

Practicing the Image of God: How Ritual Can Retrain the Elephant

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This article traces feminist theological approaches to the transformation of social bias, exemplified by Elizabeth Johnson and Jennie Knight, in terms of the ritual theories of Clifford Geertz, Catherine Bell, and Ronald Grimes. Comparative study with the ritual theories of tantric Hinduism (via Jessica Frazier) illuminates how embodiment in contemplative practices can effectively advance the project of transformation. Specifically, the non-dual Śaiva symbol of the divine reflection in multiple facets of humanity opens up multiplicity in the Christian symbol of the imago Dei, including body, emotion, and subtle states of consciousness as well as the rational and willing capacities. This holistic view of the human person, in turn, supports practices of transformation that can reshape not only intellectual beliefs, but also instinctive responses, to other people.

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“The elephant is driving most of the time.” The anti-bias trainer explains, as she displays a picture of an elephant with a rider, that the seated person represents the thinking mind, while the elephant stands for the subconscious. Many people (the rider) assume they lack bias because they believe in the dignity of all people and that discrimination is wrong. However, people are generally unaware of their unexamined cultural norms (the elephant) related to communication, emotional expressiveness, and appropriate behavior. These intuitions drive individual and collective choices and actions more often than we realize, so that institutions tend to replicate existing relationships rather pursuing their stated commitments to diversity and inclusion. By surfacing these norms and understanding differences of culture, gender expression, ability, and the like, the trainer claims, individuals and institutional cultures can become more equitable.

“But how do we retrain the elephant?” someone asks. If the elephant is the subconscious, can we really change its behavior by working on conscious beliefs? Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who popularized the image of the rider and the elephant in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, argues that focusing on information and moral reasoning cannot produce the desired results. Many diversity and inclusion programs use a case study method. This approach is ineffective, however, because it “gets causality backwards”: case study exercises “take the rider off the elephant and train him to solve problems on his own . . . Then class ends, the rider gets back on the elephant, and nothing changes at recess.”¹ Education that isolates the rational function does not work.

Religious education may not fare much better. Lofty ideals do not always translate into altruistic behavior. For example, Christians often try to leverage the idea that human beings were created in the divine image to dispel biases related to gender, racialization, and ability in Christian communities. The attempt to inspire just and inclusive action through inclusive symbols is a

¹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 165. He discusses psychological research related to controlled processing and affective priming that demonstrates why common anti-bias approaches fail (19–20, 27).

standard approach in feminist theologies. However, scholars have come to question the efficacy of working at the level of belief and symbol alone. Are better symbols enough to retrain elephants and their communities? Or do they result only in the notional enlightenment of riders within institutional structures where bias and injustice persist? What further steps need to follow, or accompany, this work? As someone who teaches theology to Christian students preparing for ministry, I have skin in this game.

This article first traces a genealogy of feminist theological approaches to this question through the ritual theories that emerged in parallel with them. Not every feminist practice of prayer or reflection may qualify as ritual, but a ritual dimension has been present from the early days of Jewish, pagan, and Christian reclamations of the sacred feminine. Feminist theologians have increasingly attended to the importance of transformation at the level of emotion, bodies, and the subconscious. The ritual dimension of religion is arguably where these capacities receive the most attention, so it is worth asking about the relationship between theology and practices. I highlight two moments in this genealogy, beginning with how Elizabeth Johnson draws upon Clifford Geertz’s functionalist understanding in her pathbreaking book, *She Who Is*. I then engage Catherine Bell’s more skeptical perspective alongside Jennie Knight’s practical theology in *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God*.

My own intervention in this genealogy comes via comparative theology, a discipline in which theologians formed in a particular religious tradition learn about, and from, another. Francis X. Clooney identifies a “third space” in comparative theology, where committed scholars can “meet, learn from one another fruitfully and in a way that demeans neither tradition, and facilitate a learning possible only in that shared space.”² Such an approach permits one to theorize not only *about* but also *along with* what practitioners think they are doing when they innovate on ritual. I propose that learning from the texts of the non-dual Śaivism of Kashmir, as well as from scholars of Asian and South Asian ritual and religion, can help to make explicit how practice advances the project of transformation.

