Icons of God in the World

Mission as Formation

Emily Ralph Servant

In Christian tradition, the word "formation" has been associated with the transformation of a Jesus-follower into the image of Christ, God in the flesh.[1] The Anabaptist tradition contains rich resources to shape a missional posture around our identity as God's image-bearers. For many early Anabaptists, the call to follow Jesus meant a total transformation, what Menno Simons called "The New Birth."[2] Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit, these radical disciples believed that the image of God within each person was reawakened, allowing them to make a decision to follow God and participate in God's life.[3] This reawakening, or "divinization," was manifested as a visible new way of life that transformed the follower of Jesus into God's image and brought them into community with God.[4] Significantly, this understanding of the "reawakening" of the image of God in each person assumes that each person already has the image of God present within them—God's image within has just been lost, tarnished, or twisted. All of humanity has been created in God's image; as one grows in their unity with God, the image of God within becomes more visible, more recognizable, more authentic.

If the goal of formation is to be transformed into the image of Jesus, the icon[5] of God, then formation is shaped by our image of God. Additionally, the

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1 2 Cor 3:18.

2 Menno Simons, "A Fundamental Doctrine from the Word of the Lord, of the New Birth," in *The Complete Works of Menno Simons*, Vol I, trans. John Funk (Elkhart, IN: John F. Funk & Brother, 1871): 167–76.

3 Frances F. Hiebert, "The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology," *Direction* 30, no. 2 (2001): 122–38.

4 Hiebert, 128.

5 Throughout this article, I will interchange the traditional phrase "image of God" with the phrase "icon of God." In English, the word "icon" has additional connotations as "a representation (as in a mural, a mosaic, or a painting . . .) . . . of a sacred individual"

image of God that we bear influences our witness as we live as icons of God in the world. What image of God does the world see when they look at us? In this article, I suggest that traditional images of God as impassive and powerful (omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent) have often been reflected in the missionary enterprise. In response, I propose an expansion of our concept of God in mission by exploring stories of Jesus through a lens of vulnerability and mutuality. I suggest that these images of Jesus can help to form us into communities that acknowledge the presence of God in the Other and consent to our own conversion as we seek to not only *be* but also *see* icons of God in the world. I then offer three spiritual practices that can position us to be transformed into communities willing to risk vulnerable relationships with our neighbors as a reflection of the God whose image we bear.

A note about my social location: As a white feminist Anabaptist theologian and pastor in the Mennonite tradition, from the stream of "Old Mennonites" that became part of Mennonite Church USA,[6] I write from a middle-class, rapidly changing, and increasingly diverse community of churches based on the East Coast of the United States.[7] While I hope that the ideas contained in this article will be helpful to folks beyond my context, I am primarily addressing long-time church members in traditional, predominantly white Mennonite congregations.

A Tarnished Image

The images we have of God, the structures of church life, and our understandings of the how and why of mission were all developed within the context of church leaders for their time and place. While this in itself was not necessarily problematic, suggests Cherokee pastor and mission worker Randy Woodley, the difficulty came when these church leaders "normalized and universalized their context to fit the whole world."[8] While causation is beyond the scope of

(*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "icon," accessed March 8, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/icon). Thus, an "icon" is something that can be tangibly experienced.

6 "Old Mennonites" is a popular term for the "Mennonite Church" denomination, which merged with the General Conference Mennonite Church to form Mennonite Church USA in 2002. See Harold S. Bender and Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, "Mennonite Church (MC)," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (January 2013), accessed March 8, 2022, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Church_(MC)&oldid=173394.

7 Mosaic Mennonite Conference: http://mosaicmennonites.org. I am grateful to my colleagues Marta Castillo and Noel Santiago for their conversation around this article.

8 Randy S. Woodley, "Mission and the Cultural Other: In Search of the Pre-colonial Jesus," *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 4 (2015): 467.

this article, we will explore one such contextualization and the harm caused as the church engaged in a model of mission that reflects this incomplete, and sometimes tarnished, image of God.

