



Friends of the Imagination

Poets were for a long time almost the only friends the power of the imagination had. Keats, for example, confessed that he could be “certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination.” Shakespeare similarly praised the gift of “a foolishly extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motives, revolutions; these are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of *pia mater*, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion.” And Dryden compared the faculty of imagination to “a nimble spaniel,” which “beats over and ranges through the field of memory till it springs the quarry it hunted after.”

For others, imagination has seemed neither an access to certain truth, nor good gift, nor nimble hunter of prize game. Too close, indeed, was its tie to emotion, too chaotic and unformed its productivity, and too unreliable its recall of things past. “Decaying sense,” muttered Hobbes. “The deceptive part in man, the mistress of error and falsehood, and so much the more deceitful as she is not always so,” complained Pascal. A “power of fabricating images without any foundation in reality,” judged Kames. Neither scientist nor philosopher was a friend of the imaginative power.

Near the end of the last century, however, positive evaluation of the imagination as means to truth became more widely shared. Perhaps Darwin signaled the shift in 1891 when he suggested in *Descent of Man* that “the Imagination is one of the highest prerogatives” of the human being, a faculty which “unites, independently of the will, former images and ideas, and thus creates brilliant and novel results.” Darwin appreciated novelty, of course—it was in fact his passion to uncover it in nature—and the changed perception of imagination appears to have something to do with this connection. Imagination is now understood to be a means to truth not yet known, a means to anticipating events not yet happened. Minds weary or bored with examining the world before the senses might find in imagination a flight to an unseen but not unreal world beyond.

Theology is perhaps something of a late-comer to this new perspective on imagination. The King James Version’s pronouncement, “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen 8:21), no doubt expresses a deeply held and enduring conviction. Protestant Christianity has been no great friend of the power of the imagination—or at least has not regarded itself so. What use is the power that produces forbidden images, falsely worshiped? Who needs the imagination when one already has in possession sure and certain truth, sufficient for all matters of life and salvation? Why should the church be interested in imagination?

Why indeed? The aim of this issue is to explore several reasons why the revaluation of the imagination is of significance for the life of faith. The articles assembled here are a collective

manifestation of anew attitude among theologians concerning this power. *Martin Marty*, the author of our Perspectives piece, holds that the imagination is fundamental to the theologian's task of relating life to God and for keeping that life interesting. *Michael Barnes* describes how a new understanding of the power of imagination might alter the relationship between science and religion. *Robert Stein*, *Robert Roth* and *William Dean* discuss aspects of the impact of the new view of imagination on the interpretation of Jesus' parables, hermeneutics, and Christian doctrine, respectively. *Richard Lischer* opens up the dimension of imagination in the preparation of a sermon. And while less directly related to our theme, *Patricia Wilson-Kastner's* article on emerging theologies surveys critical issues facing the church's theological and pastoral leaders, issues for which the new attention to imagination can clearly be helpful. More practical matters, but still related to our theme, are addressed in the Resources section: *John Ylvisaker* and *Curtis Green* discuss imaginative uses of the arts in the church, and *Paul Berge* gives us a powerfully dramatic reading of a chapter of the Gospel of John in a Texts in Context essay on Pentecost lectionary texts for late summer.

D.H.O.