

The Creative Imagination and the Intersection
of Aesthetics, Theology, and Science:
A Constructive Response
Sandra M. Levy, Ph.D.

The philosopher Mark Johnson has said, “Without imagination, nothing in the world would be meaningful. Without imagination, we could never make sense of our experience. Without imagination, we could never reason toward knowledge of reality.”

I

When Prof. Yust invited me to participate in this conference, she gave me two charges: first, to reflect on the connections among the three papers given and responded to by the conference participants themselves; and second, to suggest ways that participants might continue to explore the core conference question, “What is the imagination?”

This was a challenging assignment, and, as it turns out, a greatly rewarding one for me to undertake. When you think about the background disciplines of the three keynote speakers, we have represented here the fields of theology, behavioral science, and aesthetics – in this case, visual art. My own background was imprinted with behavioral science (specifically, psychology – the hard-nosed variety – Ph.D. from Indiana University, the home of B. F. Skinner! – and theology – I’m an Episcopal Priest).

So. We’re indeed reaching across disciplines to address our question of interest; that is, the nature and function of the imagination and perhaps therefore, most deeply, the nature and function of being human itself.

First, let me say a word about interdisciplinary dialogue. In 2006, the book *Alone in the World?* was published, authored by J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, who delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 2004. I mention this work because when I was given Dr. Yust’s assignment, I thought of Van Huyssteen’s model of interdisciplinary dialogue between science and theology which he discussed in this and other works of his. Without resorting to his technical language, Van Huyssteen argued that it is at the boundaries between disciplines that new and exciting discoveries take place. So in our case, it’s at the intersection of behavioral science, theology, and art that we raise the question of our imagination ... what it is, where it comes from, how it functions. Such dialogue *can* provide a rich heuristic ground for our research. But a word of caution.

Let’s think about the word *imagination*. ‘Cause as Van Huyssteen points out, it may very well be the case that what theology – as reflected here in Prof. Kaufman’s work – what theologians mean by the imagination and all that that concept entails, is not identical with what Prof. Harris or even Prof. Kapikian has in mind. But again, these diverse meanings and uses of the same term may alert us to the promising intersection between these disciplines, fruitful spaces occupied by multiple points of view.

So Van Huyssteen argues that dialogue at these boundaries – in these liminal spaces between disciplines – really listening to each other, grappling with each others’ perspectives, trying to understand one another – may not be just fruitful *across* disciplines, but may also finally cause us to return to our home discipline and ask new questions informed by such dialogue ... in this case, questions about the imagination which might not have occurred to us before now.

So here I’m going to examine our *convergence* on this single concept of interest – human imagination or the power of creativity – while reminding us all that each of these respective disciplines has its own integrity, its own methodology, its own language, and truth criteria, its own culture, perspectives and values – valid worlds of concern which cannot be simply collapsed into one another.

But I also think the *whole* truth, like life itself, is richly complex. Thus, there *is* this room for knowledge growth at the intersection. So let’s begin then the task of concluding summary.

II

So ... what’s the Imagination? Let me answer that in two ways. First, in my own work, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, I described the imagination as a power or capacity which allows us humans to transcend the concrete given, to imagine the unseen, to draw on elements of past experience, combine or bundle them in new ways, creating new meaning for ourselves; the power to envision a future which is not yet, to make new meaning through ritual, symbol and linguistic metaphor.

And I bet we can all agree on that description ... more or less! But here’s a question. When you dig beneath this description to grapple with deeper or extended meaning, how much variance do we find? Prof. Kaufman speaks of the “*mystery* of creativity,” and ultimately identifies this grand Mystery with God as primal creative process, from before the beginning of Big Bang to the consummation of it all. Thus, for him, the imagination is this rich human creative capacity which allows us to participate in God’s mysterious process of ongoing creation.

For Prof. Kapikian, whose concepts seem to lie much closer to traditional orthodoxy, we are made in the image of a *triune* God, with the Incarnation and its relevance to matter at the center of her thought. Through our God-given, creative and sometimes revelatory acts – inspired by the Holy Spirit or Divine Muse –we also become co-creators with Divine Transcendence.

Prof. Harris, on the other hand, as a behavioral scientist, is I think much more concerned with the conceptual *development* of religious imagination in children, and the importance of context in shaping religious belief. And so I think for him – whether we are created in the image of God or whether God actually meets us in the imaginative act is of less formal concern to him and his colleagues, i.e., beyond the purview of their methodology and measured end-points. So again, the implications entailed by this key concept differ across these disciplines.

And yet – and yet. We all *can* speak to one another – as we have for the last day and a half, raising questions which may well have some fruitful bearing on each other’s work. So my point here is this: We can and do all agree on the fundamental importance of this human creative

power – but nevertheless, as we continue our conversation in this borderland space, I think we do have to keep in mind the conceptual limits imposed by our respective disciplines. ‘Cause even now as we near the end of our meeting, we may mean something a bit different by “imagination” and all that the word implicitly entails in our ongoing discussion.