In the early church, theologians interpreted the oral and written stories about the life of Jesus and the teachings of the apostolic letters through their own cultural lenses as they sought to make sense of and defend the faith—sometimes to a hostile society and sometimes against perceived heresies within the church.[9] This contextualization within the framework of a Hellenistic worldview eventually led to what became traditional images of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent[10] (and therefore immutable). The concept of God as the perfection of virtue and form (of which humans are only imperfect reflections) was developed by Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle and found willing reception among some of the church's early theologians.[11] It was not a stretch, therefore, for some early church leaders to interpret the message of Jesus through the structures of Roman life built on Greek philosophy and political systems. Woodley observes how the message of freedom that Jesus taught and lived was quickly coopted into hierarchical models of governance and arguments about divine subordination and apostolic succession.[12] The servanthood of Jesus was replaced by an embrace of power and justified by a theology of God's sovereignty, which is still a foundational theme in missional theology today.[13]

Later theologians further developed concepts of Greek metaphysics as part of their Christian conceptions of God's essence and character.[14] In the conflation of church and state that developed, mission was driven by Jesus's words in Luke 14:23: "Compel them to come in."[15] This directive, most often expressed

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9 See John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 145, on the impact of the Arian debate on formulations of divine impassibility, for example.

10 In raising questions about our image of God as omnibenevolent, I am challenging not the concept of God's goodness but our interpretation of the nature of goodness. Who gets to decide what counts as "good," and can people from outside a culture have enough knowledge (omniscience) to define goodness or ethics on behalf of those inside a given culture? Therefore, it is not necessarily omnibenevolence in itself that can be problematic but linking it with omniscience and omnipotence.

11 Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 141–42.

12 Woodley, "Mission and the Cultural Other," 458.

13 Gene L. Green, "The Death of Mission: Rethinking the Great Commission," *Journal of the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies* 12 (2014): 95.

14 Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 149–51.

15 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 236.

through forced conversions of Jews and pagans, expanded at times during the Protestant Reformation to include the conversions of people who defected to new Christian churches. This mandate, alongside views of God's sovereignty, power, and benevolence, accompanied the Catholic Church in overseas campaigns for land, resources, and converts.[16]

The new Protestant churches did not improve much upon the Catholic models of mission. They continued the interrelationship between church and state that provided both with additional power and sovereignty.[17] That authority reflected the absolute sovereignty of God, who took the initiative in going to humanity for their salvation. As the true representatives of God on earth, church leaders "were convinced that they had both the ability and the will to remake the world in their own image."[18]

The Enlightenment only served to further develop the Western church's sense of responsibility for and superiority over the rest of the world. There was a growing confidence in the "doctrine of progress," along with a belief that Western Christians could and should make the world right, utilizing colonial systems to do so: just as an all-benevolent, all-knowing, and all-powerful God sent a representative to save the world in Jesus, so the benevolent, wise, and powerful church (linked to the benevolent, wise, and powerful state) sent representatives to save the world. The scientific method of observation, experimentation, and analysis led to a tendency to treat people of other cultures as objects to be studied and acted upon rather than equal subjects.[19] Salvation, for the "heathens" of the world, included being "civilized" into the Western (superior) image.[20]

While the church has increasingly critiqued and rejected colonial models of mission over the past century, vestiges of those models have continued to shape how the church of the West—Mennonites included—engages in mission. Although Anabaptist streams like the Mennonites advocated against the connection between church and state, they still benefitted from the structures that those unholy alliances created, settling on land taken from indigenous peoples in the United States and participating in commerce supported by colonial networks.[21] The earliest Mennonite settlers in the United States, surrounded as they were by like-minded immigrants who did not need to be converted, rarely

16 Bosch, 226–30.

17 Bosch, 240.

18 Bosch, 265.

19 Bosch, 342–44.

20 Michael Bamwesigye Badriaki, *When Helping Works: Alleviating Fear and Pain in Global Missions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 11.

21 For more on the link between the Doctrine of Discovery and mission, see Green, "The Death of Mission."

participated in mission.[22] Over the following centuries, as more diverse immigrants settled around them, the Mennonite communities often withdrew into themselves as a protectionary reaction to the threat of identity-loss.[23]

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, some Mennonites in the United States observed the missionary movement, and, fed by the fervor of American revivalism, began to call for the establishment of missionary agencies for both international and domestic mission, modeled after the agencies they witnessed in other denominations.[24] Even as Mennonite participation in mission grew in the early twentieth century, it tended to happen in distant locations, both across the ocean and in urban centers or rural mission outposts. Benevolent, wise, and powerful (resource-rich) Mennonites brought the good news to the cultural "Other."

