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Dauntless Spirits: Towards a Theological Aesthetics of Collaborative Dissent

Natasha Duquette

Christian scholarship has always been a collaborative, pedagogically focused, outward-reaching, and restorative activity in tension with corrupt social structures. The early disciples went out two by two into societies within which they were perceived as dissenters and even jailed. One could argue that Christ himself taught as an individual, but he did so within the system of communal worship and historic texts of the Judaic culture into which he was born. Those texts themselves present what literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as “heteroglossia,” in an open unity comprised of multiple voices, including those of Moses, Deborah, Jeremiah, David, Habakkuk, and many others. When Jesus spoke, he was aware that he was speaking into a dynamic textual conversation. Furthermore, he spoke and acted as part of a community of three within the paradoxical unity of the Trinity. Scripture depicts Christ praying from a position of vulnerability, consulting the Father and working in dependent collaboration with him, not in absolute Kantian autonomy.

After Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, the disciples continued to follow his pattern of collaboration. The book of Acts also presents a sublimely awe-inspiring picture of heteroglossia in the many languages of Pentecost. After Pentecost, working prayerfully in pairs, the early disciples attended to physical and spiritual suffering in the world, juxtaposed with manifestations of God’s immanent beauty. They responded to the contingent details of their particular context with words and actions that triggered sublime regeneration,

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

wonder, and openness to learning. Their teaching challenged the powerful officials of their day, who could not ignore the force of their words and the beauty of their loving action. How can we continue this biblical pattern of aesthetically delightful and ethically convicting collaborative dissent as we seek to be salt and light in a hurting world?

In envisioning an aesthetic of collaborative dissent today, I will begin by outlining Edmund Burke's division between the sublime and the beautiful and its theological implications; then I will consider a scriptural model of aesthetically delightful collaborative pedagogy. Next, I will trace a similar pattern running through the dissenting discourses of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, my own area of research, and finally I will conclude with two examples of theologically charged, aesthetically arresting, and socially conscious collaborative dissent from our own context: twenty-first-century North America.

Gesa Thiessen has recently defined "theological aesthetics" as scholarship that thinks about God "in the light of and perceived through sense knowledge (sensation, feeling, imagination), through beauty, and the arts."¹ Theological aesthetics raises important questions. How do we think about the beauty of God? How do we picture a transcendent God as the ultimate source of earthly beauty? How can we honor God by creating beautiful poetry, works of visual art, or architecture? How does the Incarnation relate to our ideas about concrete manifestations of beauty in this world? And, as Reinhold Niebuhr's work asks, is there a Yeatsian "terrible beauty" in the cross?² Recent work in theological aesthetics has focused on figures such as the African Augustine of Hippo,³ the American Jonathan Edwards,⁴ the German Immanuel Kant,⁵ and

1. Gesa Thiessen, "General Introduction," *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 1.

2. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Terrible Beauty of the Cross," *The Christian Century* 46 (1929): 386.

3. Diane Capitani, "Augustinian Aesthetics in Jane Austen's World: God as Artist," in *Jane Austen and the Arts: Elegance, Harmony, Propriety*, ed. Natasha Duquette and Elisabeth Lenckos (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 2014), pp. 193-204; Thiessen, "General Introduction," *Theological Aesthetics*, pp. 1-7; Robin Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004).

4. Janice Knight, "Learning the Language of God: Jonathan Edwards and the Typology of Nature," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, vol. 48, no. 4 (October 1991): 531-51; Kip Yin Louie, *The Beauty of the Triune God: The Theological Aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2013); Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); William Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

5. Richard Lane, "Kant's 'Safe Place': Security and the Sacred in the Sublime Experience," in

the Swiss Hans Urs von Balthasar,⁶ but my own introduction to this field came via the Irish expatriate Edmund Burke.

In 1757 Burke published his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, within which he uses extreme binary divisions to define the sublime, in very broad strokes, against its foil, the beautiful. And, in 1759, prompted by reviews asking why he did not mention God, Burke added a section titled “Power” in which he quotes from the book of Job and the Psalms in order to inflect his aesthetic system with theological meaning. In doing so, Burke draws a hard line between the Old Testament and the New, as his system does not allow for any areas of overlap. Burke is able to acknowledge that finer degrees of difference do exist, but he dismisses such subtleties as elusive and immeasurable:

In things whose excess is not judged by greater and smaller, as smoothness and roughness, darkness and light . . . all these are very easily distinguished when the difference is in any way considerable, but not when it is minute, for want of some common measures which perhaps may never come to be discovered.⁷

According to Burke, the absolute difference between the sublime and the beautiful should be obvious. However, he acknowledges that men of “cold and phlegmatic” tempers, or those engaged in “the low drudgery of avarice,” may not properly discern these aesthetic types.⁸ To disagree with his strict categories is to risk moral, or at least medical, judgment. Burke is interested only in perceptions generated by men of plain reason and healthy physique. He holds up his own perceptions as the basis for universal judgments and as a result excludes aesthetic observers with infirm, phlegmatic, female, or otherwise different bodies. Essentially, Burke is excluding such individuals from his own definition of the Christian scholar.

