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Abstract

This article situates and evaluates the cultural hermeneutic method of theologian Kevin Vanhoozer. His “theodramatic imagination” sets forth a method for rightly interpreting both Scripture and culture. Fellow theologian William Dyrness criticizes Vanhoozer’s model as theoretical rather than theatrical, focused on extracted ideas instead of embedded imaginaries. The article argues that, although Dyrness’ critique misses its mark, the true disagreement is pneumatological in nature. In the view of the author, this is the real limitation for Vanhoozer’s method: he prepares us to recognize and respond to the Spirit at work in shaping the Church’s “theodramatic” imagination, but we are less equipped to recognize the same Spirit outside the walls of the church, where much of the drama of redemption is set. Constructively, this article develops Vanhoozer’s cultural hermeneutic with a stronger connection to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the wider world, employing an underdeveloped concept from Vanhoozer’s theology.

Keywords

cultural hermeneutics, imagination, theodrama, pneumatology

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**The Theodramatic Imagination:
Spirit and Imagination in the Work of Kevin Vanhoozer**

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Abstract: This article situates and evaluates the cultural hermeneutic method of theologian Kevin Vanhoozer. His “theodramatic imagination” sets forth a method for rightly interpreting both Scripture and culture. Fellow theologian William Dyrness criticizes Vanhoozer’s model as theoretical rather than theatrical, focused on extracted ideas instead of embedded imaginaries. The article argues that, although Dyrness’ critique misses its mark, the true disagreement is pneumatological in nature. In the view of the author, this is the real limitation for Vanhoozer’s method: he prepares us to recognize and respond to the Spirit at work in shaping the Church’s “theodramatic” imagination, but we are less equipped to recognize the same Spirit outside the walls of the church, where much of the drama of redemption is set. Constructively, this article develops Vanhoozer’s cultural hermeneutic with a stronger connection to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the wider world, employing an underdeveloped concept from Vanhoozer’s theology.

Keywords: cultural hermeneutics; imagination; theodrama; pneumatology

Introduction

The imagination has been a topic of great theological interest in recent years. Despite its historical marginalization as illusion and invention, sociological and philosophical shifts have allowed theology to join the “promiscuous sprawl” of reflection on the topic.¹ On a parallel track, pneumatology is also in the midst of a boom. Enlivened by the global Pentecostal movement and energized by theologians seeking to balance the Western tradition’s focus on the Word, Christian pneumatology is experiencing “nothing less than a transformation.”² Many thinkers have noted a connection between the twin resurgences as resonant with post-Romantic sensibilities, but fewer have put the imagination and the Spirit in extended conversation. One notable exception comes in the field of theological hermeneutics, where monographs abound employing the imagination as a resource for relating Scripture and the Spirit-led interpretive community. These resources have tended to focus on the work of the Spirit in inspiring the imagination of the church through Scripture for the sake of her discipleship and witness in the world.³

Yet what can we say about the agency of the Holy Spirit in inspiring imaginations in the wider world, where public theology seeks to work? The discipline of public theology, after all, is especially concerned with speaking with a distinctively Christian voice into larger cultural conversations. The prerequisite to cogent speech is careful listening, and

¹ Leslie Stevenson, “Twelve Conceptions of Imagination,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 3 (July 2003): 238–59.

² Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Spirit(s) in Contemporary Christian Theology: An Interim Report on the Unbinding of Pneumatology,” in *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World: Loosing the Spirits*, ed. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Kirsteen Kim, and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29.

³ For a survey of recent theological monographs, see Alison Searle, “*The Eyes of Your Heart*”: *Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imagining Biblically* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster Press, 2008), pp.1-30.

this listening in turn requires a method of cultural hermeneutics with imaginative and Spiritual sensitivity, one that has ears to hear the Spirit's voice in Scripture as well as culture.

