

Response to Distinguished Faculty Lecture of Mary Tolbert  
Judith Berling  
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Thank you, Mary, for a splendid, profound, inspiring and provocative lecture.

I am deeply honored to be the respondent for Mary Tolbert's Distinguished Faculty Lecture for at least three reasons: 1) The high regard in which I hold her as a scholar, colleague, and friend; 2) Her characteristic courage and gravitas in addressing a significant topic that challenges her -- and the rest of us -- to engage issues which we too often gloss over or dismiss; 3) Her sense of timing --- when she chose the topic, she could not have known that the "occupy" movement would be so much before us. I have just returned from Harvard, where Francis Clooney, Director of the Center for World Religions, told me that he was quietly suggesting to students who will have not one but two seminars on the "occupy" movement in the next week that they might consider an "occupy the Harvard Faculty" movement to get their professors more engaged and to encourage more critical thinking about the movement.

Mary's lecture began with a detailed personal account of how her history has drawn her so powerfully into activism. Just last week Margaret Miles lectured on her book *Augustine and the Fundamentalist's daughter*, which also shares and reflects on personal history and how it has shaped her scholarly passions. In the cases of both Margaret and Mary, I believe that we have outstanding models of how to use personal history not as confession, but to provide context and support for a brilliant scholarly analysis. We need more such models.

The lecture explores with candor and thoughtful analysis the complex challenges of combining activism and scholarship: sacrificing other scholarly goals and a certain amount of the scholar's freedom to follow her own curiosity and questions without constraint; personal challenges and discomforts with some of the requirements of activism (an issue that I, personally, deeply empathize with); the importance of activities (fundraising, working a reception, talking with the media) that do not easily merge with our scholarly skills and training; and -- importantly --- the tensions and pulls between the passion of activism and the rigorous demands of scholarship.

Those of us who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s will immediately recognize that this lecture is by no means a call to activism (fighting for the right cause) as more important than scholarship. Her argument is important precisely because she argues so strongly for the importance of SCHOLARSHIP (rigorous, careful, disciplinarily responsible, not over-stated scholarship) by scholars who are also committed activists, arguing that in the long run only such responsible scholarship can help to erode views based on shoddy or biased scholarship. This means, among other things, pulling back from the temptation to score a rhetorical victory in the heat of debate, or to come up with a "zingier" slogan than

one's opponents. It is based on a profound belief that sound scholarship can contribute to right thinking --- a belief not always easy to sustain in our rhetorically polarized era.

I do think that in some ways Mary has underplayed her courage in becoming a movement activist (as she terms it) on LBGQTQ issues. It is true that PSR was more likely to be a supportive environment than Vanderbilt could have been. But some of you may not remember that when Mary came to PSR and GTU in 1994, the openness to these issues in this environment was still new and fragile. The GTU and its schools --- long suspected of Berkeley radicalism by conservative donors and churches --- had been slow to claim gay and lesbian issues. Not many years before Mary arrived, in around 1991 Bill Countryman became the first out Gay faculty member in the consortium. When I came as Dean of the GTU in 1987, I received a strong nonverbal message that I had to be discreet about my lesbian identity to provide "deniability" for trustees, staff, faculty, and students who might not be comfortable with a lesbian Dean. After Bill Countryman came out, increasing numbers of students did so, and many of them came out to me; if they came out to me, I of course reciprocated. My lesbianism slowly became an open secret. But I never made an open and unambiguous claim of my lesbianism until I stepped down in 1997. I need to say that when my partner died of cancer in 2008, scores of GTU faculty, students, trustees, and staff attended her memorial; the atmosphere had improved significantly. But in 1994 PSR and GTU were still in the early, somewhat nervous stages of affirming gay and lesbian issues, and Mary's presence, courage, and persistence certainly furthered that cause. We thank and celebrate her for that.

In closing I could like to pose two questions to Mary in the hopes that her brief comments will serve to open the conversation she will want to engage with the audience here this evening.

1. In recent years I have noticed that more and more of our doctoral and MA students seem to want to combine the scholarly life with work in a non-profit or activist center. What should young scholars think about when considering that as a career path?
2. You stressed in your lecture that activist scholarship entailed sacrifice of pursuing some of your interests in Biblical scholarship. Given that one of the characteristics of the scholarly life is to pursue one's imagination, questions and curiosities through the byways of one's field, do you think it is important for every scholar (even one with activist passions) to pursue some of that sort of classical just-because-I-want-to-know scholarship? Is this in any way a necessary balance to activist scholarship or a necessary aspect of the scholarly life?