Burke’s refusal to allow for multiple perspectives is expressed when he

Sublimar Aspects: Interfaces between Literature, Aesthetics, and Theology, ed. Natasha Duquette (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 51-61; Ben Quash, Keynote Address at Biola University Arts Symposium, 2012.

6. Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

7. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757; London: Routledge, 1958), p. 22.

8. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 24.

writes, defensively, “To multiply principles for every different appearance is useless, and unphilosophical,”⁹ and so shuts down any possibility of exploring categories that may exist somewhere in between his aesthetic binaries. This has theological consequences, as Burke draws an absolute divide between the sublime as powerful and terrifying, manifested in Old Testament “justice,” and the beautiful as weak and comforting, displayed in New Testament love. He thus creates a seemingly unbridgeable gap between Judaism and Christianity, between justice and love. He writes, “Before the Christian religion had, as it were, humanized the idea of the Divinity, and brought it somewhere nearer us, there was very little said of the love of God.”¹⁰ Burke associates the beautiful with the closeness of loving friendship in contrast to the sublime sternness of a distant and punishing father. Due to Burke’s insistence on the “wide difference”¹¹ between the sublime and the beautiful, there is no room for paradox, no room for what Nicholas Wolterstorff has recently termed *Justice in Love* (2011).

This is largely due to Burke’s scriptural blind spots. He ignores the multiple references to God’s “lovingkindness” in the Psalms and Jeremiah, for example. In attempting to restrict Christianity to the beautiful, he occludes powerful moments of sublimity in the New Testament, from which he does not quote even once in his *Enquiry*. The book of Revelation, for example, presents Christ as terrifyingly just: “And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (19:15). British scholar Ben Quash, in a recent address at Biola University, critiqued the sublime but then presented the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36) as one possible example of Christian sublimity.¹² The crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Christ are also sublime events — both terrifying and awe-inspiring. In Matthew 28, after the resurrection, the women run from the empty tomb with “fear and great joy” (28:8), a paradoxical mixture of emotions that resists Burke’s neat polarities.

In searching for a scriptural starting point from which to address the prospects and perils of Christian scholarship today, I found myself drawn to the book of Acts. Attending to the early disciples’ theological aesthetic of

9. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 27.

10. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 111, p. 70.

11. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 111, p. 113.

12. Quash, Keynote Address at Biola University Arts Symposium, 2012.

collaborative dissent, in the wake of the resurrection and ascension, further unsettles Burke's dichotomy. Certainly these first believers — aware of what happened to Christ, and themselves facing the possibility of imprisonment or execution — must have been keenly conscious of both the exciting, paradigm-shifting *prospects* of Christian thought as well as the hostile, life-threatening *perils* of openly Christian teaching. Acts 3, in particular, presents a striking picture of collaborative Christian pedagogy, framed by static beauty and enabled by dynamic sublimity. In his book *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard celebrates “the possibilities of a life of free-hearted collaboration with Jesus and his friends in the kingdom of the heavens,”¹³ and we catch a glimpse of such dauntless, constructive friendship in the unity between Peter and John. The chapter begins, “Now Peter and John went up *together* into the temple at the hour of prayer” (3:1, my italics), suggesting that Christian thought, action, and teaching arise from communal entry into prayerful spaces.

The two men are stopped in their tracks, however, by an instance of great suffering juxtaposed with the temple's stately architectural beauty. A man “above forty years old” (4:22) and paralyzed from birth lies at the temple gate “which is called Beautiful” (3:2). Most commentators agree that this is the Nicanor Gate. “Beautiful” is not the proper name of the gate; biblical scholar Ben Witherington points out that Luke uses “Beautiful” here as a “descriptive term.”¹⁴ The Greek word is *horaios*, which signifies “seasonable, in prime, blooming”; it is a feminine adjective used only four times in the New Testament. When Jewish historian Josephus describes a seventy-five-foot gate whose beauty “greatly excelled” that of the others,¹⁵ he is most likely referring to this beautiful gate. Made of Corinthian brass, its surface brightly reflected the rays of the sun,¹⁶ and it is here, beside this gate's brilliant splendor, that Peter and John encounter the paralytic. He asks them for money, but instead Peter heals him in the name of Jesus, and the man leaps and praises God, astonishing a transfixed crowd.

The sublime creates opportunities for effective Christian pedagogy because it generates a state of humility, fear, and wonder: an awareness of humanity's finitude in contrast to divine omnipotence. God's power to restoratively

13. Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 12.

14. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 174.