This article takes one possible model into account, setting forth theologian Kevin Vanhoozer's account of human imagination and Holy Spirit. Vanhoozer has written at length on the importance of the imagination for rightly interpreting both Scripture and culture, setting forth a method for interpreting the latter in his volume *Everyday Theology*.⁴ Fellow theologian William Dyrness, however, criticizes Vanhoozer's cultural method as overly theoretical, focused on extracted ideas rather than embedded imaginaries. I will argue that, while Vanhoozer's model of imagination is not as intellectualist as Dyrness believes, it is limited when it comes to engaging cultural texts. This limitation is pneumatological in nature. Vanhoozer prepares us to recognize and respond to the Spirit at work in shaping the church's "theodramatic" imagination, but we are less equipped to recognize the same Spirit outside the walls of the church, where much of the drama of redemption is set. I will propose that Vanhoozer's conception of the "eschatological imagination," though not developed by him in this way, can be filled out with a stronger pneumatology to address this limitation. Constructively, this essay begins to develop Vanhoozer's cultural hermeneutic with a stronger connection to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the wider world.

The article falls into three parts. The first section situates Vanhoozer by sketching a broad typology of the literature on imagination and the Holy Spirit. The second section

⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael Sleasman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 15–60.

zooms in on Vanhoozer's imaginative method in light of Dyrness's critique that his understanding of the hermeneutical enterprise is overly intellectualist. Finding that Dyrness underestimates the nuance of Vanhoozer's project, the third section locates the real disagreement between them as pneumatological. This section also proposes a possible way forward so that Vanhoozer's imaginative model can embrace the Holy Spirit's wider work.

Models of Imagination and the Holy Spirit

To narrow the sprawling research in this field, it is helpful to distinguish between three broad theological models relating the human imagination and the Holy Spirit. The models are the *constructive* imagination, in which the imagination operates independently of the Spirit; the *cooperative* imagination, in which the Spirit's mode of operation is through the imagination; and the *responsive* imagination, in which the imagination responds to the Spirit's initiative.

The first imaginative model takes Kant's productive imagination as a starting point: knowledge entails creative conceptual construction. Here the imagination is afforded a near godlike ingenuity and theology is the task of creative invention.⁵ Gordon Kaufman, for example, argues that theology's task is to construct a God-concept that 1) balances the human desire for immanence and transcendence and 2) is appropriate to one's context.⁶ Theology as imaginative construction entails revising traditional understandings, with the goal of providing satisfying, mythic meaning for humanity. Kaufman rejects the idea of

⁵ I say "near godlike" because Kant avoids the absolute idealism of his followers, like Fichte, who claimed that all reality is produced by the imagination. See the discussion in Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 16.

⁶ Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

revelation as representative of a time when theologians “did not understand how fully their own work was rooted in human imaginative construction.”⁷ Thus it is no surprise that his only mention of the Holy Spirit is to deconstruct the notion “that *our* activities are specially guided by the Holy Spirit.” He argues that instead we should focus on “expressing the humanizing and reconciling Spirit at work in history.”⁸ Spirit here is used in a Hegelian sense; it is not the transcendent and personal Holy Spirit of Scripture.

Paul Avis’s imaginative project suffers from a similar pneumatological deficit, though Avis (following Coleridge) seeks to demonstrate that his project “can support a critical realist theology.” Avis’s solution is to say that revelation happens, but it comes in the primary form of imaginative truth (metaphor, symbol and myth), which are our constructions.⁹ The difference between Kaufman and Avis is that the latter has greater confidence that our imaginative productions put us in contact with God, yet neither seem particularly concerned with whether the Christ-story actually *happened*.¹⁰ For the constructive imagination, the Holy Spirit is immanentized in a Hegelian sense (Kaufman), naturalized as a way of talking about poetic imagination (Avis), or completely ignored.

Whereas the emphasis above is clearly on the primacy of the imagination, in the second model it is unclear whether the initiative comes from the imagination or the Holy Spirit. Representative here is David Brown, who like Avis is deeply committed to the fluidity of religious symbols. I have labeled Brown’s project *cooperative* in that he wants

⁷ Ibid., 253.

⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁹ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁰ See the fuller discussion in Searle, “*The Eyes of Your Heart*,” pp. 12–15.

to ground the continuing renegotiation of symbolic meaning in the Holy Spirit's revelatory work. Brown argues that images and stories (rather than doctrine) give religious belief "its primary shape and vitality" and their meaning changes as a result of the imaginative interaction between a community's current assumptions, contemporary context, and the continuing work of God.¹¹ The ongoing, imaginative interrogation and revision of tradition is the way that the Holy Spirit continues to reveal God's purposes.¹² For Brown, tradition *is* revelation; the Spirit is part of the interaction, but does not necessarily set the terms. Brown is clearly committed to giving the Spirit a role in human imaginative construction; he fails to map out any significant criteria by which we might know *which* of our imaginative constructions are actually revelatory, however.

