

# **“Imaging” Light and Theophany in the process of Salvation: A case-study of an outstanding Japanese woman artist, Yoko Makoshi**

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## **Introduction**

In this article, I would like to consider how significant ‘imaging’ light is for contextualizing theology, focusing images of an outstanding Japanese woman artist Yoko Makoshi (1934- ) through a case-study. In her pictorial images, ‘imaging’ the image of light took the important role as theophany in the process of salvation from her despair. Using her *imaginal* images as methodology<sup>1</sup>, viz., ‘imaging’ one can approach not only the conscious level but also the unconscious level. ‘Imaging’ means not only an image, but also a human act resulting from the imaging of invisible forces through pathos which can be seen in the case of Yoko. In order to express this dynamic creativity, I would like to use the adjective gerundial ‘imaging’ rather than the nominal ‘image’ and the nominal ‘imagination’.

In the Bible, the images of light signify salvation, and have profound meanings. In the Hebrew Bible, "The LORD is my light and my salvation" (Ps.27:1)<sup>2</sup>, and in the New Testament, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John.8:12) "God is light." (I John.1:5)

Firstly, I touched on the reason why it is necessary to discuss the role of the image of light in North East Asian contexts. Secondly, I focused on how essentially the image of light works in the process of salvation through a case-study on images of Yoko Makoshi. For it is meaningful to know concretely how to encounter light in the process of salvation. Thirdly, considering her concrete case in relation to the image of light in the Bible, it is important to throw light on the significant role of ‘imaging’ the image of light as theophany in the process of salvation, in order to take a step of contextualizing theology forward in our struggling realities.

## **I. The Necessity of ‘Imaging’ the Image of Light in Contextualising Theology**

‘Imaging’ the image of light gives power to people who long for standing up in their difficult situations. Exactly the image of light is people’s light towards their hope in their contexts.

Some artists long for Christianity to be contextualised in their North East Asian contexts. Taking their opportunity to grasp the image of light in their Christian faith, they were to cut the cycle of the circulating cosmological world in North East Asian contexts to open a new dimension and to give a direction toward hope.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is especially meaningful to deliberate the image of light in contextualising theology in Asia.

Furthermore, the image of light is an archetypal image too. Many cosmologies begin their accounts of the creation with the emergence of light or the sun.<sup>4</sup> Lamps, candles and torches are used in church, in temples, on altars, at tombs, in various religious rites, and on special occasions. Iconographically, Mary’s figures and Jesus Christ’s figures have a halo surrounding their head or their whole body. In Buddhism, Amida Buddha has the halo of infinite rays emanating from his head. In Feng shui, light is energy.<sup>5</sup> We cannot help considering the image of light in relation to our religious and spiritual experiences in any contexts.

## **II. The Significant Role of the Light of Image in the Process of Salvation**

Yoko Makoshi (1934- ), a Japanese woman artist and a professor of art at the graduate school of Tama Art University in Tokyo, always emphasized that to paint images, ‘imaging’, gives her life and imagination is indeed the moment of her salvation<sup>6</sup>. She expresses within each painting that salvation and soaring from the depth of suffering and despair are human hope which can shine like a guiding beacon through the utter darkness. Her art works are deeply related to her life.

On canvass what she created are great dramas of humanity as colours and brushwork play out the themes of life and death, love and loneliness, hope and despair, and Heaven and Hell. In her painting, we find a deep spiritual prayer that gushes forth from the bottomless depths of human emotions.<sup>7</sup> She said: “I cannot live without painting, which for me is an act as practicing spiritual and ascetic exercise,” and “I feel the omnipresence of life throughout the universe, and I thank God for being given life. By

expressing myself, in my painting, I will revive from death.”<sup>8</sup>

For Yoko, colors mean light and bring healing and salvation, especially yellow color symbolizes brightness of life and the earth.<sup>9</sup>

### **Spiritual and Religious Influences by Parents**

Yoko spiritually and religiously had been influenced by her parents. Her father was a lawyer and had defied death for justice’s sake. In his later life, he finally became a Zen Buddhist and attained spiritual enlightenment and peace through the ideas of Zen Buddhism. Her mother was a devout Christian and was always busy working unsparingly on behalf of her family, friends and neighbors. Her mother gave Yoko the leather-bound Bible with gold inscriptions on the cover, and it is her treasure. Yoko can believe God’s existence through her mother’s faithful life. Her mother connects her with Jesus Christ. She said: “All great artists are religious, and should be so. This is the origin of art.”