As a result, new converts were often very different from the missionaries who served them.[25] One church leader observed that many congregations preferred mission work at a distance because "they feared that new Christians from non-Mennonite backgrounds might bring a 'different cultural and religious climate' into the Church."[26] These new believers were kept separate from existing Mennonite churches for many decades;[27] church leaders struggled to discern to what extent converts must conform to Mennonite distinctives in faith and practice.[28] As some Mennonites became more involved in the ecumenical church movement, they began to shift their witness to the broader church and government.[29] Former mission worker Alan Kreider acknowledged a tendency of Mennonites in recent decades to focus evangelism on winning other Christians to the Mennonite values of peace and justice,[30] remaking them in our own image.

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22 C. J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 197, 214.

23 Dyck, 198.

24 Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863–1944* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 83.

25 John Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1984), 417, 486. Schlabach describes how segregation at first led to benevolence for local people of color but not integration (*Gospel*, 76–78). See also my account of the Norristown, PA, mission in Emily Ralph, "God's Dream on Earth: New Narratives for the Intercultural Church" (MA thesis, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA, 2013), 77–78.

26 J. D. Graber, as quoted by Schlabach, *Gospel*, 238.

27 Schlabach, *Gospel*, 76–78.

28 Schlabach, 167–94.

29 Ervin R. Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908–2008* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2011), 142.

30 Alan Kreider, "Tongue Screws and Testimony," ed. James R. Krabill, *MissioDei* 16 (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2008).

Across the ideological and theological spectrum—from traditional evangelism to humanitarian or justice work—the image of the benevolent, knowledgeable, and powerful God still lurks behind the missionary enterprise. Ugandan development leader Michael Bamwesigye Badriaki suggests that the impact of Social Darwinism can still be felt in global mission programs through the promotion of "the survival of the fittest and superior culture over the 'cultural other.'"[31] As a result, "missionary fundraising and Christian humanitarianism have historically been set up to communicate fear through the portrayal of the missionized as stereotypically inferior. The system is set up to portray the people that God has called you to serve as less than you."[32] Imagery of God as "Ruler, Lord, Master, and Warrior" conveyed that Christianity was a religion for the elite, the upper-class, and those who wielded power.[33]

One lasting legacy of the Enlightenment is the expectation that sowing seeds will produce fruit: if someone who is knowledgeable plans an intervention, it will work (omniscience and omnipotence).[34] Ethicist Sharon Welch suggests that many middle-class Christians in the West organize their justice and mercy work around an ethic of control,[35] believing that it is their job to make sure everything turns out right.[36] Welch directly links this ethic of control to theology that describes God as omnipotent. She argues that absolute power, even attributed to God, "assumes that the ability to act regardless of the response of others is a good rather than a sign of alienation from others."[37] An ethic of control can simply be thinly veiled paternalism (omniscience and omnibenevolence).

Paternalism also takes the form of the "trajectory of progress," the (sometimes unspoken) belief that "look[s] at the past as moving from less civilized to more civilized."[38] Woodley describes how, in the name of "civilization," missionaries have often created "systemic changes among colonized peoples that replaced their traditional values without regarding whether or not their traditional values align with Christ and his teachings"[39] (omniscience). This includes the assumption that development work based on best practices will lead to a

31 Badriaki, *When Helping Works*, 21.

32 Badriaki, 24.

33 Beverly Mitchell et al, "Mission from the Margins," *International Review of Mission* 101, no. 1 (2012): 157.

34 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 342.

35 Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 113.