By contrast, in the third model, the imagination is meant to respond to the revelatory initiative of God's Spirit. Imagination in this model is reproductive rather than productive and subcreative rather than creative.¹³ Garret Green, for example, tethers imaginative construction to God's revelation in Christ and Scripture. Green's central argument is that the point of contact between God and humanity is in what he calls the "paradigmatic imagination." As such, the imagination is the faculty whereby we construe the world in interpretive models.¹⁴ For Green, when God speaks to us in Scripture, the inspiration of Scripture is "its imaginative force, its power to re-form the human imagination."

¹¹ David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

¹³ "Subcreation" is J.R.R. Tolkien's word for the real but metaphysically derivative creativity that humanity exhibits as divine image bearers.

¹⁴ Green, *Imagining God*, 67.

Scripture's purpose is to cultivate a canonical gestalt, "a normative pattern for faithful imagination."¹⁵

The Holy Spirit is mostly implicit in Green's work (Green prefers to root the imagination in the image of God); but, in the preface to the paperback edition, Green makes the Spirit's role explicit: "the imaginative creativity of Christians of all sorts ... is impressive and multi-faceted.... [I]ts spontaneity does not originate in the created self but rather in the gracious in-spiration of God the Holy Spirit."¹⁶ For Green, the faithful imagination must always be responsive to the initiative of the Spirit testifying to Christ. This provides a norm for the imagination absent in previous models. Nevertheless, Green leaves the reader to wonder exactly how the Spirit inspires the creative imagination to imagine faithfully.

Three Models of Imagination and the Holy Spirit

POESIS: Imagination as Lamp	Invention ←————→ Reflection				MIMESIS: Imagination as Mirror
	<i>Constructive Imagination:</i> Initiative is with the imagination		<i>Cooperative Imagination:</i> Imagination and Spirit cooperate		
	<i>Responsive Imagination:</i> Initiative is with the Holy Spirit				
	Gordon Kaufman: Imagination replaces revelation	Paul Avis: Imagination is revelation	David Brown: Imagination may be revelation	Garrett Green: Imagination is responsive to revelation	

Figure 1

¹⁵ Ibid., 5–6.

¹⁶ Ibid., viii.

The models employed above (see figure 1)¹⁷ are rough sketches; I have made this brief summary to surface three key issues: 1) the relationship of imagination to revelation, 2) the agency of the Spirit with relationship to the imagination, and 3) the mode of the Spirit's engagement. I will devote the spotlight to the latter questions, while the former will continue to stand just offstage, assumed rather than ignored. We now move to an extended description of Vanhoozer's account of the issues at hand.

Vanhoozer on Imagination the Spirit

Vanhoozer's understanding of the imagination falls within the third model, in keeping with his driving research question of the past thirty years: what does it mean to be biblical? Vanhoozer understands the Bible as an imaginative frame – spectacles! – the church's authoritative framework for interpreting and inhabiting the world. Enabling this “synoptic vision” is the imagination, which “allows us to see as whole what those who lack imagination see only as unrelated parts.”¹⁸ Rejecting caricatures of the imagination that view it as a “mental photocopier”, he argues that “the true power of the imagination resides not simply in its capacity to reproduce images but to relate and organize them into larger patterns.”¹⁹ Thus, when Vanhoozer uses the word imagination, he has in mind its *synoptic* function – that is, the way it enables an integrative and orienting vision of life in God's world.²⁰ This synoptic function is in view when Vanhoozer writes of the imaginary that

¹⁷ The poles here are drawn from the classic work on the imagination of Meyer H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 281.

¹⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 166.

²⁰ In construing the imagination paradigmatically, Vanhoozer resembles Green. Yet for Green, the Spirit inspires the community's imagination rather than the text, so that authority is not found in the text but rather

Christians inhabit as well as the imaginative visions implicit in works of culture. What counts for Vanhoozer is not the picture, but the frame.

