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The Expository Times 1962 74: 16

DOI: 10.1177/001452466207400105

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The Place of Imagination in Faith and Theology¹—I

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

It requires no great ingenuity of intellect or industry of research to uncover the reasons for the unmistakable aura of heresy—not to say apostasy—which surrounds the subject of our discussion to-day. For both imagination and the counters with which it functions, namely, images, have a long history of suspicion attaching to them in our Protestant tradition. When Calvin condemned images, he did not only reject the notion that some idol made by the hands of man might come to substitute for God in popular religion—though clearly he discerns such a danger in contemporary Romanism. He went further and maintained that ‘corporeal images are unworthy of the majesty of God, and they diminish reverence and increase error’ (*Inst.*, I. ix. 6); and that ‘everything respecting God which is learned from images is futile and false’ (*ib.*, I. ix. 5). That is, there was no possible defence for images in the true religion, even where they were recognized as not being god-substitutes; for when combined with the worship of the true God, they lead into wrong ways of thinking about Him and compromise His solitary majesty. Certain obvious consequences have followed from this outright condemnation of images. The relation of Protestantism to art and art-forms has long been one of distrust and, at the very best, bare tolerance; and it is only by the sheerest effort of will-power that in recent decades beauty has become an acknowledged value in the Protestant calendar. Even so, it has a long way to go as our deplorable taste in religious Christmas and Easter cards so amply testifies. It is true to say that there is a simple dignity to the worship that takes place within our tradition, and an impressiveness to the austerity of the buildings within which we worship; but the soul of man, even of Protestant man, sometimes longs for a beauty in his worship and beauty may well claim forms other than those of simplicity and austerity. Also in the quotations which we made from Calvin, he was thinking primarily of the physical idols which men make and worship instead of God. But his rejection of images had the farther consequence of discouraging the use of mental images both in our worship of God and in our thought about God. Imageless thought becomes the norm of Protestant theology and this emphasis is reflected in the predominance,

¹ McCahan Lecture delivered at Assembly College, Belfast, on 25th May 1962.

in so much even of the confessional literature which had to be employed at the congregational level, of abstract concepts—of notions like justification, sanctification, mortification, predestination, and so on. It penetrated deep into the heart of preaching and exposition, so that the world of faith became highly conceptualized and almost entirely imageless. Imagination with its sensuous forms had no place in this sort of world.

But imagination has been condemned in our Protestant tradition for a second reason. It has become associated in English-speaking circles with the fatal tendency in man's heart towards sin. Genesis 8²¹: ‘And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake: for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth’. Here the Hebrew word יָצַר (*yezer*) is used, but even when imagination translates another Hebrew word שִׁירִיּוּת (*sheriruth*) the pejorative sense is still present. The persons who walk in the imagination of their heart, seek their own evil designs and neglect the commandments of God. The astonishing other fact is that in the New Testament three different words are translated by imagination—*διαλογισμός* (*dialogismos*), Ro 1²¹ ‘When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened’; *διάνοια* (*dianoia*), Lk 1⁵¹ ‘He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts’; and *λογισμός* (*logismos*), 2 Co 10^{3,5} ‘We do not war after the flesh. . . . Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God’; and they all carry this same association with evil. Admittedly our illustrations here are all drawn from the A.V., and the NEB has altogether omitted the term, while most of the commentaries on the Old Testament have their own variants. But three hundred and fifty years of English usage are sufficient to brand any word—the more so when it is so intimately linked with the doctrine of original sin—and to provide good emotive if not strictly logical reasons for its exclusion from the best theological associations.

