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## **The Place of Imagination in Faith and Theology--II**

John McIntyre

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question: 'What does it mean in theological terms and in practice in this ecumenical era for the Church to discharge its mission to all the nations?' But, while it is important to reflect theologically 'it is essential to remember that theology does not itself provide the justification for missions. It rather elucidates the justification which already exists in the Church and which has been driving Christians to be missionaries for centuries.' But, if we are involved in a theological interpretation of the Church's actual missionary existence we are not bound by any particular categories in which the enterprise has been conceived and executed.

There are many who believe that the Doctrine of the Trinity provides the only solid theological foundation of mission. While not expressed in so many words this seems to underlie Dr. NILES' study of 'The Faith'—that Biblical and Christian authority under the judgment of which 'missions' must stand. For every man the Christian life began when in the mercy of God in Jesus Christ He claimed us as His own. The Christian faith, however, 'is more than a Jesus religion. It is concerned with the consequences to men of who Jesus is. . . . The issue is never only "Do you believe in Jesus?"', it is also, "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" . . . Christmas and Pentecost both celebrate the coming of God to become part of human history; to be involved in it. The coming of God in Jesus Christ determined what man's history shall be. The coming of God in the Holy Spirit regulates the tides of this history.'

'The Missionary Enterprise' is controlled by the realities of 'church' and 'mission'. The consequence of the latter is to establish and upbuild the former. The purpose of the former is to prosecute and expand the latter. The crucial questions for determining the nature of the problems and their solution are, therefore, those concerning the *selfhood* of the Church and the *integrity* of the mission. The discussion here throws into bold relief the fact that 'while the

great missionary era . . . has seen the Church planted in every continent . . . in terms of present realities Christianity is still a Western religion'. This raises a great issue. Do the churches of the West want to retain their position of leadership in denominational families, in which the younger churches will always remain weaker partners; or, do they want to help the younger churches in the common tasks they face in their own lands? And it must not be forgotten that the tasks to come will be determined in part by the fact that the missionary base has also an *Easternity*.

Finally, there is the 'Missionary Encounter' when the missionary, with the gospel, enters into the two worlds, interpenetrating one another, of religions and of nations. As to what happens on the frontier—religious and secular—there are several points of view sharply expressed in current debate. It may well prove that Dr. NILES' attempt to uncover the difficulties, and to show why Christians are here in such sharp disagreement, although brief, has more to say than the rest of the book together. He refuses to continue the debate on the old terms. 'The hope rather is so to open up the whole question that future discussion of it will move away from the world of religions as such and become lodged in that reality of human life in which God's sovereign mercy and man's blundering faith are in mutual relation, informing that life in all its parts and affecting its every activity.'

We began by referring to a book which sets the context of Dr. NILES' inquiry. The friends of Dr. K. S. Latourette have written in his honour a series of informed and authoritative essays reporting on and evaluating the missionary situation in Africa and Asia since 1938.<sup>1</sup> Every page illustrates Dr. NILES' argument and illuminates his questions.

<sup>1</sup> *Frontiers of the Christian World Mission since 1938*, ed. Wilber C. Harr (Harper, New York, and Hamish Hamilton; 35s. net).

## The Place of Imagination in Faith and Theology—II

By PROFESSOR JOHN MCINTYRE, D.D., D.LITT., THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

[In the first part of this article Professor McIntyre discussed the place of imagination in faith.—Editor.]

