



Research Article

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Shape-shifting: *TheoArtistry* Poetry as Theological Action Research

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Abstract: This paper describes a creative partnership between a theologian and a poet arranged by the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St Andrews in 2018. The *TheoArtistry* project seeks to reintroduce artists to traditional religious culture and to foster collaborations between academics and art practitioners (Corbett). In this article we discuss and utilise Theological Action Research methodology (Cameron et al.), to explore the process and outcomes of one such collaboration tasked to produce a poem inspired by an Old Testament passage and the theme of “Annunciation.” The researchers in this collaboration drew on a diverse range of cultural forms and accommodated a position of scepticism towards Christian faith. An examination of the cycles of action and reflection in the production of the poem enables conclusions to be made concerning the impact of this interaction upon the collaborators’ theological thought and practice. This section closes with the final poem and a brief team commentary. The final section evaluates the partnership in terms of the *TheoArtistry* goals and shows how it both supported the project and set a challenging precedent for broadening the scope of theological openness and inclusivity in future collaborations.

Keywords: Religion, spirituality, poetry, interfaith, re-enchantment

Setting up the *TheoArtistry* Poets Project

TheoArtistry is an ongoing project run by the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA) at the University of St Andrews. It seeks to reintroduce contemporary artists to traditional religious culture, as well as to encourage them to interact with it with free creative rein (Corbett). The project builds upon precedents such as *Theology through the Arts* (Begbie) which established interdisciplinary teams of artists and theologians in “pods” to collaborate in the creation of “religious art.” In contrast to this predecessor, the *TheoArtistry* collaborations initially featured early career theologians and choral composers in creative partnerships. The original works of art created in these collaborations were based on biblical passages which reflected the theme of “Annunciation”: the human reception of the Divine. This initiative was intended to “re-engage composers with the inspiration that can come from an encounter with Scripture, theology and Christian culture” and thereby illustrate the inspirational impact of theological scholarship on cultural practice (Corbett 2). There was also, however, a hope that these artistic encounters might leave a defining mark as “vehicles of discovery,” revealing something about “the future of theology” (Corbett 9, quoting Begbie 1).

The *TheoArtistry* Composers Scheme resulted in the creation of six new choral pieces by pairings of composers and theologians (MacMillan et al.). As this first phase of collaborative projects drew to a conclusion, the ITIA team adopted a similar method with a different art form—poetry. Building on experience

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from the Composers' Scheme, the theologians were paired with poets to develop responses to the same of scriptural texts used in the creation of the choral works (Corbett 13). For the theologians, the chance to work on the same text with a new partner was intended to enable them to build on the theological insights and discoveries in their previous collaborations.

Forming the Partnership

The *TheoArtistry* Poets' Scheme was a shared venture between ITIA and the annual StAnza Poetry festival. An open call for interest was issued through a variety of social media channels, and six poets were selected for the collaborations. Each poet was invited to rank the six proposed passages reflecting their individual creative interests. This, in turn, determined the theologian-poet pairings.

Within the general aims of *TheoArtistry*, the collaborating-theologian in this instance, Kimberley Anderson, hoped to explore the possibility of an "Annunciation" arising from a secular starting place. In this, Anderson was inspired by the approach suggested by Brown:

If God is truly generous, would we not expect to find him at work everywhere and in such a way that all human beings could not only respond to him, however implicitly, but also develop insights from which even Christians could learn? (6)

Brown's perspective is foundational to Anderson's research into the spiritual potency of popular music. In contrast to some Christian theological approaches, which embrace the arts only when they are shown to fulfil a theologically "acceptable" purpose, Brown's approach acknowledges the freedom of a work of art to speak for itself before imposing predetermined criteria upon it, believing that there will be a connection to the divine which emerges naturally from the profane context (see also: Hart 164).

In her original proposal, Anderson sought to apply this "generous" approach more broadly. She attempted to suspend the theological/religious voice by de-prioritising the requirement to choose a biblical passage; instead, she considered possible outsider reactions to the theme of annunciation. She identified a power imbalance in Christian tradition around annunciations, in which God (or religion) dominates the supplicant. This seemed a potentially fruitful site of exploration for an artistic project. What would happen if the would-be supplicant resisted such an intrusive encounter? A paradigmatically male character, biologically incapable of conception in semiotic terms, might be an almost exact anti-type for the vessel of an annunciation.

Thus, Anderson ultimately selected the passage, Song of Songs 3.6-11, on the basis of its suitability for staging a conflict between man and God. Typologically interpreted as referring to Christ facing his own death in accordance with his Father's will, Anderson described it as offering a suitable constellation of "masculinity, beauty, violence and death" in a draft proposal. Her briefing to prospective collaborators included the following creative challenge:

Oscar Wilde's tutor at Oxford answered a suffragette's question about whether men and women were innately different: "Madam, I cannot conceive" (Nugent 135; Wilde quoted in Norris 25). Given a strong Christian tradition of representing God's relation to humankind in terms of the relationship between a man and a woman or, indeed, as conception, does this pose issues for the religious experience and expression of a man? Do gender stereotypes—such as a still dominant cultural expectation of men to be strong and independent—inhibit men's receptivity to God? In a divine experience, can men "come as they are" and leave without, in cultural terms, changing and perhaps even emasculating themselves significantly? Hopefully, a poet can take inspiration from these concerns, and apply them with me in a lyrical exploration of Song of Songs 3.6-11. The passage depicts a Bridegroom, a character who is at once richly symbolic and tantalisingly mysterious. In terms of gender, the man referred to as "Solomon" arguably toes the line between contrasting conceptions of masculinity: forceful and receptive; powerful and passive. The depiction of this smoky, amorous, combative character will question and challenge conceptions of gender both modern and biblical.

John Bolland, a Buddhist writer and artist living in Aberdeenshire, was selected for this partnership from among the successful applicants.