A third reason has helped towards this exclusion, namely, the psychological interpretation of the function of imagination. For imagination has been set forth not only as the source of images

imagination as source of illusory constructs

and pictures of entities previously perceived in the space-time world, but also as the origin of purely fanciful and illusory constructs. When applied to religion, it has been the basis of a reductive criticism of the nature of religious faith. The case has been argued that the subject of such faith is imaginatively constructed by man as a kind of wish-fulfilment—man wishes that there were in the universe an all-powerful Being who would protect him from outrageous fortune and he proceeds to invest his imaginary construct with the qualities of reality; or it is suggested man requires some compensation for the griefs and sorrows which surround him in life, so he dreams up a loving Father to surround him with a cotton-wool type of comfort and peace. The sheer variety of religions and the discrepancies that exist between their gods is taken to be evidence not so much of the fact that religion is a fundamental characteristic of human nature as of inventive ingenuity of the human imagination. When this psychological refutation of the validity of faith as a medium of true knowledge and of the reality of the religious subject matter is carried to a still deeper dimension in the Freudian critique of religion, then the difficulties in the way of assigning to imagination a reputable place in the interpretation of faith's attitudes and of the structures of theology seem to become virtually insurmountable. **i. as wishful thinking**

The whole matter might well end there were it not that there is a sufficiently well-documented different conception of imagination in certain areas of modern philosophy to justify our still keeping an open mind on the question of the possible place of imagination in faith and theology. In particular, three philosophers are worthy of mention. To begin with, **Kant** in his very elaborate epistemological analysis assigned a central place to imagination in the act of knowing. He seems in fact—though the evidence is the subject of a good deal of discussion—to ascribe two functions to imagination. First, imagination makes understanding possible by elaborating the given manifold of sense in conformity to the a priori principles which the understanding employs in the activity of conscious apprehension. Imagination by its operation yields experiences which may be related to the unity of self-consciousness, that is, to the unity of the categories. Imagination is, therefore, a sine qua non of actual experience. Secondly, imagination is given a productive, or a creative function, and here an important link is made with the popular conception of imagination. It is, however, in his third *Critique of Judgement*, where he is concerned with aesthetics, that Kant is able to do full justice to this truly originaive and creative

faculty of the human spirit. It is not our intention in this analysis to launch into the philosophical niceties of Kantian criticism, but these two points made by Kant are significant for our purpose. On the one hand, imagination has a definite rôle to play in assisting the understanding in its knowledge of the external world; it is a mediating rôle, as it stands midway between the sense material provided by the material world and the categories in terms of which the mind knows that world. There are, of course, no ethical co-efficients attaching to imagination in this form, and so far from preventing knowledge it is affirmed to be a basic condition of it. On the other hand, the creative function of imagination which might be the very aspect of it which would most disqualify it from a place in any theory of *knowing* as distinct from pure *speculation* is basic to its activity in producing the material which understanding employs in the activity of conscious apprehension. Without this prior creative activity of the imagination, the understanding would be confronted by a confusing undifferentiated manifold, absolutely intractable to knowledge. It is primarily because of its creative capacity, and not because of its association with sense-images, that the imagination performs this basic function in the activity of knowing.

The second philosopher I have chosen is better known as a poet, but his philosophical work is not inconsiderable, namely, S. T. Coleridge. He divided imagination into two parts—primary and secondary. Primary imagination is 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite "I am"'.¹ Here there are close affinities with Kant's conception of the rôle of the productive imagination in the knowing activity, and a clear rejection of the old Cartesian conception of the mind as simply receiving stimuli when it is related to the external world. There is in the further suggestion that this creative function of the imagination is an analogue of the divine creative act a totally different conception of it from that with which we are familiar in the English Biblical literature. Imagination is here a sign of man's closeness to God and not of his defiance of Him. The secondary imagination is 'an echo of the former. . . . It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate'.² The imagination, in other words, operates self-consciously as well as spontaneously, but when it does, its activities are substantially of the same creative character. The important point is that, in the secondary as in the primary form, imagina-

¹ Quoted by Charles Davy in *Towards a Third Culture*, 67.

² *Ib.*

Coleridge: imagination vs. fancy

tion is productive of knowledge. Coleridge emphasises this latter point by drawing a distinction between imagination and fancy and insisting that while the latter rearranges and re-distributes the images which it derives from the world or creates for itself, imagination proper, by its activities, breaks through to new apprehension. In a word, imagination is a medium of knowledge.