15. Cited in John Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 90.

16. See Gareth Reese, *New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Publishing Company, 1976).

heal causes the crowd in Acts 3:10 to be “filled with wonder and amazement” — in Greek, “*thaumazo* and *ekstasis*,” words that denote sublimity. According to Strong’s Concordance, *thaumazo* means “amazed (at), in wonder, astonished, surprised.” The sublime is something that catches us off guard; it is unexpected and takes our breath away, whereas the beautiful is static and expected, like the beautiful gate of the temple. Burke recognizes astonishment as key to sublimity, arguing, “Several languages . . . frequently use the same word to signify indifferently the modes of astonishment and those of terror. Qamboß [Thambos] is, in Greek, either fear or wonder.”¹⁷ The fearful wonder of the crowd at the temple arises as they realize the limitations of their own preconceptions, thus becoming more open and teachable. Into the crowd’s silent awe, Peter and John speak the truth of the gospel, and as a result, five thousand people come to believe in Jesus as Messiah.

Ekstasis, the second biblical term for the crowd’s response to the healing, has historically been associated with sublime transport by writers from the first-century rhetorical philosopher Pseudo-Longinus to seventeenth-century metaphysical poet John Donne. Strong’s Concordance defines *ekstasis* as a “bewilderment, amazement,” and Thayer’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* adds,

[It is an] alienation of mind, whether such as makes a lunatic (δῆλιος, Deuteronomy 28:28; τῶν λογισμῶν, Plutarch, Sol. 8), or that of the man who by some sudden emotion is transported as it were out of himself, so that in this rapt condition, although he is awake, his mind is . . . drawn off from all surrounding objects and wholly fixed on things divine.¹⁸

In Acts 3 this is the state of the crowd gathered at the temple after they observe a previously paralyzed man leaping and praising God. The observers are not merely pleased, but terrified, astonished, on the edge of madness, and in this moment of *ek-stasis*, movement out of stasis, Peter and John teach them about “the Prince of Life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses” (3:15). After this instance of dynamic Christian pedagogy, the position of Peter and John as collaborative dissenters emerges starkly. The Sadducees, “grieved that they taught the people” (4:2) without official sanction, swoop

17. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 111, p. 58.

18. Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers and Authors Inc., n.d.), p. 199.

down on the two men, lay hands on them, and place them “in hold unto the next day” (4:3), literally imprisoning them for their Christian thought and teaching.

Similar patterns of open teaching and resulting imprisonment are imbedded in the history of British dissent. The Quakers call this dynamic “Speaking Truth to Power.” At the beginning of the eighteenth century, John Chamberlayne divided religious “Dissenters” into “four classes, Presbyterians, Independents, . . . Baptists, and Quakers.”¹⁹ The cultural products arising from such dissenting denominations can be traced back to what Mark Noll has now recognized as a uniquely dissenting theological aesthetic. In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Noll writes, “Over its first centuries, Protestantism . . . provided an ethos in which artistic expression of unusually high quality flourished. It gave one musical genius — J. S. Bach — many of the themes for his noblest work.”²⁰ Noll moves on to note that dissenting Protestant culture also “developed a poetics” and argues that in writers such as “John Milton and John Bunyan . . . we can observe an identifiably *Puritan aesthetic*.”²¹ Like Peter and John in Acts 3 and 4, the writers of *Paradise Lost* and *Pilgrim’s Progress* were themselves imprisoned for their Christian thought, John Milton for publishing *A Treatise for Civil Power* (1659), and John Bunyan for preaching and evangelizing outside of the structures of the state church.

My own research studies the women scholars of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Protestant Dissent who, largely inspired by Milton, generated poetry and aesthetic theory from within Presbyterian, Quaker, and Moravian networks. Though it was rare for Dissenters to be imprisoned in the eighteenth century, they could still not sit in Parliament or matriculate from Oxford. So, the British Dissenters set up their own colleges in order to equip Presbyterian, Moravian, and Quaker men to serve. Eighteenth-century British institutions such as the Presbyterian Warrington Academy did not enroll women, however. Dissenting British women were doubly marginalized, both by their commitments to non-conformist church communities and by the limits imposed on them by those very communities. In my monograph *Veiled Intent: Dissenting Women’s Aesthetic Approach to Biblical Hermeneutics and Social Action*, I examine the tactics such women deployed to ensure their biblical hermeneutics and theological views were preserved for posterity; I argue that dissenting women writers published poetry and aesthetic theory

19. John Chamberlayne, *The Present State of Great Britain* (London: D. Midwinter et al., 1737), p. 148.

20. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 20.

21. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, p. 40; p. 42, my italics.

as a means of tactically veiling their original biblical exegesis and trenchant social commentary.²²

The marginalized possess unique viewpoints that can generate subtle, effective tactics appropriate and helpful to Christian scholarship in the twenty-first century. I wonder if such tactics could be compared to Peter and John's veiling their Christian thought, action, and teaching in the aesthetic forms and historic practices of Judaic worship, or to Christian scholars *today* choosing to be "shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16, NASB) by couching critical thought in aesthetically delightful, even sublime, forms of discourse disarming to a potentially resistant audience.