Negotiating the Remit / Action Research Methods

The project had not, originally, been conceived with reference to Action Research methodology, though participants had been encouraged to reflect theologically and practically on the process. The project timeline is outlined in figure 1.

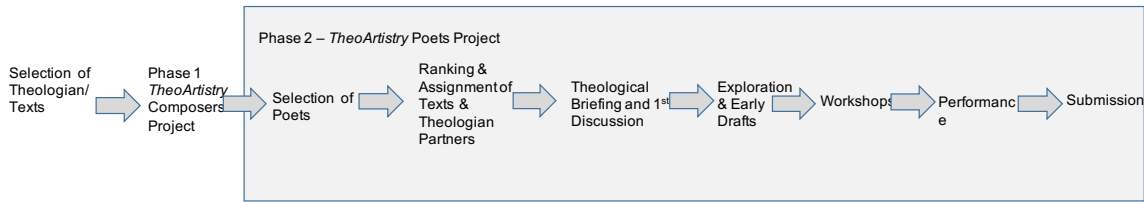


Figure 1. Timeline for the TheoArtistry Poets' Project

The final poem—of no more than 40 lines, and relating to the biblical text—was to be delivered within three months of project commencement. There was no requirement for commitment to Judeo-Christian belief among the collaborators, and no constraint on form or language (Corbett 4-5).

Dr George Corbett, the project's overall coordinator, has articulated two exploratory principles which guide the partnerships:

1. Enabling the theological to inform the creative: “engaging the next generation of [artists] with the extraordinary creative power of Christianity, of a faith that ‘makes all things new’.” (Corbett 19)
2. “[T]o offer a new, open and flexible model for collaborations between theologians and artists that can be adapted in different contexts, with different art forms, and with different styles within those art forms.” (Corbett 16)

In this instance, in addition to the overarching aspirations from ITIA, both collaborators were interested in identifying the spiritual or “enchanted” in everyday life. To pre-empt the risk of didacticism towards her partner, Anderson also entertained a more questioning approach to Christian tradition. This gave room for diverse cultural (and poetic) perspectives to act freely upon the religious, and vice versa.

After the last formal meeting of the scheme, where draft poems were performed, the collaborators made plans to stay in touch and to reflect further on the process. At this stage, Bolland identified the model described for Theological Action Research (TAR) (Cameron et al. 64-69) as a tool for evaluating the collaboration. As well as providing a framework with which to think critically about this practice, it links this partnership to an emerging branch of theology (Practical Theology) to which *TheoArtistry* has not previously been related. With the research questions and motivations described above, the collaboration aligns with all three fundamental traits identified as central to TAR:

- A partnership: Comprising an “insider” (who “owns the practice that is the subject of the research”—in this case, poetry) and an “outsider” team (who “facilitates the research, builds the capacity of the insider team to take part in the research and broadens and deepens the reflection by bringing different knowledge and perspectives”) (Cameron et al. 64). The *equality* of the dialogue partners in this process is asserted and defended wherever possible (49-60).
- A process: “The aim of TAR is discernment of a renewed theology and practice and this is likely to arise from the quality of the relationships built and the quality of the time spent together” (66). The suggested timescale for the collaborations accommodated the development of a relationship, where conversation naturally ranged to include theological reflection and reflection on the process.
- A theological conversation: Conventionally, TAR has addressed the institutional practice of faith-based Christians—for example, in “In a Parish” and “In a Faith-Based Agency” (67, 111, 130). However, it is possible to extend the encouragement of ecumenism within the existing studies to interfaith dialogue, and (potentially) to atheists interested in the “numinous.” An important differentiating characteristic of *TheoArtistry* is the acceptance that the crucial ingredient for theological action research is the willingness to conduct “theological action” and to reflect upon it; a living belief in the theology is an influential component but is not essential in all cases.

Evidently, the action of writing poetry differs in significant way to the actions conducted by a pastoral team or a faith-based agency. Anticipating the objection that writing comprises only a limited form of action, it is important to emphasise that the *TheoArtistry* poems were written to be performed and re-performed both by the poet and the reader, with the intention of invoking powerful reactions from a diverse audience. It is also, of course, possible to view academic research as a kind of action: findings are valuable in a large part because they impact society. Furthermore, in this situation, Anderson took on the role of practitioner with the contribution of creative vision in providing the project's initial brief. On the other hand, art is naturally an exploratory, reflective act; as a poet, Bolland views the creation of an artwork that says something "about" God as, in itself, a piece of research. In comparison with the "outsider" and "insider" roles described above, then, this was arguably an unusually self-conscious and reciprocal process. In this particular partnership, such reciprocity catalysed the potential for questioning and changing poetic, academic and theological practice and convictions.

It is possible to identify the following research questions, which implicitly guided Anderson and Bolland in their first steps together:

1. How does a sustained creative interaction with the proposed biblical passage and cultural question affect an individual (in this case, a poet)'s understanding of it?
2. How does the presence of an academic theologian and arts scholar affect the process, and how does collaborating affect her research on a wider level?
3. How might a poet who is not of Judeo-Christian faith tackle a piece of biblical poetry while remaining authentic to his own convictions?

Throughout this article, the partners use the TAR framework to guide their critical reflection on their experience of the project and to structure the content of this article. Now that the collaboration's background and remit have been discussed, it is possible to describe the reflective process which led to the deployment of drafts, sent to one another and eventually shared with a larger audience. The final poem is then provided, along with a brief authorial commentary. The last sections of the article reflect on the effects that this process has had both on practice and theology, initially for the individuals involved and then within the context of the rest of the *TheoArtistry* project and its overarching aims.

Action & Reflection 1—Explorations

The first stages of this collaboration involved a handover of information from theologian to poet, regarding the biblical passage, related themes and previous artworks. Having selected the passage, Bolland had already developed an impression of the passage. The coming together of the partners was, therefore, a stage where ideas might have been expected to be divergent.