R. G. Collingwood is our third choice, particularly because his interest in the nature of historical knowledge stands very close to our own in the nature of faith. He maintains that the process of knowing history rests upon a basic activity of the human mind called a *priori* imagination, which operates upon an idea of the past or of history of which every human being is possessed. It is the function of the imagination to give content to this idea of the past. The process is a *priori* in a number of senses. It is an essential feature of all mental knowledge: it is, that is, a psychological *a priori*. It is also a condition of all knowledge—so that it is also a logical *a priori*. It antedates all forms of knowledge, so that it is also a temporal *a priori*. But this act of imagination thus seen to be an original element in human psychology through which the human mind knows the past, is not simply an act of direct knowing; in order to know the past, the mind has imaginatively to re-enact it. In this process of re-enacting the past, evidence provides a certain amount of material, but the evidence is never accepted as authoritative in itself. In fact, a major part of the historical imaginative activity is the creation of interpolated material, which it weaves as a web connecting up items of so-called evidence. Collingwood would go so far as to say that that only is history for us which can be re-enacted by us, which can enter into our living consciousness and become part of our mental life. We have moved a long way from the view which takes history to be dates in books or hieroglyphics on monuments; and some feel that Collingwood is in difficulty over subjectivism and relativism. But for our purposes Collingwood has taken the examination of the nature of imagination one stage farther. He has emphasized the fact that imagination is a medium of knowledge, in fact the only medium of one kind of knowledge. He insists that it only functions as a medium of knowledge in so far as it exerts its creative function of interpolating material between so-called pieces of evidence or of information in so-called authorities. If it did not exert this creative function, if it simply sought to re-present the existing material, then it would not yield historical knowledge. It is as the past is creatively re-lived and re-enacted that it is actually known. Perhaps the most astonishing part of Collingwood's

Collingwood: a *priori* (historical) imagination

analysis is the fact that through imagination we know the *past*. There is, we feel, a possible case for our acquiring insight into the present through imaginative perception and intuition, and even for predicting the future, through a skilfully imaginative manipulation of what exists already. But the past, which is over and done with, cast as it were in an unalterable mould—this seems to be beyond the range of imaginative access. Yet exactly here, says Collingwood, exists the most specifically characteristic activity of the imagination, that by a subtle combination of the given and the interpolated it should re-live and re-enact what is past, and so create knowledge.

It is from this philosophical tradition, then, that I have derived the courage to ask the question concerning the place of imagination in faith and theology, for at times the cross-references and contacts seem to me to be almost immediate and direct.

Before we begin to examine the detail of the ways in which imagination is to be discovered within faith and faith's situations, perhaps I may be allowed an initial plea that we should begin by recognizing that imagination is one of the attributes of God. I have examined most of the recognized lists of divine attributes, and nowhere come upon it; and yet I wonder whether a proper understanding of God's nature can long justify its exclusion. We speak glibly now about God's creative activity and with the solemnity of judges roll off from our tongues the fine phrases of *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio per Verbum* and *creatio continua*; we engage in discussion about the scientific value or the pre-scientific mythological qualities of the Biblical story of the Creation; and by our heavy-handedness succeed in missing the excitement, the imaginativeness, the sheer creativity of it all. We leave it to artists and to poets to inject imagination into Nature, forgetting that the imagination is already there, because a God of infinite imagination created it. How prepared are we, also, to see the redemptive act of God in Jesus Christ as a daring piece of imaginative activity on God's part? In no area of human history has familiarity, pious, God-fearing familiarity, created greater contempt, greater indifference to the sheer imaginativeness of what was happening than has been the case in relation to the Incarnation of our Lord. If imagination is a quality of God's nature, it is unmistakably an attribute of all the words and actions of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. We speak often of the challenge that Jesus offered to His first disciples, and challenge there certainly was. But it was the imaginativeness of Christ which presented the challenge—the new insights which He gave them into the ways of God with man, i. as an attribute of God