In adopting previous aesthetic forms and modes of discourse to express theological or cultural dissent, one inevitably shapes, alters, or even extends older conceptual structures, making them more flexible, in order to express new or fresh perspectives. Peter and John do this when they adopt the structures and spaces of Judaic worship to express their dynamic teaching about Jesus as Messiah. Christian scholars today face questions regarding the balance of honoring cultural traditions while at the same time remaining winsome and adaptable to the cross-cultural currents of the present. For the dissenting women theorists and poets who were engaging with earlier definitions of beauty and sublimity, it was key both to acknowledge the influence of Anglicans, such as Edmund Burke, and fellow Dissenters, such as John Milton, as well as to adjust and modify earlier aesthetic forms to new ends, such as their voicing of a female perspective and their attainment of social reforms, including the abolition of slavery. How can Christian scholars today honor their own cultural foundations *and* deploy a theological aesthetics of collaborative dissent that encourages more inclusive, socially conscious practices? Perhaps listening to the voices of dissenting Protestant women from the past can help us.

One of the perils inherent in academic pursuits from which Christian scholars are not exempt is the danger of solipsistic isolation, and dissenting women writers were keenly aware of this problem. This is also one of the dangers of the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke, who associated "entire solitude" with sublimity and "lively conversation, and the endearments of friendship" with beauty.²³ Burke's connection between solitude and the sublime led to cultural idealizations of the solitary figure, visible in paintings such as

22. Natasha Duquette, *Veiled Intent: Dissenting Women's Aesthetic Approach to Biblical Hermeneutics and Social Action* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, forthcoming).

23. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 43.

Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (first shown as part of the Berlin Academy exhibition in 1810). However, warnings regarding the dangers of excessive solitude were voiced almost immediately upon the publication of Burke's *Enquiry*. Burke's friend Samuel Johnson wrote a cautionary parable about a brilliant astronomer who studies the vast heavens without any significant human contact for forty years until he comes to believe he can control the weather with his mind. It is the discussion of astronomical concepts with two intelligent and educated women that gradually draws this scientist out of his delusion. Johnson's parable of the mad astronomer suggests that his own intellectual friendships with women were reciprocal, edifying, and mutually beneficial, perhaps even necessary to his mental health. Christian scholarship in the twenty-first century likewise needs to include both male and female perspectives.

My own research on dissenting women writers asks whether there is a difference between male and female perspectives on the sublime, and thus my work intersects with the field of feminist standpoint epistemology. What if, instead of a brooding German monk, we think about a contemplative Canadian woman by the sea? For Burke, a position on a cliff overlooking the sea is sublime because it is perilous: the depths of the sea connote the threat of drowning, and the sharp edge of a cliff suggests the danger of falling — but the open horizon also provides a sense of freedom and possibility. Joseph Addison argued that “a spacious horizon is an image of liberty, where the eye has room to range abroad,”²⁴ and Immanuel Kant would later connect sublimity to freedom in his *Critique of Judgment*. Throughout the eighteenth century, the sweeping perspective from a geographical height was referred to as a “prospect view.” With its combined precariousness and freedom, it symbolized both the perils and the prospects of intellectual or artistic activity. Romanticist Jacqueline Labbe suggests that “the prospect view, allied as it was with . . . cultural power . . . and breadth of vision” was appealing to individual women who desired to “claim the prospect” for themselves.²⁵ Simply replacing a solitary male figure with a solitary female one, however, does not solve the problem of isolation and solipsism that haunts the eighteenth-century discourse of the sublime and the twenty-first-century pursuit of Christian scholarship. The biblical picture of Christian scholarship is neither a man nor a woman standing

24. Joseph Addison, “*The Spectator*, No. 412, Monday, June 23, 1712,” in *The Sublime: A Reader in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics*, ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 62-63.

25. Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender, and Romanticism* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 1998), p. 143.

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alone but rather a dissenting community of brothers and sisters collaborating together. Biblical theologian Kristina Lacelle-Peterson notes that in Genesis 1:28, “the woman, along with the man, is commissioned jointly with him to carry out God’s work in this world. Here we see God’s original intention . . . a *collaborative* model of mutual dominion, or caretaking.”²⁶ If such collaboration were attempted today from a prayerful space of shared vulnerability, it could result in intellectually engaging and aesthetically delightful Christian outreach towards a world in need.

In her sublime poem simply titled “A Hymn for the Scotch Kirk,” Presbyterian poet Joanna Baillie paints a portrait of a diverse community brought together through obedient worship of God. She declares,

O GOD! who madest earth, sea, and air,
And living creatures, free and fair,
Thy hallowed praise is everywhere,
Halleluja!

All blended in the swelling song,
Are wise and simple, weak and strong,
Sweet woman’s voice and infant’s tongue,
Halleluja!

Yea, woods, and winds, and waves convey
To the rapt ear a hymn, and say,
“He who hath made us we obey,
Halleluja!”²⁷

Through her image of a “rapt ear” listening to the sounds of creation, Baillie suggests that close attention to the collaborative pedagogy of nature can trigger a state of *ek-stasis*, of sublime fear and wonder, akin to that of the crowd in Acts 3. In her alliterative grouping of “woods, and winds, and waves” (line 9), Baillie creates a gradually amplifying phonetic parallelism that echoes the rhythmic sounds of nature. By depicting diverse natural elements joining their voices with human beings — wise and simple, weak and strong, women and infants

26. Kristina Lacelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition: Women’s Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 31, my italics.

27. Joanna Baillie, “A Hymn for the Scotch Kirk,” in *Fugitive Verses* (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), p. 386.

— Baillie clearly alludes to Psalm 148, where ocean “deeps” (148:7), the “stormy wind” (148:8), “mountains,” and “cedars” (148:9) unite with “young men and maidens; old men, and children” (148:12) to together exclaim “Hallelujah!”

The eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century dissenting women writers who both influenced and were influenced by Joanna Baillie also actively situate their discussion of theological aesthetics within the context of communal worship. In doing so, they move against an increasingly hyper-rationalist grain within the intellectual groups and institutions established by their dissenting communities. In her essay “Thoughts on Devotional Taste” (1775), Anna Barbauld reflects on the Presbyterian Warrington Academy, where her father taught theology, worrying that the intellectual discourse at Warrington had become overly abstract and contentious, cut off from the heartfelt faith of everyday Christians, and creating too wide a distance between reverence for God’s sublimity and love of incarnational beauty.²⁸ Unlike Edmund Burke, dissenting women writers did not divorce the beautiful from the sublime but strongly desired to bring these two aesthetic categories into reciprocal, mutually supportive, and harmonious relationship.

The voices of Joanna Baillie, Anna Barbauld, and Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck emphasize the importance of shared devotional practices to dissenting theological aesthetics. Like the women who converse with the astronomer in Samuel Johnson’s parable, Baillie, Barbauld, and Schimmelpenninck sought to ground speculative thought in collaborative activities and shared experiences. Barbauld does so by noting how Hebraic scripture mixes abstract, sublime ideas about God with concrete, poetic metaphors that reflect “all that is delightful in the beauty of holiness.”²⁹ Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck does so in her *Theory on the Classification of Beauty and Deformity* (1815) by creating a system in which the Burkean sublime of terror is one of four “species” of beauty: Schimmelpenninck’s other three species are the contemplative sublime, the sentimental, and the sprightly. She uses music to explain her scale of aesthetic types, arguing that “deep tones,” such as those produced by a bass drum, are sublime; “medium pitch” sounds, such as produced by a flute, are sentimental; and “high pitch” tones, such as produced by pan pipes, are sprightly.³⁰ She further differentiates between terrible and contemplative sublimity by arguing

28. Anna Barbauld, “Thoughts on Devotional Taste,” in *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Elizabeth Kraft and William McCarthy (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), pp. 209-34.

29. Barbauld, “Thoughts on Devotional Taste,” p. 234.

30. Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, *Theory on the Classification of Beauty and Deformity* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1815), p. 363.

that, in the terrible sublime, abrupt, irregular pauses fix the attention, whereas in the contemplative sublime, “one regular, grand, sonorous swell” strengthens and stabilizes the listener.³¹ Examples from poetry further elucidate her categories: according to Schimmelpenninck, Homer’s classical epic form typifies the terrible sublime, Milton’s Christian modification of the epic in *Paradise Lost* the contemplative sublime, William Cowper’s hymns the sentimental, and Alexander Pope’s satire the sprightly.

As well as expanding Burke’s aesthetic dichotomy into four categories, Schimmelpenninck challenges him directly regarding the necessity of solitude to the sublime. She writes,

Solitude is generally considered as an integral part of the sublime. That it is not essentially connected with it will appear from the following reason. It does not always produce that effect, but only under certain circumstances. Were we transported to Cheddar Cliffs, or any other sublime prospect, with all the company of a race-ball, for example, the sublime would be destroyed; but were a first-rate man-of-war . . . sinking, and the whole crew prostrate in prayer, whilst destruction was engulfing them; or had we seen the venerable assembly of Conscript fathers waiting their death by Gaul, the very circumstance of the multitude would have added to the sublime.³²

Schimmelpenninck’s examples of communal prayer at sea and calm acceptance of mortality may be loosely based on John Wesley’s observation of Moravian Brethren while traveling aboard a ship bound for Georgia in 1735. When the ship was caught in a storm at sea, the English passengers, including Wesley, panicked, but the Moravians kept their eyes fixed on Christ and peacefully praised him amid their experience of physical danger. Observing the Moravians’ communal dauntlessness triggered Wesley’s conversion. He recognized that they were not afraid of death because they had a strong faith he did not yet share. Schimmelpenninck’s own move from the Quaker beliefs of her family to Methodism and finally Moravianism suggests a similarly dynamic spiritual journey. Just as Wesley’s conversion out of a cultural Christianity into a saving faith in Christ spurred him to write tracts against the British slave trade, Schimmelpenninck found herself actively involved in abolitionism after her Methodist baptism in 1808.

Schimmelpenninck’s theological aesthetics were directly tied to her in-

31. Schimmelpenninck, *Theory on the Classification of Beauty and Deformity*, p. 370, p. 373.
 32. Schimmelpenninck, *Theory on the Classification of Beauty and Deformity*, pp. 28-29.

volvement in the collaborative dissent of the anti-slavery movement, an involvement that grew as she turned more intensely to the field of biblical studies, which ultimately caused her to conclude that the ultimate beauty is in Christ, who unites love and justice within himself. In the early nineteenth century, ideas about theology, aesthetics, and justice were thoroughly integrated, as also evidenced by J. M. W. Turner's painting *The Slave Ship* (1840) or *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhoon Coming On*.

After the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, and amid debates about slavery in America, Turner engaged the sublime image of a ship engulfed at sea to remind the British of their own past. In 1781 a British slave trader named Captain Collingwood cast men, women, and children into the sea in order to claim insurance money for lost "cargo." If one looks carefully at the bottom of the painting, one will see human arms and legs reaching up out of the churning waters. It is a horrific image. However, cultural historian Simon Schama also reads this image redemptively by emphasizing the light at the top of the painting and "the deep trough Turner has cut in the ocean, which at the center of the painting makes the blackly heaving swells stand still, as though the wrathful hand of Jehovah has suddenly passed over the boiling waters. For this is a day of martyrdom, . . . but also a scene, Turner must have optimistically thought, of vindication. It would be a sin redeemed. Slavery would be defeated."³³

The cultural aftermath of slavery still reverberates through American culture today, however, and it is edifying for us to be honest about this fact within any discussion of twenty-first-century Christian thought. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone critiques what he terms the "bankruptcy of any theology in America that [does] not engage the religious meaning of the African-American struggle for justice."³⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr reminded twentieth-century readers of the connection between justice and the sublime, writing, "Much of our contemporary moral idealism lacks the sublime faith of Jesus,"³⁵ and years later asserting,

Justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and "spiritual wickedness in high places." [This] is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must there-

33. Simon Schama, *Turner*, Episode 5 of *The Power of Art* (BBC Series, 2006).

34. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), p. xvi.

35. Niebuhr, "The Terrible Beauty of the Cross," p. 387.

fore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done.³⁶

Through his research into the African-American struggle for justice and its intersection with the Christian gospel, James Cone discerns expressions of a sublime faith within African-American poetry and music. He concludes that “an imminent presence of a transcendent revelation, confirming for blacks that they were more than what whites said about them, gave them the inner spiritual strength to cope with anything that came their way.”³⁷

This inner spiritual strength is evident in Countee Cullen’s long narrative poem *The Black Christ* (1929), within which the speaker, a young boy, describes his brother’s sublime dignity and calm in the face of death at the hands of an angry white mob:

He seemed one I had never known.
Never such tragic beauty shone
As this on any face before.
It pared the heart straight to the core.
It is the lustre dying lends,
I thought, to make some brief amends
To life so wantonly cut down.³⁸

Like Turner’s painting, Cullen’s narrative poem combines deep suffering, theological aesthetics, and social ethics. Literary critic Scott Slovic has recently referred to the “urgent aesthetic” of environmentally conscious writers today,³⁹ and perhaps this phrase could be applied to any socially conscious writer or artist seeking justice in love.

One such artist is Lorna Simpson, an African-American photographer and filmmaker based in Brooklyn whose early work mourns the history of lynching, but whose more recent work engages the empowering effect of music within African-American community. This engagement is clear in two short film pieces she exhibited at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 2006. The first has a very sublime title: “Cloudscape” (2004).

36. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 181.

37. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. xviii.

38. Countee Cullen, *The Black Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929), lines 541-47.

39. Scott Slovic, *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008).

Cultural theorist Trinh Minh-ha, in reference to her own film-making in Senegal, points out that “speaking nearby or together with certainly differs from speaking for and about.”⁴⁰ I would like to speak in solidarity with, nearby and alongside Lorna Simpson’s pieces, which truly speak for themselves. Her piece “Cloudscape” resulted from a collaboration between Simpson and her friend Terry Atkins, an African-American musician. She asked him to whistle a hymn from the turn of the twentieth century, which she filmed and then played backwards in a loop for her gallery installation. Obscurity or mystery can contribute to a sublime effect, and Simpson creates visual obscurity through the use of dry ice, and auditory mystery through the whistled hymn played backwards. In a lecture delivered at Minneapolis’s Walker Art Center in 2010, Simpson explained that she intentionally chose an obscure hymn that people would not recognize. The result is sublime, and the piece has a lonely feeling due to the solitary figure and the title’s connotation of a prospect view above the earth, within the clouds.