36 Welch, 15.

37 Welch, 111.

38 Woodley, *Mission*, 462.

39 Woodley, 463.

better society (omnibenevolence).[40] Even a more recent desire to rescue global Christians from the effects of what we now consider to be "bad theology" introduced by previous Western missionaries has continued this narrative of progress: "'Soft' colonization is still colonization."[41]

In his critique of the popular book *When Helping Hurts*,[42] Badriaki wonders why Western definitions of "hurt" and success (omnibenevolence) are used to evaluate the effectiveness of missionary engagement. He suggests that the Western mission or development worker's tendency to refuse direct giving in the name of asset-based development[43] actually reflects a colonial (omniscient) mindset, in which the outsider knows what is best for the locals. This ends up portraying the recipients of mission "as incompetent, uncaring, 'always needy,' and inherently lacking in intellect."[44] The resulting stereotype suggests that the recipients of mission are not problem solvers but are themselves the problem.[45]

Much mission (including evangelism, justice, mercy, and development work) is designed around a model that sends out Western representatives with the truth, solution, or salvation (omniscience). Womanist theologian and anthropologist Linda Thomas connects this outward missionary movement to the Great Commission, which has focused attention on the command to "go and teach."[46] In joining forces with colonialism, the Great Commission has been interpreted as a command for Christians to "go over the world telling people about their God and teaching Western ways."[47] Christian mission has been a movement designed to spread a timeless, previously defined knowledge—described as the good news—which means that the missionary's posture is always that of "telling, curing, [and] saving" (omniscience and omnipotence).[48] This missionary posture reflects a dominant image of God as all-knowing, powerful, good, and unchanging—whether or not its practitioners acknowledge or endorse such a view.

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40 Consider the implications of the term "developing world."

41 Green, "Death of Mission," 90.

42 Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor—and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2014).

43 Badriaki's critique arises out of Corbett and Fikkert's assertion in *When Helping Hurts* that an outsider harms a community by meeting a need directly instead of empowering the community to find its own solution (a principle of asset-based community development) (Corbett and Fikkert, 25; Badriaki, *When Helping Works*, 20).

44 Badriaki, *When Helping Works*, 20.

45 Randy Woodley, forward to Badriaki, *When Helping Works*, viii.

46 Linda E. Thomas, "Anthropology, Mission, and the African Woman," in *Mission and Culture*, ed. Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 120.

47 Thomas, 120.

48 Thomas, 122.

Liberating the Image of Jesus

The concept of mission as a person of power lowering themselves to enter the world of someone inferior to elevate that inferior person to a higher level of living points to the very first agent of the *missio Dei*, the missionary God.[49] When seen through this lens, Jesus could be understood as the image of the impassive, benevolent, powerful, and all-knowing God—the Messiah come to establish a new kingdom based on a higher principle in the journey toward perfection. This image is of Jesus as the quintessential Colonizer. Members of the World Council of Churches' Just and Inclusive Communities program suggest that Jesus has become

> the captive saviour of the captive church. Jesus must first regain his own freedom, if he is to bestow it on others. This task cannot be accomplished either by the reactionary fundamentalist theology or reformative liberal theology of the privileged. Only the theology and practice of the despised, the marginalized, and the disinherited can liberate mission and the captive church.[50]

As members of a "Jesus-centered" tradition,[51] Anabaptists are well positioned to dig deeper into the stories of Jesus in the Gospels to discover how expanded images of God might change our practice of mission and formation. Missional practitioners Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost suggest that while it is true "that Jesus is like God," the greater truth is that God is like Jesus. For Hirsch and Frost, this means that the stories of Jesus in the Gospels should redefine our concepts of God while also modeling for us what it means to be truly human.[52]

No one can simply point to the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus and expect a straightforward reading, however, even as, traditionally, some Anabaptist theologians have claimed a "simple reading" is possible.[53] As humans, we cannot avoid the influence of our social locations, life experiences, and theological or religious traditions on our biblical interpretation.[54] After generations of imitating a harmful image of God in the world, we are called to conversion. The historic

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49 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389–90.

50 Mitchell et al, "Mission from the Margins," 158.

51 As articulated in the popular credo from Palmer Becker, "Jesus is the center of our faith." See *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2017).

52 Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 12–13.

53 Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2001), 40–51.

54 Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 1–3.

models of mission discussed above have been harmful to not only the recipients of them but also to those of us who have been formed as practitioners of them. A genuine image of God lies within us, but that image has been tarnished by a false image of God, an idol. Until we can strip away the remnants of those thought patterns, practices, and expectations, we will not be able to bring our authentic selves to others as the gift that God intended.