the new daring possibilities in life which they might venture for God's sake, the new light that was shed upon their fellows—all kindled by the imagination of this one Man. It is imagination which picks upon the lilies of the field and says that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these; imagination, too, that set a little child in their midst and said that except they became as little children they would in no wise enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; imagination, finally, which breaking bread could say with penetrative insight, This is My body which is broken for you, and taking the cup, This cup is the new testament in My blood. When confronted by such imagination, how often has the Church crushed the life, the excitement, the perception out of it with the tortures of scholasticism and perfectionist orthodoxy. Is there not also an element of imagination in the way in which the Holy Spirit meets us in the ordinariness of our daily lives, so that a situation takes on a totally new light, or an action acquires a new tone of adventure, or some life shines with a new beauty where previously we had noticed only dullness? We miss God's working through the Holy Spirit all too often because we are not ready for the imagination which His approach to us displays. Small wonder our religion is dull: we think God dull, whereas the evidence in Nature and in history, in the Bible and in our lives is that He is pure imagination. **i. in Bible's metaphors**

Once we allow that God had imagination as one of His attributes then whole areas of our faith are affected by this fact. Take, for example, the immediate situation in which faith places us—in the presence of our neighbour. Recently I have endeavoured to construct an analysis of the essential constituents in *love*, primarily in God for His nature is normative for all else, but also naturally in ourselves. I can see now that in addition to saying that love is concern, commitment, involvement and so on, we must also say that love is imagination. We have seen already the imaginative forms in which God's love expresses itself towards us. But in our relations to our neighbours imagination is an integral element in the love enjoined upon us. It requires imagination to appreciate the plight in which many of our contemporaries are placed by reason of hunger, over-population, homelessness, civil war, imprisonment; and the only way in which the conscience often can be stirred is by having the imagination fired. The picture of a pot-bellied starving infant can quicken us to action, and to loving concern, a thousand times more swiftly than all the pages of statistics of gloomily-prophetic demographers. The sin of the priest and the Levite as they passed by on the other

side was primarily a failure in imagination, and from that failure followed the unconcern and the callousness which left the wounded man where he was. Loving our neighbour as ourselves involved primarily a supreme effort of the imagination so that we can empathetically place ourselves in his shoes, and so become one with him that we know what it means to love him as ourselves. In such an effort of imagination we begin to understand what it is like to be the recipients as well as the projectors of those home-truths of which we are so proud. When Christ asks us to become His disciples, but, like the man who began to build but was not able, to consider carefully the cost of discipleship, He is inviting us to do an exercise in imagination, to enter proleptically into the situations into which discipleship will involve us. Marriage Guidance counsellors tell us that the way back to reconciliation begins when one or other or both of the parties to the marriage begin to create imaginatively new forms for the expression of their love for one another. If, therefore, faith is three parts obedience, love could well be said to be three parts imagination, for imagination is the medium of ethical intuition and empathetic penetration into the situation of the other, who confronts us in the encounters of ordinary life.

Another area in the field of faith to which imagination is particularly relevant is that of the private devotional life of the Christian, and it is so in a variety of ways. To begin with, if we accept the assistance of R. G. Collingwood's analysis of *a priori* imagination, we can give a fresh interpretation of the function of that central aspect of the Protestant devotional discipline—daily Bible reading. The task of the historian is to re-enact the past, so to enter into it imaginatively that he re-lives the situation. The thought of the past can only be known as it is re-thought. Such exactly is the task of the person who reads the Bible devotionally. He seeks so to enter imaginatively into the situation that the words which Jesus speaks, say, to Zacchaeus or the rich young ruler are spoken directly to himself. Two notions have been employed to describe this very process. The one is to be found in Kierkegaard who, in rejection of the suggestion that the original disciples had a spiritual advantage over modern believers, insisted that we are all 'contemporary disciples', all confronted by Jesus Christ as really as were Peter and James and John. We are at no disadvantage, by reason of our living two thousand years after them. In the mystery of faith's leap, we become contemporary with Christ and Christ with us. The other description of the situation comes from the late Principal Baillie, who used the idea of 'mediated Kierkegaard: mediated immediacy'

