
Imagination, Art, and Feminist Theology

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of imagination and art when developing and working with theology, particularly feminist theology. It begins with a short review of selected periods in Christian history that either supported or warned against the use of imagination and art in classical theological development. Feminist theology has had a different history because since its inception, imagination has been central to the formation and exploration of the field. Imagination and art have continued to develop and promote feminist theological worship, and backlash against feminist theology has also focused on these artistic expressions. I propose the term *theological imaginizing* for the intentional engagement and exploration of imagination and art with theology, and I share insights based on my field research for integrating feminist theology with art in Christian worship today.

Keywords

Art, imagination, theology, feminism, liturgy, ritual

Introduction

In the year 2000, The Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts was launched with a series description that began, ‘What have imagination and the arts to do with theology? For much of the modern era, the answer has been “not much”’.¹ While this statement is a fair assessment of classical theology, it is not true of feminist theology.

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1. See <https://www.routledge.com/Ashgate-Studies-in-Theology-Imagination-and-the-Arts/book-series/ATHEOART> accessed 27 September 2016.

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Feminist theology started with the exploration of imagery as a central concern, particularly the exclusively male imagery of God in the Abrahamic religions. Pioneering feminist theologians showed how the pictures and language we use to represent the mystery of God can take hold in our imagination, and if unexamined, can skew what we believe about God and each other, especially when these images are taken literally. Mary Daly penned the clarion call for the movement when she wrote, 'If God is male, then the male is God' (Daly, 1973). Alternative images of God, particularly female imagery of God expressed in language, art, and embodiment, became a common way to communicate a feminist theological point of view. Even today, one of the most identifiable ways to recognize feminist theological expression is when female imagery of the sacred is presented in liturgy, prayer, theological reflection, visual art, and song.

It is unfortunate that art and imagination have not received more recognition in all theologies, especially because artists and theologians serve similar creative functions in society. Artists bring new awareness and new ways of seeing to the wider community by engaging their imagination. They translate this knowledge through sound, colour, light, form, movement, and words so that others can experience and understand it too. Theologians serve a similar creative role when they help the broader community to see new insights, and new understandings of God, and encourage growth in the community's relationship with God and each other. Great theology, like great art, speaks directly to the needs, hopes, and desires of the community by revealing a deeper wisdom. Theology, like art, requires imagination.

The contours of this article come out of the roots of my own life. Artists and academics are often seen as different populations, but like many of us who are inspired by and contribute to the field of feminist theology in various ways, I identify with both groups. I am a musician. I play piano and cello, and I compose. I also have an intellectual inclination. These two worlds came together in the year 2000 when I became a fellow at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music at Yale Divinity School. Today I am a professor of religious studies in Phoenix, Arizona and I continue to compose, perform, and record music. I have seen in a very personal way that my best ideas and my best musical compositions have much in common and they give me a similar sense of creative satisfaction, particularly when engaging theological themes. I have also seen how artistic communities and theological networks encourage all of us to connect more deeply with each other, creation, and ourselves.

In this article, I explore the importance of imagination and art when developing and working with theology, particularly feminist theology. I begin by reviewing selected periods in Christian history that either supported or warned against the use of imagination and art in classical theological development. I then explore the central role imagination and art have served in the development of feminist theology, and consider the backlash that some Christian communities faced when they artistically expressed female imagery of the sacred during the 1980s and 1990s. I propose the term *theological imagining* for the intentional engagement and exploration of imagination and art with theology. I share insights based on my own research for integrating feminist theology and feminist theological art in Christian worship today. I conclude that feminist theology has the potential to enliven all theology by articulating the role of imagination in theological development.

Mixed Messages about Imagination, Art, and Theology in Christianity

Imagination in the Bible

Imagination can be defined as ‘the ability to form mental images of things that either are not physically present or have never been conceived or created by others’.² While imagination functions as a whole, it is useful to consider these distinct elements. Imagination is an ability. It comes to us naturally as children and can be developed as we grow. From a theological perspective, this imaginative ability is a gift contained in our creation. Our imaginative ability can ‘form mental images of things that are not physically present’, which allows us to learn from the experiences of others, and to interact with realities, thoughts, and concepts within ourselves. Finally, imagination gives us the ability to form mental images of something that ‘has never been created nor conceived of by someone else’, which is a standard that both artists and theologians have commonly held. Artists want their art to be unique, and the same is true for ideas in academe. As scholars, we are expected to innovate and contribute unique thought to our field of study, and we only grant PhDs to doctoral students when they have contributed something to our field that has never been created nor conceived of by someone else.

The historical ambiguity about the role of imagination in the development of classical theology must be addressed if we are to invigorate and amplify this cross-disciplinary field of study today. At the heart of the debates is wariness about the role of imagination and art in the development of religion. Understanding how we got to this point is important as it informs possible solutions for moving forward. I will focus my comments on Christianity for this article, though the critiques and possible solutions may have broader applications, particularly among the Abrahamic faiths.

