

IMAGINATION AND FAITH

By MICHAEL PAUL GALLAGHER

IN 1976 Ursula le Guin wrote a preface to her already acclaimed work of science fiction, *The left hand of darkness*, and in this new addition she spoke deliberately in paradoxes:

I talk about the gods, I am an atheist. But I am an artist too, and therefore a liar. Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth . . . the truth is a matter of the imagination.

Half a century earlier, one of the greatest explorers of this theme wrote a poem called 'A high-toned old christian woman', in which he mocked at the puritan tradition and argued that poetry springs more joyously from exactly the same source as religion — human imagination:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. . . .

And the piece continues as one of the typically playful poems that Wallace Stevens loved to produce in the twenties, many of them obsessed with the new role that imagination plays, if life is godless. Here he is pondering in a letter the dilemma of his own atheist position:

If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else. Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination.¹

Hence, in his view, the calling of the poet is to 'create his unreal out of what is real'. In a shoddy time of things, the poet will seek to

undermine 'the purely realistic mind', whether in literature or religion, because such a mind 'never experiences any passion for reality'.

It is on purpose that I begin with these two quirky and tantalizing voices: they raise the level of discourse to that of wonderment. At least at the outset they prevent us from speaking with questionable reasonableness of what is essentially non-rational. Sometimes faith is experienced, wrongly, as irrational, but it is always non-rational. Aquinas pinpointed something crucially different about the knowing involved in faith when he saw it as an act of the intellect commanded by the will. More attractive definitions are only translations of that insight into other vocabularies: faith is the knowledge born of love, or an interplay between discernment and commitment.² In this great tradition of faith-analysis the claims to truth are met by the role given to the mind, and the claims for freedom are met by the special place reserved for decision. But is this the whole story? Surely a third partner is involved and indeed centrally involved: even more fundamentally than the proud tradition of intellect and will, human imagination is the forgotten vehicle of faith. Theologies of faith too dominated by reason are in constant danger of turning divine mystery into a neat human system. Theologies of faith too dominated by will can fall into two families: either dramatic appeals to dark jumping, or else the severe self-imposed imperatives of voluntarism (and ultimately of pelagianism).

If one returns to the New Testament in search of the language of reason, one realizes suddenly and with some starkness to what degree we are now the children of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The voice of Pilate, who, in asking 'What is truth?', seems to have had what Stevens would term 'a purely realistic mind', is a faint one in the pages of scripture. But both his question about truth and his wavelength of scepticism have been dominant in all the complex rationalisms of the last few centuries. It is not at all surprising that the atheist poet can have more in common with the imaginative modes of scripture than some of our more rationalistic theologians.

From that camp will come a predictable objection to any elevation of imagination into membership, along with intellect and will, of a new trinity of faith-faculties. Imagination, we shall be warned, is the playground of artists, of people who tell lies that they claim to embody some greater truth. But they are lies, nonetheless, as Plato perceived before he banished the poets. However 'supreme' the

fictions, they are man-made, illusory, lacking in valid truth-claims; gestures towards truth, perhaps, but not 'really' true. In all this doubting of the imagination, however, what is lacking is a distinction between the *imaginary* and the *imaginative*. In some of its exercises imagination creates the (merely) imaginative, but in other modes it can reveal the (truly) imaginative. Faith is imaginative, not imaginary.

Once again the opposing voices may insist on a secondary and subordinate role for imagination in any journey to faith or in any understanding of faith. Advancing more subtle arguments this time, their strategy is to deny to imagination a full partnership in the knowing that is faith. One can imagine the counsel for the prosecution: 'Intellect and will are senior members but imagination can be permitted to hold a respected place as a pastoral associate. Yes, of course, Christ himself spoke to the crowds only in parables (as two of the Synoptics baldly state). Yes, of course our images of God are crucial in any communication of faith. Yes, of course the receptivity of humankind before revelation is powerfully akin to the quality of listening required by great poetry. Yes, of course the whole of the bible is more literature than dogma in its level of discourse. But let's be serious. Even if imagination has an important role in the genesis of faith and in the spirituality that feeds the life of faith, and even if imagination need not be equated with the imaginary, it is still excessive to suppose that imagination can be a faculty of religious truth. Imagination — to be generous — often prepares the way of the Lord. But it does not enter into the core of the act of faith'.