### **Her Life and William Blake**

Her encounter with the book of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by William Blake (1757-1827) was crucial during her Tokyo Women’s Christian College days. Blake was an English poet, painter, printmaker, and a great visionary of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England. Blake asserted that only through the resurrection of the imaginable ‘the Prophet’s spirit’ could mankind achieve harmonious unity between the opposing powers of reason and intuitive passion. His concept of Jesus Christ was closely akin to the polytheistic beliefs of East Asian religions. In the first sentence of her graduation thesis on William Blake, she wrote: “There is no art apart from the human condition.”<sup>10</sup> This phrase typified her stance as an artist. She always repeated the phrase, and continued to assert that without the existence of humans there would be no religion, nor ‘God and Devil,’ ‘heaven and hell,’ ‘reason and sensitivity,’ ‘philosophy and science,’ ‘beauty and ugliness,’ and ‘love and hate.’ She had not followed Blake’s drawing style, but had lived in Blake’s world. After her graduation, she entered Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music, and her career as an artist started. Literally, her graduation thesis on Blake became her guide in her art works.

### **Her Images of Light in the Process of Salvation**

Let us consider her images of light in her journey from a severe destiny to her salvation.

### a) Expecting the Coming of Dawn in Chaos

In the third-year at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music, she married a classmate who was one year younger than she, in 1963, and the couple held their joint exhibition in 1966. Moreover, she won awards from major Exhibitions in 1967 and 1968. It seemed that she would have a promising future as an artist and a wife. Fortuna, however, twisted their life. Her husband went through a serious manic-depressive phase, and could not continue working as a painter. The sudden outbreak of his disease forced her to work for living expenses, nursing him, and painting. She did everything



<1> People Waiting for Dawn,  
1967, 162.1x130.3cm

possible that could be of benefit to her husband and nursed him devotedly. In 1967, she received the Mrs. H. Award from Institute of Women Painters for 'People Waiting for Dawn.' <1> In the beginning stage of darkness, she was expecting the coming of dawn.

### b) The Pitch-Dark in Despair and Agape

Unless her husband took psychotropic medicine, he usually fell into an extremely unsettled condition, in which even reading a newspaper proved difficult.<sup>11</sup> His violence led to him breaking all window panes in the house. He was tormented by its after-effects until his death.<sup>12</sup> In 1981, she painted the

'Struggle of Life' and the 'Woman Embracing the Sun'. These tell us her days. The latter is akin to the 'Pieta' that Mary embraces her suffering Son Jesus. In 1980 her father who had supported her secretly died. She lost the big person in her hardship. In hindsight, along the path Yoko followed, her style in 1980s – the defiguration and recomposition of the human form – seems to trace her psychic reality in the struggle of Yoko and her husband for their survivable life. In the 'Space for Prayer' (1982), the praying hands are bloody red color and tears are overflowing on her lashes. This prayer shows us that she seeks



<2> The Pitch-Dark, 1986, 60.6x70.7cm

for God in the midst of the limit of patience. Believing that he was holding up the life and career of his wife Yoko, her husband attempted to commit suicide several times. Each time she came through in the clutch of his attempt, and she realized how important human life is and how very slight and slim the difference between life and death us. She came to believe more deeply the real existence of God living in no other creatures but in humans, and the God in humans responding to the Universal God. This belief was strengthened by her experiences in the wilderness through her traveling abroad, which she called “A World Pilgrimage.” She depicted ‘Indian Flute Player’ (1983), ‘Clown Dancing under the Moon’ (1983), ‘Person Traveling’ (1986) and so on. The ‘Lying giant’ came from her images at Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. In the wilderness she encountered the nature of the human and saw a light. It is a point of connection between the physical and metaphysical spaces and of uniting both within her imaging.

Spring of 1987, her husband killed himself, when she was in hospital because of a cycling accident that broke her pelvis and an arm. During the sixth day of her stay in hospital, she felt a presentiment of his death, but she could not save his life, because she could not move in the hospital bed. His last words were written, “For me, living yet more means getting in your way. To save you, there’s no choice for me but to die.”<sup>13</sup> Her heart was torn by grief. She could not see God, disliked herself much more than any other person, kept facing the concept of death, and thought of the crucified Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> She often looked back at those days and said: “The life for us has been kept by Agape.”

