Sarah Esther Merry

Dr. Jordan Rowan Fannin

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Theology of Creativity and Women as Imago Dei

Artists and creatures of the living God alike actively participate in seeing glimpses of the eternal glory that we desire to come into fruition when they engage in creative acts. Paul references this glory of God in how we are being transformed “from one degree of glory to another” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2 Cor. 3:18). This calls for, in fact, necessitates a theology of creativity, where one imagines, or envisions the being and reality that we are created to truly exist in even as it is not yet here. In this, artists along with everyone who is called to be co-creators with the invisible God embark on an ethereal journey in partially seeing that which is not yet or appears as a mere reflection of the truest things to come. It is important that everyone, especially women, seek to emphasize the imago Dei, that is the image of God, in themselves and to call it out in others through engaging creatively with God so that the brokenness of humanity might be redeemed to be the way it was designed it to be.

A theology of creativity depicts the God from whom we came and to whom we are going as innately creative in nature. It is important that this characteristic of God is recognized because the first account that we have of God in the Bible starts with him creating human beings in his image and speaking the world into existence. The best place to start when seeking how to reconcile humanity’s nature with the creative mandate they have been given is in the beginning. From the ground he crafts man and breathes life into him. He then makes woman with a rib taken from the man showing how the two are connected and made for each other. God gives them a creative mandate to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (*New International Version Bible*, Genesis 1:28). In Elizabeth McLaughlin’s chapter *Engendering the Imago Dei: How Christ Grounds Our Lives as Parables of the Divine Image,* she says that “in the Genesis accounts, God created male and female in the imago Dei for divine connection, creativity, communication, community, and freely chosen caring for the world, as they mutually reflect God’s justice and love to the world” (17). God ordained men and women over the caretaking and nurturing of the earth which offers new ground for what it means to be human and creative.

McLaughlin says we need to see a reconciliation of the genders so that we might know how to fulfill this mandate well. Seeking creative ways to maintain the world we live in is a beautiful way to execute the mandate that God has given us and connects us even more intimately with him. She says “Each gender bears this image uniquely and needs the other to reflect it fully”therefore necessitating the presence and full participation of both men and women in order to complete the picture and truly obey God’s command (16). The problem is, in the midst of the garden this perfect nature of humanity was broken and therefore their roles were also twisted. The equal partnership that God designed women and men to have with each other fell into disarray as Eve was told that her husband Adam would rule over her in Genesis 3:16. This is a part of the curse that God dictates on humanity as punishment for their sinfulness and it is crucial that humans do not forget that this is not the way it was meant to be.

Unfortunately, humanity is broken and this sets in motion a history of women being subjugated to men in a way that does not honor God’s original design and results in women not being seen for the true image bearers that they are. As Elizabeth Johnson says in her book, *She Who Is,* “To be precise, actual, historical women are created in the image of God and are bearers of the image of Christ” (72). This is where the reality of imago Dei becomes so paramount to the discussion of women’s inclusion in the life and love and leadership of the Christian faith and community. The women in the Bible and the women who preach the Bible today are still image bearers of the same God. They are image bearers in the same capacity that men are image bearers, or in other words, one does not represent God better than the other. “This gender unity and interdependence expresses itself within the very fabric of human gifts and capabilities as well as in the nature of human relations with God, other humans, and the world itself” (McLaughlin 16). The way God created his image bearers to also be creative informs how we can better understand and relate to God.