In defence of imagination

The remaining pages of this article will resemble a courtroom sequence, where we call witnesses for the defence of imagination against this type of criticism. Drawing on a range of authors, several of whom do not seem to know of the existence of their like-minded colleagues, the aim will be to establish a case for imagination as a crucial vehicle of faith. What will unite these witnesses, as members of a rich if unacknowledged resistance movement, is their tendency to downplay the knowledge dimensions, and to stress instead that faith is much more (i) a matter of disposition or attitude that leads to (ii) a special receptivity of searching and listening, which in turn grounds (iii) a struggling way of living rather than a clear way of knowing.

In this light one can see some of the older authors at pains to

preserve a balance between the cognitive and the imaginative in the process of faith. Thus, to call our first witness, E. H. Johnson would hold that imagination has to do with 'vividness of mental seeing', and that this is the hinge between the usual kind of knowing and the trust that is so central in faith:

Religious faith is grounded in discernment of spiritual things. It is first knowing, secondly imaging, thirdly trusting. . . . The recognition that spiritualities are realities can be put into most effective exercise only by aid of imagination. . . . Faith . . . is the work of imagination fortified by experience.³

Long before developmental thinking became self-conscious, Johnson was speaking of stages of faith, or envisaging it as a 'tripod' of recognition, imagining and belonging in confidence to Christ: 'so far as conversion of ideals into energy goes, it is all a matter of imaging Christ'. A final statement from him will serve as a bridge back to an older and more celebrated witness, John Henry Newman: 'It is when imagination sounds the depths of fundamental reality that this reality begins to be felt . . . that is, to be veritably known and actually faced.' This seems remarkably close in spirit to *A grammar of assent*, where one of Newman's constant concerns is a pre-reflective encounter with our images, pictures, parables of divine reality. He takes the example of a child's imaginative apprehension of God and, while admitting that it is incomplete as theology, he argues that it offers a paradigm of adult faith: it is rooted in 'an image, before it has been reflected on, and before it is recognized by him as a notion'.⁴ Many readers will be aware of Newman's distinction between a 'notional assent' (a theological act) and 'real assent' (an act of religion or of devotion); but it is fascinating to learn that in the drafts his initial choice of a phrase to express 'real assent' was in fact 'imaginative assent'.⁵ His originality in this area lies in his emphasis that faith needs *first* to become credible to the imagination before it can journey towards a fuller and more intellectual theology of faith:

Images, when assented to, have an influence both on the individual and on society, which mere notions cannot exert. . . . The natural and rightful effect of acts of the imagination upon us . . . is not to create assent, but to intensify it. . . . The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination.

After listening briefly to Newman, our jury might benefit from hearing from someone who has translated the relevance of these

more-than-century-old insights into the more complex horizons of today. John Coulson's recent book, *Religion and imagination*, explores the parallels between the experience of faith and the experience of literature, and holds that in both areas it is by means of the imagination that we are 'predisposed to believe'.⁶ In his view the 'primary forms of religious belief' are not to be found in formulated truths and creeds but in the stranger modes of metaphor, symbol and story. From this point of view, it is a mistake to give precedence to rational explanation over the imaginative assent as understood by Newman. Coulson would see this as an 'inversion of priorities in religion'. Thus his book begins from the question 'how can I believe what I cannot understand?' and his answer takes the form of a nuanced distinction between *holding* a belief apprehended first by the imagination and *explaining* it in some form of comprehended proof: 'religious belief originates in that activity we call imagination'.

Before calling another major witness, it is worth drawing the jury's attention to an almost exact echo of that final claim of Coulson's in another catholic researcher of the same period. The sociological approach of Andrew Greeley has led him also to

the position that primordially religion is a function of the creative imagination . . . (it) originates in our experiences of hope, experiences which are articulated and resonated in symbols which are stories. . . . Religious images are a much stronger predictor of world view than is doctrinal orthodoxy. Propositions which exist independent of any grounding in the creative imagination are likely to have little impact on practical responses to suffering and tragedy.⁷

The nature of imagination

But what is this 'imagination' of which so many speak? It can seem a slithery term pointing in several directions.⁸ For many of the common-sense thinkers of the eighteenth century, imagination was a power of producing mental images of things in their absence (and even as such it would be important for any religious perception of a hidden God). But for a later generation, from being a power of visualizing what was absent, imagination now became a god-like and essentially creative agent. So, is imagination a secondary and subordinate stage on the road to real knowledge? Or is it 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception'.⁹ This old debate will find its echoes in the more recent discussions concerning the role of imagination in faith.