Following von Balthasar, Vanhoozer's word for the imaginative framework that we find in Holy Scripture is *theodrama*.²¹ To be biblical, he contends, is faithfully to continue the theodramatic action begun in creation, focused in the story of Israel, and consummated in Christ, through the Spirit, given to the church, for the world. As players in the unfinished drama, Christians seek so to inhabit the larger story that their "faithful improvisation" in new situations and settings continue to project the main idea of God's play.²² This improvised activity requires interpretive virtuosity, both of Scripture and of culture, which provide multiple possible scripts and project multiple possible ways of being human.²³ Amidst all the possibilities, theodramatic faithfulness requires a healthy imagination that is responsive to the Spirit's creative agency.

Directing the Imagination: The Role of the Holy Spirit

Vanhoozer's early work centered on appropriating the work of Paul Ricoeur for biblical hermeneutics. Ricoeur wrote of the disorienting and reorienting potency of the biblical text, and the power of the world of the text to transform the world of the reader. While Vanhoozer is deeply appreciative of the believing philosopher, he argues that Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory leaves no room for the Holy Spirit's gracious initiative.

in the imaginative paradigm it produces (by the Spirit's power). For Vanhoozer the Spirit inspires both text (as divine communicative action) *and* the community in interpretive action; the former norms the latter. See Green, *Imagining God*, p. 106.

²¹ Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, p.168.

²² Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, p. 372.

²³ Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?" 48.

Insofar as Ricoeur's creative imagination "opens itself" to revelation, Ricoeur bypasses the need for the Spirit's illumination, something Vanhoozer wants to reclaim.²⁴

For Vanhoozer, the Spirit directs believers by *giving* them an imaginative sense of the theodrama, *grasping* them with its imaginative force, and *guiding* them in imaginative skill to continue the action in new situations.²⁵ He writes: "The Holy Spirit is both the author of the script and the one who guides the church's contemporary performance – its improvisatory variations – on the script."²⁶ Fitting participation in this redemptive drama means not just common sense but "canon sense," which "involves the training of our minds and imaginations." Canon sense is less a matter of technical skill than of spiritual formation, and as the Spirit conforms us, we are trained "to see the everyday world as participating in the drama of Christ."²⁷

But wherein does this seeing consist? Insofar as Vanhoozer's focus is on the interpretation of biblical and cultural *texts*, imaginative vision is often described as *reading* and the Spirit's illumination is construed as enabling *understanding*.²⁸ The question is whether reading and understanding are more a matter of intellectual clarity (getting the right "frame of *mind*") or aesthetic apprehension (reorienting our affections and will).

²⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 227, 278. Stiver argues that Vanhoozer unnecessarily narrows Ricoeur's tri-dimensional understanding of reference to God to the imaginative, and that Ricoeur's epistemology of attestation is fully compatible with Vanhoozer's conservative perspective on its own terms. Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 216–19.

²⁵ While I believe it is accurate, *giving*, *grasping* and *guiding* is my language, not Vanhoozer's.

²⁶ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, p. 102.

²⁷ Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, p. 172.

²⁸ Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?," 49.

This question comes from William Dyrness, who reads Vanhoozer's cultural hermeneutic (delineated in *Everyday Theology*) as an overly *idea-driven* approach: "one thinks about things and forms clear opinions about what is appropriate and not appropriate in given cultural patterns."²⁹ Despite Vanhoozer's preoccupation with the imagination, Dyrness finds Vanhoozer's method to be overly intellectualist, captive to a particular picture of cultural hermeneutics: "an isolated scholar sitting alone in her/his office grappling with a written text, or, in this case, an isolated cultural product."³⁰ Interpretation in this model is concerned with examining extracted ideas and deciding which to accept or reject. Dyrness writes that, while reflecting on the ideology of a cultural text is important, what is more important is a text's aesthetic component, its economy of response: "what this state of affairs does to me, how I feel about it, and how I need to respond to it – what I am drawn to or repelled by, and what I make of this."³¹ In other words, meaning is experienced by embodied agents before it is abstracted for reflection. Cultural texts act on us implicitly and inculcate a tacit rather than theoretical knowledge of what to do next.

