

## COMPLEX DREAMS FOR WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Mary E. Hunt

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Given the current state of the world in which tiny percentages of people own majority shares of wealth in virtually every country, it is not surprising that the academy would have a similar ownership pattern. Even those who are hired in the most elite institutions are still working for systems in which they are not really stakeholders. The fate of the rest of us—especially women, people of color, queer folks, people living with disabilities, immigrants, and the like—is unlikely to be the tenure-track job about which we were taught to dream, work, and achieve.

This is due in large measure to the issues feminist/womanists problematize, including racism, sexism, ableism, homo and trans hatred, that condition both our choices and our chances. Our dreams are co-opted by the same neoliberal, some would say now neofascist, context. So, we must begin by liberating, complexifying our dreams.

The best work of feminists in religion, especially the content of our teaching, research, and activism, is critical of the established order, disruptive of the status quo, and meant to empower people to change the morally hideous context in which we find ourselves. As such, it is hardly the work that most educational institutions want to underwrite by hiring us. It did not take me or many of my generation long to find this out. It is all the more obvious now.

I have participated in the American Academy of Religion mentoring project for several years. I have worked with over eighty-five interns at the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), many of whom have gone on to graduate studies, so I have been in this conversation over several decades. I cannot report that things are improving. However, I can add some data to the mix that point to creative, useful ways forward.

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Three guides by women in religion reflect the history of our efforts to do things differently. The first one, *A Guide to the Perplexing: A Survival Manual for Women in Religious Studies* by Judith Plaskow, Rita Nakashima Brock, and others (collectively referred to as the American Academy of Religion Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession) was just that—a primer for how to jump through the hoops in academia with the assumption that there would be a job at the other end.<sup>1</sup> And for many in those early days there was a job. Mary Daly had several offers when she finished graduate school.

The second, *A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way from A to Z* (which I worked on with Rebecca Alpert, Karen Baker-Fletcher, Valerie Dixon, Janet Jakobsen, Rosamond Rodman, and Katharina Von Kellenbach), took account of the increasing diversity in the field.<sup>2</sup> In addition to more women of color, queer women, and others on the margins, we noted that some women achieved emerita status as part of the “established” career trajectory (kindergarten to emerita status). But we also noted that the academic market was beginning to shrink and women would do well to broaden their scope of employment options.

Ten years later, Kecia Ali, Monique Moultrie, and I published a revised *Guide* to reflect the many changes in the field.<sup>3</sup> We emphasized the ways technology has altered the landscape. We insisted on the realistic need to cast a wide net in thinking about getting jobs and making career choices. Five years later, I can say that we were right—both technology and the market intertwine to shape options today. After many decades of thinking about the questions of how feminist scholars of religion can survive and thrive in academia, I offer three concrete practical insights that I have shared with my colleagues in religion in recent years.

### *Think Creatively beyond Teaching*

Academics spend decades in school to become religious studies professionals. So, there is a tendency to think that we will become what we have had modeled for us—namely, teachers. The reality is that most lawyers do not go to law school expecting to become law professors; and most doctors go to medical school to become doctors not professors of medicine. I think we need to take a cue from these other professions and acknowledge that our studies set us up for more kinds of work than we can imagine, of which teaching is but one.

There are many ways to contribute—writing, activism, working in publishing, ministry, government, religious leadership, antiviolence work—the sky is the

<sup>1</sup> American Academy of Religion Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, *A Guide to the Perplexing: A Survival Manual for Women in Religious Studies* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Mary E. Hunt, ed., *A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way from A to Z* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Mary E. Hunt, Monique Moultrie, and Kecia Ali, eds., *A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way from A to Z*, rev. ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

limit. While a few people will get the increasingly rarer tenure-track jobs, and most of those people will still be white, male, and heterosexual, there are many exciting and interesting ways to use religious studies in a world sorely in need of our insights.

My career as a feminist theologian in public practice at the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) is an early example of just that approach. Essentially, my colleagues and I have developed a nonprofit educational/activist center to bring feminist religious insights to the work of social change through programs, projects, and publications. I am deeply aware of the race and economic privilege that conditioned the possibility that Diann Neu and I would be able to carve out a new and useful space for others and ourselves. Nonetheless, the field of feminist/womanist studies in religion needs many such freestanding places, like the new Center for Womanist Leadership founded by the late Rev. Dr. Katie G. Cannon, to provide intellectual and physical locations for the new work by newly empowered people who are reshaping the field of religion.

### *Adjunct Teaching Is, for the Most Part, a Case of Diminishing Returns*

Circumstances differ widely in terms of what makes an adjunct job palatable—getting teaching experience for a CV, a spouse's employment in the area, young children at home, and more. But over time, institutions benefit enormously, and adjuncts suffer increasingly—so much so that I do not recommend it as a long-term strategy.

One course, one year, one institution is probably enough to get what a scholar wants out of adjunct teaching: Do I like to teach? Do I like this kind of teaching? Does it pay enough to make it worthwhile? Where can I get a full-time job that will be more satisfying and more just? But every year after that, the institution (which probably does not increase the per-course salary in a way that keeps pace with the cost of living), gets someone who has increased teaching experience, more familiarity with how the particular institution operates, and a professor whom students will likely ask for recommendations, advice, and time to talk, none of which are remunerated. In short, it is a win for institutions and a gradually less lucrative deal for the professor. I counsel against adjunct teaching for more than a year or two.

### *Get Some Marketable Training*

The real issue is how to make a living as a person with religious studies training—an issue all the more complex for people of color, women, people from minority faith traditions or no religious tradition, out queer people, people with disabilities, and others who are marginalized. One helpful strategy is to get marketable training in a cognate field. For example, some people get social work degrees in order to do therapy in private practice rather than ministry in a denomination that will not hire them. Others learn nonprofit management skills, including grant writing, accounting, public relations, social media, and all the other things needed

to run an organization. Still others pursue an MBA in nonprofit management, a skill that graduate schools of religion do not teach. Some colleagues find their way in information technology, library science, and even business where there are job opportunities in some seminaries and universities. Likewise, some people gravitate toward administration rather than teaching, finding fulfilling careers in supervisory and leadership roles. These are all viable alternatives to full-time teaching and may actually be both more interesting and more remunerative for some people.

The socioeconomic parameters of our field are real, and the opportunities continue to shrink. So, we must rely on our vivid imaginations and networking skills to help one another build new options while we dismantle the foundations that currently exclude and thus circumscribe the field. I am optimistic that such common action will create new spaces, both intellectual and physical, for putting the skills of feminists/womanists in religion to great use.

**Mary E. Hunt, PhD**, is a feminist theologian who is cofounder and codirector of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) in Silver Spring, Maryland. A Catholic active in the women-church movement and on LGBTIQ matters, she lectures and writes on theology and ethics with particular attention to liberation issues. She is an editor of *A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way from A to Z* (2004, 2014) and coeditor with Diann L. Neu of *New Feminist Christianity: Many Voices, Many Views* (2010). [mhunt@hers.com](mailto:mhunt@hers.com)

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