Anderson's previous reflections on *TheoArtistry* issues in the Composers' project formed a key element in this early process of exploration. Initially, she had sought an example of male vulnerability analogous to the Immaculate Conception (Luke 1.28-35), identifying the moment in Genesis 2 when Eve is created from Adam's rib whilst Adam, asleep, experiences a moment of passivity and reproduction parallel to giving birth. This represented a male annunciation analogous to the New Testament paradigm. Adam cries out—"Bone of my bones" (Genesis 2.23, *ESV*)—likening Eve to a body part more core and intimate to him than his own. Since the text finally chosen is about a wedding, it seemed plausible that some of these themes (love; the other; self-giving) might be explored by the Bridegroom, interpolated into a passage where his feelings are otherwise articulated only through metaphor.

During the composer scheme, Anderson had directed the composer, Stuart Beatch, towards Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a potential libretto, appreciating its nuanced portrayal of gender (see Lehnhof). In the final composition, Beatch used this passage to great effect, playing on the idea of male vulnerability to the extent that the Bridegroom is musically "feminised" (Beatch). His use of the line "Myself before me" emphasises the commonalities between the sexes. This portrayal also accommodates homoerotic readings of the institution of marriage and espouses a more liberated model of masculinity than had originally been envisaged.

While Anderson was delighted with Beatch's innovations in the development of the choral work, in initiating the poetry project she revived her original theological interest in exploring how a heteronormative man might find it more difficult to be vulnerable, before a woman or God (or both). Recognising some of the drawbacks of adopting a canonical text such as Milton's, she also sought examples of a more contemporary register for voicing the Bridegroom, proposing Jay Z's 4.44 (Jay Z). This piece, written and released at the same time as Beatch's composition, offered an interesting model. Responding to his wife's previously released album, *Lemonade* (Beyoncé) the rapper apologises for his absence and his flippant treatment of her with direct, humble sincerity. The impact of patriarchal pressures within their relationship is evident, and may have exacerbated his hurtful, "emotionless" behaviour: "If I wasn't a superhero in your face..." (Jay Z). Yet he also presents himself, in awe, before a disarmingly strong and beautiful woman, admitting his fault, weakness and vulnerability, in both distant and near past. This is a powerful cultural move—in the broad context of anxious masculinity as a whole, and also in the social context of this genre. According to the album's producer,

Everything it covers about being a man, being in a relationship, being a father, how you affect your kids. These things don't really get touched on in music, especially in hip-hop. (Coscarelli)

As this exploratory phase progressed, Anderson argued for the potency of hip-hop and grime as models for a masculinity that is contemporary and young, yet still struggling to express vulnerability, in love or faith or anything in between.

In the months leading up to this collaboration, John Bolland was working on a texts exploring the recent history of the North East of Scotland and, specifically, the various forms of enchantment (and disenchantment in Weberian terms) experienced by folk inhabiting that space. He was intrigued by the fundamentalist beliefs held by a number of Christian groups, especially in declining fisher-communities in the area. These groups, especially of Brethren denominations, sustained a belief in biblical inerrancy and eschatological programming in parallel with sophisticated technological practices and traditional superstitions. He was particularly interested in the doubling of lived experience of a proportion of the population who experience the material world of heavy machinery, extreme environmental conditions, material wealth and depleting non-renewable resources as enchanted, purposive and eschatologically programmed. The project's invitation to engage with and respond to a "revealed" biblical text without artistic constraint offered space to explore how revelation and received sacred narrative are both valorised and addressed more pragmatically in a contemporary cultural space.

From the outset, Bolland considered the amorous and/or submissive engagement of the protagonists—the presumption of pre-existent love and faith—as far more of an emotional challenge than other passages offered to the collaborating poets. He identified the masculine combative engagement with the divine that fits with cultural norms of masculinity as a "spiritual comfort zone." For this reason he had been drawn immediately to the account of Jacob wrestling with the angel, and (more obliquely) to the story where Elijah appears to confront the divine, in tempest, earthquake and conflagration, only to encounter the divine, beyond this clamour, in the sound of silence, an inner stillness and emptiness. This pattern of engagement echoed concepts of *samskara* and *shunyata* in Buddhism, the tradition which forms the core of his own spiritual practice (Hahn 73,146-148).

Anderson's feminist perspective on the conflicted role of the Bridegroom, as a reluctant participant in this communion, therefore offered a context in which issues of enchantment and disenchantment with incarnation could be explored. Like Beatch, he noted the gender fluidity of *Song of Songs* from the outset and especially in the first line of 3.6 where the gendered pronoun is explicit in the Hebrew text is unvoiced in English translations: who is this [she] who comes." The pillar of fire and smoke (Exodus, 13.12) sweeping in from the wilderness is articulated (in the Hebrew) as feminine. This, for Bolland, subverted the conventional presumption of the masculine groom as YHWH/Christ and the feminine bride as the Church/congregation, echoing other ritual traditions which interpret the Bridegroom/King as sacrificial victim consecrated to a matriarchal deity (Frazer). This, in turn, generated wider issues of textual authority and the shifts in meaning across language boundaries and faith traditions.

Action & Reflection 2—Exchange of Ideas—Early Drafts

Concerned with these questions, Bolland began to build his own relationship with the Hebrew Bible text as he took the leading role for the next phase of the collaboration: a collation and sharing of notes and ideas which would eventually shape the finished poem. Close engagement with the passage led emphasis on issues of immanence and physicality, which might formerly have been censored in traditional readings. These were both fascinating and uncomfortable to him as a poet and as a man.

In his creative practice, Bolland is sympathetic to the post-modern and post-structuralist perspective that there is “no outside-text” (Derrida 158). This is not to assert that “stuff” does not exist—even the divine may exist. But in poetry, text (or performance) is the only product, and previous texts represent the feedstock; the metonymy for the specific metaphors within the poem (Jacobson). At the beginning of this collaboration, for Bolland, there was no text, only a set of coordinates, however—Song of Songs 3.6-11.

