

Mary E. Hunt, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual



Mary E. Hunt 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, Hunt lectures and writes on theology and ethics with particular attention to liberation issues. She is the editor of A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way from A to Z (Palgrave, 2004) and is coeditor with Diann L. Neu of New Feminist Christianity: Many Voices, Many Views (SkyLight Paths, 2010).

I come to the relationship between scholarship in religion and social activism from a hybrid place — the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) — a nonprofit educational center that my partner Diann Neu and I started more than twenty-five years ago in Silver Spring, Maryland. We offer intellectual and pastoral resources to encourage and sustain those who bring feminist religious values to the service of social change.

I write and teach online and in the summer at various institutions, including Pacific School of Religion and Lancaster Theological Seminary. I lecture abroad primarily in Latin America. So while I straddle both sides of the fence, I find that these are mutually enriching ways to work — scholarship that is grounded in the needs and priorities of the larger feminist queer community and activism that is informed by the best academic work in the field.

My analysis here is very practical in four areas: time, money, conservatives, and liberals.

Time

One of the major barriers to living and working as an integrated scholar-activist is time. Even with the best technology, it takes time to research, write, edit, and respond to the reactions to one's work. Collaborative efforts — anthologies, jointly written articles, and the like — take even more time and those efforts are not rewarded by the tenure/promotion systems of most academic institutions.

It is time-consuming to find just the right place to publish such work. There are journals such as *Theology and Sexuality*, magazines such as the Web-based *Religion Dispatches*, edited volumes like what SCM Press puts out, but places that publish accessible but erudite work are limited in number.

Time spent to prepare such materials cannot be spent on the front lines, at the strategy tables, or on conference calls. Organizations like WATER do not have funded sabbatical programs, work reduction because of other scholarly commitments, access to fellowship programs for teaching scholars, or other perks of academia.

I say this by way of challenge. If we want scholar-activists to function effectively, if we want to encourage hybrid approaches, we are going to have to find ways to create and support the institutions necessary to foster their growth.

I am amazed that no one has yet set up the equivalent of WATER for queer work in religion. While there are several wonderful programs at Pacific School of Religion and Chicago Theological Seminary, I believe we also need an independent place unfettered by the whims of academia and by the constraints of institutional religions.

Money

The second reality check is the little-discussed-among-scholars question of money. Scholarship and activism require money. We kid ourselves to avoid it, and we subvert ourselves to ignore it.

Money issues are more than rows of zeros. To do this work, one must know something about budgeting and investments, about financial planning, fundraising, and grant writing. These are

not skills that religion graduate students learn. Interns at WATER always get some experience in how to do fundraising. Two of our former interns — one lesbian, one gay — have gone on to full-time fundraising jobs — one with the Global Fund for Women and the other with various nonprofits. While our primary work is academic and pastoral, we are also a business, and a nonprofit...but a small business to be sure. We have all of the same earning, reporting, and stewarding of resources responsibilities that any other small business faces.

If we are to develop this work at the pace necessary to keep up with the backlash against it, and to sustain the interest and provide structure for the careers of those who follow us, we need a significant infusion of funds. The Templeton Foundation has dedicated serious money to explore the relationship of science and religion and creating and nurturing that relationship into an entirely new field of study. Their endowment is now \$1.8 billion. Given the number of theological institutions, colleges, and universities that have no queer studies in religion, it is clear that at least this much money is needed. We cannot nickel-and-dime a paradigm shift in the twenty-first century. If we want both the inclusion of queer issues in the academy and the fusion of queer studies with queer activism, then we are going to need a lot of money. Ideas are powerful, but ideas backed up by the money to implement them are what change the world.

Conservatives

A major stumbling block in all of this is what I politely label “conservatives.” For my purpose, “conservative” means anyone who wants to keep things as they are.

Washington, D.C., is full of right-wing think tanks where smart people spend their days trying to be sure that the work progressives propose is discredited and derailed. They see to it that the issues of justice like marriage, healthcare, military service, and access to housing and jobs for queer people are scuttled at the ballot box, in the legislatures, and in the courts. They have plenty of help from conservative religious leaders. For example, Prop 8 in California proved that Catholic numbers combined with Mormon money could produce disastrous results.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has an Institution for Welcoming Resources that does marvelous work. The Human Rights Campaign’s Religion and Faith Program is useful. But we need many more such resources.

In conservative Catholic circles, lots of money is used to prevent progressive social change. For instance, Archbishop John Nienstedt of Minneapolis/Saint Paul sent a DVD to every Catholic

household in that archdiocese to persuade voters to support ballot initiatives to restrict marriage to a man and a woman. Similarly, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released a video called “Made for Each Other” on hetero-only marriage. All of this was funded by major contributions from the Knights of Columbus.

Today’s scholar activists need media skills and training to play in the real world of TV, radio, blogging, and social media. We also need critical skills to deconstruct oppressive work. The increasing sophistication of conservatives is something to admire and emulate as they do their scholarly activism.

Liberals

Finally, I am sorry to break it to Dan Savage, but in some respects it does not always get better in our work. It sometimes gets worse. There is still much antipathy toward religion among many LGBTIQ political activists. Even the most progressive of them expect little of religion in the service of social change. I note in some instances that religion is of interest to secular queer advocacy groups not because they see any value in religion as such, but because the political climate makes clear that religion is a factor in how people vote. I understand this approach in a cynical way.

But I also know the effective efforts of groups such as a new coalition of Catholic organizations called “Equally Blessed,” by Jewish organizations including the World Congress of Jewish GLB Organizations, and the Presbyterian group That All May Freely Serve, to name just a few. The National Religious Leadership Roundtable of the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force pulls such groups together for effective lobbying as well as heart- and mind-changing education. Without this work, I submit that political efforts would take much longer and be less effective. Still, these groups need an academic think/do tank to bolster their work. We need to create it.

Another liberal problem is the lack of solidarity across issues. Racism, discrimination against immigrants, and economic injustice all go hand in hand with sex/gender oppression. But the connections are not made often enough and the issues are treated as if they were separate. This needs to change.

These four issues — time, money, conservatives, and liberals — frame the current scene in scholar activism on LGBTIQ issues. I can report from the front lines that, despite the challenges I have outlined, the work remains as enjoyable and satisfying as ever. It becomes even more so

with the new colleagues who are joining the ranks every year.