

The Use of Imagination in Christian Devotion and Ministry

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Christianity has expressed mixed feelings about the use of images and the faculty of imagination for a long time. From the fifth and sixth century Origenist controversy, to the Iconoclast debates of the eighth and ninth centuries, to discussions about images among Protestant reformers and Spanish mystics, up to the debates between Richard Foster and the Spiritual Counterfeits Project in recent decades, Christians have argued about the proper role which human imagination should play in Christian devotion and ministry.¹ Some are suspicious that we are easily deceived through our imagination. Some feel that visualized images of God distract us from the true, unrepresentable I AM, or from a purer form of prayer. Some feel that the use of intentional visualization, particularly in ministry prayer, places more undue emphasis on human exercise.

Underneath these concerns are two fundamental questions. First is the question of mediation: are the person and work of Christ and the Holy Spirit mediated to God's people (*or should they be mediated*) through imaginative operations? Second is a question of discernment: How do we distinguish the work of God in human experience from other, less wanted, influences? My own conviction is that the human imagination, like other human faculties, can indeed be used (or misused) for mediating and facilitating relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Thus I answer affirmatively to the first question, while reminding the Church of the need for careful discernment through wise response to the second. My defense for this approach comes from my studies of both the psychology of human imagination and the theology of God.

The Psychology of Imagination

From the 1970s on psychologists have spent a fair amount of energy exploring the behavior of the human imagination. Allan Paivio, Steven Kosslyn, Ronald Finke and others have demonstrated the significance of mental imagery in human thought and life.² A few insights from the field of mental imagery studies bear upon our my own sense of the place of images and imagery in Christian devotion and ministry.

First, human beings think with a combination of words and pictures. For the most part, verbal and visual processing utilize different parts of the brain. Verbal and visual processing also yield different kinds of knowledge, different ways of understanding things. For example, the use of mental imagery is especially useful in problem-solving and memory. The point here is that mental imagery functions as a distinct and valuable part of human knowledge and life. If Christians are commanded to "love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength" (a way of saying that all our faculties as humans are to be devoted to God), then it would seem only appropriate for Christians to find ways of employing the human imagination to the glory of God.

Second, mental imagery has a special connection to the affective dimension of human experience. The presence of strong emotion and vivid image are often found together. This is especially the case with regard to interpersonal relationships. Producers of pornography and advertizing have been aware of this fact for some time. So have Christian spiritual writers, who often speak of the value of vivid imaginative meditation on our death, or on the birth of the Christ child.

Third, whereas perception is predominantly a retrieval operation, mental imagery is a *constructive* operation. Mental imagery takes pieces of information from a variety of sources and integrates these into a coherent whole. Mental images can range between largely reproductive to highly creative, depending on the situation. Consequently, it is important to recognize that, for example, our "memories" of the past are not just reproductive, but involve our own constructive meaning-making. The sources of a present mental image are prior sense experience events and prior

mental events, all processed through a framework of beliefs and expectations. One must be especially attentive to the role of beliefs and expectations in Christian contexts, as memory and hope combine through mental imagery to mediate the presence of God.

Finally, some people have a stronger predisposition toward mental imagery than others. Just as some of us are “thinkers” and some are “feelers,” some have a better spatial sensibility than others, and so on, so also there are people who are especially gifted in their use of imagination. Perhaps some of the great visionaries in the history of Christian spirituality possessed just such a gifting. It is also reasonable to assume, based on the above, that there are also some people whose imagination is less keen, and who will have difficulty making use of devotional and ministry-prayer practices that require a heavy use of the imagination.

The Theology of God

Devotional and ministry practices are used as means of bringing people into the presence of God. People and God: the relationship of the human and the divine. But who is God and how does God communicate his presence to human beings? If we are to understand the place of mental imagery, as with other dimensions of Christian spirituality, then our reflections must arise in the context of a consideration of the *God* of Christian spirituality.³ Thus, a few points of the theology of God seem particularly relevant to an exploration of the use of mental imagery.

First, God is transcendent. God, as *God*, cannot ultimately be comprehended by human image or concept. Neither picture nor word is able to grasp fully the magnificence of the Almighty. After three chapters of a valiant attempt to probe God’s sovereignty, Paul closes the eleventh chapter of his epistle to the Romans by throwing up his hands. “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out” (Romans 11:13). When he asks for God’s name, Moses only hears, “I AM” (Exodus 3:14). It is this fact that is behind the Jewish/Christian condemnation of idolatry. God cannot be captured ultimately in any image and consequently our God should not be worshiped as an image. We are in danger when we try to capture God normatively in any single image, even a single picture of Christ.