### **c) The Sun’s Rising and the Coming Light to Darkness**

In only two months after his death, she painted the ‘Dialogue of Life’ (1987), while still walking on crutches. ‘The Sun is Rising’ (1987) was the second painting after his death and was exhibited at an annual major exhibition. She felt the sun rose after dark night invariably, and wanted to verify her living will again by herself in that painting. In the same year, she expressed her grief on ‘Tribute to Dawn’, ‘Time of Ordeals’, ‘When Tinged with the Sun’ and ‘Two Loves’. In 1988, the following year of his death, she depicted ‘Human Bond’, ‘Live Dances - Immortal Love’, ‘King and Queen’, ‘Seeing through’, ‘Birth Under the Moon’, ‘Orpheus 1988’ and ‘Daybreak’. The human eyes in some of those paintings seem to witness her will



<3> Pouring Light, 1990, 121.1x145.5cm

to contemplate and to see through her despair in the bottom of life. She painted a theme of lying human repeatedly, such as 'Lying Giants' (1986), 'Lying Down on the Earth' (1988), 'To the Earth' (1990) and 'Throwing herself on the Earth' (1998). She said that the person held a cinerary urn and lay down in 'To the Earth'. In the midst of despair, the human could only lie down on the earth, and then from top to toe receives abundant graces from the Mother Earth and Mother Nature. It is a light for hope in despair.

In 1990, she expressed such graces and love in 'Mercy', 'Motherhood', 'Pouring Light' and 'Smile'. In 'Pouring Light' <3>, hands above the middle respond to the yellow circle as light. When perceiving warmth as graces, love, hope, and light, and being filled with warmth, new energy springs from the inside. In 1991, this new power expressed as an image of birds in 'Distant Dream', 'Invited by Phoenix', 'Resurrection', 'Soaring Far in the Distance', and as images of her living volition in 'The Oath of Human Goodness', 'For Tomorrow', 'Hope', and 'Start in Life'. From her jostling with despair and hope, an image of bird is flying out.

In 1993, taking a phrase of the Bible "They make night into day; 'The light,' they say, 'is near to the darkness.'" (Job.17:12), Yoko painted the 'Light Is Coming Close to Darkness' <4>. In it, appear her three characters; a person lying on the earth, one spreading out one's arms on high towards light, and the other spreading one's arms like an angel



**<4> Light is Coming Close to Darkness, 1993**

approaching from the above. Regarding this painting, J.E. Forbes, the Director of Long Island Museum in the USA, stated, "the mysterious traces ... allow us to sense recuperative light ... The sincere artist seems to be looking at an icon as a metaphor for the invisible religious light. Her images are not merely abstractions but also metaphors for her exploration of man's isolated existence in a vast, empty world. Makoshi's art reveals that light we need in here with us and in us."<sup>15</sup>

In 1993, she held a solo exhibition in Paris, which her husband had really expected for her and she explored its possibilities at art galleries in Paris by herself to

actualize it.

#### **d) The Moment of Kairos - Standing Up**

In 1994, two paintings of Yoko show the moment that a person lying down is standing up. This can be said to be the Kairos. In the 'River of Humanity', the central spiral images seems to mean a movement that a person lying down who has been filled with graces will live responding to light. The 'Get Up! For a Person Lying Prone' <5> focuses on the connecting moment with the person's volition and graces, that is, the



<5> Get Up! For a Person Lying Prone, 1994, 181.8x227.3cm

moment of standing up. It is her rebirth. This dynamic moment is the moment of grasping the invisible with our will and giving it a form. Its imaging an image is imagination, viz., the Salvation.

Actually, in the same year, she was awarded the Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art Grand Prix, because her continuous works of high spirituality on a human theme was appreciated and her vivid colors and boisterous brushwork on canvas brimming over with energy usually overwhelms viewers.<sup>16</sup>

#### **e) Own Light in Rebirth**

In recent years, Yoko expressed her experiences of the image of light in her salvation process in many works, such as 'Prayer for an Abundant Harvest' in 2002; 'Flower's Light' <6>, 'Light at Daybreak', 'Flickering light' 'Sky Becomes Bright & Someone is Stretching out His Hands to Me', 'People Scooping up Light', and 'The River of Humanity: In Streams of the Fate' in 2003; and 'The River of Humanity: a Vision of Sun' in 2004. She holds the image of light firmly by her arms. Now, her images of light are not only daylight and moonlight which come from



<6> Flower's Light, 2003

heaven naturally, but also flower, an ear of rice and humans which belong to the earth.

