

THE IMAGINATION OF FAITH

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TODAY in the Western world Christians tend to live bifurcated lives, on the one hand within an enclave of private faith, and on the other in a 'real' world surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of science, technology and commerce, with very few bridges connecting them. Work, the media, politics and the rest require that faith be left at the gates if you want to travel in their realm.

It is a source of great spiritual dissonance, felt by nearly everyone but especially by the young, who can't find any connecting links between the secular world they have grown up in and what they are taught of faith. Many school age children, we are told, lose their faith because of the disjunction they experience between their secular subjects, especially the sciences, and their religious education. Adults too feel the difficulty of linking their hour or so with God and the rest of their day-to-day living and working—it creates a feeling that faith is somehow 'unreal'.

The impasse is felt on the secular side also—there are enormous barriers to be surmounted just to consider what faith might offer your life—aren't they just fairy stories?

These problems are confounded also by the limitations individualism and consumerism set on our thinking, feeling and acting—in this atmosphere anything outside our own needs, interests and wants feels like foreign territory. Bridges need to be built, therefore, if there is to be any way to cross from one side to the other and, we will find, 'imagination', is an essential source of the resources we need to do so.

Imagination is our power to form, to connect and disconnect, to arrange and rearrange images, ideas and sensations in our minds. By our imagination we can create new worlds, opening up links between our

everyday world, its problems and limitations, with new worlds of possibility and the resolution of difficulties: science needs imagination to devise new hypotheses; technology relies on the inventiveness of imagination to solve problems; and we see imagination at work in every advertisement, novel or movie that seeks to entertain us or lure us into some new buying experience. Our imagination is at work throughout our lives.

Faith too requires imagination if we are to keep open our relationship with God, as Jesus' parables seek to do, and to forge links with the world around us. Faith in God is our trust in, our beliefs about and our commitment to the One who is the Source of all that is. Tradition provides the grammar, concepts and the varied vocabulary that preserve the integrity of faith, but it remains truncated and barely alive if it is disconnected from culture, experience and the public sphere. Shut in on itself, as many feel it to be now, it suffocates for want of the air it needs to breathe in the *real* world of people's lives.

Faith is not meant to be frozen in time, whether in some alleged golden age of practice or even in the age, culture or literal interpretation of the Bible. Throughout the Scriptures we encounter people struggling with faith, facing calamitous events such as slavery in Egypt, exile and persecution, and Jesus himself in the midst of the turmoil of the sick, dispossessed, sinners and outcasts of Galilee ending in his death on the cross.

For his followers we see this struggle of faith carried on in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters and other writings of the New Testament as they face the very different world of the Roman Empire outside Israel.

Our faith always remembers and treasures this past, but lives out the struggle in the 'real'

present while it looks to the possibilities God offers for the future—links which can only be made when imagination brings all these together in our vision of what is being asked of us in the actual circumstances of our time and place.

Richard Dawkins provides a good example of how lack of imagination creates difficulties for faith in our present scientific culture:

A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe cannot be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right. Worse (from the point of view of simplicity), other corners of God's great consciousness are simultaneously preoccupied with the doings and emotions and prayers of every single human being—and whatever intelligent aliens there might be on other planets in this and 100 billion other galaxies.¹

A few pages later, he states that believing in such a God is tantamount to dealing yourself 'a perfect hand in bridge', 'a total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation', 'a dreadful exhibition of self-indulgent, thought-denying skyhookery'.²

But, leaving aside the diatribe which sounds like a highly excited electioneering speech, in the manner of Donald Trump, that is precisely what we believe about God—God would not be God if that were not true. It is not, however, a campaign for votes—God is not some pseudo solution to a scientific equation. God as Creator is the One on whom everything that exists depends.

Modern science presents us with vast eons of time, some fourteen and a half billion years of our universe's existence, with the possibility of an indefinite number of bangs and bounces preceding that beginning; with a billion billion stars; with the intricate and complex settings for the forces that allow the Goldilocks' zone for life to emerge on earth; with fermions and bosons, the building blocks of matter and force; with the double helix of life replicating and life evolving DNA and RNA; with the indeterminacy of quantum



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theory, the unpredictability of chaos theory, and the multi-dimensions of string theory, and the conundrums they create; and with a list of wonders that will continue to grow, all creating a very different mindset from the past. The question then is how is faith to erect the bridges needed to allow people to cross from one to the other and back again.³

Perhaps we can begin with St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), an unlikely ally in the present contest. Even theists today have given up on Anselm's famous argument for the existence of God—if it is possible to conceive, he argued, of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, then, if that being does not exist, it would be less than perfect, so therefore that being must exist in order to be the being than which nothing greater can be conceived.