immediacy', by which he meant that though Jesus Christ is mediated to us by the records of Scripture, and even by the moral demands which our neighbours make upon us, nevertheless His presence with us is immediate and direct. In devotional Bible reading, there is just such a situation of mediated immediacy, where Christ comes really alive to the believer who in faithfulness reads the written records of His life, death, and resurrection. What I am here maintaining is that the feature common to Kierkegaard's description and John Baillie's is the element of imagination which on the human side makes the process possible. In fact they are really both alternative formulations of Collingwood's *a priori* imagination.

Imagination is relevant to the devotional life at another point—that of image-thought. We saw that Calvin had very severe condemnation to pass upon the use of images in the worship of God, and while he was thinking primarily of physical objects, his condemnation has led to the elimination of all visual images from the devotional life, and to the creation of a prayer-life on the basis of conceptual thought. Now it just is a psychological fact that most of the time ordinary people think in terms of images and it is only natural that they should carry these over into their religious thought and into prayer. It becomes imperative at this point for us to recognize this fact and deliberately to take account of it in the general conception that we present of the nature of prayer. When we take account of the concreteness of image-thought, we may endeavour afresh to examine the possibility of the use of pictures and symbolism in devotional discipline. But this is a process to be embarked upon with conscious forethought, and not to be allowed carelessly to drift into the situation—which is what many congregations do who indiscriminately place crosses here and there around their churches. We shall then be much more careful and selective in the pictures we use in the education of the young. We seem to think that somehow art is all right in religious education, less likely to corrupt and lead astray, provided it is sufficiently bad, when in fact the very best of art, the very highest of symbolic construction should alone be permitted. In our Protestant tradition we can only at our peril continue to deny the relevance of art to the devotional life, and perpetuate an aesthetic sterility which was one of the less fortunate by-products of scholastic Calvinism.

So, too, our neglect of moral psychology has led us to underestimate the extent to which imagination may assist in the field of Christian morality as it is prepared for and sustained in the times of private devotion. The psychologists describe a certain type of action as ideo-motor,

action, that is, in which there is no time-lag between the person's entertaining the idea that he will do something or other *and* his actual completing of the action. It is now recognized that such ideo-motor action is not nearly as spontaneous or unprompted as at first appears to be the case; it in fact issues from prior dispositions in a certain direction due to imaginative anticipation of just such actions. One of the functions of Christian devotion is imaginatively to anticipate the day and to predispose the soul to react in a certain direction, and so to pre-dispose it that the action when it comes is ideo-motor. Because of the lack of such imaginative anticipation a good deal of our moral decision and behaviour has a curious *ad hoc* quality to it. Our pastorate is, I feel, weakest at this point: we have as good preaching in our churches as we have had at any time in the past four hundred years—it is generally much better than the preaching I knew in the thirties; we take the Bible extremely seriously and there are few who would still stand by the old Liberalism of fifty years ago; we are much more committed theologically than our grandfathers were; and we have a very comprehensive conception of the task of the Church *vis-à-vis* the world, society, culture, politics, economics, overpopulation and so on. But I doubt whether together with all these many things that we do, we are really training our people in how to nurture a spiritual life, and how imaginatively to enter into the riches of the spiritual inheritance which is theirs in the faith.

But we have not yet exhausted the account of the responsibility which imagination must bear in relation to the faith if we leave untouched the whole question of Church architecture and the structure of the liturgy. I mention them in one breath because they belong essentially together. We are engaged in a furious industry of church building, and we now have to do with a generation of architects who are not prepared to copy the barrenness of the eighteenth century or the stylistic grotesqueness of the nineteenth century. They put the question to churchmen which they put to all of their clients: What do you want to do in this building, and which parts of what you wish to do are to be done in which parts of the building? How is the building to be joined together so that it visibly bodies forth what you are seeking to do in it? Only churchmen can answer those questions and the answer must be couched in terms of our imaginative construction of what we are about, Sunday by Sunday, as we worship in God's house. In other words, the answer has to be in terms of our image of the liturgy. At this point our courage fails us, for we swiftly retreat to prepared positions, the

i. in church architecture and liturgy

safety of the Reformed liturgy, the sanctuary of the Book of Common Order,—forgetting that in their days both of these were creative productions, imaginatively worked out by those who saw that the new day called for new inventiveness. The Reformers succeeded in linking the liturgy to the form of church-building; we have

not yet found our formula, largely because we do not realize that it is to be found through the imagination and not in the fastnesses of scholasticism however reputable.¹