After grasping pouring light from God in midst of her pitch-dark to stand up, consequently, she gains a new light as her own fruits which her severe work brought to her through the process of salvation. The light from God becomes her own light. In other words, God's light has incarnated in her.

### **III. Consideration: 'Imaging' Light and Theophany and Salvation**

The case of Yoko Makoshi showed that 'imaging' light is theophany for her. When she perceived various lights in her life and expressed those experiences in her art works through 'imaging' light, her outer reality in her life also changed. Her inner experiences and outer reality corresponded to each other, and both coincided mutually. 'Imaging' light was theophany in the process of salvation for her.

In the Bible, "light" is employed to signify the revelation of God<sup>17</sup>, and symbolizes the presence of God.<sup>18</sup> In the process of salvation, the image of light gives power to the human and takes a significant role, as mentioned above. Psychologically, the image of light shining into darkness brings movement of a new life in human depth.<sup>19</sup>

The human does not go to the place where God's light exists, but God comes to people to light up their lamp and lightens their darkness. (Ps.18:29) It can be said that for Yoko Makoshi God was the "fountain of life" and in God's light she saw light. (Ps.36:9) If she could not have absolute trust in light which is pouring from God, if she could not see through light in her darkness, could she have any energy to stand up in darkness where she had to be lying down? "When I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me." (Mic.7:8)

God's light comes not only to the person but also to the nation. In Isa. 42:6f, light represents the manifestation of justice<sup>20</sup> to the nation, and the salvation of the blind and the oppressed who sit in darkness. God's light brings justice to the oppressed and sight to the blind. Jesus also healed the blind to give light to their eyes, that is, seeing that light equates "en-lightenment", and to be able to see light means real salvation from captive situations in prison. God says: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isa.49:6) and God says "to prisoners, 'Come forth,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.'" (Isa.49:9).

Before bringing light, God has already taken people's hand and kept them. (Isa.42:6) In the picture of Yoko, 'Get Up! For a Person Lying Prone' <5>, which is expressed at the moment of kairos for salvation, we can see that the person lying prone is stretching out to the person's hand. In other words, we can not be saved without stretching out our hand, even though God has already taken our hand and kept us. When supporting those who are in darkness, churches need to encourage them to swing into action towards the direction of light.

God's intervention to save human beings is connected with the morning and the dawn. (Ps. 46:6) The Israelites in the Hebrew Bible connect light with the morning and the dawn.<sup>21</sup> The dawn appears before sunrise, but it is still in darkness. At dawn, gradually a faint light gleams on the eastern horizon and grows into a light, viz., it is a transfer from darkness to light, from night to morning. "The steadfast love of the LORD" and mercies are "new every morning." (Lam.3:22f) 'Every morning, signifies a renewal of creation.'<sup>22</sup> Christ is shining as the morning star (Rev.2:28, 22:16) and the darkness will be dispelled by Christ's Parousia.(Rev. 21:23f). Yoko Makoshi expected the dawn in her darkness. After her husband's death, she felt that the sun always rises to verify her will to live again through painting.

Sun and moon are not the source of light. The Lord is our everlasting light. (Isa.60:19). Light is permanently present in Jesus Christ (e.g. Matt.4:16, John.8:12, 9:5) in the Gospel (e.g. Acts.26:23, II Cor.4:4). The light of Christ overcomes darkness, however, God forms light and creates darkness (Isa.45:7). Both of light and darkness are God's creation. Yoko Makoshi saw through her darkness, and struggled with it, while believing God's light. This process led her to salvation.

God's light was incarnated in Jesus Christ for us. Jesus said: "I am the light of the world." (John.8:12) Christians, therefore, profess faith in Christ as "light from light" in the Nicene Creed.<sup>23</sup> Yoko Makoshi held her own light after long struggles with her darkness. God's light incarnated in her, and became her "light of life" (Job.33:30 and Ps.56:13). This is to "en-lighten", viz. to live as children of light (John.12:36), not to mimic the Western way. For Asian Christians to contextualize theology is to struggle with our darkness, in God's light. Only through such struggling in our own contexts, is Christianity incarnated vividly. In struggling with suffering, people manage to overcome hardships through their faith in God, resulting in creating a new dimension from old

values and traditions. This action and its creative works can be called 'imaging'. 'Imaging' is related not only to art and artistic works, but also to holistic human/creature's existence. Such 'imaging' is already being re-constructed in the midst of people's daily contexts, as the case of Yoko showed. Therefore, through 'imaging', viz., through human creative actions in God's love, the human finds hope in darkness, and then is saved.