As every modern atheist who has kicked Anselm's dialectical football around the playing field of logic enjoys pointing out—because something can be thought to exist, eg a unicorn, it does not mean that it does exist.⁴ A fair ruling! But even if Anselm's argument does not kick a goal, it may keep the ball in play.

Anselm's reflection was originally in the context of a prayer, so, rather than being a 'proof', it may be better seen as a corrective to our inadequate powers of imagining. When we think of the billions of galaxies, of the infinitesimally small particles of matter and energy, of the eons of the evolution of life, and the complex equations we need to explore the universe, perhaps again Anselm's thought

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experiment can propel our imagination to the Being than which nothing greater can be thought - for this is precisely what the Scriptures attempt to do for our faith in the God who is revealed in the events and lives the authors portray.

The stars in the night sky of Israel some two and a half thousand years ago would have shone brighter than we can now see them and certainly excited the psalmist's imagination:

He who lives forever created
the whole universe;
the Lord alone is just.
To none has he given power to
proclaim his works;
and who can search out his
mighty deeds?

Who can measure his majestic
power?...

It is not possible to diminish or
increase them,
nor is it possible to fathom the
wonders of the Lord. (Sir 18:1-6)

Beauty and wonder are for the Scriptures
the imagination's way into the
transcendent:

If through delight in the beauty of
these things people assumed
them to be gods,
let them know how much better
than these is their Lord,
for the author of beauty created
them. (Wis 13:3)

The Scriptures invite us to use our imagination if we are to come into the Presence of God. What the Scriptural authors knew excited wonder and awe. What we know through science, the numbers, equations and eons of time, excites wonder and awe also—this amazement must be allowed to enter into our own faith as well.

In the Scriptures faith has a cosmic dimension which has tended to be eclipsed by our narrow focus on the private and the personal: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now...' (Rm 8:22)—a 'groaning' we are very acutely

conscious of as habitat is destroyed and the world faces ecological disaster.

'Creation' is very much to the forefront in the prayer of the Scriptures—a dimension that tends to escape us:

Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the
heavens. (Ps 148:3-4)

The word 'God' in the Scriptures is an infinite universe of meaning, value and expression, unlimited even in imagination, a reality that cannot be named, a universe that can never be captured, and is always expanding, and only ever glimpsed momentarily in awe and wonder as we struggle into the future:

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephes 3:18-9).

The openness of the word 'God' to encompass the whole universe and all that is in it, is also a holding open of the 'human' so that it doesn't close in on itself and implode, losing its sense of worth and destiny. The Scriptural prohibition of idolatry was just as much about humanity as it was about God:

They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their ancestors, and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false... (2Kg 17:15).

Idolatry is the belief that there is something within the universe that defines us, whether it be literally an idol or is some principle, fact or theory that seeks to tell us once and for all what we are. Idolatry is a foreclosure of meaning and value which seeks to reduce us to some pre-established formula and to pretend to answer the perennial existential question of human beings: Who am I?

Faith in God is the refusal of all forms of idolatry, ancient and modern. Revelation, however, is not the disclosure of everything,

but the coming into the presence of the ungraspable Mystery of all things that is to be understood as personal, loving, just and compassionate. Just as God is always a Question for us, so are we always a question to ourselves. As the Scriptures tell us, 'the dawn from on high' is always breaking upon us to enlarge our vision of who we are:

By the tender mercy of our God,
 the dawn from on high will
 break upon us,
 to give light to those who sit in
 darkness and in the shadow
 of death
 to guide our feet into the way
 of peace. (Lk 1:78-9)

The imagination of faith keeps alive our sense of our own worth and of the things that truly matter to us as we are confronted by the trinity of our modern world's gods—Profit, Pleasure and material Progress. Walled off within our private and personal enclaves, our faith will feel 'unreal' if it does not march out to combat 'the cosmic powers of the present darkness' as the Epistle to the Ephesians calls the struggle of faith (Eph 6:12).