Another twenty-first-century piece by Lorna Simpson, “15 Mouths” (2001), is much more obviously collaborative. This piece was first shown just after 9/11; the viewer may be reminded of a gospel choir, but what these performers are humming is a piece from John Coltrane’s album *Ballads* (1963); it is a re-setting of a 1930 Rodgers and Hart show tune titled “It’s Easy to Remember.” Simpson chose the tune for what she terms its “melodic” and “Romantic” qualities. But her friends in New York who saw her piece first exhibited just four days after 9/11 found it tragic. Regardless of the viewer’s interpretation of tone, the piece definitely conveys the “open unity” of Bakhtinian heteroglossia. Simpson gave her hummers freedom to express their individuality as each chose his or her own octave from Coltrane’s multilayered improvisational jazz piece. The result is, in Simpson’s words, “beautiful,” *because* of the huge range of octaves — baritone, soprano, alto — expressed in male and female voices. The piece is also witty and “sprightly,” to borrow Schimmelpenninck’s word, because of the playful visual and audio variations, and the one mouth that occasionally smiles. In fact, “15 Mouths” contains all four categories of Schimmelpenninckian beauty. Nigerian American art critic Okwui Enwezor argues for a reading of Simpson’s early photography in terms of an “American sublime”⁴¹ of violence, and perhaps we could read her twenty-first-century

40. Trinh Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 101.

41. Okwui Enwezor, “The American Sublime and the Racial Self,” in *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Morley (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2010), p. 193.

work in light of what scholars as diverse as philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff and literary historian Harriet Guest have called “the religious sublime,” with its life-affirming dynamic movement.

A theological aesthetics of collaborative dissent, whether modeled on the diverse unity of Peter and John, Joanna Baillie and Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, or Lorna Simpson and her cast of musicians both past and present, could serve as a response to terrible suffering that moves communities forward towards the wonder of contemplative sublimity, the affection of the sentimental, and perhaps even the uplifting wit of the sprightly. As Christian scholars in the twenty-first century, we must attend to a hurting world through collaborative writing, speaking, and teaching that both acknowledges the horrors of the past and provides hope for life-affirming, restorative movement into the future.

What could that future look like? Would prominent, established Christian thinkers of the American past, such as eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards, even recognize it? Some recent patterns in Christian scholarship give reason for hope that faith-based collaborative dissent will continue to find niches within international academia. But how will aesthetically engaging collaborative dissent be embodied in the cultural practices of future generations? Current demographics suggest that new communities of Christian thought, art, and action will arise with increasing momentum from the developing world, where there is the fastest expansion of evangelical Christianity today. Though the Americas still contain a large number of self-reported Christians, the percentage of the population identifying as Christian is significantly higher in South American countries such as Peru (97 percent) than in the United States (80 percent) or in Canada (71 percent). The fact that the newest pope of the Roman Catholic Church is an Argentinean reflects this reality. In Western European countries, the traditionally Protestant population is rapidly shrinking, and gorgeous, towering Church of England cathedrals feel cavernous and lonely when they hold only a congregation of eight on a Sunday morning.

By engaging worldwide communities in irenic, cross-cultural dialogue in the name of Christ, we can approach cultural difference with the humble expectation of learning from the other, thus adopting an intellectual position of teachable receptivity and open wonder rather than didactic judgment. Listening to Christians from other nations can help us see how, despite variations in cultural practices, Christ remains at the center. As missiologist Allen Yeh argues,

Culture is not moral (good) nor immoral (bad); it is amoral (neutral) — and it all depends what you do with it. It is like a vessel carrying water. The

gospel is like the water; it must be carried in something, but it takes the shape of the vessel it's carried in. Still, that does not change the nature of the water, merely its shape. Unlike Islam, which is untranslatable (the Koran is always in Arabic, Sharia law is imposed wherever the religion goes, and the structure is top-down), Christianity is eminently translatable (the Bible is translated into the vernacular, worship songs are sung in the local cultural style, [and] it is bottom-up); in fact, Christianity thrives best when it is translated.⁴²

If Christian scholarship is to flourish — indeed, if it is to survive — it needs to reflect the shifting and dynamic cultural shapes the gospel takes on today, which means inviting those who have been marginalized to the table, inviting them to move “from margin to center,” as African-American thinker bell hooks advocates in her book of that title.⁴³ To avoid widening the gap between academic communities of Christian thought and the body of Christ worldwide, we need to hear the voices of those who have been historically marginalized in disciplines such as the philosophy of religion, church history, and biblical studies.

As communities of men and women generating Christian scholarship together, how can we engage in modes of collaborative writing, speaking, and teaching that empower the powerless, inspired by the patterns of reciprocal influence shared between Joanna Baillie and the male and female writers with whom she connected? One answer may lie in publishing collaborative work that serves a greater cause, rather than focusing exclusively on monographs that further our own individual career advancement within a specific or narrow field. Community in shared vulnerability can involve joint academic service, such as reviewing and editing each other's work, meeting together to discuss ideas, informally or at conferences, and editing collaborative projects.

Joanna Baillie engaged in such a project in the early 1820s, when she gathered poetry, from a wide variety of writers, men and women, members of dissenting churches and the Church of England, in order to raise money for an impoverished friend. The result was her *Collection of Poems, Chiefly Manuscript, and from Living Authors, edited for the benefit of a friend* (1823). As editor, Baillie included Anna Barbauld's compassionate elegy “On the King's Illness,”

42. Allen Yeh, “The Road Ahead,” in *Routes and Radishes and Other Things to Talk about at the Evangelical Crossroads*, ed. Mark Russell, Allen Yeh, et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p. 47.