Has Vanhoozer overly intellectualized the imagination, ignoring its fundamentally aesthetic character? There are certainly places throughout Vanhoozer's corpus when it seems that this criticism has purchase. Part of this is because Vanhoozer is a champion for the possibility of hearing the voice of the author in a text and emphasizes the Spirit's illumination as securing a measure of interpretive clarity. He writes that while we may

²⁹ William A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 73. Dyrness restricts his engagement to *Everyday Theology*, though his bibliography in *Poetic Theology* cites Vanhoozer's later *Drama of Doctrine*, which develops Vanhoozer's broader methodology.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

never completely escape our situatedness, the Spirit “progressively convicts us of our biases and conforms us to reality,” and “does not circumvent our finitude but renews, restores and perfects our interpretive capacities.”³² The Spirit, he points out, is the “Spirit of understanding.”

Yet for Vanhoozer spiritual understanding is more than intellectual clarity. It is rather “our ability to follow the Word” and this following has at least two senses: following its content (“I follow you.”) and following its issue (“Follow me!”).³³ To follow a text in this second sense is to “feel the full force of its communicative action.”³⁴ When speaking of Scripture, only the Spirit’s illumination produces the second kind of following, which is an imaginative apprehension that includes the emotions and will. What Vanhoozer calls the spiritual sense of a text (as opposed to the literal) has to do with “the quality and force of our appreciation of the literal sense”; indeed, the spiritual sense of a text is “the literal sense correctly understood.”³⁵ Vanhoozer’s focus is on the biblical text, but he makes the parenthetical and provocative statement that this aspect of the Spirit’s work is relevant not just for biblical hermeneutics but for general hermeneutics as well. For now the point is that what Dyrness calls the economy of response for a cultural text, Vanhoozer might call its spiritual sense. The aesthetic component that grabs our imagination has a fundamentally *spiritual* character, which means that it does not just allow us to follow its content but to be grasped by its *force*.

³² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 229n.

³³ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

Indeed, Vanhoozer's interpretive theory is more nuanced than Dyrness credits. As developed in his *Drama of Doctrine*, part of Vanhoozer's project is to defend the "cognitive-propositional" approach (George Lindbeck's term) against more liberal interpreters even as he helps conservatives move beyond it in a strict sense. He writes, "The aim is to rehabilitate the cognitive-propositional approach to theology by expanding what we mean by 'cognitive' and by dramatizing what we mean by 'proposition.'" ³⁶

As to the former, Vanhoozer expands the cognitive by including the imagination, arguing that "the imagination is a cognitive instrument, and that Scripture, in addressing our imaginations, speaks to our minds, wills, and emotions alike." ³⁷ The problem, Vanhoozer writes, comes in reducing the cognitive to the *literal*, "to what can be clearly and distinctly comprehended." Images, metaphors and symbols are nonliteral, but they are not non-cognitive; rather "they have a *surplus* of cognition." ³⁸ What we find in the forms mentioned above is a different kind of communication, a different kind of knowing. It cannot be reduced to propositions, but it is not absent of content either.

In order to "dramatize the proposition," Vanhoozer employs a communicative model where concepts are the atoms and propositions are the molecules of communication. Beginning with concepts, he argues that "concepts are not mental pictures of discrete objects.... A concept is a habitual way of experiencing and interpreting the world." Similarly, a proposition is a significant grouping of concepts, "something that a speaker or author 'proposes' for our consideration ... for some communicative purpose."

³⁶ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, p. 88.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁸ Ibid., p.88.

Propositional content need not entail assertions, and propositions only become problematic when they are abstracted from their communicative function, when they are *dedramatized*.³⁹ We often experience the force of propositions acting upon us long before we abstract their content.

Vanhoozer desire to “feel the full force” of a text’s communicative action, and Dyrness’s aesthetic component (“what this state of affairs does to me, how I feel about it, and how I need to respond to it”) strike me as very similar, but with different accents. Vanhoozer places his emphasis on the accessibility of communicative intent (what it says to us and what it does to us), while Dyrness places his emphasis on the economy of response (what it does to us and what we do with it). Yet for both, interpretative engagement is concerned with more than abstracted propositional content; it always involves imaginative apprehension, the cultivation of (in Vanhoozer’s words) “skills and sensibilities, and hence the ability to see, feel, and taste the world.”⁴⁰ Both thinkers emphasize (in Dyrness’s words) that “we are not spectators sitting in the gallery ... we are part of the cast ... we are called to perform.”⁴¹ Our interpretations of biblical and cultural texts are manifest, consciously or not, in our everyday lives, our everyday theology.