It is time to call two major authorities to the witness box, in order

both to clarify what is meant by imagination and to state a strong form of the claim that it constitutes a central language of faith. The first is Richard Kroner, a philosopher of religion, who devoted much of his life to clarifying the non-cognitive and imagination-centred nature of faith. It was from Kroner that I found my own distinction between the imaginary and the imaginative confirmed: 'The content of the bible is not imaginary but imaginative, whereas the content of poems is not only imaginative but also imaginary or fictitious.'¹⁰ Kroner would be openly hostile to any downgrading of imagination as 'the opposite of understanding', and his own works are intended to justify the existence of what he terms 'spiritual imagination', which is central to all religious faith.¹¹ It is through the medium of imagination that revelation can be received, and hence a theology of faith needs a different starting point than from the one that is usually offered: 'the *idea* of God must be replaced by the *image* of God'. Our knowledge of God is 'not theoretical or objective but imaginative knowledge', or at least its

objectivity must be distinguished from scientific objectivity, because it is inseparably connected with the subjectivity of religious imagination. It is the peculiar and unique nature of ultimate truth to demand the collaboration of reason and imagination; the isolated intellect alone cannot find it.¹²

What then is faith? Does it lose all claims to intelligent truth? Kroner would reply with some qualifications that echo the stances taken by our earlier witnesses. On the one hand, faith is more a matter of attitude than of verifiable knowledge in the usual sense: it is 'the accurate and the adequate attitude of finite man towards the self-revelation of God'. On the other hand, faith should not be too demeaning in abandoning claims to truth: it is not 'a lower degree of knowledge; it is something wider than all knowledge, something different in principle from all knowledge'.¹³

If there is time to call only one other witness to testify at any length, William Lynch will bring our case to a worthy climax. It is a topic that he has meditated through a long career, and he can provide some of the clearest and most persuasive descriptions of imagination:

The imagination is not an aesthetic faculty. It is not a single or special faculty. It is all the resources of man, all his faculties, his whole history, his whole life, and his whole heritage brought to bear

upon the concrete world inside and outside of himself, to form images of the world, and thus to find it, cope with it, shape it, even make it. The task of the imagination is to imagine the real. . . . The religious imagination . . . tries literally to imagine things with God. . . . The imagination is really the only way we have of handling the world.¹⁴

From this basis it is a short step to thinking of faith either as 'a way of experiencing and imagining the world' or as a 'world within which we experience or imagine'.¹⁵ In words that seem very close to Newman and Coulson, Lynch would invite us to 'try reversing our images' and to understand faith as 'a first and primitive force in life', something universally operative but pre-rational: 'rationality will later come in' to help in the search for explicit meaning. Faith precedes knowledge but it does need to progress towards knowledge: 'the power and beauty of faith or imagination depend on a progressive relationship with reality, and revelation. Otherwise faith remains a permanent child'. It is no coincidence that both Newman and Lynch take the example of the child to explain the role of imagination in faith and at the same time the need for faith to expand from its cherished and crucial seed-bed in imagination. 'Unless one becomes as a little child' can be re-read as pointing to the non-intellectual and non-voluntarist gateway to faith through images and wonderment and listening. Is imagination more than a gateway? Must not the essential moment of the 'child' be transcended as faith progresses into knowledge? Lynch would hold that faith remains stunted unless it finds embodiment *both* in a vertical belief in God *and* in the horizontal 'belief men have in each other'. At the same time he would not see this mature faith as abandoning imagination, as a space-craft might jettison its launching rocket. There is a temptation to reduce the role of imagination in this way, by limiting it to an initial rhetoric or affective invitation into the life of faith. This line of thinking would allow to imagination only a preparatory usefulness as a psychological or pastoral tool. In a more recent article William Lynch protests against this 'belittling' and seeks to establish instead a view of 'the imagination as place of thought'. As against a tendency (even among some of our previous witnesses) to polarize the world of images and the world of ideas, Lynch wants us to recognize the imagination as a form of intelligence or understanding from its beginnings: 'images and the imagination that creates them must be seen as bearers of cognition, truth, knowledge'.¹⁶