The Galilee of Jesus' day was a human wilderness of suffering, oppression, alienation, poverty and conflict, as we saw earlier. It was also the world of possibility, with a potential for change, grace and conversion. At the end of his Gospel, Mark tells us that it is there in Galilee that we will encounter the risen Christ:

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you (Mk 16:7).

In every age, people have indulged their tendency to fashion gods for themselves, gods which they serve and worship. In modern times the Scriptures will allow us to come into the presence of a God not made into our own individual and consumer image and likeness: but rather, into the presence of the *God of Creation*—'the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters' (Gen 1:2); the *God of history*—'I am the God of your

father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Ex 3:6); the *God of contradiction and surprise*—'But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23-4); the *God of the poor and oppressed*—Jesus reechoing the words of Isaiah 'he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor' (Lk 4:18); and the *God whose purposes bring all things together*—'See, I am making all things new... I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end' (Rev 21:5-6).

Such a God is able to upset the applecart and shopping trolleys in which we place all our privileged wants and desires, as Jesus did with the money changers' tables in the temple. The God of the Scriptures is infinitely larger in life than our own domesticated imitations, well able to encompass both the discoveries of science and the struggle for justice in an afflicted world.

In place of a catechism mentality that seems to have all the answers, we need to be more aware of the questions we face that don't have ready answers and on which so much depends. Science, literature, the Arts and the human sciences are all engaged in exploring the human. Technology confronts us with issues that affect both our planet and our social health. Commerce raises our standards of living, but more and more people fall through the cracks. Often we seem to use our certainties as a shield against the questions and issues that our life and times throw up to us.

Imagination is not comfortable—but neither is love—in the real world. As the English poet, W.H. Auden reminds us:

What figures of destruction unawares
 Jump out at love's imagination,
 And chase away the castles and the bears;
 How warped the mirrors where our worlds
 are made;

While we are attempting to protect the 'castles' and the 'bears' of our faith within the

enclaves of our Western Churches, we never seem to notice how 'warped' is our own view of the world. If nothing else, however, the death of Jesus at the hands of unjust and vicious political and religious authorities should convince us that our place is not within protective walls, but facing the 'figures of destruction' in the real world.

We do a great disservice to everyone and to young people especially when we present faith as an interminable list of answers to questions people have long since ceased to ask. Our faith is a commitment to the questioning and wonder both at the God revealed in the Scriptures, especially in the death of Jesus, and at ourselves with our mystery and unlimited potential.

The philosopher, John Armstrong, in his book, *In Search of Civilization*, poses a problem that he perceives in secular terms, but which is just as relevant for Christian faith:

how to meet the almost opposed demands of redemptive meaning (a story that is good enough, hopeful enough, to be worth believing) and plausibility (a story that is true enough, close enough to reality to be a genuine source of strength).⁶

There may be many ways to 'redemption' and 'plausibility', but for Christian faith one way stands out, that of squarely facing the reality of the world we live in - it is what the cross of Jesus confronts us with as do the Scriptures as a whole.

The Book of Job, in particular, takes us to the depths of human suffering: the vulnerability, injustice, wickedness and calamities that humankind can face:

The wicked remove landmarks;

they seize flocks and pasture them.

They drive away the donkey of the orphan; they take the widow's ox for a pledge.

They thrust the needy off the road;

the poor of the earth all hide themselves (24:2-4).

And Job puzzles over the silence of God:

The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;

he covers the eyes of its judges—

if not he, who then is it? (9:24)

This seeming silence of God is broken in the person of Jesus, especially on the cross, when God identifies with the suffering and victimhood of the poor and oppressed in face of injustice—Job's faith is vindicated:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,

and at the last he will

stand upon the earth... (19:25).

Death is not the end of the story. Resurrection in this life is the power of God *within* the struggle for a better world evoking, inspiring and sustaining hope for integrity, justice and peace. In this way the Christian story is 'redemptive' and 'plausible'. When it remains solely a story of ritual and private devotion it appears 'unreal' and 'lifeless', a far cry from the cry of Jesus' anguish on the cross as he entered into the depths of human suffering: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46)

NOTES

1. *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) 149.

2. *ibid*, 155

3. See for a fuller treatment, John Polkonghorne, *Exploring Reality*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005; and *Quantum Physics and Theology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

4. For example, Kerry Walters, *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2010) 68-72.

5. 'In Sickness and in Health', *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979) 112.

6. *In Search of Civilization* (London: Allen Lane, 2009) 114.