

AAR & SBL Southeastern Regional Meeting 2022, Florida State University
Theme: “New World Coming—Religion, Imagination & Possibility”

This hybrid conference explores how religious practitioners as well as religion scholars mobilize the imagination to create new worlds of human agency and understanding. Our imaginations are uniquely capable of generating the critical distance required to shape alternative visions of the future, whether utopian or dystopian. Prophets, millenarians, scriptural and ritual innovations, and movements on behalf of human and civil rights have all testified to the world-making power of religious imagination.

Through imagination, we articulate new perspectives that give power and direction to existence. For scholars of religion, the question of how imagination informs the creation of texts and ritual practices is paramount. At the same time, imagination also stimulates academic inventiveness. How, then, are the imaginative process and imaginative production different and similar for prophets and professors? What are the conditions that make imagination and its representation possible and how do religious and academic thinkers conceptualize creativity and engage in their respective imaginative tasks? Why do some imagine new worlds that sustain the status quo and others, radical reform?

The Latin root of the word, “imagination,” offers clues. *Imago* means both image and echo, shadow and ancestor, metaphor and portrait. It evokes what we typically mean by art and poetry as well as religion. The word implies that the act of representation is itself creative, enduring death like an ancestor, recalling the past like an echo, or depicting emerging realities like a portrait—all in ways that can both trouble and console. The imagination, instead of just reflecting or obscuring reality, generates it. It is therefore a crucial public resource, capable of moving societies toward repression or renewal, especially during and after moments of crisis, such as the one in which we find ourselves—of global pandemic, rising authoritarianism, threats to climate and ecology, and violence against people of color, women, and sexual minorities. How can human societies imagine better futures for all?

We invite participants to focus on how sacred and scholarly imaginations inform, reshape, and redirect worlds of human experience—in both past and present, writing and performance. We encourage investigations of classic topics and approaches through both textual and ethnographic analyses; interrogations of theory and method, including studies of academic figures, genres, and currents; and inquiries into a range of other topics, including contemporary issues, such as prison abolition, intersectionality, public health, and social justice. Please imagine others!

Bibliographical Notes

The trope of imaginative creativity pervades our field with works such as Lanternari’s *Religions of the Oppressed* (1960), Burrige’s *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (1969), Tracy’s *Analogical Imagination* (1981), Fernandez’s *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (1982), Smith’s *Imagining Religion* (1982), Collins’ *Apocalyptic Imagination* (1984), Le Goff’s *Medieval Imagination* (1985), Ricœur’s *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (1995), Bednarowski’s *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (1999), Moosa’s *Gazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (2005), Pui-lan’s *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (2005), Noel’s *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (2009), Taylor’s *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2009), Watling’s *Ecological Imaginations in the World Religions* (2009), and Jennings’ *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (2010).

Other notable works include Olupona’s *City of 201 Gods: Ifé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (2011), Dieleman’s *Religious Imaginaries: The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter* (2013), Ratti’s *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (2013), Ando’s *Roman Social Imaginaries* (2015), Feitler’s *Imaginary Synagogue: Anti-Jewish Literature in the Portuguese Early Modern Period* (2015), Mroczek’s *Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (2016), Barton and Boyarin’s *Imagine No Religion* (2016), Crawley’s, *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (2016), Ohnuma’s *Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination* (2017), Weisenfeld’s *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (2017), Jarrett Zigon’s *War on People: Drug User Politics and a new Ethics of Community* (2018), and Gilmore’s *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition* (2021).