LET us turn now to the question of the place of imagination in theology and particularly in theological method. If imagination is to be given a rightful place in faith and faith's situations, and

if we agree with the view that theology is the carrying forward, into more intellectual forms, of activities present in faith, then there does seem to be at least an *a priori* case for finding

imagination in theology. Yet this is the very point at which some theologians, who might be willing to grant us the thesis already maintained, would be most outspokenly in opposition to any suggestion of this sort. I would myself be the last person to deny that Christian theology must be derived from the Scriptures, but would maintain that the way in which theology is related to Scriptures is one of the central issues for our time. Objection would be made to the idea that imagination has any part to play in this relation from at least three points of view. First there is a widely canvassed contention that in order to construct theology we must piously and reverently listen to what God has to say to us in His own written Word. The theology which then transpires is written down and invested with the authority of the written Word itself. This interpretation of the way in which theology is constructed is an extension of the account, given by some, of the way in which the Bible was written—by the dictation of the Holy Spirit. Now even if this doctrine were true of the way in which the Bible came to us—and I am not at the moment discussing that point—it can never be a true account of how theology is constructed. To begin with it is based on a naïve realistic view of the way in which God now inspires our thoughts and ideas, and might with a certain fairness be called the MRA theory of theology. It is not borne out by the sheer variety of theological formulation that is the contemporary situation in this discipline. Bultmann as well as his critics could equally claim—and do so with all sincerity—that God had spoken to them the theological ideas which they express. It seems to have affinities with Barth's theology because Barth has a lot to say about the *vox Dei loquentis*, the voice of God speaking to us through His Word. But the noteworthy fact is that Barth, while he has a theory of the threefold form of the Word of God as revealed, written and proclaimed, nowhere suggests that theology is a fourth form of the Word of God. He says that proclamation, preaching, may become the Word of God, that our word spoken in the sermon may become His Word of Salvation to sinners, but nowhere does he extend this conception to theology. Theology is human speaking about God. But to my mind the most regrettable aspect of this theory is that it should come to invest this human speaking about God which is theology with the ultimate sanctity and sanction and authority of Scripture itself. Here could be found the final blasphemy in theology that it pretends to be God's words when it is only man's. Here, too, is the real source of the *odium theologicum*, for on these terms to question a man's theological position is to question the authenticity

of his hearing what he claims to be the very Word of God; it is as if you queried his whole faith. It is not to be denied that some theology comes close to being preaching, but when it does so it is no longer theology: it is preaching. In the same way some preaching is very close to being theology, but by the same token when this actually happens it is no longer preaching. In a word, then, the nature of theology is falsified if we treat it as an extension of God's activity in giving to us the Scriptures—which is not to say that there are not other ways in which while exposing ourselves to the Scriptures, as we must, we may come by our theology.

A second objection to the suggestion that imagination may be given a place in theological construction would come from those who hold that theology is to be logically deduced from Scripture. They would differ from the first objectors in so far as they would not regard theology as literally inspired by a dictating God. They would leave room for fallibility in the fact that while God gave man the Scriptures He left it to man to deduce theology by logical inference from them. But they would not allow that flexibility of relation between Scriptures and theology which would be entailed by the suggested presence of imagination in the process. Yet when we examine theological constructions we find it very hard to believe that they represent anything so precise as logical deductions. There is much more quite radical difference of opinion on certain subjects than would ever be compatible with differences in logic. When the Church has tackled the extravagances of the heretics it has not done so by the demonstration of their violation of the essential rules of syllogistic reasoning; nor have the heretics themselves shown any ignorance of these rules; in fact, at times, they have had logic on their side as against orthodoxy. In other words, the relation of theological construction is much more vague, much more difficult to define, than would be the case if it were one of logical entailment. **theology isn't theo-logic**

A third objection might come from the exponents of the word-book type of theology to the introduction of imagination into the theological arena. For them, the task of theology consists in the laying bare of the original meanings which words have in Biblical usage; and in the accumulating of them into tidy lists which are the bases of theological compendia. The grey books of the SCM Press—'Studies in Biblical Theology'—would represent the ultimate goal and the only possibility for Christian theology. The grey books fulfil a purpose, a very valuable purpose—but that does not include standing as substitute for Christian theology proper. For when we have

amassed the Biblical material with all the references from the different passages and from contemporary writers, there remains the problem of appropriating it, of so penetrating to its meaning that it becomes live twentieth-century thought about God and God's ways. **It is one thing to assert that the Bible says so-and-so; it is another thing to add that I can see it to be true for me in the language of my time and in the cultural context in which I exist.** This second statement requires of us a good deal more than etymological know-how or semantic expertise; it requires that we bridge two thousand years and appropriate to ourselves some situation, some manner of speech that may at a first glance appear both scandalous and foreign. What that 'good deal more' is is the problem we have been investigating.

When the question is put about the exact nature of theological thought after we have considered those various invalid descriptions, one immediate answer that leaps to mind is that theology is interpretative in character; and this answer is certainly very close to the mark if we think of contemporary theology as interpreting the Scriptures, and doing so very often in the light of the Church's tradition, whether it be the tradition of the classical Creeds or of the Westminster Confession. The case which I should like now finally to argue is that imagination is an inalienable and basal element in this process of interpretation. What is entailed by this suggestion? i. is essential to process of interpretation

To begin with we have to admit at once that theology is an activity of the creative imagination, that it inevitably introduces into its subject matter elements which are not present in its initial starting point in Scripture and the Church's tradition. If we are in any doubt about this point, we need only compare any theological work—for example, Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik*—with the Bible itself to realize that there is a good deal in the latter which is not in the former, however warranted it is by the former. But **the fact that we say that it is creative imagination that is operative in theology does not commit us to saying that it is purely humanly inspired. Rather is it open to us to hold that here as in all creative activity the creative Spirit of God is present.** And we would do so remembering that the presence of the Holy Spirit here no more guarantees verbal and literal inerrancy than does His presence with us in our moral activities guarantee our immediate moral perfection. Nor must we think that the creative imagination operates in flights of pure fancy. We have affirmed that the starting point lies in Scripture and tradition, maybe sometimes only in Scripture itself, and that starting point in the very nature

of the case prescribes the range of operation. It constitutes a constant check-point for anything that is being said at any time in the name of Christian theology.

Recalling Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy, we can add that **imagination as we have been interpreting it actually breaks through to new apprehensions and is not simply rearranging and re-distributing previously acquired material in patterns that bear no relation to reality.** Here the link is close with Kant's insistence upon the part which imagination plays in the acquiring of actual knowledge. It is often suggested by those who are suspicious of the intellectualization of our faith in theological terms that doctrine is a rationalistic elaboration of a basically simple material, which often results in the confusion of the basic issues at stake. Now, undoubtedly, in the periods of scholasticism theological elaboration has produced a diversification of the subject matter of the faith to a degree which in Coleridge's sense could only be called fanciful; but **to appreciate the theological task aright, we have to think of it as a process in and through which we establish the facts about God's nature.** It is knowledge about God that we seek when we study theology, and not simply knowledge about knowledge of God, which we do sometimes also achieve. In other words, in theology we do think about God and are not confined to thinking about thinking about Him, or to telling the story of the ways in which other people have thought about Him. So, then, our doctrinal constructions, achieved through imaginative interpretation of the basic material of Scripture and tradition, must be seen to be the means of genuine apprehension of God's nature, and not otiose and fanciful theorizing which might be taken to be expendable if the Church had better things to do. Here I feel the connexion to be close with other creative activities of the mind. Creative imagination must generally not be thought of as adding embellishments to a basic reality which is in itself bereft of all qualities and distinctions: this is the fallacy which Cartesian dualism has perpetrated upon three centuries of thought on the subject. Rather does creative imagination progressively discern and apprehend the infinite wealth and complexity of a reality which far surpasses all of the categories in which we apprehend it. This statement is true *a fortiori* of God and of our knowledge of Him: in the creative imaginative activity which is theology we are led to discern ever more and more of the wonderful depth of God's Being and Nature.