With thanks to Prof. Yoko Makoshi who kindly allow me to use her pictures for the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the "Imaginal image" and my methodology, please see my paper 'Christianity in East Asia in the Perspective of the *Imaginal* Image of the Soul' in Hidetoshi Watanabe, Keiichi Kaneko & Megumi Yoshida (eds.) *Vitality of East Asian Christianity: Challenges to Mission and Theology in Japan*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2004, pp.215-254.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, Biblical passages are quoted from *Revised Standard Version* in the website: <http://www.hti.umich.edu/r/rsv>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Yuyu Yang (1926-1997, an outstanding Taiwanese artist) and Ding Fang (1956, a Chinese Christian art professor in Nanjing). Especially, Yuyu Yang perceived light of laser as a compassionate gift from God and a kind of spirituality or religious manifestation. He developed the use of the laser in his unique art work as "Lasography" in which he integrated his perception of the light of laser as God's epiphany and Love and his background of Chinese traditional thought. (Megumi Yoshida, 'A Preliminary Attempt to Introduce Asianized/Contextualized Christianity in North East Asia through Case-Studying Yuyu Yang's "Lifescape Chapel"' in *Asia Journal Theology*, Oct. 2006, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp.355-384.)

<sup>4</sup> Lindsay Jones (editor in chief), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Vol.8, Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005, p.5451.

<sup>5</sup> William Spear, *Feng Shui Made Easy: Designing Your Life with the Ancient Art of Placement*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995, p.134.

<sup>6</sup> Megumi Yoshida, 'In Search of the Human Profundity in East Asian Christianity: Using Images As The Logos of Soul' in Yeow Choo Lak (ed.) *Doing Theology with Asian Resources: Innovative Theological Education in Asia*, Vol.5, pp. 166-192, to roll off press, spring of 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ichiro Hariu, 'The River of Humanity – The Works of Yoko Makoshi', *Exposition "Le Fleuve Humain"*, 1993, p.14.

<sup>8</sup> Since the autumn of 1991, I visited her atelier and talked with her deeply about her creativity for more than 200 hours at various opportunities. Here, I would like to appreciate her willingness in giving me permission to share what she has talked in this paper.

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- <sup>9</sup> Yoko Makoshi, 'Colouring 4: No title' in *Acrylart Vol.25*, Holbein Works, LTD., May 1995, p.16.
- <sup>10</sup> Yoko Makoshi, Graduation thesis 'Emancipation of Humanity: A Study of Blake's Faith', Tokyo Women's Christian College, 1955, p.1.
- <sup>11</sup> Yoko Makoshi, 'My Story: Creation and Spirituality', presented by herself at the first Asian Women Christian Artists Consultation by Christian Conference of Asia in association with Asian Christian Art Association in Hong Kong, 1995, p.19.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p.21.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.22.
- <sup>14</sup> Yoko Makoshi, an original manuscript of her presentation: 'My Story: Creation and Spirituality', at the First Asian Christian Women's Artist Consultation in Hong Kong, 1992, p.8.
- <sup>15</sup> Jamie Ellin Forbes, 'Yoko Makoshi', *Art Japan '96*, p.128.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Foreword' by Yasuda Kasai Fine Art Foundation, Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art, *Yoko Makoshi: Homage of Humanity*, 1994, p.4.
- <sup>17</sup> J.-J. von Allmen (ed.), *Vocabulary of the Bible*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1958, p.238.
- <sup>18</sup> Madeleine S. Miller & J. Jane Miller, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959, p. 393.
- <sup>19</sup> Hayao Kawai, *Reading Fantasy (Fantazih wo Yomu)*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1996, pp.342-358.
- <sup>20</sup> G. Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Translation of Theological Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament, Revised Edition, Vol.1*, William B. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983, p.163.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p.154.
- <sup>22</sup> *loc.cit.*
- <sup>23</sup> [http://en.wikidepia.org/wiki/Nicene\\_Creed](http://en.wikidepia.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed).