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Keep the Hope Alive: A Review of Imagining Theology

Abstract

"Imagining is something that we tend to grasp intuitively, and yet it remains notoriously difficult to define."

Posting about the book *Imagining Theology* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/keep-the-hope-alive-a-review-of-imagining-theology/>

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July 23, 2020

Keep the Hope Alive: A Review of *Imagining Theology*

Justin Bailey

Title: *Imagining Theology: Encounters with God in Scripture, Interpretation, and Aesthetics*

Author: Garrett Green

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The imagination fascinated me long before I ever dreamed of going to graduate school. I grew up reading fairy tales, myths, and comic books. Yet, as I grew older, I began to believe that these stories were trivial and childish, the food of an immature mind. Not for nothing did my beloved King James Version Bible call human imagining vain. Truth was what mattered.

But, even as I doubled down on truth, imagination never quite lost its hold on me. The more I read, the more I realized that most formative authors were not the ones that simply restated the truth. They were the ones who mesmerized me with metaphors, who helped me carve out new connections—the ones who engaged my imagination. I also began to see that Scripture itself is not presented to us as bullet points, but rather in numerous genres (e.g., poetry, parable, apocalyptic) that require considerable imaginative dexterity. Following the biblical authors would require the development of a biblical imagination.

Thus, in the early years of my doctoral work, when people would ask me the dreaded question, “what’s the subject of your dissertation?” I would usually mumble something about the imagination. Most would nod their heads approvingly. Few would ask for more information. Imagining is something that we tend to grasp intuitively, and yet it remains notoriously difficult to define. In recent decades there has been an explosion of interest in the imagination, in fields ranging from philosophy of mind and language to ethics and aesthetics. But, for the most part, theologians have lagged behind.

One notable exception to this is Garrett Green, professor emeritus at Connecticut College. Green’s best-known work, published in 1998, is *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination*. Some twenty years later, Green has pulled together ten of his past essays and five new pieces into a scintillating new volume that advances his imaginative project in some important ways.

Green’s basic thesis is that the imagination is the lens through which we experience the world paradigmatically. By this he means that the meaning of each part of our sensory experience can only be grasped in terms of our prior apprehension of the whole. Against those who have no interest in the imaginary, Green proposes a theory that is “thoroughly, aggressively realist” in which “we cannot have reliable knowledge of the world or God without right imagination” (264). Indeed, as a theologian, Green’s primary interest is the imagination’s responsiveness to revelation, and the role of Scripture as the “concrete paradigm” governing imaginative exercise and curbing imaginative excess (12).

This emphasis on the imagination can be distinguished from a more popular emphasis within the Christian community on “having a biblical worldview.” Worldview thinking has come under substantial critique in recent years as being excessively oriented towards propositional beliefs.¹ This limited approach renders discipleship as a matter of downloading “what Scripture says” on any given subject. It fails precisely because it neglects our imaginative embeddedness: Scripture and society cultivate us not primarily by making claims, but by instantiating those claims in “social imaginaries”² that form us, with or without our consent, and often in opposition to what we say we believe.

By contrast, Green’s approach is simultaneously more holistic, and more open to surprise. The role of the theologian is to offer a biblically grounded “grammar” of Christian imagination, so that our apprehension of the world trusts and follows the imagination of the biblical authors. Green writes, “Just as the discipline of grammar does not prevent the poet or philosopher from employing the language in new and creative ways, so the church’s doctrine does not confine the theologian to a boring traditionalism but rather provides guideposts and warning signs along the way to new

insights into the meaning and application of the biblical witness to real life in the world today” (22).

Green dedicates the volume “the inmates of the Church Inside the Walls at the Radgowski Correctional Institution, my companions on the Way.” He notes that in recent years he has spent much more time in prison than in lecture halls, and this new location has offered him a “second naïveté,”³ hearing the voice of God anew alongside believing prisoners.

The fifteen essays in this volume are organized in four broad areas of interest: theological hermeneutics (part 1), metaphor, aesthetics, and gender (part 2), modernity eschatology (part 3), and theology of religion (part 4). The essays are rich and often provocative. Green wrestles with the terms set by German philosopher Immanuel Kant, taking on Kant directly (chapter 10) as well as one of his most important heirs, Ludwig Feuerbach (chapter 3). He also draws from important thinkers like J.G Hamann, whose attempt to “convert” Kant (his contemporary) has stood the test of time (chapter 9). But while this is a volume that will reward the attention of close readers, its contribution may be lost on the educated layperson (Green often makes arguments based on his own German translations, and this sometimes leads him into the weeds).

Nevertheless, I found Green’s chapters to be intellectually stimulating and imaginatively satisfying. Although I tend work from a different starting point than Green’s Barthian sensibilities, I found many of Green’s conclusions to be compatible with and generative for my own work in understanding the role of the imagination in Christian faith.

Perhaps the component of Green’s project I found most illuminating was his discussion of the relationship of imagination and eschatological hope. Hope, which is oriented specifically towards that which is not seen, requires a well-developed imagination—the ability to see and to live in light of the kingdom that is coming.

Hope is not sight. Indeed, we find ourselves in the middle of the story and can never know the ending with certainty until we arrive. Hope is not a prediction that charts the precise contours of what will be; hope is imaginative trust, grounded in God’s promise. As he writes: “The secular world is obsessed with predictions, forecasts, and strategic plans, while the church seeks to live by faith, not knowing what the future will bring, but always expecting to receive it by grace out of the hand of the God who leads us forward by his Spirit” (203). This hopeful posture allows us to live with confidence, but also humility, it enjoins us to resist systematic closure, and to stay open to surprise, for that which exceeds our expectations.

In the meantime, the imagination enables us to participate in the mystery to which theology testifies, which requires “patient training and practice” (40). I will allow Green to have the final word:

The role of Christians in a post-Christian age is to keep alive the hope that is in us, abiding in the confidence that God remains faithful to his promise. Our age is not the first time that Christian believers have needed to keep the lamp of hope burning in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation.... Many will be tempted to see the secular culture around us as the enemy and to adopt a defensive and embattled stance, but this temptation must be resisted at all costs. For we have a joyful message to impart, the gospel of God’s love for his creation, a message that needs to be heard all the more in a faithless age. We must be prepared to continue living in faithful imagination grounded in Holy Scripture, even when the culture around us assumes that the object of our imagining is merely imaginary and that we are fools to believe it. (267)

FOOTNOTES

1. See for example James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).
2. A social imaginary is an unarticulated and often unexamined sense of the world and our place in it. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
3. “Second naïveté” is a term of philosopher Paul Ricoeur for the ability—after moving through the “desert” of historical criticism—to feel once again the meaning of traditional symbols and religious texts.)