¹ In part II of this article, which will be published next month, Professor McIntyre discusses the place of imagination in theology.—*Editor*.

Barth's Doctrine of Reconciliation

BY THE REVEREND RONALD S. WALLACE, B.Sc., PH.D., EDINBURGH

By the appearance of two volumes¹ the English-speaking world is now almost up to date so far as Barth is concerned. It is only seven years since the translation of volume i part 2 appeared, and ten other volumes have now followed. The speedy execution of this work is an important contribution to the cause of theology by the editors, translators, and publishers.

It is in the United States that Barth to-day causes the most keen discussion. But the task there of those who, like Dr. Geoffrey Bromiley, the translator, are seeking to 'dispel imaginary pictures' is as great as that of the early pioneers on the same continent in their battle with the dark forests and the swamps, for there are still books being published even by theologians of some repute who simply slump together and dismiss together 'Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and the existentialists' as if it was not worth while even trying to distinguish between any of the lot. Barth is still discussed, and final decisions are made about him, by those who, if pressed, will admit that they have never read a word of his own writing. In such theological conversation the most frequently expressed doubts at present are as to whether Barth's admission of contradictions and obscurities in the Bible really allows him to take it as seriously and authoritatively as he seems to do, as to whether or not he believes in the inevitable universal salvation of every one, and as to whether or not he believes in an after-life at all.

Vigorous antagonism comes from that numerically large section of American theological life in which there is a tendency to stress logical rational coherence and order in the development of theological propositions. In such circles revelation

¹ *Church Dogmatics*, vol. iv. *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, part 3 first half and *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, part 3 second half (T. and T. Clark; 50s. net each). These two volumes together make up one complete chapter of Barth's *Dogmatics*. The pages of the second half-volume are numbered consecutively with the first, and there is one index to the whole chapter.

tends to be viewed as a body of truths apprehensible by the human mind on the basis of an analogy between the being of God and natural human existence, and in real continuity and harmony with natural theology. Those trained in this way of thinking are naturally bound to feel that Barth speaks in a strange language and belongs to an alien world.

The main attack on Barth's *Dogmatics*, however, now that its structure can be seen on a large scale, comes from those who are deeply committed to traditional scholastic Reformed Theology, sincerely believing that this gives the best possible summary of the teaching of Holy Scripture. Here, there is serious reaction to the fact that Barth at times indulges in severe criticism of certain aspects of the teaching of traditional Calvinism, and of Calvin himself. His radically new approach to the problem of double predestination, and his refusal to consider Christ's state of humiliation as prior, in order of discussion, to His state of glorification, are given as typical illustrations of his departure from orthodoxy.

These two volumes under review will help us to assess the value of Barth's innovations in method within Reformed Theology. Barth here discusses the Person and work of Christ as one inseparable unity. In the New Testament Christ is presented always as One engaged in His work for His people. Therefore throughout his discussion of the Doctrine of Reconciliation, Barth has sought to present what Calvin would have called 'Christ clothed with his Gospel', avoiding the traditional tendency to separate the Person of Christ from His work and office, and to develop a soteriology and ecclesiology divorced from Christology.

In the previous volumes of his *Doctrine of Reconciliation* Barth has already discussed the whole event of the Atonement, firstly by viewing Jesus Christ in His personal work as the God who humbles Himself and therefore reconciles man with Himself, and, secondly, by viewing Him as the man who is exalted by God and therefore reconciled with Him. In this way Barth has sought to do