Setting out to establish his own nuanced engagement with the biblical text, Bolland studied and cross-referenced a number of variant translations to develop a sense of the five assigned verses and the Song of Songs as a whole. Three translations into English in the Christian tradition (*Darby Translation, English Standard Version, King James Version*), an English translation of the Hebrew *Tanakh (The Holy Scriptures)* and a poetic transposition (Graves and Erni) were selected. Figure 2 illustrates the variant translations employed and how the poet chose to integrate these into a source text.

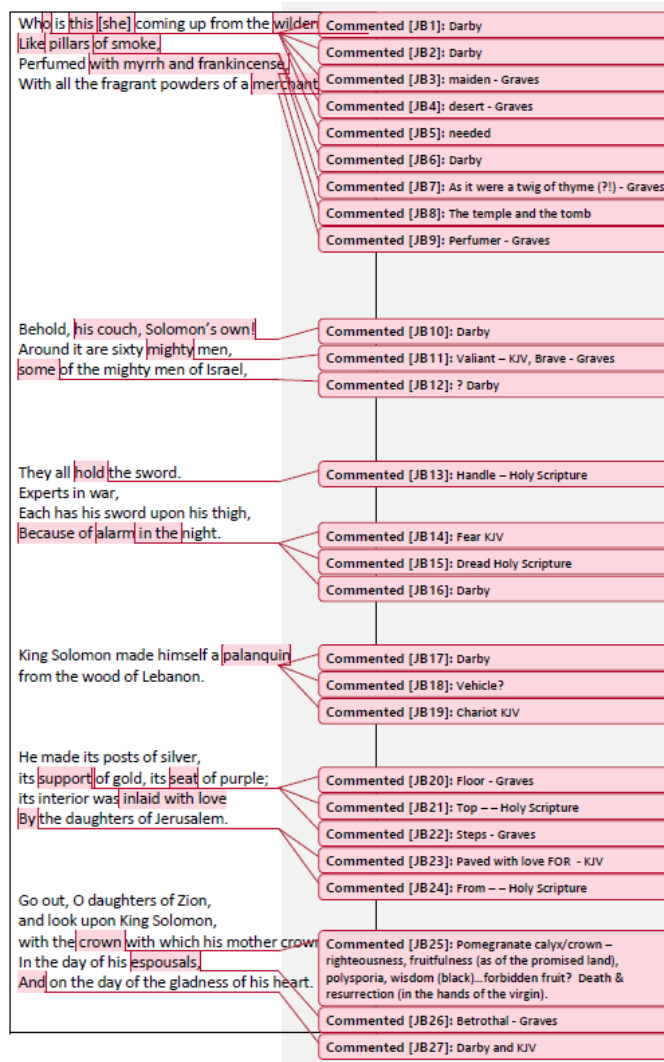


Figure 2. Bolland's composite translation of Song of Songs 3.6-11.

All signifiers are slippery, especially when passed hand-to-hand across three millennia, schismatic faith traditions, diverse ecosystems and multiple language groups. Bolland, who does not read Hebrew or Greek, had to rely on the advice of scholars. At this phase, the role of typology and hermeneutics in the reading of the text was brought into focus. All the imagery in the original text has been read, by biblical scholars and lay readers, as allusive and resonant with other texts and narratives but also as prophetic and typological, e.g. the Groom as Christ, the Bride as Israel/the Church. It is also understood by individual readers in the light of a wider lexicon of narratives, concepts, historical understandings and signs accrued through their life experience.

As with the forbidden fruit of Genesis 3.2, the long history of translation has left its mark on the lexicon of the text. Quinces, pomegranates or apricots become apples; crocuses or daffodils become roses in English translation (Noegel and Rendsburg; Graves). By reviewing variant translations/ transpositions and a wider reading of biblical and “mythological” texts, Bolland began to develop a mind-map reflecting related imagery and narrative tropes of interest, in the context of his own cultural, philosophical and personal context. The final version of this map is shown in figure 3. Theological themes such as typology convolved with structural congruence with other narratives (e.g. Ishtar and Tammuz, Persephone/Aphrodite and Adonis), sensuous imagery and cultural signification (e.g. pomegranates/fecundity/ death) to suggest a repertoire of available imagery and allusion.

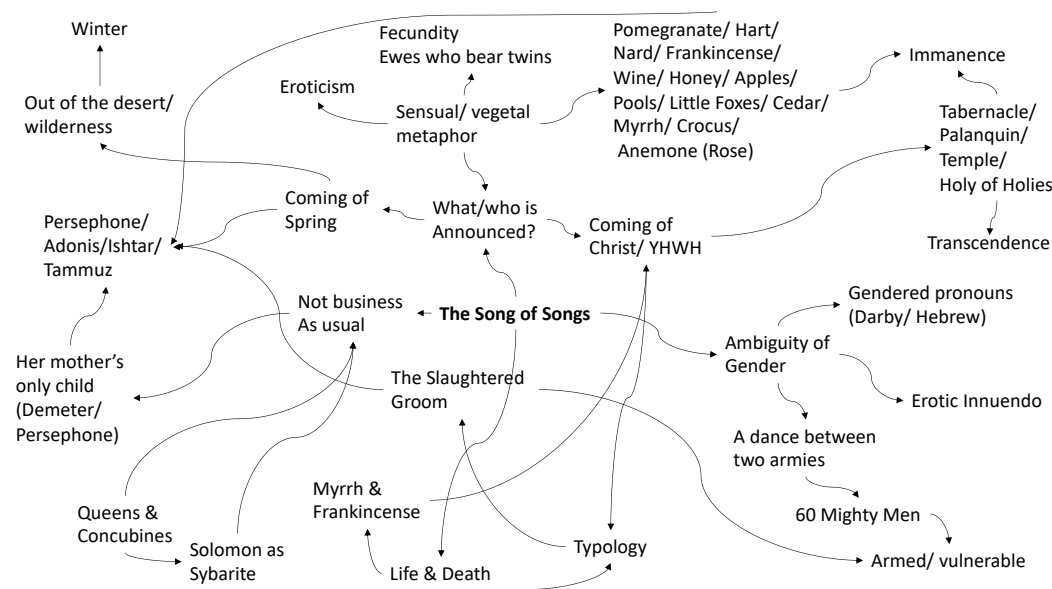


Figure 3. The Song of Songs :themes and Imagery]

Very quickly, a syncretic dimension entered the project as the theologian’s rhetorical intentions blended with the sceptical and exploratory practice of the artist. Anderson acknowledged this, stating “John’s more interested in biblical scholarship that I am,” whilst qualifying that that interest was “literary.”