While this aspect of Dyrness’s critique fails, I believe the more significant methodological disagreement between Dyrness and Vanhoozer is located elsewhere, in their pneumatology. I want to draw out this contrast, arguing that Vanhoozer’s understanding of the Spirit’s work with the human imagination is too narrowly constrained

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 90–91.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 285.

⁴¹ Dyrness, *Poetic Theology*, p.311.

to the church and thus discerns with difficulty the wider presence of God's Spirit in the world. I will then develop a concept from within Vanhoozer's imaginative theory to correct this lacuna.

Extending Vanhoozer's Borders

Dyrness acknowledges a significant overlap between Vanhoozer's approach to culture and his own; in my opinion Dyrness's allergy is not as much to Vanhoozer's interpretive method as it is to his primarily antithetical posture.⁴² Dyrness argues that the interpreter of culture is already thoroughly embedded in the cultural situation she is trying to critique, and thus wholesale rejection is never really an option. Something must be *made* of the world that each cultural text proposes. For Dyrness, our embeddedness is such that the boundary lines between church and culture are not as clear as we imagine.

Vanhoozer, by contrast, operates with a clear focus on the church as distinct from the world. Interestingly, both Dyrness and Vanhoozer employ Charles Taylor's idea of the social imaginary, the vision that lies behind and makes sense of a society's practices.⁴³ While Dyrness follows Taylor in using the concept to understand our modern situation, Vanhoozer writes that he deploys Taylor's phrase to makes sense of the practices of "the society of Jesus.... What theodramatic imagination provides is a framework for understanding why the church does what it typically does." The theodramatic imagination is centered in the church, where Christians are formed and enabled by the Spirit to "work a revolution in the plausibility structures of modernity and postmodernity alike."⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 72–73.

⁴³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p.2.

⁴⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Drama of Christ: The Gospel as Thing Done and Word Made" (Wade Center Evangelism Roundtable: Imagination and the Gospel, Wheaton, IL, April 23, 2008),

While granting the church's cultural calling, one might push back that plausibility structures have in some sense already shifted so that there is greater space for both imagination and spiritual experience, and that these paradigmatic shifts may have little to do with God's work in and through the church.⁴⁵ This push back does not mean that we should "too easily celebrate [them] as progress without cost"⁴⁶ but it does mean that we might discern within them God's work in the wider world. Key to such discernment is the extent to which one believes, in Dyrness's words, "that the Spirit of God is at work in the larger culture prompting and attracting people toward God."⁴⁷

Vanhoozer affirms that we must "move beyond the assumption that the church is 'the only location in which the Holy Spirit is operative'"; yet his assessment of the possibility of the spirited inspiration of cultural products is tepid at best. He writes: "The Spirit ministers divine discourse to sinners as well as saints. It follows that *there may be vestiges* of truth, goodness, and beauty outside the church – in culture."⁴⁸ This claim is significantly muted in comparison with Dyrness, who argues that the symbolic practices of human culture are: "spiritual sites... places where, because of God's continuing presence in creation and God's redemptive work in Christ and by the Spirit, God is also active,

<http://www.wheaton.edu/~media/Files/Centers-and-Institutes/BGC/Roundtable/2008/2008-Session-3-Vanhoozer.pdf>, 18. Accessed October 1, 2014 [this resource is no longer available online, but these words are not found in the published version.] This lecture is an earlier version of the argument found in Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, pp. 159–179.

⁴⁵ For an account of these shifts towards what Taylor calls the "Age of Authenticity" see chapter 13 of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 473-504.

⁴⁶ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 85.

⁴⁷ Dyrness, *Poetic Theology*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?" 42–43.

nurturing, calling, and drawing persons – and indeed, all creation – toward the perfection God intends for them.”⁴⁹ Where Vanhoozer looks only for “vestiges” outside the church, Dyrness seeks sites of the Spirit’s active presence. While both would agree that products of human imagination are spiritual (in that they grasp us with communicative *force*), they would differ on how frequently we can speak of the spiritual force of cultural texts as Spiritual.

The contrast highlights a lacuna in Vanhoozer’s imaginative theory: the lack of space for the Spirit’s work in the wider world. Vanhoozer’s conception of the Spirit’s activity in illuminating the Christian imagination to play our role in the theodrama is profound. Yet he leaves us unsure to what extent the Spirit is at work in somehow illuminating the imaginative work of nonbelieving others and cultures in God’s world – hence a public theology.