One challenge in rediscovering the image of God beneath the idol is that we often are not aware of the ways that our cultures and contexts have shaped our perceptions. Frequently, it is not until we encounter someone who sees the world differently that we grow conscious of our own lenses and interpretations.[55] Therefore it is difficult for us to change our images of God on our own; we are transformed through encounters—and even more so, through relationships—with God and with others. In this way, not only is formation missional but mission is formational.

To be transformed through encounters with others, however, we must be open to recognizing an image of God in them that may look unfamiliar. At the time the Creation story was written, as writer and activist Lisa Sharon Harper points out, a common cultural understanding considered only a select portion of the population to reflect the image of God. In contrast, by claiming that all humans bear God's "image," the biblical writers were introducing the radical concept that God could be found in everyone and that, as "image-bearers," each person had the right to exercise dominion—that is, to contribute to the common good of the world. Harper suggests that bearing God's image identifies each person as belonging to God; when we ignore that image in others or when we destroy that image by preventing others from exercising dominion, we are declaring war on God.[56]

God showed us a different way. When God "moved into the neighborhood,"[57] God chose to give up the privileges of existing outside of the mess of the world and became a human, an immigrant, right in the thick of it.[58] Jesus was the image of the invisible God,[59] the "word" or expression of God,[60] an "icon" of God to show us what God is like.[61] Yet Jesus did not model a faraway

55 See Emily Ralph Servant, *Experiments in Love: An Anabaptist Theology of Risk-Taking in Mission* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 30.

56 Lisa Sharon Harper, "#Lynchburg Revival Sermon," Red Letter Christians, September 20, 2018, accessed March 8, 2022. Video, 29:18. https://youtu.be/3YWJzWX-DWcY.

57 John 1:14, MSG.

58 Phil 2:5–11.

59 Col 1:15–20.

60 John 1:1.

61 John 14:6–10.

God; he modeled what humanity made in the image of God, in relationship with God, looks like. This God "is best understood, not in the ancient Greek philosophical notions of divinity as a master of perfection, who is aloof in divine omniscience, omnipotence, and impassibility [but] in the freedom of vulnerability."[62]

In modeling how to live as a vibrant icon of God in the world, Jesus showed this vulnerability by depending on his family and community to survive childhood. He relied on others around him to teach him the culture and social expectations of his community.[63] As an artisan's son, and described as a builder himself,[64] he needed his father to teach him a trade. He learned the language of his community, and he studied the Scriptures in religious spaces.[65] He depended on his community to teach him how to be human as a first-century Jewish man.

Yet Jesus also modeled a dependency beyond that of his community. Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow has argued that Jesus did not introduce new teachings about women, justice, or the authority of Rome; there were other rabbis teaching similar concepts.[66] At the same time, still other rabbis were claiming to represent the voice of God while advocating for religious practices that conflicted with the teachings of Jesus. In the midst of the clamor of voices, Jesus modeled what it looks like to recognize the voice of God in the world around us. Jesus watched for what the Spirit of God was doing and then moved to align himself with it.

Jesus demonstrates this awareness and alignment in an encounter he had with an immigrant who asked for help.[67] At first, Jesus told her that he was limiting his healing ministry to his own people. When the woman challenged him to expand his focus, however, Jesus recognized the image of God in her face and the voice of God in her words. He realized that God was already working and chose to consent to the Spirit's energy moving through him. He healed the

62 Mitchell et al, "Mission from the Margins," 159.

63 Note Jesus's ability to integrate culturally relevant imagery in his parables. In Luke 15, for instance, Jesus tells stories that integrate social expectations around father-son relationships and inheritance, knowledge of agricultural practices, and even an understanding of how much a laborer makes in a day of work.

64 Matt 13:55 and Mark 6:3.

65 Luke 2:46.

66 Judith Plaskow, "Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God," in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 92–97.

67 Mark 7:24–30.

woman's daughter, affirmed her faith, and continued in a ministry that more clearly reflected the image of God in him.[68]

Perhaps Jesus was thinking about this woman when he told the parable of the widow bothering a judge until the judge relented.[69] Perhaps Jesus was thinking about the woman who washed his feet as an act of love[70] when he washed the feet of his disciples.[71] Perhaps Jesus was thinking of his own mother's care when he described God as a mother hen wanting to hide her chicks under her wings.[72] In using what Womanist Bible scholar Wil Gafney describes as our "sanctified imagination,"[73] we can see ways that Jesus's ministry may have been shaped by those he encountered.