The conceit of Song of Songs is a love song shared between Bride and Groom and the Daughters of Jerusalem. The language is dense with recurrent sexual and vegetal metaphors, exhorting communion with the world of the senses. This is God in Her immanence, cutting across the grain of conventional patriarchal readings in Judaism and Christianity which identify God with the transcendent groom. Perhaps these phrasings also, covertly, reflect a non-patriarchal scepticism about the male-female binary: the genderless YHWH of the Hebrew text. But the text is also perfumed with frankincense and myrrh, resins used in the embalming of corpses or to conceal the smell of burning flesh. Just as the pomegranate is a symbol of fertility, incense has strong associations with death-rituals. Close reading of the text and its semiotic hinterland in Hellenistic and Mesopotamian mythologies and earlier books of the Hebrew Bible focused attention on immanence and carnality.

As work progressed, Bolland became increasingly aware of his personal resistance to making himself vulnerable to love or grace. He realised that to “Come to Jesus,” to be “Saved,” frightened him. They represented a loss of identity and agency. He recognised that his preference for Buddhist praxis as a route to a necessary emptying and access to grace reflected a need for a spiritual discipline without the demon of a loving, parental God. For Bolland, whatever God “is,” it isn’t “Love”—an insight that further problematized the amorous conceits of the selected passage. Awareness of this resistance and the parallels between practices of emptying (such as *zazen*) and the figurative emptying of God into Man and of the transcendent into the immanent provided the tension upon which the final poem was founded. Was this, then, what the “masculine” culture of transcendence was expected to struggle with? Anderson’s initial conception of heteronormative gender struggles was thus supplemented by Bolland’s instinctive resistance to the loss of autonomy in the suffocating cycle of incarnation.

As it happened, Bolland’s consideration of immanence *within* the text coincided with the collaborators’ discovery of the carnality of sacred art more widely. Intrigued to discover a further contemporary idiom for a fierce and righteous masculinity, Anderson sent Bolland a link to a performance by the grime artist Stormzy. Making use of a heavily vernacular register, modelling a “tough” persona and situating his work against a backdrop of gangs and criminality, Stormzy channels his creative energy and influence into social justice issues. In “Blinded By Your Grace (Pt 2)” (Stormzy), the artist describes a personal transformation in what can easily be called an expression of self and emotion towards God; or, as Bolland describes it, “male openness to grace.”

As a potential model for voicing his draft poem, Bolland considered this example alongside visual work by Peter Howson (*Stations of the Cross, Heller 221*) and Caravaggio (*The Calling of St. Matthew, Madonna di Loretto*); works which ground the sacred and redemptive narrative in its contemporary moment, acknowledging a prodigal “nostalgia for grace” and redemption experienced within the contingencies and miseries of everyday life on the streets, in bars, in dismal doorways.

Each of these artists, engaged with the (re)presentation of “sacred narratives” in the Christian tradition, are also embodiments of a “lived experience” encompassing substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, destitution and profligacy and, in Caravaggio’s case, probable murder. And each chose to locate the exemplary narrative in an immediate present populated by ordinary people in profane places, doing quotidian things. These strategies not only make their art accessible, enabling contemporaries to identify with the sacred protagonists, but insist on the inclusion of the abject, the sceptical and the sinners in the sacred discourse.

3—Action & Reflection—Hip-hop to the Stag Do

During the next phase of collaboration, poet and theologian worked to create a single text capable of being workshopped at the forthcoming *TheoArtistry* festival. This involved several pragmatic decisions for drafting the poem, which centred around the realisation that the poem should be polyphonous, presented in multiple voices in order to reflect the structure of the canonical text and to enable diverse perspectives on the event to be expressed in a single work (see Bakhtin).

The final product was intended to explore the theme of Annunciation and masculine resistance or submission to this “unnatural” experience. For narrative purposes, it seemed important to understand the state of mind of the Bridegroom prior to attendance at his wedding. But it became apparent that each collaborator held differing perspectives on the sequencing of annunciation and communion. This seemed crucial to situating the Bridegroom in that moment. Anderson saw communion (“falling in love”) as preceding annunciation: perhaps the necessary state of receptivity to conception. However, Bolland saw annunciation (“penetration” by God) as preceding communion, like when the prototypically masculine Paul resists Christ before the annunciation of the Damascus Road episode (Acts 9.1-19). These biological metaphors and pre-conceptions seemed to disorder masculine/feminine expectations of the theophanic experience as illustrated in figure 4.



Figure 4. Amalgamating “male” and “female” perspectives ordering annunciation and communion.

Bolland’s perspective, in part mirroring a Roman Catholic perspective, presumes that the fallen “masculine” must make himself “open” and contrite in order to be “saved” and receive Divine grace as a precursor to communion. Conversely, Anderson’s view presumes communion as an essential precursor of reception of a fecundating annunciation. Perhaps the distinction between the two is that the masculine cannot “conceive” without a prior existential shift away from his “fallen” masculinity.

In reading the Song of Songs, Bolland was struck by the absence of Solomon’s groomsmen from the script. In blending the voices of the Bride, the Groom and, as a chorus, the Daughters of Jerusalem, some translations attempt to assign “parts” to the various players (*English Standard Version*) whilst others flatten the text into a single stream of erotic imagery ranging from breathless infatuation to “nudge-nudge” innuendo. The groomsmen, depicted in the biblical text as 60 mighty men armed against the “terror of the night” who carry the Bridegroom out to meet the Bride as she sweeps in from the wilderness are silent. This became a central element informing the composition of the poem. Is masculine resistance to immanence expressed here in metaphors of defensive readiness and confrontation? How would this play out in the poem? The groom and groomsmen have a vast variety of potential attitudes and behaviours, operating (as many modern men *and* women do) in the profane and disenchanting sphere of politics and violence, and yet required to “play their part” in the idealism and vulnerability associated with a wedding ceremony.

The performance of fierce/righteous resistance resonated with the combative machismo and evasive manoeuvring of hip-hop and grime. What would the voices of Solomon’s “posse” sound like? The team experimented with rap tropes and rhythms in early drafts, for example: “We never saw the sign on this Road to Damascus/ Someone oughta had the fuckin decency to ask us.” Although many drafts were discarded in the course of development, this exploration of common ground in a contemporary bridging genre was helpful in agreeing on aesthetic principles for the evolving poem. But the appropriation of rap idioms and styles by an “old white male” from Paisley, no matter how “voiced” the piece, seemed unconscionable. Similar effects had to be achieved using a more authentic personal register and in forms suited to both readability on the page as well as stage performance (a basic constraint of the brief).

For these reasons the final poem—“So Much for the Stag”—was sited in a “missing” element of the wedding ritual—the “Stag Do” in contemporary Scottish culture imagined as a men-only trip to Amsterdam. The voices are those of the groom and his groomsmen. This model consciously facilitated a diversity of voicings, from profanity to wonder, in English and Scots. It also enabled scepticism about the groom’s ultimate commitment to the communion and his virtue, which might be questionable in the light of other biblical representations of Solomon as sybaritic (1 Kings 11) and ruthless (1 Kings 2).

This reinterpretation of the narrative enabled the text to address an emergent element in the partners’ learning: the necessary co-existence of achronic (timeless; a universal truth; the “word of God”) and synchronic (of the moment; historically situated, quotidian, profane); elements in the text which have been partially obscured by the accumulated sanctity and clichés of millennia. Resetting the text off-centre and in modern dress defamiliarises the parable, cancelling its historicity. By situating it within a contemporary yet timeless predicament, it implies that annunciation is always happening to “people like you and me”].

4—Action & Reflection—Widening the Conversation

The *TheoArtistry* Festival was an important moment for the collaboration, as musical, poetic and theological participants came together to discuss their processes and creations in a public forum. By this stage, a long draft of the poem had been written. One feature in the festival was a workshop with other poets to share and give feedback on each other’s work. However, other discussions at the festival echoed key concerns in our research process and impacted decisions.

A general trend emerged during the festival. Music and poetry were perceived to be different in quality and to present differing potentials for reflecting transcendent/traditional versus immanent/contemporary material. Occasionally, pejorative views were expressed about the quality of some “popular” forms of music (e.g. hymns). Though the most extreme views were anomalies, it is a potential critique of the composer scheme overall that, due to the specified genre, it focused on established cultural and religious forms. Despite the new pieces’ theological and artistic innovativeness and often impressive accessibility, they had a limited distance to travel, from a theology department to the chapel in the same University. When the time came to discuss the six new poems, however, their “earthiness” emerged as a common theme: from texts in contemporary Scots and Shetlandic to a prose-poem echoing a comic-book/graphic art paradigm, from poem-shaped poems to dense, stream-of-(sub-)consciousness prose poetry. This generic diversity and tonal variety appeared to stem from the relative technical independence of poets—general artisans—in comparison to composers tied into an almost industrial process by the delivery capabilities of choristers and choral practices.

Debates during the festival around inclusivity and the role of “high” and “low” art as vehicles for theological exploration (if not liturgical worship) encouraged Bolland to exercise greater freedom in (re) stating theological questions with integrity in an earthier and more profane register. The conversation prompted further thought by presenting poetry, in a theological light, as a radical form. Michael Symmons Roberts, a poet with extensive experience of addressing theological issues in his work, singled Bolland out to commend his bravery in asking a difficult question in his poem. Mentoring the poets on the scheme, he articulated a number of key insights which informed the final draft of Bolland’s poem:

1. In engaging with theological themes, there is the need for the poet to be courageous and to speak powerfully about big ideas and experiences: “Just flash your poetic license and wade right in.”
2. Never ask a question in the poem that you know the answer to—the poem is an exploration (for both poet and reader), not an act of transmission or preaching.
3. The poem must stand on its own merits in a typical poetry reading—which is more likely to be in a pub or a coffee shop than a chapel or a festival venue. It should not require previous textual knowledge in order to be understood.

Symmons Roberts facilitated the critical workshop at the end of the festival, in which all six *TheoArtistry* poets contributed comment and reflection on each other’s work, testing the integrity of the work against its intended purpose and reflecting of the strength and weakness of the deployed language and imagery. The draft poem Bolland offered was, consciously, long and exploratory. He used the workshop to test the partnership’s thematic and aesthetic choices with fellow practitioners whilst aware of the need to compress the poem, formally and semiotically. It was agreed that retaining energy and tension was necessary represented to express masculine resistance in the subjects.

The final draft of the poem will be included alongside the work of the five other poets in a forthcoming ITIA publication. This text appears below in figure 5.

Collaborators’ Commentary

In resetting and voicing the response, Bolland’s aesthetic choices were informed by both textual and typological references.

Setting: Bolland chose to set the poem in a formal yet bacchanalian contemporary wedding ritual of his native region. The “Stag Do” setting enabled the “polyphonous” perspectives of the groomsmen and the Bridegroom regarding the imminent nuptials to be voiced. Amsterdam is one of many “conventional” locations for such events.

Biblical and syncretic allusions: The choice of Amsterdam also reflects the scholarly view that the Song of Songs is a post-exilic composition. The canals of Amsterdam echo those of Babylon. Similarly, the disenfranchised sex workers of the red-light district allude to the “sixty Queens and eighty concubines,” and the reference to Benaiah (1 Kings 1-2) reflects “Solomon’s” propensity for pragmatic violence. In

So much for the stag.

Who is she - coming from the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant ?

Last night we should have been a bacchanal,
 seeking the fruit before the flower, high,
 heelster-gowdie on space cakes, psilocybin, metaphors.
 Like foxes run berserk, the girls along the banks of those canals
 proffered the business-as-usual – lace and lash. We all went well-protected and dead hard.
 But He was having none of it, immune to innuendo, scribbling
 empty vows on sodden beer mats. Frantic. Shape-shifting.

I spill my wine and watch it pool like blood upon the table top,
 coagulating into rubies spaced by the stillness of that fatal process –
 water to wine to blood to stone - the must, the ripening and see
 amongst this tinsel righteousness,
 the irresponsibility of things,
 the simple emptiness of letting go.

His i-phone ringing out (the stupid cunt),
 we rallied back at the Liederplein, those of us still upright in the morning damp,
 abiding on espresso and red bull. We feared
 he was face down in a canal or OD-d in a stairwell near the Rembrandthuis
 or shacked up with some cabin-girl. The cunt
 was not supposed to take this business seriously – it's all
 just a charade we're acting out the meantime knowing
 that we all need love. But should still check the price tag on the goods.

Let's disambiguate. I bade Benaiah drag that boy out of the sanctuary.
 We bled him like a goat. (Shalom). Yet here I'm putting on a show,
 jangling with good intentions, stinking of Old Spice.
 I know Her perfumes mask dead meat and menstrual blood. She's one-big-ask
 and dolled up like an angel - but She's true. Her ears comb every nuance from the breeze.
 The soft mouth oozes honey. The morning dogs are barking. My hair is wet with dew.

He thought, by then, he'd thrown off our pursuit.
 A plastic bag from HEMA slowly sank
 where two swans floated on the Prinzengraacht. They preened
 their Teflon-feathered purity
 above the needles, prophylactics, douts and sediment.
 Beyond him, in a cabin-door, a maid was mopping at a carpet-stain.
 Heads aching, bellies sour, (which is to say incarnate and alive)
 we hovered after him into Her wintry promise.

John Bolland 2018

Figure 5 So Much for the Stag

contrast, Bolland exploits the metaphor of the received texts by, for example, acknowledging the function of perfumes to mask the smells of life and death. Similarly, he extends the simile of the “hind” to that of the “stag” thereby alluding to other mythic hunters doomed for either being loved-by or daring to look-upon the goddess (e.g. Tammuz, Adonis, Acteon).

The spiritual in the profane: Bolland sites the Bridegroom's encounter with the spiritual and enchanted (annunciation, receptiveness, love) in the profane and disenchanting (incarnation, sex, intoxication).

The Bridegroom is receptive to Her/her “one big ask” and moved by the “Teflon-feathered purity” of the Divine but the Song of Songs acknowledges, “unproblematically,” sexual pleasure: the repeated use of the taboo “cunt” demands recognition of this whilst doubling the meaning by employing it as an affectionate-pejorative term in the groomsmen’s masculine, vernacular register.

Structure: The poem was cut to 36 lines - a format of 8-6-8-6-8 line stanzas. This self-consciously exploits “two and a half” sonnet lengths, using octave and volta to alternate voices and perspectives, but with an implied missing volta at the end. Something is left unsaid: the form of the poem, therefore, encodes the incompleteness of the journey towards communion/annunciation.

Reflection Leading to New Practice and Theology

The insights derived from Bolland’s poetic interaction with the biblical text and accompanying cultural questions will be outlined in response to the first research question articulated in our initial framing of the project. After this, the role and learnings of the theologian in the process (question 2) will be considered, before we deal with how a secular poet found authenticity expressing himself in a sacred space (question 3).

In engaging with the text and its hinterland, Bolland deepened his understanding of the consubstantiation of achronic and synchronic aspects of sacred text. In order to engage fully, the poet’s more naturally ironic readings of the said hinterland had to be integrated into an accessible vehicle for shared meaning and a wider understanding of openness and resistance to the Divine. This deepened understanding of how the disenchanting and enchanting might be sustained in a single experience will inform Bolland’s projects in the future.

Sustained textual engagement allowed the passage to become analogous to a *koan* (a contemplative riddle) for Bolland through which to examine personal and universal predicaments and consider other imaginable readings. As a Buddhist poet lapsed from a Roman Catholic heritage, Bolland began to re-engage with Christian conceptions of grace and faith and deepened his awareness of a contemporary “nostalgia for grace” and of resistance to calling which may be characteristic of many within post-secular culture. These reflections prompted an (as yet incomplete) disentangling of the nature of such resistances—for example, to immanence and emptying and to contingent cultural signifiers (e.g. a masculine/patriarchal signification of the Divine). There was, in the moment, a reactive impulse to “queer” the narrative and achieve a more fluid and progressive transposition which distanced the narrative from gender-binaries. This “queer” impulse is present in, but does not overcome, the poem’s polyphony; the feminine is portrayed as pragmatic and disenchanting, yet the Bridegroom, despite his fear of commitment and the bravado he shows among his men, is taking love, sex and commitment seriously in conventional gender terms.

Anderson’s impact on the poem as a theologian was in providing challenge and encouragement for Bolland to pursue his difficult question. The partners’ shared interest in the immanent and physical led to a collaborative espousal of these elements, which have not always been brought out in religious art or explorations of *Song of Songs*. Anderson’s advocacy of the value of the physical from a theologian’s perspective carries it out of the experimental, sometimes transgressive world of the arts into the realm of mainstream theology. This does not dilute its impact but rather reinforces this advocacy of the physical: as well as being exciting for the imagination, the acceptance of this carnal poem in a theological setting bolsters its intellectual and conceptual significance. The conjunction of the “carnal” and the “incarnate,” cognate terms which have sometimes been kept for very separate worlds, was implicit for a long time throughout the partnership.