My research shifts from a focus on the symbol of God in Johnson and Knight to its corollary: the image of God in humanity. The non-dual Śaiva (Hindu) symbol of the divine reflected in humanity opens up multiplicity in the Christian symbol of the *imago Dei*, with a multiplicity of facets to this image that include body, emotion, and subtle states of consciousness. More importantly for this investigation, its holistic view of the human person also points toward the kinds of practices of transformation that can retrain not only riders, but also elephants.³

The Symbol Functions: Elizabeth Johnson

Perhaps one of the most influential works of feminist theology is Elizabeth A. Johnson’s 1992 *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. By now, several generations of students in mainline theological schools have internalized its central thesis: “the symbol of God

² Francis X. Clooney, *The Future of Hindu-Christian Studies: A Theological Inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 10.

³ I am grateful to Katie Mylroie for her invitation to explore the relation of my recent research to ritual theory, to the participants in the Engaging Particularities conference for their engagement with these ideas, and to my colleague William Kervin and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this article.

functions.”⁴ Specifically, the exclusive, literal, and patriarchal use of masculine God-language functions to “undermine women’s human dignity as equally created in the image of God.”⁵ Johnson urges a “critical retrieval” of feminine God-language in scripture and the theological tradition in order to encourage openness to the divine mystery and to “[create] conditions for the formation of community characterized by relationships of mutuality and reciprocity, of love and justice.”⁶

Johnson’s proposal relies upon Clifford Geertz, the sociologist of religion who posits that religious symbols establish moods and motivations among their adherents, so that “specific ideas of God support certain kinds of relationship and not others.”⁷ Images of God as Father and King imbue fatherhood and kingship with the aura of holiness, “while femaleness is relegated to the unholy [place] without”—or, at least, women must “abstract themselves from their concrete, bodily identity as women” in order to name “their own goodness and power.”⁸ Johnson searches for symbols that engender moods and motivations to support women’s liberation and flourishing, settling on the multivalent figure of Sophia, Woman Wisdom.

For Johnson, as with Geertz, existential moods and motivations *follow from* these concepts. While Johnson does not develop a ritual dimension to this project in *She Who Is*, the reader may discern that she also accepts his understanding of ritual as a dimension of religion that enacts or performs its symbols. Bell argues that, for Geertz, ritual’s efficacy lies in its iconic modeling of the social order: it “‘defines’ social norms and presents them for internalization.”⁹ Johnson’s project shares the directionality of this ritual theory, in which concepts shape practices such as liturgical language and authority structures.

When Christian feminist theologians and liturgists employ gender-inclusive images in prayer, then, they make a critical intervention by changing the symbols that will function in the community. They elevate underrecognized images of God from the tradition in order to reshape how the community creates value and authority. They intervene at the level of concepts to change what people value and, accordingly, how they act. Put simply: If we think better about God, we will treat one another better. Inclusive theological symbols should lead to inclusive communities.

But what if symbols don’t quite work this way?

Although mainline seminary students learn the importance of diverse God-images, Jennie Knight notes, they very often “submit, within months of beginning their ministries, to the pressure from their congregations to maintain exclusively male language for God.”¹⁰ Despite the realization that female-positive symbols can contribute to just gender relations, androcentric God-language persists in worship, and the formal leadership even of progressive denominations continues to be

⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 4.

⁵ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 5.

⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 6.

⁷ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 36. In this section, Johnson draws upon Carol Christ’s earlier use of Geertz, found in Carol Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” in *WomanSpirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

⁸ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 37–38.

⁹ Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 175.

¹⁰ Jennie Knight, *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God: A Practical Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2011), 1.

dominated by cisgender men. The link between the changed beliefs of seminarians and institutional practices appears to be broken. Other ritual theories may be necessary to explain what happens when symbols do *not* function as hoped.