But this God who transcends is also a God who is present, who reveals, and who mediates his own divine being through both words and images. Indeed, because God cannot *ultimately* be captured in any image, God is *proximately* revealed through all kinds of images. God is “shepherd,” “rock,” “father” “wind,” “fire” and much more. Our own understanding of God develops as our own images of God develop. Perhaps we experience God early as a savior. Then later we discover God as purifier; then as friend, as judge, and so on. Aspects of the ultimately Unnameable One collect and coalesce as we mature, offering to us an ever richer knowledge of the God who is beyond knowledge and makes himself known to us (Ephesians 3:19). Thus, while we are in danger when we place our ultimate focus of worship on a single image, nearly any image can serve as a vehicle through which the presence of God can be mediated. Both imageless and image-full prayer have their rightful place in Christian devotion and ministry, because we have relationship with a God who is both transcendent and immanent.

The people of God use imagination and expect us to use imagination to access God. We are commanded to “remember” God. And this remembering is an act of the imagination as much as an act of verbal processing. In Psalm 77 for example, Asaph declares in a time of trouble that he will “remember the deeds of the Lord,” and that he will “meditate on all your mighty deeds” (vv. 11-12). Then follows a description of a time when God redeemed the descendants of Jacob and Joseph: “the waters writhed,” “the clouds poured forth water,” “your lightning lit up the world,” “the earth trembled and quaked” (vv. 15-18). then he concludes, “Your path led through the sea, . . . You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (vv. 19-20). What is important to see in this passage is that the elements of the description of the exodus experience detailed in verses 15-18 *are not found* in Exodus 14. All you hear about there is a strong east wind. Asaph was *imagining* the event. And his imagination, rooted in history but not strictly tied to the details of history, served to mediate the presence of God to him in his time of trouble. He remembered God’s faithful care for Israel. God would also care for him. Similarly, the book of Revelation is full of vivid imaginative descriptions given so as to engage us in heartfelt commitment and hope in the God who holds the

future. We cannot properly read the parables, the poetry, indeed, even the metaphors that drive Pauline theology, apart from an active use of our imagination. The inspired authors of the Scriptures wrote the text with this very intention in mind. And the Holy Spirit of God, whose primary means of communicating the Son to believers is to move upon the heart and mind, will certainly awaken images as well as words to instruct and inspire us to deeper relationship and service to Christ.

Conclusion: The Practice of Imagination

To be human is to imagine: to picture and re-picture, to hear and re-hear, to experience and re-experience our world. Our imagination is constructive, a re-presentation of thoughts and feelings in the context of beliefs and expectations. What if these beliefs and expectations are full of hope and rooted in truth, as was Asaph's imagination? Then healing flows. People throughout Christian history have used imagination to facilitate their relationship with God: people like the desert fathers who recommended meditation on our death; the communities of the Modern Devotion who developed formal guides for meditating on the mysteries of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; Ignatius of Loyola, whose *Spiritual Exercises* made heavy use of the Christian imagination; or Puritan Richard Baxter who, in his *Saint's Everlasting Rest* taught us how to be inspired by our future in heaven through the use of vivid imagery in meditation. Like these, I am persuaded that the nature of our transcendent-immanent God and the nature of human experience gives reason for us to make discerning use of mental imagery as a means of facilitating devotion and ministry.

Mental imagery can be employed in devotion and ministry in a variety of ways. We might picture a passage of Scripture, what it must have been like to be present with Jesus as he heals (and even perhaps to imagine ourselves there with him — the Holy Spirit present with us as we pray is the same Spirit that was present in and through Jesus). We might imagine our sinful habits, visualizing either a single event or a generalized habit in the presence of the God who convicts and forgives, watching ourselves with the eyes of Christ. We might picture the Church as a sanctified body, imagining congregations and communities expressing Christ's love, and through such an imagination exercise, finding ourselves inspired to offer this or that act in service to our gracious Lord. The possibilities are endless.⁴

And of course, like all human faculties and operations, our imaginations can be led astray through our use of mental imagery. Just as we can be deceived by our use of words and concepts, so we can be deceived in our use of imagination. For some people, at certain stages of growth, or under certain circumstances, the use of mental imagery can be harmful rather than helpful. But so can certain methods of Bible study. We have need, in all our prayer and ministry, to place ourselves in the context of the careful discernment of a wise and caring community.

Jesus stated that the greatest commandment is that we “love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind” (Luke 10:27). For me, to live this passage means finding ways to use my mental imagery—created by God along with my verbal processing—to glorify God best.

¹See, for example Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Edward J. Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (London, SPCK, 1978); Bryan D. Mangrum and Guisepppe Skavizzi, trans. *A Reformation Debate: Karlstadt, Emser, and Eck on Sacred Images: Three Treatises in Translation*, Renaissance and Reformation Texts in Translation, 5, 2nd edition (Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2005); Richard Foster, *Prayer: finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992); and the *SCP Journal* 9/3 (1990), which is devoted to visualization.

²For example, Allan Paivio, *Imagery and Verbal Processes* (New York: Holt, 1971); Steven Kosslyn, *Image and Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Ronald Finke, *Principles of Mental Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989). The current state of research can be explored through a review of recent issue of the

Journal of Mental Imagery.

3 For my own treatment of this topic see Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 113-144.

4 I describe a few of the uses for devotion in my *Praying the Scriptures* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999).