Jesus modeled for us how to be transformed by the Other. Regardless of what old images of an immutable God have depicted, the life of Jesus implies that change is not a sin. Jesus's encounter with the immigrant woman suggests that a sin might actually occur if we were to recognize the Spirit in the Other and refuse to change in response. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant by an "unforgiveable sin" against God's Spirit[74]—attributing the work of the Spirit to evil forces.[75] If we watch for her, we can recognize the Spirit by her fruit.[76]

Jesus not only learned from others but also received their care and nurture. A group of women provided for Jesus and his disciples from their own financial resources;[77] other people—including "tax collectors and sinners"—fed Jesus and his disciples at their own tables;[78] some of the women of Jesus's community were present with him in his final moments on the cross;[79] another disciple provided

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68 See Wil Gafney, "The Woman Who Changed Jesus," The Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D./Womanists Wading in the Word, August 20, 2017, accessed March 8, 2022, https://www.wilgafney.com/2017/08/20/the-woman-who-changed-jesus/.

69 Luke 18:1–8.

70 John 12:1–3.

71 John 13:2–15.

72 Matt 23:37.

73 Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 3.

74 Matt 12:22–37.

75 Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power* (Dallas: Word, 2003), 172.

76 Matt 12:33.

77 Luke 8:1–3.

78 Luke 10:38–42. See Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 101–3 for Jesus as both host and guest.

79 Matt 27:55–61; Mark 15:40, 47; Luke 23:49–55; and John 19:25.

a final resting place.[80] Jesus seemed to be deeply invested in his friendships with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus;[81] in moments of great stress, he sought solace in the company of his closest friends.[82] Jesus accepted the mutuality of these give-and-take relationships.

When Jesus sends out his disciples to engage in the work of mission in Luke 9, his instructions reflect a similar posture of mutuality and vulnerability. Yes, the disciples are given authority to perform acts of liberation and to share the good news, but they are also expected to do their work with a certain humility, as a guest. Thomas describes this mission as "radical" and "Jesus-like":

> [The disciples] go out as beggars; they have nothing to give. . . .
>
> The disciples do not bring God to others; no introduction is necessary. God's image greets them at the door; the Word comes to them when a stranger outside the gate says, "I have some extra bread if you're hungry." The disciples' work has nothing to do with changing others and everything to do with changing themselves. We do not create the kin-dom; we receive it when we are invited in just as we are, accepted by the *imago Dei* of a stranger who offers to wash our dirty feet.[83]

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These glimpses into the life of Jesus present a more nuanced image of God than the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-benevolent God of traditional mission. If this is the image of God that is forming us, like Jesus we relate to others in our communities and our world in fresh ways. We realize that we not only present the image of God *to* the world (mission) but also find the image of God *in* the world and are changed as a result (formation). Woodley describes the integration of formation and mission as a realization that "God expects two conversions out of every missional encounter: (1) our conversion to the truths in their culture, and (2) their conversion to the truth we bring to the encounter." He argues that it is first the responsibility of the church to adapt to others, and then, after much time, if "they invite us to share the gospel they have noticed us living out," we can share our (carefully contextualized) good news.[84]

Significantly, the practices of mission and formation are not solitary acts. Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan describes the "radical relationality" of

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80 Mark 15:42–47.

81 Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–44, 12:1–11.

82 Matt 17:1–2, 26:36–46.

83 Thomas, "Anthropology, Mission, and the African Woman," 130.

84 Woodley, "Mission and the Cultural Other," 466.

human existence: "A person does not exist in isolation, but in the web of relationship in which she finds herself."[85] The church, together, is an icon of God in the world: the body of Jesus, made of many parts—a mosaic.[86] The church is not *modeled after* the Trinitarian community of God, suggests Catholic feminist theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna, but has been invited to *participate in* the life of the Trinity, welcomed into (re)union with God.[87] God's "dynamic movement" is "outward, a personal self-sharing by which God is forever bending toward God's 'other,'"[88] inviting humanity into a loving relationship. At its best, the church in union with God is a reflection of God's very self.

As an icon made of many pieces, however, the church will not accurately reflect the image of God if some of its parts are missing. The church will continue to be an incomplete icon until all of humanity has been welcomed into God's community, sharing God's life.[89] Therefore mission is inseparable from formation, transforming the church into a clearer and clearer image of God as "they" become "us," and we all join God's dynamic movement of bending toward others.

The Other does not become one of "us" by being replicated into our image, however; in that case, we would be forming them into an idol. Rather, the Other becomes one of "us" when we create space for them to belong as fully themselves and when we change our church structures and systems in response to what their presence among us brings to light, creating a new "us." This is a process in which we "reconcile the disparate parts, for people to remember their stories and who they are. . . . It is about being restored to one's rightful place in the community, about bringing together all the different pieces of the puzzle in order to complete the picture."[90] As we recognize "our common gift of the image of God," we together strive to love our neighbor as ourselves.[91]

Reawakening (to) the Image of God

In mission, we encounter God in the Other, and when we consent to being changed by those encounters, we reflect the image of God more fully, together. In this way, formation and mission are interconnected as essential to the life

85 Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 78.

86 1 Cor 12:12–27.

87 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 332.

88 LaCugna, 222.

89 Ralph Servant, *Experiments in Love*, 163–34.

90 Mitchell et al, "Mission from the Margins," 162.

91 Mitchell et al, 163.

of the church. To reawaken the image of the vulnerable God within us, we are invited to participate in spiritual practices that position us for transformation. At the intersection of these encounters with God, ourselves, and others, we may experience rebirth.

Practice One: Exploring New Images of God

The Bible is full of stories that have been used for harm, but it also contains stories of God that can challenge our old ways of thinking and acting. We can intentionally look to re-narrate[92] stories of God in the Bible through the lens of Jesus and through the experience of the Other. This involves emphasizing different narratives, finding new meaning in familiar stories, and exploring how our worldviews shape our biblical interpretations. This practice includes reading, listening, and watching theological reflections by those who are an "other" to us because of their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious background, gender identity, politics, or life experience. We can also benefit from studying the Bible with people who are still beginning their journey with Jesus, have not yet committed themselves to Christian faith, or who are skeptical of the Bible's value in everyday life.

As we contemplate the icons of God revealed in these interactions, we encounter the living God and are transformed in the process. "By emptying ourselves of concepts and images of God, or of expectations about what God is or should be or should be doing," suggests LaCugna, "we become free to know and love the real living God instead of the God of our projections."[93]

Practice Two: Connecting with Our Own Cultural Giftedness

Whether we identify as "white" or have a deeper connection to an ethnic identity, "whitewashing" has tarnished the image of God in many of us.[94] At the same time, "whiteness" has blinded us to the intersections of experience and cultures

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92 The concept of "re-narrating" stories from the Bible comes from the field of narrative therapy, which suggests that "in any life there are always more events that don't get 'storied' than there are ones that do"; therefore, "when life narratives carry hurtful meanings or seem to offer only unpleasant choices, they can be changed by highlighting different, previously un-storied events or by taking new meaning from already-storied events, thereby constructing new narratives." Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy* (New York: W. W. Norton: 1996), 32–33. See also Ralph Servant, *Experiments in Love*, 31–36.

93 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "The Trinitarian Mystery of God," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 157.

94 Harper, "#Lynchburg Revival Sermon." Harper describes how the legal rights associated with a "white" identity caused immigrants to the United States throughout

that make each person unique.[95] A spiritual practice of reconnecting with our own cultural giftedness requires the painful work of stripping away the layers of racism, sexism, colonialism, capitalism, classism, and other "isms" that have infiltrated our ways of acting and interacting in the world. To help with this process, we can learn about cultural difference[96] and challenge ourselves to make our implicit assumptions explicit.[97] We can listen to the experiences of those different from ourselves, explore family traditions and stories, and reflect on the elements that combine to shape our identities and worldviews. This practice can be expanded to include communal exploration as congregations discover the diversity within and together recognize and change practices or assumptions that may create exclusive or unwelcome spaces for those we encounter in our communities.[98]

As we strip away the unhealthy parts of ourselves and our congregations, we experience resurrection into our true identities as reflections of God; we cannot stay mired in the guilt or shame of our idols or we will become paralyzed.[99] We must reawaken to God's image within (formation) so that we can share that icon of God with others (mission).