There is another way in which imagination has come into the service of theology. This is the day of the analogy in theology, the controlling concept

which prescribes the whole character of the theologian's treatment of the entire range of his subject. Whereas our fathers tended to write theology, as it were, in series, we prefer to integrate ours into close systems held together by the interlocking key of some dominant analogy. For some in our time, the analogy is that of the hypostatic union of two natures in one Person, Jesus Christ; for others, it is the idea of community which may be traced in central theological doctrines such as that of the Trinity as well as in soteriological and ethical spheres; or it may be the idea of revelation which forms the central concept for the interpretation of all theology; whatever the key analogy, imagination has a double rôle to play both in the initial choice of it and in its implementation over the whole field of theology. It requires imaginative discernment to select the right analogy for this purpose, and to anticipate just how effective it is going to be in its interpretative office; and imaginative construction to elaborate the several forms in which it embodies itself in the different fields. This is no small task, because analogies often prove to be too weak to bear the burden of responsibility that we place upon them; and some, if forced, may actually introduce misrepresentation into a subject they are required to elucidate. In no matter must a theologian be more careful than in the analogies he chooses in order to unfold his subject; and in his choice, imagination is of great value and relevance.

One of the main theological emphases of our time is the central place which the Person of Jesus Christ occupies in our knowledge of God. An immediate consequence of this emphasis, which has not always been appreciated, is the quite central place which historical knowledge must occupy in the analysis of the nature of our knowledge of God. Such analyses as are given of our knowledge of God are either very close to being analyses of a type of mysticism, or if they are based upon knowledge of God through the present and living Christ, they fail to appreciate the way in which our knowledge of God is fundamentally conditioned by our knowledge of who Christ really was when Incarnate and of the many things that He said and did. In fact knowledge of the risen and living Christ gains content supremely from the historical records of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This being so, our knowledge of God in Christ is intimately bound up with our knowledge of that historical situation. It is not for nothing, therefore, that the Christocentricism of our time has led to a revival in the interest in the nature of our knowledge of the historical Jesus. It is here that R. G. Collingwood's theory that *a priori*

imagination is the vehicle of historical knowledge becomes relevant, in two respects. First, at a time when we are seeking to understand the essential nature of theological method we then realize that this method resembles historical method more closely than it does any of the other sciences. It was this point that J. V. Langmead Casserley was making when he maintained that theology like history was concerned with the singular, over against those sciences which have the universal and its instances as their subject matter. Secondly, it becomes clear that there must be a place for something like Collingwood's *a priori* imagination in theological method. By this imagination faith is enabled to penetrate into the historical situations of which the subject matter of theology is centrally compounded, and in this penetration break through to a new understanding of them. If we also hold that it is impossible for Christian theology to have done with those situations and to embark on an unmediated knowledge of God in a mystical here and now which bypasses the historical, then it is clear that this imaginative process establishes itself as an essential feature of theological method.

One of the chief objections which may be raised to the importance which I have attached to imagination in the theological process is that I have introduced an element of the uncontrollable into the subject. And I wish to conclude by meeting this objection. First of all, I must say that it rests on the quite false presupposition that imagination is not already present in the process of constructive theology. It is there, as anyone can see who tries to trace the way from Scripture to doctrine, or who compares the content of established works in theology with the words of Scripture. I have, next, already said that imagination in theology as in many other fields operates upon already existent material, and Scripture and tradition which form the raw material of theology also constitute the checkpoints for what is said in theology. But we may now mention a third control, in the historical fact of the Incarnation itself. It is to this subject that faith in its historico-imaginative activity returns; this is the subject which it seeks to penetrate and apprehend more fully; and this subject in its turn controls the range of faith's imaginative construction. Without the control of the historical fact of the Incarnation, no theology can ever claim to be theology; and, in the same way, so long as a theology recognizes that this control is imposed upon its imaginative activities then there will be no need for fear in the exercise of it. In fact, our theology is going to be a good deal the poorer, if not also a good deal duller, for the lack of it.