This same conjunction—where “the carnal” pertains both to the physical/emotional and to the everyday - catalysed a shift in Anderson’s approach to her research, from analysing music as a postmodern “text” towards incorporating surveys and other ethnographic work to gauge the broader, holistic and experiential reaction to the music. The project encouraged her to consider music as a movement with “effects” rather than merely “meaning” and has demonstrated that theology and spirituality have a place in this discourse.

Paradoxically, the above point also proved to be a substantial yet fruitful point of difference in the collaborators’ evaluation of the poem. The piece was self-consciously designed to have meaning beyond

the University and the chapel. The collaboration was intentionally polyphonic: an expression at the crossroads, blending theology and art, faith and scepticism, masculine and feminine, “high” and “low” culture, past, present and future. But would the poem really have much of an effect on the lives of the general public? How do the typical middle-class audience at the StAnza poetry festival compare with that of Stormzy, broadcast on mainstream and social media? Even if the poetry takes us out of the chapel and into the theatre, and ultimately into bars and cafés, there are still many boundaries yet to cross. Anderson prioritised simplicity, and mass contemporary, even commercial, appeal in her aesthetic standards. Bolland’s practice implies a greater investment in erudition and textual authority and the idea that the art-work should be “timeless.” In an apparent role reversal, then, it is Bolland who has more faith in the transcendent.

The collaboration also, however, emphasised the similarities between the poet’s and the theologian’s practices: both may, in some contexts, be conceived as acts of contemplative removal from the world and a dedication to something else that is less obvious but perhaps more profound. The poem placed both participants in the shoes of the prospective Bridegroom at his most vulnerable; suspending his life in the real world to anticipate the action of self-giving; reviewing his options. Did the partnership’s collaborative interest in the biblical text then uncannily reproduce the action of the “stag” in the final poem: “scribbling / empty vows on sodden beer mats. Frantic. Shape-shifting”? (Bolland)

This role of the text as a mode of disengagement from the world might answer the question as to how Bolland managed to remain authentic whilst writing a religious poem as a sceptic. This challenge was, evidently, one shared through the centuries by artists engaged, institutionally or personally, with “sacred” or canonical subject matter. The process surfaced the tension between fidelity to the shared object of collaboration (the co-mission), and the artistic subversion which individuates the expression and makes it real (or more real?) for artist and audience.

For the partnership, the supposedly sacred text served as a third, mediating partner in this conversation; a partner which, it is important to acknowledge, is good at affording heterodox as well as doctrinally compliant meanings. This permitted the poet to empathise with a religious perspective whilst holding space for innovation and subversion. With this built relationship, it was possible to invest personally—and even believe, in a literary sense—in this sacred site of meaning.

Learnings for TheoArtistry Research

In accordance with ITIA’s aspirations at the inception of the *TheoArtistry* partnerships, this collaboration engaged poet and theologian with the creative power of Christianity and the instrumentality of art as a vehicle for exploration. The comparatively equal power structure, reflected in Bolland’s deep textual engagement and Anderson’s hands-off mentoring in theological detail was helpful, avoiding didacticism and provoking dialogue. Bolland’s approach to the text and its motifs was sceptical at times, but the parallels discovered by both collaborators between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Buddhism constitutes shared learning. The Christian tradition, previously experienced as a negative power relationship by the poet, was explored and partially reconceived and redeemed in a space which did not require it to be accepted totally or dogmatically.

The second aim of *TheoArtistry* (i.e. facilitating lasting relationships between theologians and those practically involved in contemporary art production) was realised through this partnership. Although the original aims were expressed as “growing dialogue about the creative power of Christianity,” this collaboration demonstrated that Christianity can also contribute to interfaith dialogues surrounding the creative power of the spiritual: affirming the sacramental potential of the arts in terms which include, but are not confined to and are not uncritical of, Christianity. This resonates with Bolland’s creative interest in the doubling of (dis/re)enchanted experience, but also with discussion of spiritual experiences in other “secular” arts (for example, the “magic” described as surrounding the highest moments in some rock performances) (Kennedy).

As a consequence of this scheme, both collaborators have sought to maintain contact and collaborate further with some of the most spiritually critical and inquisitive artists who participated in the schemes.

Further evidence of the blossoming of this particular community is the poet cohort's decision to exchange and share biblical passages, along with the theologians' commentaries. These exchanges have emerged organically, outwith the formal structures of the original project. The fruits of these some of these multiple collaborative attempts will be released in the form of a pamphlet in the near future.

Conclusions

In this collaboration, there are many points where the theological paradigm has been stretched, to a point where the partners wondered whether we might have overstepped the boundaries and taken too many liberties. Interrogative and then interfaith; one of the other composers on the scheme joked that perhaps the theologian in this partnership had simply set out to be controversial. Such an assertion is, in fact, not far from the truth; controversy *can* be a promising sign that boundaries are being crossed constructively. We were by no means the only partners to create a provocative poem; after all, as Symmons Roberts says, good poetry asks difficult questions and requires bravery. To their credit, ITIA, *TheoArtistry* and the audiences involved never criticised or impeded these choices; on the contrary, they allowed them to flourish, in a way which reflects the "generosity" described by Brown, which is perceived in God and, in this case, is reflected in theologians.

Generosity and open-mindedness are appropriate principles, also, for facilitating action research. A substantial, interdisciplinary volume is currently in press which details the collaborations between the theologians and composers, alongside important theological reflections on topics from biblical typology to inclusive theological aesthetics. Detailing the process of this first collaboration was a significant challenge for Anderson, following a previously unfamiliar methodology. Nevertheless, with the hindsight of further work for this project, including the fertilising process of reflecting extensively with Bolland, the potential for such theological collaborations seems to have been demonstrated. It is the hope of both partners that these conversations might continue for years to come.

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