This lacuna is due in part to the fact that, as a Reformed theologian, Vanhoozer wants to keep Word and Spirit close together. This tendency is particularly prominent in his early work, where he construes the antithesis sharply: “Either the Spirit of Christ absorbs our world into the text [of Scripture], or the spirit of the age absorbs the text into our world.” What keeps the latter from happening, and what enables us to respond faithfully is the Spirit’s efficacious presence, which proceeds only from the Word (here he invokes a hermeneutical parallel to the *filioque*).⁵⁰

By the writing of *Everyday Theology*, however, he seems more open to the Spirit’s wider presence: “to interpret the signs of the times *is* to discern the mode of the Spirit’s

⁴⁹ Dyrness, *Poetic Theology*, p.6.

⁵⁰ Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p. 227.

presence in the spirit of the age.”⁵¹ This reference to the “signs” – a frequent invocation of a more public theology - suggests that the Spirit is at work in and through the imaginations of non-believers, as well as the larger social imaginary, even if it only leads to “vestiges” of truth, goodness and beauty. Thus, when Vanhoozer goes on to list four doctrines in which we might ground a theology of culture (the incarnation, general revelation, common grace, and the image of God) he identifies the Holy Spirit as the common thread. Yet, in each case, he is still quick to qualify the value of these doctrines. The incarnation affirms human culture and allows for the “translatability” of the gospel into every culture; yet culture is only the “raw materials” for the special revelation (the gospel). The image of God is a call to develop the potentialities of creation, but this accounts for only a “residual goodness and beauty in culture,” since after the fall our response to the cultural mandate is misdirected by sin. Common grace mitigates “the outward effects of our corruption,” but is only construed in terms of restraint of sin. General revelation, “a divine discourse delivered through the medium of creation, there to be ‘read’ at all times and places,” encompasses lingering communicative action in creation but does not necessarily include the Spirit’s illuminating presence in granting understanding.⁵²

Thus I apprise Vanhoozer as having too narrow a focus on the Spirit’s wider work with the human imagination – and, by extension, the public domain. I argue that a more robust doctrine of general revelation must include not just God’s universal, past revelatory action but also the Spirit’s present work in allowing those outside the church to feel the force of divine encounter, to which their imaginative construction is often a response.

⁵¹ Vanhoozer, “What Is Everyday Theology?”, 17.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 42–43.

“General” revelation here relates to location, not quality: it is revelation that occurs outside the church; it is not “revelation lite.”⁵³ Moreover, following Abraham Kuyper, I argue that a robust doctrine of common grace must also encompass the Spirit’s guidance of creation towards God’s eschatological purposes. We can anticipate the Holy Spirit active in inspired imaginings because, as Kuyper put it, “the work of the Holy Spirit consists in leading all creation to its destiny, the final purpose of which is the glory of God.”⁵⁴

Kuyper’s identification of God’s larger purpose to heal creation highlights the Spirit’s role in manifesting the coming eschatological reality. This eschatological perspective might make further sense of times when the imaginative vision projected by a cultural text (e.g. in a film or piece of music) is deeply resonant with the theodramatic imagination of Scripture. Must faithful imagination only happen consciously, or is it possible that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the human imagination towards instantiating what Moltmann called a “fore-shining of [the] eschatological horizon,” a taste of God’s kingdom?⁵⁵ If this is so, then we can expect more than merely “vestiges” of truth, goodness and beauty. Here Vanhoozer’s imaginative theory provides an opening.

The Eschatological Imagination

In *The Drama of Doctrine* Vanhoozer writes of the eschatological imagination, which enables us “to see the kingdom coming, to see God at work in Christ through the

⁵³ Adapting Barth’s understanding of revelation, Robert K. Johnston argues that creation, culture and conscience are only revelatory through the active, encountering presence of the Spirit. Robert K. Johnston, *God’s Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

⁵⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri deVries. (New York: Funk and Wagnalis, 1900), p.24.

⁵⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 72.