The Turn to Practice: Jennie Knight

Mary and Martha’s Place is a center for feminist spirituality in Atlanta. In her interviews with women there, practical theologian Jennie Knight “found that the process of reimagining the divine is a long and difficult one,” even for Christians who commit themselves in principle and practice to inclusive God symbols.¹¹ One woman described how, “even when she tried actively not to imagine God as an ‘old, white man in the sky,’ when she goes to pray, ‘there he is!’”¹² The old patriarchal images are so deeply ingrained in the cultural and personal psyche that one wonders whether the elephant *can* actually be retrained. In times of stress or inattention, dormant beliefs and biases manifest themselves.¹³

Knight argues that as long as theological education operates primarily at the intellectual level (addressing the rider on the elephant), it will be inadequate to change something as rooted in psychology, memory, and emotion as God-images seem to be. Her approach reflects what Haidt discovered about the rider and the elephant: emotion and affect often override reason.¹⁴ Transformation happens through the *experience* of alternative images, both visual and verbal. It requires practice and experimentation, not only ideas. Above all, Knight recommends an attitude of play that loosens the censoring role of the judging mind and opens the faculties to experience God in a variety of ways.¹⁵

Specifically addressing the field of religious education, Knight develops practices of memory, journaling, group exploration, and liturgy creation related to images of the divine. Her proposed curriculum first uncovers the gendered and racialized images of God and self that participants have internalized or repressed. Subsequent lessons explore alternative images from nature and from participants’ positive experiences of the divine. Leaders walk participants through the process of identifying their God-images, then negating them (recognizing the inadequacy of any human model), and then moving toward a “transcendent affirmation” of chosen images, in order to facilitate deep transformation.¹⁶

¹¹ Knight, *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God*, 10.

¹² Knight, *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God*, 10. The interviewee continues: “It still feels very intellectual to me, and not in my heart. I think it will probably take years of doing that, and years of those kinds of rituals, to create in me like a real sense of the divine that’s feminine or without this very paternalistic side” (10).

¹³ Feminist theologians have wrestled with this phenomenon. For example, Marjorie Proctor-Smith distinguishes among “non-sexist,” “inclusive” and “emancipatory” language in terms of their relative power to re-form the theological imagination (*In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1990], 63) but she also develops angles beyond language alone (*Praying with Our Eyes Open: Engendering Feminist Liturgical Prayer* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1995]).

¹⁴ In a vivid example, Haidt describes how he had become convinced that the slaughter of animals for food is morally problematic, but it was not until he viewed a documentary about these practices that his visceral feelings of disgust led him to embrace vegetarianism (*The Happiness Hypothesis*, 166).

¹⁵ Knight, *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God*, 10–11.

¹⁶ Knight, *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God*, 155.

Knight proposes a shift from a top-down focus on the function of theological symbols to a holistic emphasis on educational practices that transform belief. She does not identify a theory of ritual to undergird this shift. One might imagine an affinity with theories of ritual as a vehicle of social control: ritual fosters group solidarity by channeling conflict, infusing certain social values with emotion, or repressing chaotic impulses.¹⁷ Although feminist liturgical innovators do intend social formation, Catherine Bell's critique of these theories and her alternative theory of ritualization lands closer to the mark. Bell observes that the grand theories of social control often ignore the particularity of the social arrangements where ritual occurs. She proposes to speak not of "ritual" in the abstract, but of processes of "ritualization," in which ritual actors strategically choose particular rites. Here, "ritual activity is not the 'instrument' of more basic purposes, such as power, politics, or social control, which are usually seen as existing before or outside the activities of the rite"; rather, "ritual practices are themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations."¹⁸ When Knight's study participants interrogate their inherited God-images in terms of gender and racialization, and when they choose to experiment liturgically with other images, they both negotiate and produce structures of authority.

Bell cites the contemporary construction of feminist and womanist rituals as a case study in ritual change. Some of the women involved in this activity assert that they are reclaiming ancient, pre-patriarchal rites that venerate goddesses, nature, and the body. Others describe their work as new and unprecedented opportunities for women's participation and ritual agency. Liturgical innovations, such as those conducted at Mary and Martha's Place, not only adjure exclusively patriarchal language, but "they also address the traditional exclusion of women from positions of ritual expertise and the general dismissal of women's experiences."¹⁹ As examples of ritualization, they are explicitly concerned with the embodiment of power relations.