English Bible translations are not consistent regarding the use of the word *imagination*. A search of the NSRV Bible reveals seven scriptural passages translated as *imagination*, and other Bibles translate the same scripture passages with other words.³ *Imagination* appears more often in the older King James Version because six different Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible texts are translated as *imagination*: *yester*, *sheriruth*, *machashebeth*, *dialogismos*, *dianoia*, and *logismos*. Despite these issues in translation, the collection of scripture passages are consistently pejorative, containing warnings or prohibitions about engaging imagination (McIntyre, 1987: 5).

According to the scriptures, imagination is an aspect of the human that can be corrupted. ‘Before the imaginations of those who now sin were estranged, and before those who stored up treasures of faith were sealed’ (2 Esdras 6.5), and ‘He knows your imaginations and what you think in your hearts! Woe to those who sin and want to hide their sins!’ (2 Esdras 16.63). Imagination is what allows a false sense of security. ‘The wealth of the rich is their strong city; in their imagination it is like a high wall’ (Proverbs 18.11). Humans are warned that their imagination does not give a true picture of God. ‘Since we

2. See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/imagination>

3. See 2 Esdras 6.5, 2 Esdras 16.54, 2 Esdras 16.63, Proverbs 18.11, Ezekiel 13.2, Ezekiel 13.17, Acts 17.29.

are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals' (Acts 17.29). Imagination is also identified as the source of false prophecy. 'Mortal, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are prophesying; say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: "Hear the word of the Lord!"' (Ezekiel 13.2). There are also specific warnings against the dangers of women and imagination. 'As for you, mortal, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own imagination; prophesy against them' (Ezekiel 13.17). While other texts show women as legitimate prophetesses in the Bible (Gafney, 2008), the numbers are small compared to men, and only in a few instances do we even know what the prophetess said.

We need to ask why the scripture writers were so disparaging about imagination, particularly since the imaginative capacity is required for prophesying and prophecy shoots through the texts as a wonderful and historical occurrence. It appears these statements about imagination are less a comment about imaginative capacity and more about who had the right to engage their imagination in prophecy and whose messages were important enough to remember. The word *imagination* becomes shorthand for the authors' judgements about the internal experiences of others.

Despite the warnings, these scripture passages affirm the existence of imagination. 'The Lord certainly knows everything that people do; he knows their imaginations and their thoughts and their hearts' (2 Esdras 16.54). They are a testament to an interior world in all of us that is created by God and known by God. They show that women as well as men had prophetic imaginings and were expressing them. They are explicit that God knows everything that occurs in our interior imaginative space, so God is with us when we engage our imagination whether we recognize it or not. Finally, because *imagination*, *thought*, and *heart* are mentioned as locations of this interior space, the scripture affirms different ways we can experience our imaginative capacity through what we imagine, think, or feel.

In the Gospels, Jesus expected his followers to engage their imagination. When he taught with metaphors and parables, imagination was required to understand the metaphor, and imagination was needed to have the wisdom (and whimsy) to hold the comparison lightly, not literally. 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field' (Matthew 13.31); or 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[d] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened' (Matthew 13.33). Sometimes the metaphors were explained, but oftentimes not. When Jesus taught with parables such as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11–32), listeners were expected to imagine the story and accept the essential teaching without being concerned about the historicity of it.

Jesus also identified disciples by who were ready, willing, and able to grasp the message of these metaphorical teachings. When the disciples asked him why he spoke in parables, he explained that those who were not ready would not understand the parable through a lack of seeing, hearing, and hardened hearts – a lack of imagination. 'But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it' (Matthew 13.16–17).

Early Uses of Christian Art

The impulse to create art has a long history in the Christian tradition. Sacred art was produced even during Christian persecution in the late second and third centuries. Christian catacombs were built to bury the dead, and they were adorned with pictures of scripture stories and symbols such as the Chi Ro, fish, and anchor as testaments of Christian faith.⁴ Later, Roman emperors funded the use of the arts to stimulate Christian belief and practice, beginning with Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. During his reign, Constantine sent his mother, the Empress Helena, to Jerusalem to identify and commemorate those significant places in the Bible where sacred events took place. She was given wealth from the imperial treasury to commission churches and art, as well as to preserve relics.

The earliest Christian churches communicated the faith to a predominantly non-literate population through the use of art. Paintings and statues taught the sacred stories. Architecture and liturgy provided sacred theatre for an embodied, full sensory and participatory experience that included vestment costumes, choreographed movement, mood-creating music, and liturgical scripts with multiple parts. This investment in sacred art, especially when directed by the emperor, involved politics as well as piety. When Helena was in Jerusalem, she not only had churches constructed to commemorate Christianity, she also had temples to Roman gods destroyed that were built under the edict of previous emperors (Stephenson, 2010: 252). Destruction and construction of religious art and architecture displayed an exercise of power (Noyes, 2013: 1–2).