If conceptual ideas alone can aspire to valid knowledge, we would seem condemned to a divorced and fruitless language of faith. But when imagination is admitted as a primary colleague of theological thought, then the faith one defends will be one that does more justice to the double mystery of humanity and of divinity. Ultimately it is through imagination that we cope with the difficult docking manoeuvre between a hidden God and a fallen humanity. If that meeting is the foundation of faith, then one touches at once on two reasons why imagination is crucial: we do not *see* God directly, and often we do not want to *hear* him or hear of him (the hearing whence faith comes). In this situation of essential struggle, it is imagination that helps us to escape from fantasy and falsehood, to be healed into hope, and to receive new vision from the image of God made man.¹⁷

Postscript

Our appeal to the jury must rest there. But two further points deserve brief mention. Many important witnesses were unable to be cited this time. The handful that we have heard may represent an intriguing convergence but the club has other potential members. So one should at least list a few authors and titles: Ray Hart, *Unfinished man and the imagination* (1968); Julian Hartt, *Theological method and imagination* (1977); Gordon Kaufman, *The theological imagination*; Rosemary Haughton, *The passionate God*; John Navone and Thomas Cooper, *Tellers of the Word*; David Tracy, *The analogical imagination* (all 1981); Avery Dulles, *Models of revelation* (1983), and, in somewhat different vein, much of the writing of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Finally one might hint at the possible relevance of this field for a new apologetics. The old apologetics has become not so much untrue as inadequate within a very different cultural context. The newer culture, especially in some of its youth forms, often seems a more poetically exploratory one than before. If so, a corner-stone for any new apologetics would be to grasp that the language of knowing God is primarily the language of images. Our colder forms of discourse get the wavelength wrong. A case could be made that the God of the bible seldom either argues or orders; instead he recites poems and tells stories and invites to freedom by way of images. Out of this revelation springs faith, a revelation where imagination is a central strand in the communication of mystery and in its continued life — both as receiving apparatus and as fostering agency. And in so far as faith is much closer to an active attitude than to a piece of

knowledge, it will continue to be shaped and nourished less by clear concepts than by the many images, acknowledged or not, that each person has of his or her life and of its hopes.

NOTES

¹ *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p 370. Other prose quotations from Stevens here are from *The necessary angel* (New York, 1951), p 58 and *Letters*, p 597.

² See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in theology* (London, 1971), p 115, and Avery Dulles, 'The meaning of faith considered in relationship to justice', in *The faith that does justice*, ed. John Haughey (New York, 1977), p 13.

³ Johnson, E. H.: *The religious use of imagination* (New York, 1901), pp 43, 134. Other quotations from Johnson are from pp 9, 187, 63.

⁴ Newman, J. H.: *A grammar of assent* (London, 1909), p 115. Subsequent quotations are from pp 117, 75, 82, 92.

⁵ Coulson, John: *Religion and imagination* (Oxford, 1981), pp 82-83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 55. Further quotations from Coulson come from pp 16, 34, v, 46.

⁷ Greeley, Andrew: *Religion: a secular theory* (New York, 1982), pp 48, 68, 98.

⁸ See James Engell's *The creative imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). See also Ernest Tuveson, *The imagination as a means of grace* (Berkeley, 1960), and Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (London, 1976).

⁹ Coleridge, S. T.: *Biographia literaria*, chapter 13.

¹⁰ Kroner, Richard: *The religious function of imagination* (New Haven, 1941), p 36.

¹¹ Kroner, Richard: *Between faith and thought* (New York, 1966), pp 98, 101.

¹² Kroner, Richard: *The religious function of the imagination*, pp 33, 63.

¹³ Kroner, Richard: *How do we know God?* (New York, 1943), pp 98, 9.

¹⁴ Lynch, William: *Christ and Prometheus: a new image of the secular* (Notre Dame, 1970), p 23.

¹⁵ Lynch, William: *Images of faith* (Notre Dame, 1973), p 17. Further quotations come from pp 36-37, 97, 57.

¹⁶ Lynch, William: 'The life of faith and imagination', *Thought*, lvii (1982), pp 14, 9.

¹⁷ These phrases draw on some other expressions of William Lynch in his book *Images of hope* (New York, 1966), p 209.