God, who birthed the earth into being, sets the story in the midst of the garden of Eden in which he walks with Adam and Eve as an example for how he desires his image bearers to continue on. God did not create a passive world such as an artist crafts a painting only to place it on a wall and never to engage with it again. He created an active world that he continues to interact with while it is meant to still grow and adapt and continue creating from what has already been created. In Richard A. Hughes’ critique on *Nikolai Berdyaev’s Theology of Creativity*, he says that “The primary meaning [of creativity] is that it ‘signifies the willful strengthening or perfecting of the individual’s personality,’ which may be ethical or therapeutic” (121-122).Therefore, God can use creativity as a way to challenge us and stir us towards seeking how to better understand him, ourselves, and the world we live in. We are better understood as pieces of pottery with God as our ultimate potter like we see in the biblical image of Isaiah 64:8. The clay has to go through a difficult process of wedging, throwing, and firing before it is made to be a complete piece and even then, sometimes it has to be broken in order to be remade into a stronger vessel. These vessels can then be used to hold liquids and foods that sustain people and bring them together in fellowship. Like these vessels, God uses us and our unique gifts to bring people together and to reflect the true nature he has crafted us to reflect. NikolaiBerdyaev provides scriptural evidence of the significance of this when he references the “various gifts [that] are given by God to people, and no one possesses the right to bury them in the ground, for these talents all need to be creatively fulfilled, manifest in the objective vocations of man” (Hughes 126). As God crafts everything with a purpose, so he has given to each and every human different gifts that are meant to bring about his will even as a vessel is meant to hold water and pour that water into other vessels.This is only one image of how God sees us, and he encourages us to go on creating alongside him even as we are still being shaped every day.

Another beautiful way that creativity is portrayed is in the art practice of Henna. Contradictory to western women’s tendency to use this craft as merely a way to decorate themselves, women of the east have tapped into a groundbreaking phenomenon.“Human image-bearing involves the gifts we are given and the way we express these gifts in relationship to God, self, others, and the world” (Hughes 17). African, Asian and Arabic women commemorate the women of the Bible by intricately marking themselves with symbols saturated in meaning and memory, causing their stories still live on and are used to exhort and encourage women to this day. By taking on a woman’s story who makes up a part of the holy scriptures, women are weaving themselves into the story of our savior (Henna Stories).It is also significant to emphasize that the majority of occasions where women wear Henna are typically during weddings, at births or religious events. This likens the craft to a type of sacrament where the women are demonstrating an outward expression of a spiritual reality about themselves and the women who the markings represent (McLaughlin 20).

The careful and considerate creativity that is required for such an intimate joining is the basis for where I draw my argument for the critical existence of a theology of creativity. Human beings as created imago Dei have to engage with this reality at some point in their lives and it is so beautiful that these women are not only seeking what that means from current events, but are looking to the women of the Bible and meditating on their stories as image bearers as a way to inform how current women are still image bearers.“A restored vision of the imago Dei serves as a liberating perspective from which women and men can understand how their lives and gifts have sacred worth in connection with Jesus, the Christ” (McLaughlin 20). What abeautiful depiction of what it looks like for humans to participate in the creativity of Christ. These women have added a new layer of meaning to what the imago Dei is made of by layering one woman’s story of imago Dei onto themselves and therefore practicing an art that reproduces a manifestation of the peak of God’s creation through design. Pope John Paul describes the creative endeavor in his letter to artists where he says that “the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator. God is the creator who creates out of nothing, ‘ex nihilo’ while humans are the ‘craftsman, by contrast, [who] uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning.” He goes on to say how this should shape our experience with God because even though not all called to be artists, we are all called to be creative and to “exercise [our] own creative endeavors.”This means no one can truly be defensive about not being artistic in light of our discussion of creativity, because they are simply not the same thing. “Artistry” connotes a specific umbrella of creativity, mostly explored by those gifted in the visual arts. It is true that not everyone was made with these specific gifts, but it does not mean that they should disregard them altogether nor deny the creative fibers that are interwoven in themselves, even if they have not discovered what they are yet. “Society needs artists, just as it needs scientists, technicians, workers, professional people, witnesses of the faith, teachers, fathers and mothers, who ensure the growth of the person and the development of the community” (Paul II).This shows how creativity is manifested in many different ways and how artists are a significant part of the society.

Yet up until now I have almost exclusively referred to art and creativity in light of solely visual art. I would hope and pray that we would not limit the realm of creativity to the walls of the visual arts alone, because as I said before, creativity is so much more than that. Creativity should be used as a vessel that is integrated into the church and called out where it is already present. To remove creativity from the church is to quite literally undermine the reality of the incarnation. “Human creativity expresses humanity’s love of God and facilitates the coming of the Kingdom of God. If humans were to renounce their duty to create, then the continuing creation of the world would cease and cause God to suffer and become dissatisfied” (Hughes 129).There is an affirmation of creativity in Jesus who was the ultimate creative being in the miracle of God becoming flesh. Taking on the creation’s nature, the Creator becomes the created and through this imitates what the creature was meant to be like.