43. bell hooks, *From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2000).

William Wordsworth's sonnet in praise of lowliness, "Not love, nor war, nor the tumultuous swell," Felicia Hemans's exegetical poem in Spenserian stanzas, "Belshazzar's Feast," and William Smyth's "The Reformer of Newgate," a tribute to the prison activism of Elizabeth Fry. Poems by famous writers, such as the abolitionist Thomas Campbell and novelist Sir Walter Scott, appear alongside poems by relatively unknown poets, such as a "Miss Benger." As editor, Baillie carefully mixed younger, somewhat marginalized poets with the most respected poets of her nation.⁴⁴ As men and women engaging in Christian scholarship within twenty-first-century contexts, perhaps we too, whether editing collections of poems or academic essays, should seek to include relatively unknown, burgeoning writers alongside more established writers, in collections that serve larger, socially conscious causes in aid of the vulnerable.

As Christian writers, we could also generate textual projects in support of the vulnerable by cooperating with local church communities. This moves us towards the idea of developing an aesthetic of collaborative speaking. The dissenting women thinkers of the past — such as Joanna Baillie, Anna Barbauld, and Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck — had varying levels of access to public speaking within the Presbyterian, Quaker, and Moravian churches they attended. Schimmelpenninck, for example, was raised in a Quaker culture where women regularly spoke at meetings, and she did attend a Methodist church for a time after John Wesley had moved from cautioning against women's preaching to allowing it. On the other hand, women did not ever preach in the Presbyterian circles within which Joanna Baillie and Anna Barbauld moved, though women could teach children. What is true of all three women is that they did meet in salon-style gatherings within private homes to discuss science and theology, and to recite poetry and drama in patterns of mentorship. How could the church replicate this mentorship today in ways that would encourage young women (as well as men) to become the next generation of Christian scholars for the twenty-first century?

This idea of bringing young voices from the margins to the center of our public discourse and textual practices connects to the final form of collaborative dissent key for generating aesthetically engaging Christian scholarship in the twenty-first century: the mentorship of future generations, or teaching. Dissenting women poets provide unique models of such mentorship, especially Anna Barbauld, who intellectually and spiritually mentored the younger poets Helen Maria Williams and Joanna Baillie by meeting with them in church as

44. Joanna Baillie, *Collection of Poems, Chiefly Manuscript, and from Living Authors, edited for the benefit of a friend* (Paternoster Row: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823).

well as in other public spaces, and with whom Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck stayed for a month as a young woman. It is important to encourage developing writers who are speaking from the margins and also to challenge them to be socially responsible critical thinkers whose varied and fresh voices will shape the tone of future scholarship and social practice. Sound Christian scholarship will always be God-honoring and doxological. And, as the Psalmist reminds us in Psalm 148, communities of polyphonic doxology include young men and young women, old men and children, the flora and fauna of creation, in a *harmony of diverse expression unified by its shared Godward direction*.

Christian scholarship in the twenty-first century, like the poetry and aesthetic theory penned by dissenting women of the past, needs to reflect the polyphonic praise of the culminating Psalms, with their pictures of communal expression. Psalm 149 begins,

Praise ye the LORD. Sing unto the LORD a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints.
Let Israel rejoice in him that made him: let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.
Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp.
For the LORD taketh pleasure in his people: he will beautify the meek with salvation. (vv. 1-4)

If we follow this psalm, as men and women engaged in Christian scholarship we are called to honor God with joyful and poetic words spoken not in solitude but “in the congregation of the saints,” in a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. By doing so with the sprightly energy and artistic care of a dancer engaged with others in a collaborative production (v. 3), we can bring pleasure not only to ourselves and to our human audiences but, most importantly, to God himself (v. 4). God is our final collaborator, and through the immanence of the Holy Spirit, he can take our sincere offerings of scholarship and beautify them, and us, with restorative salvation.

By crafting inclusive, polyphonic, and joyful offerings of scholarship from liminal but dynamic spaces of communal Christian thought today, we can continue to extend the Christ-formed patterns of restoration and teaching found in the Bible. By banding together as believers on the margins and encouraging one another towards tactful and aesthetically delightful creative expression, we can also follow in the footsteps of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dissenting women scholars, such as Joanna Baillie and Mary Anne Schimmel-

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penninck. Each of these women sought cross-cultural dialogue by including the practices of diverse cultures — such as Ceylon/Sri Lanka (the setting of Baillie’s play *The Bride*) and Peru (Schimmelpenninck discusses Machu Picchu in her *Theory*) — in their textual representations. We too, as Christian scholars today, will benefit greatly by lifting our eyes from exclusively Anglo-American contexts to contemplate the increasingly rich and varied expressions of Christian thought around the globe. Such contemplation could ultimately draw us closer to Christ and give us a glimpse of the eternal reality when, with “every nation and kindred and tongue” (Rev. 14:6), we will stand together in awe of the Lamb.