“Re-imagining Communities of Justice and Peace: The Nuns on the Bus”
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This paper explores the Nuns on the Bus tour as a refreshing resource for a constructive feminist theology of the U.S. public church. Drawing on the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, on feminist and womanist reinterpretations of sacramentality, and on recent examples of U.S. Catholic women’s social justice praxis, this paper argues that the U.S. public church bears sacramental significance when it creates the public, i.e. when it breaks open a public space to witness to an alternative political reality, to birth a new world that better signifies some of the political conditions for a more just, loving, and peaceful U.S. body politic. U.S. Catholic women religious have stood at the forefront of such prophetic praxis, by working in various social justice ministries. Their ministries contest and critically transform U.S. public life so as to forge solidarity with marginalized groups and thereby better embrace and enhance our common life together. The Nuns on the Bus tour in summer 2012 reinforced the prophetic praxis of U.S. women religious for social justice. Launched by NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby group, the "Nuns on the Bus: Nuns Drive for Faith, Family, and Fairness" traveled through 9 states en route to Washington, DC from June 17 to July 2, 2012 in order to question the devastating effects of Congressional budget proposals on poor people. The Nuns on the Bus tour itself – stopping at and spotlighting social justice ministries run by nuns – exposed and interrupted the prevailing immoral discourse about a balanced federal budget on the backs of poor people. Also, the tour educated about and engendered another possible political world by partially creating and enacting, albeit briefly via the bus tour, a more just body politic rooted in recovering an interdependent, interconnected sense of community and responsibility – of solidarity. Theologizing about women, sacramentality, and the public church via the Nuns on the Bus tour (and a more recent tour on immigration) enables and empowers women to reclaim being the public church. Beyond institutional church representatives who introduce faith-based views into current civic debates about so-called nonnegotiable beginning and end of life issues, this paper proposes that what makes the public church “public” consists in the ability to re-imagine and re-create communities of justice of peace.