Imagination as a Pathway to God

Scripture eventually became more than a written witness and testament; it became a location for imaginal and inspirational communion with God. *Lectio divina* is a Latin phrase meaning ‘divine reading’, and its roots begin in the third century with Origen. He viewed scripture as a living word. He saw scripture as a location where Christ was present and available if one would seek what was beyond the text. Origen wrote, ‘Devote yourself to the divine reading ... seek the meaning of divine words which is hidden from most people’ (Studzinski, 2009: 26–35). St. Benedict in the fifth century formalized the process of *lectio divina* with specific times and methods that would become a common monastic practice.

The imaginative interior world as a way of knowing God is a central tenet of mysticism, and Christian mysticism was at its height during the medieval period. Female medieval mystics such as Catherine of Siena, Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and Marguerite Porete described their visions with vivid imagery, and some of these mystics were also artistic. Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth century German abbess, painted images of her visionary experiences along with her theological explanations in *Scivias* and other works. She composed music for her nuns to sing that expressed her vision of God and church. She also wrote at least one liturgical drama, the *Ordo Virtutum*, where her nuns performed the

4. Christian catacomb images can be found at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/archeo/inglese/documents/rc_com_archeo_doc_20011010_catacrist_en.html#Arte

roles of virtues in this morality play. Visual and musical arts allowed a female mystic to express herself directly because the written word often required a priest amanuensis to scribe her dictation and sometimes translate the female mystic's vernacular into more formalized texts (Dickens, 2009: 168; McAvoy, 2004: 118). In this role, the male amanuensis could edit or shape the text to exercise authority and control (Dyas et al., 2005: 121).

Mystics such as Hildegard repeated formulaic tropes such as *ego paupercula feminea forma* (I, a poor little figure of a woman) in order to attribute their visions to God (Newman, 1997: 2). At the same time, they 'laid hold of these female symbols – Wisdom, Mother Church, and bridal soul – to affirm their own spiritual journeys as women empowered to speak, write, teach, and guide other women' (Ruether, 2005: 8–9). Female symbols were also 'modes of religious imagination' that offered freedom of interpretation because it was safer to theologize about them than the Trinity (Newman, 2003: 38–39).

Iconoclasm Breaks Through

As the medieval period ended and the early modern period dawned, visionary imagination, female imagery of God, mysticism, and art diminished. In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation brought a wave of iconoclastic fervour that echoed the iconoclastic controversies of the eighth–ninth centuries when the Byzantine Emperor Leo III decreed that all pictures in churches throughout the Roman Empire were to be destroyed.⁵ In the sixteenth century, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli and others advocated for the removal of statues and images in churches, citing the Decalogue, 'You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them' (Exodus 20.3–5a). It was a persuasive case for leaving the Catholic Church, which had statues, paintings and holy shrines to saints as well as a commercialization of indulgences. In contrast to sensationalized historical accounts, most of the image removal was carried out peacefully when the city or territory officially broke with the Catholic Church and established a form of Protestantism as its religion (Wallace, 2004: 95). Changing the sacred landscape was an obvious public sign of a regional shift of power.

Acceptable methods for discovering truth were changing during the modern era as well. From the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, intellectual movements of Humanism, Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution considered interior and imaginative experiences to be subjective, and the concept of God was suspect as well. Distancing theology from imagination and art was one way theologians could remain relevant.

The Current Situation

It could be argued that the last 50 years have opened the doors again to consider the role of imagination and art in knowledge production, particularly in theology. Intellectual

5. For class and ethnic analysis of Byzantine iconoclastic controversies, see Mango (2002) *The Oxford History of Byzantium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

movements of deconstructionism and post-modernism, along with the new frontiers in science that include quantum physics shake the foundational pillars of fixed truths that can be observed and objectively measured. Imagination and art are being recognized as valid and valued locations for probing our understandings about life and ourselves. The Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts has published 19 books since 2000. This statement continues to be the official description of the series that appears in each published volume:

What have imagination and the arts to do with theology? For much of the modern era, the answer has been “not much”. It is precisely this deficit that this series seeks to redress. For, whatever role they have or have not been granted in the theological disciplines, imagination and the arts are undeniably bound up with how we as human beings think, learn and communicate, engage with and respond to our physical and social environments and, in particular, our awareness and experience of that which transcends our own creatureliness... The peculiar inter-disciplinarity of theology, and the growing interest in imagination and the arts in many different fields of human concern, afford the opportunity for a series that has its roots sunk in varied and diverse intellectual soils, while focused around a coherent theological question: How are imagination and the arts involved in the shaping and reshaping of our humanity as part of the creative and redemptive purposes of God, and what roles do they perform in the theological enterprise? (Guite, 2010: frontis piece)

The statements about art and imagination are valid, but it is doubtful that feminist theologians would bifurcate transcendence and ‘creatureliness’ or focus on redemption as a main purpose of God. The ending theological question, however, is relevant. With a slight modification, the question becomes: How are imagination and the arts involved in the shaping and reshaping of our humanity as part of the co-creative dance with the sacred, and what roles do they perform in the theological enterprise? Feminist theology has much to offer this important discussion.

Imagination and Art in Feminist Theology

Imagery Stimulates Feminist Theology

Feminist theology has made strong contributions to understanding how image and imagination contribute to theology, religious practice, and social ordering. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow see feminist theology at the centre of all the theologies because the image of God has had such an impact on how we interpret and justify our world. As they explain in their 2016 book, *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology*:

Feminist theology did not begin with the statement that the nature of divinity is unknowable. Rather it began with the assertion that the idea and image of God as an old white man who rules the world from outside it justified male domination. The interrelated set of ideas associated with the traditional image of God not only fails to make sense of the world as we know it, but also has been harmful, and destructive to individuals, communities, and the whole web of life. Unless and until we develop alternatives to these ideas, they will continue to influence us (Christ and Plaskow, 2016: 145).

Pioneering feminist theologians had to rely on their imaginative capacity to invent the new field of feminist theology with new methods and theories that others could apply, debate, and refine. They published their first feminist works between the late 1960s and early 1980s and were innovators in ways that few who came later could claim. They were the ones looking at the blank piece of paper as they worked out in their own minds how to make sense of what they were seeing, what they were experiencing, and what they were noticing. Their embodied experiences were vitally important, but they had to engage their imaginative capacity to form the insights. Returning to our original definition of imagination, these theologians demonstrated the ‘ability to form mental images of things that either were not physically present or had never been conceived or created by others’.

They were also word-artists. Early pioneers of feminist theology extended their reach beyond academe when they used descriptive imagery and memorable phrases to communicate their ideas. Short theological one-liners such as: ‘If God is male, then the male is God’, was widely repeated and popularized by both secular and religious feminists as no theological training was needed to understand the point. These expressions became rallying anthems for many in the women’s movement to succinctly communicate complex issues about patriarchy, society, and God in simple ways that were easy to repeat and hard to forget, while also effectively challenging previously unexamined thinking.

It is ironic that Mary Daly penned a rallying anthem when she herself was an iconoclast. She was an image-breaker who was fearless in her critiques, and scathing in her assessments. Her paintbrush was her pen, and over time, she developed an eccentrically capitalized and hyper-punctuated style. She contributed to the field by skewering anything that prevented women’s equality. In her first book in 1968, *The Church and the Second Sex*, she writes about visiting the 1965 Second Vatican Council in Rome. The Catholic Church was receiving kudos for opening to ecumenism and modernity, but Daly saw gender injustice. She described the flamboyantly dressed bishops and cardinals arrogantly debating issues as ‘old men in crimson dresses’, while a handful of women, mostly veiled nuns wearing black, looked on silently as no women at the council was allowed to speak (Daly, 1968: 10). Her next book in 1973, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, had more shock value. Her caustic iconoclastic wit revealed just how ‘real’ sacred images in the reader’s imagination could be. Under the heading ‘Castrating God’ Daly wrote, ‘We already suggested that if God is male, then the male is God. The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live in the human imagination. The process of cutting away the Supreme phallus can hardly be a “rational” affair. The problem is one of transforming the collective imagination’ (Daly, 1975: 19). Predictably, critics of Daly reacted strongly to the castration image, while less-radical feminists who embraced the shorter anthem rarely cited the longer quote.

Carol Christ provided another anthem-like, image-centred phrase when she penned, ‘Why Women Need the Goddess’ in 1978. It was her keynote address for the ‘Great Goddess Re-emerging’ conference, and published the same year in *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (Christ, 1978: 8–13). The same essay appeared in a feminist reader on religion that she co-edited with Judith Plaskow in 1979 titled *Womanspirit Rising* (Christ, 1979: 273–87). As the field developed, diversity in women’s experiences was recognized and the metaphorical language shifted to pluralities.

The ten year follow-up volume to *Womanspirit Rising*, was titled *Weaving the Visions* in recognition of the variety of experiences and intersectionality of class, race, culture, gender, and sexuality.

In 1983, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza published *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, and Rosemary Radford Ruether published *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Both theologians held forth on the power of story – where herstory was a counter-narrative to history. Ruether's thesis was that experience was not just a category for feminist theology, but for all theology because scripture and tradition were actually codified men's experiences. To make her point artistically, she engaged her imagination as a storyteller and began the book with 11 pages of 'A Feminist Midrash of the Gospel in Three Acts', ending with 'Act III Mary Magdalene's Witness'. Schüssler Fiorenza wanted to do more than just correct history; she created a narrative about 'a universal solidarity of sisterhood' across time. Her approach was similar to Judy Chicago's feminist art installation, *The Dinner Party*, which depicts an imagined dinner party for extraordinary historical and mythical women. Schüssler Fiorenza even acknowledges a famous quote by Chicago when she writes 'Our heritage is our power' (Weaver, 1995: 162).

These pioneering feminist theologians were image breakers, image makers, and storytellers. They were also word-artists. Ruether's 'God/dess' communicates a critique of male-dominated theological language while acknowledging that we possess no adequate name for God. I have only highlighted a few of these theologians and I recognize that I am characterizing their imaginal and artistic side in overly simplified ways. My point, however, is to highlight how these scholars engaged imagination and art to innovate, produce, and reproduce the field of feminist theology.

Feminist Theology Inspires Art

The imagery that inspired feminist theology also inspired visual and performance art. Expressing this new theological understanding became essential if feminist theology was to transform religious practice. The sculpture *Christa*, created by Edwina Sandys in 1973, was the first female Christ figure displayed on a cross in a modern sculpture. It debuted in London in 1975 and toured to numerous churches before being installed at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City at Easter in 1984. The four foot, 250 pound bronze figure on a lucite cross showed a crucified Christ depicted as female. It was installed to the side of the high altar, set apart with ropes and two large candleholders, and lit with a spotlight. The sculpture was one of three expressions of 'feminine spirituality' to be presented in the cathedral during Holy Week, along with a series of meditations that centred on Bible passages where women are pictured as suffering servants (Briggs, 1984).

Other liturgies, prayers, and experimental worship settings for feminist theology developed too, both within and outside formalized church structures. Methodist ministers Susan Cady and Hal Taussig were early adopters for introducing feminist theology into parish life. In 1989 they published with Marian Ronan *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration*, which included over 50 worship aids, including hymns, sermons, rituals, and special liturgies such as a Sophia Triduum (Cady et al., 1997). Rosemary

Radford Ruether published *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* in 1986, just three years after *Sexism and God-Talk*. By the early 1990s, a vibrant Woman-Church movement was underway as women gathered in homes and informal spaces to create rituals, songs, and art. These liturgies and prayers were not just reflections of feminist theology, but ‘places of primary theology’ (Slee, 2008: 189).

Larger feminist theology events were produced as well. The Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis in 1993 attracted thousands of participants, mostly women, to explore new ideas and language about Christianity in light of women’s experience. Approximately a third of the 2,200 participants came from Presbyterian Church USA and United Methodist Church, as well as Roman Catholic and other Protestant denominations. The event was organized by the North American chapter of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in response to its ‘Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women’. The event marked the midpoint of the decade with a conference to discuss and explore the topic. Feminist theology and female imagery were central themes of the conference, as were rituals, art, prayers, music, poetry, and dance.

Concurrent with this feminist theological expression, interest in the feminist theory of art accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s. A revealing graph can be found in the book *Re-enchantment*, co-edited by Religion Professor David Morgan from Duke University and James Elkins, Chair in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Head of History of Art at the University College Cork, Ireland. The three dimensional chart analyses interest in six different approaches to art theory from 1940–2000: feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, the gaze, visual theory, and deconstruction. Interest is analysed by the number of art historical essays containing these keywords in the *Bibliography of the History of Art*, a searchable database. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminism was the largest category, twice as large as the next category, psychoanalysis, and with exponential growth. By the year 2000, feminism was outpacing everything else in the field with an acceleration of interest.

Feminist Theological Art Provokes Backlash

Once feminist theological art and liturgy appeared, patriarchal pushback usually resulted in a backlash. In 1984, Sandy’s *Christa* sculpture was removed from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine after only 11 days. *The New York Times* covered the controversy:

The bronze figure of a crucified woman will be removed today from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. But the impact of exhibiting the statue grows even as it is removed, causing strain between the dean of the cathedral and officials of his church, and drawing attention to questions of feminist theology.... In an interview, Bishop Dennis said he did not object to “enhancing” symbols of Jesus by casting them in differing skin colors or ethnic characteristics. But he said the statue went too far by “totally changing the symbol.” Supporters, agreeing that the historical Jesus was a man, contend that the statue conveys the concept that women as well as men are called upon by the Gospels to share the sufferings of Jesus... The dean, an ebullient man whose interests in the arts, science and social issues have largely transformed the cathedral into a cultural moveable feast, says unexamined sexist attitudes fuel opposition to the statue. “The

Episcopal Church went through the same issues before accepting women's ordination," he said this week in his office. "I don't see anything really new here." Prof. Phyllis Tribble of the Union Theological Seminary said a female crucifixion figure should be seen as an allusion to "Christ's mystical body that transcends sex" while not denying the male Jesus of history.... "We never have problems when we talk about males being Christ figures. We only get stirred up when the figure becomes a woman" (Briggs, 1984).

Revd Susan Cady and Revd Hal Taussig faced a similar backlash when *Wisdom's Feast* was published. A disgruntled parishioner formed a 'Jesus Christ is Lord' task force and sought to have Cady removed. When the bishop promoted her instead, he was furious and took his complaints to the local United Methodist newspaper and the Eastern Pennsylvania synod. A formal charge of heresy was levied against the ministers but their bishop declined. Meanwhile, the bishop from the Western synod publicly stated that the heresy charge was valid and censure was in order. The controversy led to a resolution at the General Conference to investigate Sophia theology. The result was a ten page paper titled 'Biblical Wisdom and Current Theological Ferment: Report of the Task Force on the Study of Wisdom, the Council of Bishops.' The theological ruling supported the work of Taussig and Cady, but the controversy virtually stopped Sophia worship expression in the United Methodist Church (Ursic, 2014: 58).

Similar controversies were simmering in other denominations too, and they usually boiled over when feminist theology was performed, expressed, and embodied in art. In the Church of Scotland, a controversy ensued when a prayer to *God Our Mother* was read by Anne Hepburn, the President of the Women's Guild, at their 1981 annual meeting. Two years later, after much debate, a 1984 theological report titled *The Motherhood of God* supported the biblical grounding for describing God as mother, but the committee was split on whether God should be addressed with female language in the Church of Scotland. The debate was so controversial that the BBC covered it on their nightly news with an extended interview of Hepburn (Ursic, 2014: 114).

The 1993 Re-Imagining Conference was also targeted. The organizers of the event were unaware that reporters from conservative Christian magazines had registered as participants. Shortly afterwards, 'conservative factions of some denominations mobilized an effort to denounce the conference' (Berneking and Joern, 1995: xv). *Christianity Today* published an article by Susan Cyre that detailed what she found heretical and disturbing at the conference, along with a threat that many clergy and laity from different Protestant denominations were going to protest their denominations' participation in the event. The controversy received national coverage in the US and Ted Koppel interviewed Rita Nakashima Brock, a speaker at the event, along with Susan Cyre for ABC's *Nightline* programme. The segment began, 'In many American mainline Protestant churches, a holy war is raging over a feminist movement to rethink not only masculine concepts of God, but bedrock Christine doctrine' (Hoover and Clark, 1997: 54).

The overall result of the multiple backlashes against feminist theology in visual art and liturgical expression was to make feminist theology dangerous, and by extension, suspect. By the turn of the century, feminist theology book contracts were cancelled and experimental worship declined. After the ordination battles were fought, controlling worship was the next line of defense. In many denominations, it was no longer safe to

advocate and explore feminist theology in worship with an entire congregation. Those who were interested could form study groups and meet down the hall or in someone's home. (Ursic, 2014: 5, 181).

In her 1998 book, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, Mary Farrell Bednarowski studied the religious thought of American women. She identified ambivalence toward religious communities as a significant theme in the theological imaginations of American women in the 1990s. There was 'a particular experience with their communities that women relate over and over again: that of being simultaneously outsiders and insiders. I am particularly concerned with how feelings of contradiction and ambivalence shape women's religious thought' (Bednarowski, 1999: 17). Mary Fainsod Katzenstein examined a similar trend. In her 1998 book, *Faithful and Fearless: Moving Feminist Protest Inside the Church and Military*, she compared feminist activism in two highly patriarchal environments: the US military, and the Roman Catholic Church. She found military feminists working within the system because laws were in place for access and equality, but because the Catholic Church had decreed that women could not be priests, she found Catholic feminist activism centred on creating and performing the rituals and ceremonies outside of church structures as a form of protest (Katzenstein, 1998: 121).

A New Era Begins

I became personally interested in discovering what had happened to feminist theology in liturgical expression in the mid-2000s. I decided to study worship communities that performed female imagery of God within large institutional Christian denominations and were led by ordained or vowed religious leaders within these denominations. I intentionally chose these criteria for three reasons. First, female imagery of God was an unambiguous expression of feminist theology in a Christian setting, and I wanted to see where feminist theology was being enacted with the entire faith community in an obvious way. Second, locations with God-as-She had the greatest potential for revealing counterclaims of God-as-He, and I wanted to show how patriarchy continues to operate in churches today, and how power politics is being negotiated within institutional denominations. Third, I wanted to identify the resources and best practices needed to sustain female imagery in institutionally recognized worship in order to help other communities interested in doing the same. The results were published in my book, *Women, Ritual, and Power: Placing Female Imagery of God in Christian Worship* (SUNY Press, 2014).

In the book, two of the four resources I identify as necessary for performing feminist liturgical worship focused on art and imagination. Producing feminist liturgical arts was one of the main reasons why the resource of a supportive community was needed to help the worship leader produce new liturgies. Members were needed to decorate the worship space, paint images, compose songs, create dances, sew banners and clothing, write prayers, and perform the rituals and liturgies that reflected a feminist theological understanding. Artists were essential.

The other resource involved imagination. In the worship locations I investigated, there was a willingness by some members of the community to speak publicly about their imaginative interior experiences of God as female or feminine, and they included explanations about how the experience had helped the person in their daily life. For many of

these church members, only when the female imagery began to appear in worship did they feel emboldened to share these prayer experiences with others. The testimonies of dreams, mediations, and other occurrences where God was experienced as female or feminine helped members of the wider community to let go of any resistance to female imagery because someone they liked or knew had spoken about its transformational value. Usually these testimonies happened informally between friends. So in addition to artists, these communities benefitted from modern-day mystics sharing their imaginal, interior experiences of God.

I coin the phrase *strategic emplacement* as my theoretical contribution in the book (Ursic, 2014: 17–18). Defining *place* and its importance has been an ongoing conversation in the field of ritual studies ever since theorist Jonathan Z. Smith published *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* in 1987. Significantly, Smith extended the category of place beyond physical place to include concepts and mental images, yet he did not dispute the sacredness of a defined physical place, such as an altar or church, which was a major assumption in the older field of liturgical studies. Soon many theories, including the concept of *lived religion*, challenged any inherent sacredness of place. Lived religion supported the study of women's religious experience because most women's religious activity was not being experienced on the altar. Feminist ritual studies scholar, Catherine Bell, helped to reintroduce the study of ritual in these lived religion spaces by moving the conversation away from static ritual to *ritualization*, 'a strategic and power-laden process of differentiation' (Bell, 1992: 130). Ritualization could happen anywhere and did not have to be as formal as the term *ritual* might suggest.

Because I was interested in the power dynamics within church settings, I reintroduced the idea of studying rituals on the altar during Sunday morning worship, not because of any inherent sacredness, but because the altar and Sunday morning worship were locations where power was being negotiated within institutionalized Christianity. Like Bell, I wanted to move away from static terms. *Emplacement* highlighted the act of placing. Emplacement is also a geological term for igneous rock in older rock caused by a solidification of molten magma. I liked using a geological metaphor to describe what I was seeing in feminist theology liturgical expression. Adding the word *strategic* emphasizes intentionality and a long-term view. All the communities in my study had been successful with strategic emplacement of feminist theology because they had been intentional in their placing and had taken a long-term view about their ultimate goal.

Theologians as Artists and Artists as Theologians

Last summer I saw other examples of strategic emplacement of feminist theology when I attended the 2016 Summer School of the Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology at the University of Winchester. It was my first time participating in the event even though it was the 20th year of the programme. The colloquium attracted young graduate students and retired life-long learners, along with academic scholars and professional artists. I experienced a stimulating and supportive cross-fertilization of talent, perspective, and experience. In addition to the colloquium, there were two feminist theology projects on the campus and they offered additional ways that feminist theology, art, and imagination could be explored and expressed.

The University of Winchester now has a permanent art installation titled *The Cosmic Walk*. When theologian Lisa Isherwood joined the faculty she was invited to deliver a lecture series, but she wanted to do something different. She received funding and administrative support to produce an interactive art and justice space where the campus community could ‘reflect, interact, inhabit, and contribute’. *The Cosmic Walk* is both an outdoor art installation and an interactive theological experience. Among the many items I encountered when I walked the space were: evocative paintings and photos along with serious information about degradation of the planet, whimsical sculptured animals made out of metal parts, a dancing female outlined in the earth, chairs for meditation and conversation, and a collection of stones from around the world inviting international participation. The bicycle rack for the dorm next door had become an extension of the experience. Isherwood explains:

There is something very vital about using our bodies when we are contemplating deep change and commitment – cerebral activity is not enough. I am a body theologian and I want bodies back in the garden but acting from different frames of reference than those imposed on the early stories in Genesis. We can walk accompanied by quantum theory, incarnational theology, myths and legends, cosmology and if we can learn to dance it all then we are a revolution because as Elsa Tamez says, if we can’t dance it, walk it, love it then it is no revolution at all!⁶ (Isherwood, n.d.)

The university has also hosted annual feminist and body theology art exhibitions sponsored through the Institute for Theological Partnerships. The 2016 exhibit was curated by Megan Clay and titled ‘Feminist Images of Mary/Miriam’.⁷ The exhibit included paintings by local and international artists with images inspired by biblical texts as well as the embodied experiences of the artists themselves. One painting by Clay, *In the Depths of the Divine*, was created at a time in her life when she was reawakening to God and discovering an image and impression different from what her church taught. The painting shows a female image in silhouette with a swirl of colour and light behind her that emerged as Clay was experimenting with acrylics for the first time. For this artist, the art came first and only later did feminist and body theology give her words to describe her early spiritual experience (Clay, 2015: 226).