Feminist liturgies exemplify key dimensions of Bell's definition of ritual practice. Their work is both (1) situational and (2) strategic: feminist liturgists create rituals for particular situations in order to empower women. Feminist rituals also (3) create a "redemptive hegemony" insofar as they are "able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world."²⁰ In other words, participants experience rituals as empowering because the rituals cohere with their (emerging, feminist) understanding of reality. For the feminist project of shaping theology through practice to be effective, communities must strategically remake symbols through ritual practices, and these remade symbols must take root in the understanding of those who participate.²¹

¹⁷ Bell discusses the work of William Robertson Smith, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Émile Durkheim, Victor Turner, René Girard, and others in this vein (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 169–75).

¹⁸ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 196.

¹⁹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 238, cf. 170.

²⁰ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 81.

²¹ Bell posits an additional dimension: ritual practice is "embedded in a misrecognition of what it is in fact doing" (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 81). In other words, participants must not perceive the "circular process" of constructing the rituals which are in turn constructing them as subjects. If they do experience this, they attribute it to a power order beyond themselves (98–99; cf. 190–91). Knight's project demonstrates that feminist liturgists are quite intentional about the construction and appropriation of symbols. As much as they may assume the existence of an empowering divine presence to be encountered in ritual, many will also recognize that they are calling it into being. Bell later complexifies her own position: though she maintains ritual "must make its own invention invisible" (Bell, *Ritual*, 224), she goes on to critique and complexify this perspective in light of modern examples, leaving it somewhat inconclusive and in need of "more research" (Bell, *Ritual*, 242).

Limits to Ritualization

An important dimension of Bell’s contribution is her analysis of the factors that limit ritual’s social efficacy, which may illuminate the tepid reception of feminist contributions within mainline Christian worship and liturgy. “Religious beliefs are relatively unstable and unsystematic for most people,” she observes.²² This ambiguity renders ritual unable “to control by virtue of any consensus based on shared beliefs.”²³ Ritual can create the illusion of consensus. It can encourage consent. However, it is the nature of ritualization that participants can resist or appropriate a ritual in strategic and negotiated ways.²⁴ Unless the underlying convictions take root, ritual innovations such as inclusive language in liturgy may be treated as interesting and benign experiments but fail to transform the community’s practice.

Even in denominations where feminist liturgical revisions appear in official resources, participants may only consent to the form of the rites but still hold varied interpretations of them. This ambivalence diminishes the efficacy of ritual for social change. Bell observes, “This minimal consent actually contrasts with the degree of conviction frequently required in more day-to-day activities as, for example, the spontaneous sincerity that must be conveyed in many forms of conversation.”²⁵ And, of course, it is precisely this kind of spontaneity feminist liturgists and religious educators hope to transform, so that at the instinctual level, rooted in core convictions, people will experience the spectrum of human difference as sacred. They want to retrain the elephant.

Even the most willing of ritual participants may find it neither easy nor straightforward to remake their elephant-level understandings of God and self. Feminist understandings exist alongside other messages and power dynamics. Bell observes, “Ideology is *not* a coherent set of ideas, statements, or attitudes imposed on people who dutifully internalize them . . . Any ideology is always in dialogue with, and thus shaped and constrained by, the voices it is suppressing, manipulating, echoing.”²⁶ Again, this is not a theory of social control, but of empowerment. To the extent that empowered participants are conscious of appropriating symbols, they still do so amid “a self-constituting history that is a patchwork of compliance, resistance, misunderstanding, and a redemptive personal appropriation of the hegemonic order.”²⁷ Both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies can operate at an unconscious and instinctive level. This element of resistance and patchwork compliance is visible in the “there he is!” phenomenon of the interviewee at Mary and Martha’s Place, as well as in churches that simultaneously understand the feminist critique and avoid implementing gender-inclusive practices in worship.

Thus far, the ritual theories I’ve engaged leave the elephant only partially trained. Symbols may not function as directly as Johnson, via Geertz, might hope. According to Bell and Knight, strategic ritualization may empower ritual innovators as agents and provide a sense of existential empowerment for participants; but in the diffuse connection between religious authority and broader social structures, the influence on the community of elephants is tenuous.

²² Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 184–85.

²³ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 186.

²⁴ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 210–11.

²⁵ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 186.

²⁶ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 191.

²⁷ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 208.

Tantric Hindu Ritual Theory

Comparative theological study, which draws on a range of secular and religiously committed perspectives, may suggest approaches to elephant training that access the subtler levels of consciousness where resistance to transformation lies. Theories of ritual formation in Tantric Hindu disciplines and Christian discourses on prayer or the sacraments represent emic (insider) perspectives. Contemporary practical theologians also draw on outsider (etic) points of view when they consider the social functions of ideas or rituals. When feminist theologians ask about ritual efficacy, it is both an emic perspective (insofar as they believe in such things as God and the *imago Dei*) and an etic perspective (insofar as the question involves the operation of power within communities).

Theory should be able to recognize both the mechanics of ritual and its mystery through “interlocking, rather than polarized conceptions of religion, spirituality, and ritual,” ritual theorist Ronald Grimes argues.²⁸ Grimes pays special attention to the insights of participants as they negotiate and are transformed by the important events of life. He also engages in crafting rituals within his own community. It is promising that recent scholarship on ritual innovation in the South Asian context has taken up his theoretical framework in order to take seriously what ritual actors understand and experience themselves to be doing.²⁹

Jessica Frazier, for example, advocates for contemporary scholars to treat Hindu models of the self, embodiment, and ritual practice not only as topics of interest but as sources of theory itself.³⁰ The intellectual habit of “model making” is a prominent form of theory in Hindu thought that differs from Western instrumental uses of theory, which *apply* theory through science or criticism. Frazier urges scholars to expand their theoretical possibilities in light of the traditions they study—for example, by considering metaphysics as a form of theory, not only as an emic explanation of phenomena.³¹

Tantric Hindu traditions are apt conversation partners on the training of elephants because their ritual theory addresses a multifaceted and connected self and world. In Hindu traditions, ritual often relies on homology—a fundamental connection between anthropology and cosmology. In many of these traditions, conscious beings and the cosmos are made of the same things, from the gross elements to subtle levels of consciousness, which emerge on a continuum with one another. Material forces have “intelligence of different grades”; no single factor—like the mind or the will—makes a person.³² In the non-dual Śaivism of Kashmir, for example, the thirty-six principles (*tattvas*) constitute the divine body of consciousness, the body of the cosmos, and the body of the human being. This includes, in addition to the twenty-five parts enumerated in the earlier Samkhya system, an additional eleven degrees of consciousness that elaborate the subtle degrees

²⁸ Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 71.

²⁹ For example, a volume edited by Brian Pennington and Amy Allocco attends to communities’ relation to ritual, including how rituals change, how changes gain acceptance, and how they relate to social, political, and material conditions. See Brian K. Pennington and Amy L. Allocco, “Introduction,” in *Ritual Innovation: Strategic Interventions in South Asian Religions*, ed. Brian K. Pennington and Amy L. Allocco (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 4.

³⁰ Jessica Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews: Theories of Self, Ritual and Reality* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 7.

³¹ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 8.

³² Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 65.

of union and distinction between self and other, as well as the sheaths that limit ordinary consciousness from recognizing the inherent nature of each being. As I have explored in depth elsewhere, the human “mirrors” the divine through this homology.³³

Two approaches to the ritual formation of the self in India arise out of the presupposition of such homologies. The orthodox or Vedic traditions seek “to constrain identity through rituals of initiation, and constrain action through conceptions of right *dharma*, auspiciousness, and purity.”³⁴ Ritual upholds the order of the universe, and individuals participate in that order through observance of rites throughout their lives. Ritual constructs self and community. As one would expect after reading Bell, participation in these rituals can be strategic and empowering, as agents interact with social identities and norms.³⁵ The second approach is characteristic of “the cultures of self-creation seen in certain yogic and tantric texts” such as the non-dual Śaiva traditions.³⁶ Here, techniques such as physical asceticism, yogic concentration, and visualization serve as “tools to achieve the ‘art’ of reconfiguring causal relations between different levels of selfhood, so that mind and body could be reshaped.”³⁷ Together, these views mean that the self, the community, and the cosmos are malleable—needing to be constrained, but also capable of being controlled, reshaped, and directed toward transformation and spiritual realization.

Comparative work with Tantric Hindu traditions supplements previous liberationist projects by considering how practices can push beyond intellectual assent to convince the other embodied capacities of the sacred worth of all humanity. The homologies undergird practices that relate the self to the cosmos and the divine. Through ritual, one can conform one’s life to the patterns (*dharma*) of society and cosmos, but one can also transform them. Initiation rituals, for example, transform the tantric practitioner into a “being that exists on a higher soteriological level of reality.”³⁸ Transformation continues with practices that utilize the energies of the various *tattvas* through mantras, visualizations, and other means of “mentally inscribing pre-existing sacred realities . . . onto the body.”³⁹

In some Tantric rituals, practitioners ritually map the thirty-six parts of the divine and cosmic onto their own body. For example, Śaiva theologian Abhinavagupta elaborates on the *triśūlābjamaṇḍala* ritual, which overlays the hierarchy of the *tattvas* in the form of Śiva’s trident upon the central energy channel of the body. Beginning with the earth principle at the base of the spine, the practitioner visualizes the trident rising through the body, starting with the elements and moving through the principles of sensation, action, cognition, and the obscuring cosmic power of *māyā*. Above the plinth of the trident, located within the head, lies the form of the deity called Sadāśiva, who gazes upward to the point above the skull that transcends perception and duality.

³³ Michelle Voss Roberts, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

³⁴ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 66.

³⁵ See, for example, Tracy Pintchman, ed., *Women’s Lives, Women’s Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), in which the authors demonstrate how Hindu women’s agency in creating, choosing to perform, and participating in rituals helps to “produce, reproduce, transform, resist, or even defy . . . larger norms” (5).

³⁶ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 66.

³⁷ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 68.

³⁸ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 160.

³⁹ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 159.

The goddesses enthroned on the three points on the trident symbolize the subtle degrees of divine consciousness and its unity.⁴⁰

In other Tantric rituals, the embodied faculties themselves become means of realization: by attending to how the senses operate, or the arising of emotion, or the coming and going of thought, one witnesses the nature of consciousness that is the nature of everything. The Vijñānabhairava Tantra (*VBT*) is a compendium of practices that watch for the movement of consciousness. For example,

If one, after casting one's gaze on some object, withdraws it and slowly eliminates the knowledge of that object along with the thought and impression of it, he abides in the void (*VBT* 120).

At the commencement and end of a sneeze, in terror, in sorrow, in the condition of a deep sigh or on the occasion of flight from the battlefield, during (keen) curiosity, [and] at the commencement or end of hunger, the state is like that of *brahma* (*VBT* 118).⁴¹

Tantric practices employ the full range of embodiment to tap into the ordinary working of consciousness in perception, emotion, and thought. Through something as simple as tasting food, recognizing a friend, having a thought, becoming angry, or transcending the limited self when encountering a sublime work of art, one can observe the movement of awareness from unity to the recognition of objects, or vice versa.

For practitioners of the non-dual Śaiva traditions, the expansion and contraction of consciousness is the very nature of Śiva and of the self. Attention to these ordinary experiences rewires perception. In short, retraining the elephant depends on a method of “taking charge of the body and mind in order to steer them out of their habitual paths grounded in natural processes, toward higher possibilities that are rooted in discriminating reflection.”⁴² As other scholars who have bridged Western theories and the ritual theories of other cultures have discerned, the inability to overcome biases is not a matter of inadequate beliefs but of “untrained bodies.”⁴³

This theoretical matrix resists the dichotomy that Geertz and other ritual theorists imagine between thought and action, symbol and ritual, worldview and dispositions to act. The dichotomy “tends to distort not only the nature of so-called physical activities, but the nature of mental ones as well,” Bell observes, and it establishes a hierarchy that subordinates physicality.⁴⁴ By contrast, in the non-dual Śaiva cosmology, thought does not transcend the ritual realm but is part of the embodied, material cosmos that ritual shapes. The analogy of the rider and the elephant

⁴⁰ Abhinavagupta's ritual is described in Sanderson, “Maṇḍala and Āgamic Identity in the Trika of Kashmir,” 176–80. Also see Sthaneshwar Timalina, “Reconstructing the Tantric Body: Elements of the Symbolism of Body in the Monistic Kaula and Trika Tantric Traditions,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 16 (1): 57–91.

⁴¹ Jaideva Singh, trans., *The Yoga of Delight, Wonder, and Astonishment: A Translation of the Vijñāna-Bhairava* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

⁴² Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 68.

⁴³ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 77.

⁴⁴ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 48–49.

presupposes a model of the human being in which the mental and physical/emotional are distinct. This alternative view renders the self both part of its environment and yet open to the agency of “constantly negotiating its own becoming” through religious practice.⁴⁵

Learning from Comparative Ritual Studies

There is much food for thought here for Christian feminist and liberation theologians. If constructive work at the level of theological symbol is to transform how we love our neighbors, it must address the embodied ways that we come to hold our deepest convictions. Symbols do function, but only if communities interiorize them. Effective constructive theologies will attend to ritual and contemplative practices as well as action-oriented social praxis.

John Makransky’s comparative treatment of engaged Buddhism and Christian liberation theologies arrives at a similar critique. He lauds ecofeminist and liberation theologians Ivone Gebara and Mayra Rivera for overcoming the dualism of oppressor and oppressed in earlier liberation theologies, but he laments that they do “not provide any contemplative discipline, any means of knowing beyond discursive analysis itself, to help us become more attuned to this transcendent dimension of self and others, the dimension that transcends our reified, reductive thoughts of them.”⁴⁶ To Christian liberation theology’s important social analysis, Buddhism contributes a contemplative discipline that can identify the error in such thoughts and witness the potential within each person.

Here, a different comparative conversation partner offers other angles for overcoming dehumanizing biases. As we have seen, non-dual Śaivism holds important clues to the activation of reconstructed beliefs. In conversation with non-dual Śaiva anthropology, Christian theology can appreciate the entire range of embodiment—the elements, the organs of sense and action, the mental and willing apparatus, the subtle degrees of consciousness, and even our limitations—as dimensions of the image of God. That tradition’s extensive ritual and contemplative apparatus suggests that developing practices connected to these alternative models of God and the human being might help Christians to undo deep and harmful biases related to gender, age, racialization, and ability. Such practices of embodiment could, in turn, further help to unravel the presupposition that the image of God resides in the rational capacities.

Feminist theologians share with the tantric traditions a multilayered understanding of the self. They target more than the mind and more than the emotions (a single faculty, called *manas*, in this system). The mental apparatus, along with the rest of the embodied person, can be governed by either “the changing, automatically active” or “the abiding, intelligently discriminative parts of the self.”⁴⁷ Transformation does not only come about by learning to think differently, but by using the entire embodied matrix in practices that shape body, emotions, and mind to be receptive to the truth of one’s relation to the divine.

⁴⁵ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 198.

⁴⁶ John Makransky, “A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (2014): 652.

⁴⁷ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 69.

If all of the embodied faculties are connected to one another, to the rest of the world, and to God, then we can engage those faculties toward recognition of the divine image in every person. In addition to theological reasoning and reflection, which are always embodied activities, a range of embodied Christian disciplines can contribute to this transformation. Here, we are looking for practices that move beyond good ideas about how our whole selves image the divine, to evoke the experience of that reality. Different practices tap into different embodied ways of knowing. As an experiment with the various *tattvas*, each chapter of my comparative study of Christian and non-dual Śaiva theological anthropology couples critical-constructive work with modest proposals for prayer and meditation.⁴⁸ In an online companion resource, I propose centering prayer, collage, imaginative engagement with works of art, and attention to the breath as just some examples of how Christians can employ the entire range of embodiment toward deeper perception of the image of God in the self, the neighbor, and the world.⁴⁹ Practical theologians and spiritual directors will have much more to add in terms of practices that do not center solely on thought and analysis.