Not only does Jesus become human, but he humbled himself to the point of becoming a seed in his mother Mary’s womb, fashioned like those he loves so that he could demonstrate the creative nature we were designed to have. “Humans are called to be creators and co-creators with God in the world. Creativity is necessary not for personal salvation but the realization of God’s plan in the world” (Hughes 126). In coming into the world through the miracle of birth, Jesus initiates his first action in redeeming creativity in the world. This way of entering the world through a woman’s womb makes a claim about the nature of childbearing and how God sees it. It is also important to remember that Jesus was shaped by his parents, in fact he was literally grown within Mary which is a remarkable phenomenon that causes us to ponder the type of God we serve who would submit himself to be dependent upon his very own creation. Jesus also actively participated in creativity through his father’s occupation as a carpenter. ‘As Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece’” (Paul II).Here the reality of creativity and art is grafted into a way for us to understand how we live.

If creativity is meant to inform our lives, then how does it change the way we are currently living? This changes the perspective of our purpose while on earth as well as how we are meant to interact as a community. Our lives should welcome the flow and ebb of creativity within our homes, our churches, our schools and our relationships. “More recent interpretations have identified the image of God with human creativity, or with human community or with the likeness of human beings to God in their whole person including bodily form” (Johnson 73). We see this affirmed in the way that Jesus lived his life on earth. Jesus is in the business of crushing social standards about how women are viewed and we see this through stories of women engaging in creative endeavors in the Bible like Mary, Lydia, Rahab, and Ruth.“Bearing God’s image in all of its fullness, Jesus affirmed the equality and agency of women, reaffirmed this central teaching from Genesis, restored gender balance in his relationships and friendships with women, and is still restoring God’s image today” (McLaughlin 18)**.** But what does it mean to engage in the image of God alongside other co-bearers of this same image? How to men and women honor each other in their different expressions of the same image? Because even though they are different, when put together they are made to be a more complete depiction from which we came, whom which we serve and reflect, and to which we are destined to return. In fact, because both men and women are images of God, we can refer to God in both masculine and feminine terms because they both represent the divine nature.“If women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors in as full and as limited a way as God is imaged in male ones, without talk of feminine dimensions reducing the impact of this imagery” (Johnson 56).The reason whyit is appropriate and evenreverent to refer to God in both masculine and feminine traits is because God encompasses both. In fact, it could be said that the creative side of God, the same one that spoke or “birthed” everything into existence is more fully understood in a feminine way. This framing of the creation narrative depicts God as a nurturing mother who looks at her creation as her own child, or in her image.

Another way that Jesus does this is through affirming women’s actions that followed him. A prime example is the story of the woman who anointed his feet with the alabaster jar that can be found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. This creative and sacrificial act was looked down upon by the men surrounding Jesus at the time, but Jesus praises her gesture in a way that “restored gender balance through the recognition of her action” and ushered her into the family of God by forgiving her sins (McLaughlin 19). **“**Further, Jesus’ approval of her symbolic action as a living parable exemplifies Christ’s affirmation of women’s agency. This example highlights how the restored imago Dei is an empowering point of orientation for women and men seeking the sacred in their lives.” **(**McLaughlin19)So not only does one’s inclusion in imago Dei shape the nature of who we are but it also informs how we relate to our creator and savior God. Once we start to understand the gravity of who we are in Christ, and that the characteristics which make up God are also imaged in us, we are therefore empowered incredibly more to engage in acts of creativity, but also courage, honor, sacrifice, love, and nurturing. As images of the invisible God we have to lean in to creative ways to help us understand more of the trinity’s nature and how that shapes our individual and communal nature.

We get the opportunity to gaze on the glory of the LORD when we see it in the imago Dei that shines through the beautiful manifestations of our fellow human beings. We must seek out and call out these things in one another, male and female alike. As image bearers we are blessed with the weighty cloak of righteousness that outweighs the burden of brokenness caused by sin. Yet there is something about this that is hard to understand innately without something else to help inform us. This is why we need artists! This is why humans are made to be creative: so that they can create things to better understand the world we live in, the lives we lead and the God who designed it all. The beautiful glory and creative nature of our God calls out to the deepest parts of our beings to join the ever-going dance and symphony of this world as we transcend from one world, a mere reflection, into the eternity we have longed for so long.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Source: Hughes, Richard A. “Nikolai Berdyaev’s Theology of Creativity.” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, 2016.

In this critique of and report on a theology of creativity, Richard A. Hughes delves into Nikolai Berdyav’s study of the creative nature of God and how that informs the creative nature of human beings. Berdyaev believes that creativity is a legitimate source which informs how we do theology well and that we should use it more to tap more into how we relate to God, each other, and our world. He cites passages on spiritual gifts that are given in the Bible as support for his stance on the impact of creativity on our everyday lives and how it should be integrated into the church. Berdyaev also describes creativity God’s gift to humanity to help us in our understanding of his nature, especially the Spirit.

Secondary Sources:

“Henna Stories: Telling Stories Through the Art of Henna.” Henna Stories,

www.hennastories.org/category/african-designs/.

Through the use of henna art, women in parts of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East decorate their hands and feet with these intricate designs to tell a story. Each design tells a specific message and some women even choose to have stories of women from the Bible imprinted on them. This is such a powerful action because it not only emphasizes the current women’s status in whichever event occasioned the henna, whether that be a wedding, a birth or a religious event, it also goes to affirm the woman who is represented through the design and remembered all the more because of it. Through referencing different locations where Henna is a prominent medium, this website presents culturally diverse examples of how this art is used around the world today.

Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: the Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. Crossroad, 2002.

In her book, *She Who Is,* Elizabeth Johnson emphasizes the paramount importance of the fact that women are a part of the imago Dei. The fact that God calls men and women to equally represent his divinity to the fullest degree restores the significance of women’s nature and even affirms their relationship with God in a deeper way. If God can be understood in both feminine and masculine terms, then both men and women are manifestations of the same God. What has been seen as feminine traits has sometimes been depicted as “weaker” but this does not seem to follow when relating to God, the omnipotent, omniscient and all powerful being that he is. Johnson claims that we should refer to God as mother as well as father. God is like a mother who birthed the world into being in a similar way that a child is born by their mother. When one understands that God is above the structure of gender that he has designed, it invokes a wonderful mystery of humans seeking to know God to a fuller extent but also marveling in the Trinity’s unknowable nature that goes beyond our finite minds.

McLaughlin, Elizabeth W. *Engendering the Imago Dei: How Christ Grounds Our Lives as*

*Parables of the Divine Image.* Priscilla Papers Vol. 23, No. 2. 2009

Elizabeth McLaughlin addresses the inclusion of both men and women as the imago Dei in her excerpt of the Priscilla Papers by looking to Jesus’ nature and the way he treated others. The current distortion that the fall has made human nature to be today is contrasted with the original design they were created to encompass. Because of men and women’s equal calling to co-create alongside God, she addresses a reconciliation that needs to be had between men and women in order to fulfill this mandate given by God. Since both are created in the image of God, one should not be subject to the other, but they should partner together, championing one another to reflect God to the fullest extent through their different creative pursuits. These pursuits should ultimately go to build up the other gender while simultaneously going to reflect the God that made them both as a symbol of his own divinity.

Paul II, Pope John. “Letter to Artists.” *Catholic News Agency*, 1999, www.catholicnewsagency.com/document/letter-to-artists-315.

Pope John Paul addresses this letter to artists so that he might affirm and exhort them to not let their gifts pass them by. He sees the value art has to offer spiritual life and encourages artists to lean into this experience. Stressing the significant meaning art has to offer the church and faith, the pope emphasizes how art has fostered a type of “religious experience” that bridges the gap between culture and the church. In his claim that “artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption,” he opens a door for the potential that art and creativity have in informing theology and a search to understand God and his saving nature. Because of art’s capacity to translate theological meanings into visual representations without losing the message and mystery, he quotes Father Marie Dominique Chenu**,** who claimsthat art is a source for theology.