Turning to the second area of convergence, I think we all generally agree that the imagination itself – the power and its products – is shaped in turn by its context. Certainly all three speakers I think would agree that our imagination is shaped by life experience, its creative products colored by the books and poems you read, by the people you engage with in conversation, by the music you listen to, by the movies you see, by the art you gaze at, by the culture you grow up in and by the cultural context in which you choose to live as an adult.

In short, the imagination can be enhanced or dampened or warped through life experience. In this sense, imagination is a potential creative power which *emerges* –as Prof. Kaufman emphasizes – *emerges* through a process of individual maturation.

Mark Johnson also speaks of the “emergence” of the creative mind in the sense that we acquire minds through the social sharing of meaning ... through our ability to engage in symbolic interactions with others. In this sense, we’re born with this creative *potential*, and so the imaginative mind is a matter of degree – an *achievement*, if you will.

So to sum up: We have brought our various disciplines to bear on the question, and have answered collectively that the imagination – which we all possess to some degree – is our creative, embodied, synthesizing power to make meaning. This power of imagination lies at the base of our reasoning about the world we live in through the use of symbol, metaphorical language and abstract concepts.

And finally, this creative, imaginative power is shaped, in turn, by life experience, by both our biological equipment – including what we genetically inherit – and by our social and cultural world which surrounds us.

So, having said all that, let me ask this question: Are there different *kinds* of imagination? Or is this creative power expressed differently in different individuals based on a host of other factors such as intelligence, personality, emotional temperament? Is the imaginative ability which goes into the design of a bridge or airplane or new snow shovel the same as the kind of imagination that goes into writing a poem?

My guess here is that at the most basic level, our human imaginative power is the same expressed across all of these creative activities, again with a genetic and neurological base. But as we’ve already said, what our imagination creates is shaped in large part by our social and cultural experience. And I believe the imaginative expression which matters in terms of creating a *religious* world of meaning, open to Transcendence, is an imagination which is shaped by a religious community, a culture which supplies symbols, and metaphors, and stories which can be incorporated imaginatively into ones world view.

Therefore, my bias (and I believe Prof. Kapikian’s) is that the imagination that matters for

religious belief is touched more closely by the poetic and the aesthetic than by the mathematical and technical.

Well, I think we come very close here to understanding the embodied mind, with imaginative meaning-making at the core of our experience, as lying at the heart of human being – anthropologically speaking. So what does it mean to be human (according to at least some of our conference participants)? Both Profs. Kaufman and Kapikian (and I in my own thinking and writing) have espoused essentially an anti-dualistic, holistic understanding of human being. Consistent with this, Mark Johnson argues that meaning does not reside in our brain, nor does it reside in a disembodied mind. But humanly speaking, meaning does require a functioning brain in a living body which dynamically, emotionally engages with its environment – environments that are social and cultural, as well as physical and biological.

Johnson goes on to write, "Cultural artifacts and practices – for example, language, architecture, music, art, ritual acts, and public institutions – (these artifacts) preserve aspects of meaning as objective features of the world. (You can point to them, write about them, teach them, and learn them.). Without these cultural artifacts, our accumulated meaning, understanding, and knowledge would not be preserved over time, and each new generation would have to literally start over from scratch. Fortunately, because (we can learn and pass on knowledge across generations), we don't have to relearn the meaning of our world. We can appropriate what's there. (But) these cultural artifacts become meaningful to you and me *only* insofar as they are enacted in the lives of (each one of us) who *use* the language, *live by* the symbols, *sing and appreciate* the music, *participate* in the rituals, and *re-enact* the practices and values of institutions." (pp. 151-2) And so with that said, I want to shift my focus to the role of *tradition* in our imaginative creation of meaning, before turning to future directions.

III

In the most recent edition of the journal *Image*, the editor has the following to say about tradition and the making of meaning: "The effort to be fully human cannot ultimately be undertaken in solitude. Though there are many forces in our culture that lead us ... to reduce religion to a merely private experience – to 'spirituality' – this is to rob it of meaning and to surrender to solipsism."

He says, "We believe that the Jewish and Christian roots of our culture, though tainted by terrible sins of omission and commission, can and should be renewed by reason and imagination. ... To reject institutions, to refuse to reform them and be formed by them, is a counsel of despair."

So although it's true that meaning grounded solely in traditional dogma, reflected in outmoded symbols, grows rigid and finally dies, on the other hand I believe – along with many others – that imaginative flights of fancy ... unmoored in a tradition's wisdom ... risk imaginatively running amok or even giving rise to the creation of evil ends.