Engagement with the ritual systems of India also invites further comparative work on the construction of the self in historical Christian practices of initiation and the catechumenate, as well as in the ongoing formative role of prayer and the monastic daily office. The hope—in both tantric Hindu and Christian ascetic and contemplative practices—is that the deepest truth and reality will become the prominent, conscious reality for practitioners. In Christian terms, practitioners will gradually come to perceive the divine image more readily in both self and others. Although spiritual guides in both traditions have long attested to the transformative efficacy of ascetic and meditative regimes, future conversations between ritual studies, liturgical studies, and the fields of religious education and spirituality could bear fruit with regard to measuring their efficacy.⁵⁰

On Herds of Elephants

Dehumanizing biases are part of the “automatic” responses to others. Ritual retrains these instincts, “making multiple worlds imminent in the reality around us present to the individual,” as Frazier puts it.⁵¹ The potential for practices to break instinctual habits is key to their use for projects of liberation. However, many of the practices discussed in the previous section still work at the level of the individual riders and their elephants. We conclude with the possibility of social and institutional formation and transformation: the training of herds of elephants.

Both feminist liturgies and tantric contemplative practices aim consciously to construct a self and a world. In postmodern models of the self, these are not separate. Selves are fluid in their construction, and social structures are part of us. We do not construct worlds alone or simply alongside other individuals and their practices. Most tantric practitioners are also engaged in the world-building rituals of the larger community (festivals, temple worship, life cycle rites). For Christians, too, communal practices and rituals remain vital, especially when communities aspire

⁴⁸ See Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*.

⁴⁹ Michelle Voss Roberts, “Practicing the Image of God,” available at <https://tinyurl.com/yx9qpcpo>.

⁵⁰ Kevin Schilbrack articulates the potential for several philosophical approaches to underpin this kind of interdisciplinary work on ritual in “Introduction: On the Use of Philosophy in the Study of Rituals,” in *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–30.

⁵¹ Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews*, 146.

to institutional renewal or societal transformation. Knight, therefore, concludes her study of the psychological process of transforming God-images with recommendations for religious leaders in wider settings. “Because of their holistic approach to faith formation through multiple religious practices,” she urges, “religious communities are ideal places in which people might engage in this transformative process.”⁵² Beyond innovation with language and symbols, community practices of worship, prayer, preaching, education, and pastoral care can contribute to formation that engages the whole self.

Across many kinds of exercises, both individual and communal, and across this interdisciplinary conversation, one of the most important gleanings from the field of ritual studies is the importance of *practice*. Repetition of prayers, creeds, and gestures inscribes habits or values that, under pressure or due to inattention, may be forgotten. For Christians, those that inscribe the image of God in humanity into the imagination are especially important means of resisting the dehumanizing dimensions of social, economic, and political life. “The likelihood of success increases if an ethic can be repeatedly enacted in an effective ritual system,” Grimes writes:

Rituals cultivate values by making them seem inevitable or desirable, then, through practice, rendering them automatic, operating without the necessity for conscious reflection. Rituals associate a set of values with memorable events and recurrent practices by eliciting sentiment and rendering ideologies persuasive. In effective rituals participants do not merely listen to others extolling treasured values; they steep themselves in those values by enacting them in concert with others. Like any practiced activity, a ritual action can eventually seem second nature.⁵³

Ritual practice can overcome the division between conscious aspirations and the emotions, affects, and instincts that undercut them, but this formation takes time.

Communal rituals, in particular, are subject to interpretation, appropriation, and resistance. “Conflict, paralysis, and anomie are likely when a community fails to provide coherence, or, worse, when its practices contradict people’s gut feelings or their shared mythology and ideology,” Haidt observes.⁵⁴ Effective movements for social justice force society to face these contradictions and, slowly, “to achieve ‘cross-level coherence’ between a tradition from which symbols arise, bodily feelings and association, and community endorsement and practice.”⁵⁵ Religious communities—their songs, rhythms, ideals, prayers, and gathering—have been, and continue to be, important drivers of this process. In order to actualize belief in the divine image in humanity, practitioners innovating in this field (ritualizing) will need to negotiate the range of factors—psychological, social, and institutional—that impact the training of elephants.

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⁵² Knight, *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God*, 155.

⁵³ Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 324. This insight is congruent with recent research on neuroplasticity and innovations in the field of activist education. See Beth Berila, *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁵⁴ Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 229.

⁵⁵ Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 229.

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