

Truthful Imaginings: Scientific and Theological Enquiry

Only by imagination therefore can the world be known.

—Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction*

In a world of “alternative facts” what does it mean to search for “truth,” scientifically and theologically? This is a pressing question. One-liners seem to have replaced civil discussion and the general mistrust of science has never been more rampant.¹ In evaluating information we now turn to “fact checkers.” Indeed, we should want the truth and nothing but the truth. Christians of all people should encourage and engage in the relentless search for it. After all, our faith is based on certain historical realities concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet in getting rid of distortions and falsehood in scientific and theological enquiry we are not to dispose ourselves of the imagination. Let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

This may sound counterintuitive. The imagination is often associated with the faculty that brings to mind objects or events in the past or things that never existed in the first place. On this account, the imagination is seen as potentially unreliable at best and dangerous at worst, for it is only trustworthy insofar the images it generates represent the things we experience through our senses. These images are but reproductions of what is real. This is why Plato disregarded poets: their work was too far removed from reality. Likewise, Christians too have not had a high regard for the imagination. Our faith is not a figment of the imagination or a product of philosophy. Furthermore, theologian Kevin Vanhoozer notes that the King James Version of the Bible is partly to blame for the bad reputation of the imagination among Christians. Genesis 6:5 is translated as: “And God saw that the

¹ Daniel W. Drezner chronicles and comments on these phenomena in his recent *The Ideas Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”²

Yet in recent decades, as Vanhoozer points out, “the imagination’s stock has risen considerably in the eyes of philosophers thanks to its association with creative language.”³ What if the imagination does not merely reproduce reality but aids our understanding of the world? And what if this is not a function of its pictorial nature, but rather of its verbal nature? Philosopher Paul Ricoeur is an important proponent of this view, arguing that “images are *spoken* before they are *seen*.”⁴ He links the imagination to language and interpretation, attributing to it an important feature called semantic innovation: the moment we redescribe reality through metaphorisation, the act of applying a verbal image. This is what we do when we say something in terms of something else, giving shape to new meaning in the process.⁵

For example, numerous Biblical passages say that the LORD is a rock. We immediately recognize that this is not to be taken literally, but rather that the authors are invoking a verbal image to say something about God. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are full of these literary devices that speak to the imagination. Consider also Jesus’ use of parables which are essentially lengthy metaphors (e.g. the kingdom of God is like...). Likewise, in the realm of science verbal pictures help us understand reality and may end up becoming a dominant paradigm. Consider these examples: nature as book, world as mechanism, earth as spaceship, light as particle and so forth.

Obviously, redescription of reality through metaphorisation in different domains achieve different ends. Scientific knowledge (e.g. light is like a wave) and theological knowledge (e.g. Jesus is like a shepherd) pertain to different areas of reality. Yet it is evident

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Imagination in Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al., 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 441. See also Genesis 8:21 and Romans 1:21.

³ Ibid., 442.

⁴ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 39.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor,” *Philosophy Today* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1973): 110.

that in both fields the imagination plays a formative role in gaining understanding.⁶ In our search for truth let us not go overboard by dispensing with the imagination. Still, there is a real possibility of the imagination hindering our grasp of reality instead of aiding it. “But,” as Vanhoozer writes, “this no more disqualifies the imagination...than the existence of logical fallacies disqualifies reason.”⁷ Let us thus walk the fine line between a dry, lifeless documentation of facts and an escapism that defies reality. May we imagine truthfully.

⁶ This is not to say that these domains are not related. Taking the imagination seriously, Alister E. McGrath for example maintains the credibility of a Christian take on the natural world, arguing for “an imaginative discernment of deeper levels of truth beauty, and goodness within the natural world, enabled by the informing *imaginariium* of the Christian tradition” (*Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology* [Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2017], 182).

⁷ Vanhoozer, “Imagination in Theology,” 443.

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