During my talk at the summer colloquium, I explored the concept of *theological imaginizing*. I see potential for more exploration of imagination and art within feminist theology – both for theologians crossing into the art world and for artists crossing into the theological world. I prefer the word *imaginizing* because it is an action. In my usage, *theological imaginizing* has real world implications, whether it results in different attitudes and behaviours in the world, or produces artistic or intellectual expression. It is expressed in both theology and art. *Theological imaginizing* acknowledges the interior imaginative place that is also the indwelling of presence and infinite connection with the

6. For more information on the Cosmic Walk at the University of Winchester see, <http://www.winchester.ac.uk/aboutus/lifelonglearning/Institute%20for%20Theological%20Partnerships/Pages/CosmicWalk.aspx>

7. See <http://www.winchester.ac.uk/newsandevents/eventscalendar/Pages/Link-Gallery-Exhibition-Feminist-Images-of-MaryMiriam.aspx>

universe. It is also the creative space where we are both cradled in stillness and called to co-create in the cosmic dance.

Conclusion

Imagination and art are integral aspects of feminist theology. Feminist theology draws attention to the images we hold in our minds, particularly sacred images, and shows how these images influence how we see the world and our role in it. Developing new imagery, including female images, has been a significant contribution of feminist theology. Producing these images in art and ritual as well as incorporating storytelling, imagery, and word-art in theological writings offers an embodied experience of feminist theology. While this art encourages many to feel the full wonder of God/dess, others have been deeply disturbed and resist new imagery from taking hold in their places of worship through thinly-veiled patriarchal pushback. Worship communities that advocate for multiple images of God in Christian worship are a gift to the wider community because they reflect the fullness of the central message that we are all made in God's image.

In 2016, justice was served when Sandys' *Christa* statue found a permanent home at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. It was a fitting end to an almost five-decade odyssey that began with Edwina Sandys' theological imaginizing of the crucified female Christ in 1973, and ended with the successful strategic emplacement of the sculpture in its most contested setting 46 years later. To celebrate and commemorate the event, an exhibition titled *The Christa Project: Manifesting Divine Bodies* was on view at the Cathedral from 6 October 2016 to 12 March 2017 with the following description:

During Holy Week of 1984, Edwina Sandys' *Christa* was displayed in the Cathedral as part of a small exhibition on the feminine divine. The general reception was positive, but a particularly vocal minority condemned the piece and its placement in a house of worship through ecclesiastical denunciations and a plethora of hate mail that attacked the "blasphemy" of changing the symbol of Christ. These dissenters highlighted how the sculpture's allegedly sexualized (i.e. female) figure brought attention to Christ's human body, which was "blasphemous, shocking, and inappropriate." Conversations about the politics of identity have changed tremendously since the 1980s. *Christa's* essential statement, however, remains vital to our world today: people are hungry to see themselves and each other fully represented in society, especially in its most powerful and iconic institutions. In turn, the Cathedral is thrilled to display *Christa* once again, alongside works by 21 other contemporary artists, all exploring the language, symbolism, art, and ritual associated with the historic concept of the Christ image and the divine as manifested in every person – across all genders, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and abilities.⁸

The movement continues. I am delighted to have been invited to compose a musical piece for the 2017 feminist theology art exhibit at the University of Winchester. The theme is Ecofeminist Theology. Not only am I looking forward to co-creating with feminist theologian/artists, but the process of participating will allow me to study theological imaginizing in action. The first step has already happened. All the artists were

8. See *The Christa Project: About Exhibit*. Available at: <http://www.stjohndivine.org/programs/christa>

sent four theology references to inspire their art: Ivone Gebara's *Longing for Running Water*, Catherine Keller's *The Energy We Are*, and two Rosemary Radford Ruether selections, *Gaia and God* and *Women Healing Earth*. I am calling these writings our common theological pallet. Like the cluster of instruments I will choose to compose, or the colours the visual artists select for their work, we now have a common base coat of theology to anchor and inspire our creativity. I am very interested to see where this will take us in our artistic expression, as well as what our art may prompt in others, including feminist theologians who write in this field.

More work needs to be done on how imagination, art, and theology interact and influence each other, particularly regarding equality, voice, and experience of all who are marginalized. Feminist theologies have actively pursued categories of experience and the body, but imagination has also been a significant theme in conceiving and shaping the field too. Feminist theology has the potential to enliven all theology by articulating the role of imagination in theological development. Theologians and artists are both way-showers for the wider community. We are called to use our imaginative capacity to see what others have yet to see, and hear what others have yet to hear. We are called to be prophetic witness of what lies just beyond what is known and bring it into awareness, not just for ourselves, but also for others through our writings and artistic expression.

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