism as scholar-practitioners. Each woman scholar cultivates a multi-leveled and catalytic approach, activating change and growth within their own respective faith traditions – a balancing act while at the same time being fully engaged and contributing within their scholarly communities. For each of them, scholarship is art; it is a creative practice that cultivates personal and social transformation. To illustrate this, I will offer a few of my many ‘takeaways’ from the works of these brilliant scholars.

Dr. Ashley Bacchi, WSR Faculty Emeritus ’21-’22, when teaching the WSR Seminar, embraces a strategic term called “flipping the table.” She explains that there are situations when it is not enough for women to be invited to the table, but they are called to strategically ‘flip the table.’ To be able to do so while still keeping people gathered at the table is a transformational art form.

³⁴ All quotes from faculty are obtained from one-on-one interactions from the author of this piece.

Dr. Mahjabeen Dhala, WSR Faculty Emeritus '22-'24, through her scholarship on a female hero within her own faith tradition, offers an example for all women to find their prophetic voice and to speak and to sing truth into their traditions. Truth moves mountains, even amongst traditions that have been historically led only by men.

Dr. Deidre Green's work encourages a journey through the depths of the human heart and soul to discover resistance through forgiveness. Her scholarship additionally invites a journey to the heights of the human experience, finding joy as a force for resistance. Women and all genders, within various circumstances, can find these transformative tools within, growing wisdom and cultivating strength on an individual and community level.

Dr. Kirsi Stjerna, this year's (2024) new WSR Faculty Chair, through the study of Christian History, within which men's writings and voices have dominated, uses texts written by only women, giving the tradition a circular view. She grounds the challenges found within Christian history in a faith that is "centered on the belief of the divine entering into our "fleshy-messy humanity." Her scholarship brings a wholeness, a realness, and an aliveness to her tradition within which men have seemingly solely led. Not so, would Dr. Stjerna argue; behind the scenes, women reformers were contributing in profound and often uncelebrated ways, but again bringing radical change within their own spheres. Dr. Stjerna explains the interreligious philosophy behind her pedagogy and what inspires her in her new role as Faculty Advisor for the WSR Program:

Mentoring is a vital part of scholarship, and at the WSR, I've seen that is our main mission – to mentor and empower bold scholarship to go to places that may need “defending” and that require new thinking and risk-taking. These values apply to scholarship done with all the sources, regardless of the tradition they are associated with. Women, so often coming from the margins of power or with experiences that have been ... difficult, ... are poised to explore new methods, new hermeneutics, and new relationships. Scholarship relies on relationships, trust, and respect. The WSR is a central power in these regards: we build a community of scholars where all are welcome, where we are bold and creative with our hermeneutics, and where we are committed to bringing women's stories, experiences, and voices.

From these woman scholars and the many others of the WSR, I have learned there are no walls that a bridge cannot be built over, under, or through, and there is no darkness within which the spark – the light of scholarship – cannot penetrate. Dr. Mahjabeen Dhala, the outgoing Faculty Chair, speaks of the various pathways that she has crafted for the empowerment of students:

In co-teaching the Women's Studies in Religion departmental seminar with Sheryl Johnson in 2019, we embodied WSR's commitment to integrating global feminist perspectives and pedagogies. As chair, I was inspired to build on this vision by organizing the annual WSR Student Conference, which serves as a platform for the diverse concerns and contributions of women from various religious traditions while providing students with a unique opportunity for feedback and potential publications.

In this journal, you will hear some of these voices and scholarship that offer light and spirit for our times. As a womanist scholar, Dr. Miles-Tribbles calls us forth, “We must write, fight, advocate for our future generations; however, this requires multiethnic/multiracial grappling with racialized privileges of whiteness and with religious complicity in exclusionary practices.” These times are complex, yes, but for all who engage with the WSR program at GTU, there are many ways to move forward as people of hope, fortitude, brilliance, and contribution.

Congratulations to the editors of this come-back edition of the *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology*, Charissa Jaeger-Sanders and Javney Mohr. They have chosen, for this first edition, to celebrate from within the scholarship and voices of the student scholars of the WSR Student Conferences. It is the hope that you, too, will be inspired, impassioned, and join in the mission they share.

In Peace and Gratitude,

Diane Saunders

Diane Saunders is a 4th year PhD student in the History and Culture Studies of Religion Department with a concentration in Art and Religion. She is a long-time Catholic Lay Professional working in Youth, Family, and Adult Education. She completed her Masters degree at Boston College in Theology and Education. Prior to beginning her Ph.D. Program, she has been working on writing a family lectionary-based curriculum. She has also been involved in developing art and spirituality centers within and beyond the Catholic community. She is trained in Spiritual Direction.

For more information on the Women Studies in Religion Program at the Graduate Theological Union, see the website at [Women's Studies in Religion | Graduate Theological Union \(gtu.edu\)](http://www.gtu.edu/wsr), and contact WSR's current Program Coordinator, Meera Tanikella, at wsr@ses.gtu.edu.