A central focus in Prof. Kapikian's paper, and indeed in much of her life's work, is to re-enliven the symbols of our religious tradition, making them come alive and compellingly speak to those who experience such symbols in a religious context. And I think for Prof. Harris, certainly

implicit in his findings about religious vs. magical beliefs as children mature, is the nurturing context of parental and other cultural influences on a child's imaginative grasp of what is real and what is possible. That is, kids' creative conceptions of God, prayer efficacy, and death are colored by traditional social shaping. Now for Prof. Kaufman, the continuity with traditional symbols and concepts of religious belief is based on the concept of *creativity*, rooted in the creative power of the Divine as imaged in Genesis and other books of the Hebrew Bible.

So I think at some level we all agree: There needs to be some rootedness in a tradition's wisdom – symbols and stories – in order to create a coherent world view of one's own, as well as in order to inhabit a shared world of community. And while we're speaking of traditional roots for our imaginings, I think it would be fitting here to say a word about *responsible* engagement; that is, the responsibility of the consumer of imaginative artifacts, as Johnson puts it. If it is the case that our imaginations are shaped by the culture within which we immerse ourselves, then the responsible engagement with that culture becomes an imperative.

The imagination can be a power for evil as well as for good. Undoubtedly, Hitler and Osama bin Laden had or have rich imaginations, fed with symbols and stories which bore the cultural fruit of destruction. Thus each of us has a primary responsibility creatively to engage with, and in that sense consume, aesthetic cultural artifacts (e.g., movies, novels, poems, art, etc.), artifacts which feed and exercise our imaginative world views with visions of the good, with *shalom*, with peace, with goodwill toward our neighbor, with hope in a merciful God. So choose your conversation partners well! And *conversely* I would argue that engaging with imaginary creations depicting pornography, racism of all kinds, nihilistic art, and so on is irresponsible consumption, running the risk of warping the shape of your world view, perverting your God-given power from good to evil ends.

With this, let me finally turn now to future directions and explorations.

IV

It seems to me that out of the papers presented at this conference there are clear directions in terms of enhancing the creative mind ... maturing and achieving our humanity in the deepest sense. First, if we conceive of the imagination as a power we all possess to some degree or other, then – analogous to a virtue such as patience – Fred Buechner says “like whistling ... like muscles ... it can be strengthened through practice and exercise.”

Obviously, there isn't time here to go into all the ways we can exercise and enhance our imaginations and those of our children – through practices in the home like reading and storytelling, educational programs in the community – in schools, in churches, and community centers – to expand our creative potential. Our speakers have indicated some directions here, and there are many resources available in the literature. Certainly, Karen-Marie's *Real Kids, Real Faith* is an excellent resource in this regard. And since this is a seminary, I imagine most of us are vitally concerned with the church as a context for creative, faithful growth.

I believe, along with Prof. Kapikian, that churches are a prime place for aesthetic expression, for good music, visual art, stories, and even dance. The problem with many church services is that

they're frankly boring in the sense that they do not feed the senses and do not fill the imagination with rich symbols and movement. In short, they're not imaginatively engaging. Many writers have addressed this problem, and there are contemporary attempts to counter such lifeless liturgy (for example, aesthetic offerings found in the Emergent church movement and worship experiences found within the African-American community).

Finally, let me turn to interdisciplinary dialogue and propose that we continue the fruitful discussions across disciplinary boundaries which we have engaged in over the past two days. We've found ourselves conversing within the fruitful intersection lying between the borders of theology, developmental psychology, and art. It has been a wonderful engagement where we've listened to one another, grappled with each others' methods and meanings, and come away enriched in our understanding of the meaning of being human with imagination at its core.

Let me propose that the conversation be expanded to include other disciplines which have something to say about our topic of interest. Perhaps the next conference on this topic could include an anthropologist, a philosopher, and a cognitive neuroscientist. As I said at the beginning of my paper, the whole truth, like life itself, is richly complex. In future conferences, we'll also talk and listen to one another. And the conversation which will occur in the liminal space opened up where our disciplines converge may produce epiphanies for us all.

Allow me to close with a quote from my book.

"In George Steiner's *Real Presences* he plays with the metaphor of 'Saturday.' All of us, every one of us, knows the Good Friday of pain and loss. Of paradoxical limits to our human condition, of mortality and the unknown mystery beyond death. And all of us – believers, unbelievers, and those in between – know something about the longing for Sunday, the longing for shalom and wholeness and resurrection, for redemption, hoping in some sure justice and love that will conquer death in the end. But in the meantime, 'ours is the long day's journey of the Saturday,' the long day's journey into that good night. Between the tragedy, suffering, brutality, and evil of today and the hope of resurrection, between the dark death of Friday and the promise of wholeness and redemption of God's Sunday, we have each other, and we have our human capacity to imagine meaning beyond the terror and the darkness. We all have the power to choose life and not death, to survive our Saturday lives and to imagine some story of Sunday wholeness that will sustain us to that end."

By the grace of God, so shall it be. Thank you.