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history to seek to be incorporated into the white culture. As a result, many people who consider themselves "white" have little connection to their ethnic roots.

95 For one starting point, see the metaphor of the "cultural flower" in Michelle Lebaron and Venashri Pillay, *Conflict across Cultures: A Unique Experience of Bridging Difference* (Boston: Intercultural, 2006), 48. See also Emmanuel Lartey's approach to intercultural pastoral care built around the assumption that each person is in some ways like all others, like some others, and like no others: *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 2nd ed. (New York: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 34.

96 There are many books available that explore differences in cultural orientation and values, including David Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); Sarah A. Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar; A Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures* (Hagerstown, MD: McDougal, 2000); and Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

97 David Augsburger suggests that crossing cultures includes sensitizing ourselves to the "common sense" of the Other while desensitizing ourselves to our own assumptions. *Conflict Mediation across Cultures* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 8–9.

98 Eric H. F. Law calls these our "boundary functions" in *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 15–27.

99 Eric H. F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality of Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1993), 71–77.

Practice Three: Developing Mutual Friendships

God is already present in our neighborhoods and our world—we are not responsible for bringing God to those places or people.[100] We may find it difficult to recognize God in others from a distance, however; like living icons, we must contemplate them up close, over time.[101] While we cannot force relationship upon others, we can regularly position ourselves in places where relationships can be built—taking walks, engaging with neighborhood groups, establishing routines within our communities, and "practicing stability"[102] by making our homes permanent.[103]

As we begin to receive the gift of friendship from others, we can fight the instinct to control our relationships[104] and we can accept our need for others, even as we give of ourselves in return. Mutuality also involves extending hospitality as both a host and a guest and frequently sharing meals with those who are different from us.[105] As we develop friendships, we can cultivate curiosity about how and why our neighbors think and act the way they do and intentionally create a "grace margin," where we commit to discerning how we see God revealed in them without judgment.[106] As our love for our neighbors grows, we experience delight in our difference, celebrating the gift they bring to us and the world. This delight opens doors to remind others of the image of God in them: there is power in telling someone, "I see Jesus in you" or "I experienced God through you today." This is a missional act as we witness the Spirit reawakening our neighbors to the image of God they reflect.

People of Mission: *Being and Seeing Icons of God in the World*

These spiritual practices do not produce instant results; rather, they are entry points into the work of transformation. As we engage in these practices, we position ourselves to break old cycles of behavior and offer our consent to the transforming work of God's Spirit in and through us. All three practices are

100 See Thomas, "Anthropology, Mission, and the African Woman."

101 Ralph Servant, *Experiments in Love*, 125–26.

102 Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People: The Missional Challenge of the West* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 151.

103 Many of these practices are embraced by the New Parish movement, as described by Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen in *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014).

104 Welch, *Feminist Ethic*, 113.

105 Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 131–33; Safwat Marzouk, *Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for an Age of Migration* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 147–69.

106 Law, *Inclusion*, 45.

interrelated: (1) as we explore new narratives in Scripture, we begin to better recognize God in others; (2) as we recognize God in others, we are changed through new friendships so that we more clearly reflect a truer image of God; (3) as we shed the idols that have distorted the image of God in us, we encounter God in fresh ways and more clearly see God in our neighbors. Reflecting the image of God in the world by being transformed through the image of God in others is a long-term commitment, one that requires patience. Woodley reminds us that "conversion is both instantaneous and a process," and therefore we need to "think through those implications as we begin to consider our timelines. Then, throw out our timelines."[107]

Through the incarnation of Jesus—the perfect Icon of God—the image of God within us is reawakened and we participate in God's work of restoring the world. As we go about God's ministry of reconciliation, we encounter the image of God in others. When we consent to being transformed by those encounters, we reflect the image of God more fully so that, together, we can invite others into the Community of God. As we are formed into a people of mission, we expect to both *be* and *see* Icons of God in the world. May it be so.

107 Woodley, "Mission and the Cultural Other," 466.