Spirit making all things new.”⁵⁶ Vanhoozer eloquently frames this in terms of the Church’s theodramatic performance:

For what the ecclesial ensemble enjoys together is the creation of a new, eschatological world in the midst of the old, a creation that requires imaginative play, displays forgiving trust, and evinces evangelical joy.... The theo-dramatic imagination that fuels Christian play is altogether different: it is the ability to form mental images of what is really present – the kingdom of God – even though it cannot be perceived empirically with the senses. To see the church and world in theo-dramatic terms is to exercise a properly eschatological imagination that is able to discern what is not yet fully or wholly present.⁵⁷

While Vanhoozer’s scope is wide here – both church and world are seen theodramatically – his conception of theodramatic action tends to be restricted to the former. Yet if the eschatological imagination involves seeing the kingdom that is actually but not yet fully present, we should expect to see the kingdom breaking into imaginative activity outside the church. Thus, Vanhoozer’s articulation of the eschatological imagination remains underdeveloped in its scope.

The church, after all, is not the kingdom. While the church encompasses all those in covenantal relationship with God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit, the kingdom encompasses God’s larger plan for the consummation of creation. Notwithstanding our fallenness, human imaginings continue within creational structures, which pull us with certain gravity towards creational norms like love and justice. And the

⁵⁶ Vanhoozer, “The Drama of Christ,” 14.

⁵⁷ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, p. 416.

consummation of the created order is the special the work of the Spirit. Here we are not required to adopt Moltmann's panentheism to draw his connection: "the Holy Spirit in its efficacies is the bridge between creation-in-the-beginning and creation's eternal goal" enabling us to anticipate in the wider world "the real presence and advance radiance of the coming kingdom."⁵⁸ Colin Gunton expresses a similar sentiment with specific reference to artistic creation: "All true art, and certainly not just religious or 'Christian' art, is ... the gift of the creator Spirit as he enables in the present anticipations of the perfection that is to come at the end of the age."⁵⁹

Vanhoozer is certainly correct in his emphasis that special revelation in Christ and the Scriptures orients and norms our interpretation of general revelation.⁶⁰ Indeed, the next step of our exploration should include developing criteria for discerning spirits human and Holy, the Spirit of God from the spirit of the age. Following Amos Yong, these criteria might include items such as the fruit of the Spirit, works of the kingdom, salvation understood in various dimensions, conversion in various human domains, and holiness. Such criteria may be "abstract in the extreme," but discernment requires a spirit of recognition, attunement rather than calculation, and this prevents a more specific list.⁶¹ The aim of this article is not so much to settle on criteria so much as to argue that an eschatological imagination requires not just the willingness to engage cultural

⁵⁸ Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, p. 73.

⁵⁹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 234.

⁶⁰ Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?", p. 44.

⁶¹ These are Amos Yong's criteria for discerning the Spirit in the world of religions. Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 256.

conversations but also the expectation of encountering the surprising work of the Spirit when we do.

This does not mean that everything we encounter in the wider world is inspired by and responsive to the Holy Spirit. Yet the eschatological imagination seeks to source every impulse of beauty, goodness, and truth in the gracious initiative of the Triune God who is bringing creation to consummation. To anticipate the advance radiance of the kingdom in the wider world requires a greater interplay between the church and the concrete cultural context in which the church must make her way. This wider world is, after all, the stage and setting where the theodrama must be performed. We tend to think of the background as ornamental to the scene; but, acknowledging the Spirit's cosmic presence reminds us that the background – where everyday meaning is made in imaginative action – can actually become the foreground where people encounter God and are perhaps given a glimpse (even if not yet new eyes) of the kingdom bursting forth with justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Would that we would often join with Jacob in saying: “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!” (Gen. 26:18, NRSV).

Conclusion

This article has taken a snapshot of one contemporary model of the relationship of the imagination and the Holy Spirit. I have argued that, while the criticism of Vanhoozer's model as too theoretical is ill-founded, Vanhoozer's approach does suffer from a narrow understanding of the scope of the Holy Spirit's work. This malady that might be remedied by a more robust understanding of the Spirit's wider work in creation, and a more developed eschatological imagination.

In any case, wider spaces have been opened both for reflection on the imagination and the Holy Spirit. This is an auspicious event, for the imagination is the province of the Holy Spirit, especially if the Spirit is, as John McIntyre writes, “God’s imagination let loose” in the world.⁶² But that, perhaps, is another essay. In the meantime, the project of public theology proceeds, with imaginative vigor and Spirited expectation.

⁶² John McIntyre, *Faith, Theology, and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1987), 64.