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Exercising the Imagination: Why We Need Imaginative Apologetics

By Justin Ariel Bailey

Nov 27, 2020

When I tell people that my research concerns apologetics and the imagination, I often get strange looks. Usually, a person is interested in one or the other. But the Venn diagram of those who are interested in both seems to overlap only a sliver.

Artists, aesthetes, and other creative types are usually ready to hear more about the imagination. But they are allergic to apologetics, which they associate with winning arguments. Artists in particular fear that the rich texture of their imaginative works will be flattened by the heavy handedness of an apologetic agenda.

By contrast, those who value the discipline of apologetics tend to be suspicious of the imagination. They associate the imagination with conjecture (“it was just my imagination”) and escapism. Apologetics is about defending the *truth* of the Christian faith, and this seems antithetical to the flights of fancy to which the imagination is disposed.

But the reality is that the best sort of apologetics is the sort that engages our full humanity, and the imagination is one of the most basic (and best!) things about being human. The question is not *whether* we will use our imagination as we navigate the world and negotiate faith and doubt, but *whether* our imaginative faculty will be properly trained for the task. For when we engage the imagination in apologetics, we are entertaining what is *beautiful*, extending the boundaries of what is *imaginable*, and exploring what is *possible*. Let us take these points one at a time.

First, the imagination is the faculty with which we entertain what is *beautiful*. Beauty is the most misunderstood of the transcendental trio (truth, goodness, beauty). It defies easy categorization, and we are prone to confuse it. But we use the word *beauty* to name our experience of something that arrests our attention, marked by excellence, elegance, and electricity. We even may feel that these experiences open us up to a richer dimension of existence. The Christian tradition claims that we have experiences of beauty because beauty is a feature of created reality, a reflection of the beauty of God. The poet Rilke reminds us that when we truly encounter beauty, we feel its claim on us: “you must change your life.”^[1]

Yet beauty can also be counterfeited, and so imaginations must be trained to discern a beauty that is grounded in goodness and in truth. We all walk around with an imaginative, felt sense of the world and what things are worthy of our attention. This felt sense might be mistaken, and it might even be pointed in the wrong direction, which is precisely the reason that we need to take the imagination seriously.

In apologetic dialogue this means listening long before leading out with our best arguments. It means asking the questions: “What would be good news to this person?” and “What are the ways that the gospel addresses their vulnerabilities, longings, and desires?” It does not mean changing the good news to tell a person whatever they want to hear, but it does mean drawing out the dimensions of the gospel that connect with where they are. Taking the imagination seriously will mean better storytelling, but first it will mean better story-listening.

Second, imaginative engagement seeks to extend the borders of what is *imaginable*. One of the central apologetic quandaries is that you can only see so much from the outside, from a position of critical examination. There are some things about the Christian faith that can only be grasped from the inside, from a position of commitment. But imaginative works can help us cross this gap, giving outsiders a glimpse of what it would be like to live with faith.

This was reinforced to me a few years ago when I read a review in *The New Yorker* of Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*. The Pulitzer Prize winning book is written from the perspective of an elderly minister living in Iowa. The reviewer, an atheist, marveled at the grandeur of a world seen through aging Calvinist eyes: "She makes an atheist reader like myself capable of identifying with the sense of a fallen world that is filled with pain and sadness but also suffused with divine grace."^[2] What Robinson offered him, he wrote, was a gift, the vicarious experience of a world drenched with grace.

This is why testimonies have so much potency, and why a beautiful life is the most powerful, embodied argument we can make. So too imaginative apologetics seeks to impress on outsiders a sense of what faith feels like from the inside. It invites the skeptic to taste and see what they otherwise might be unable to imagine.

Finally, the imagination is the faculty with which we explore what is *possible*. What is imaginable and what is possible, after all, are two different things. But although we may sometimes use imaginative works to escape unpleasant realities, most of us are drawn to them because we believe they open up real possibilities in our everyday lives. We believe we are better people for having read this poem, seen this film, lingered in front of this painting. In other words, we use our imagination not to escape from reality but to grasp it more firmly, to get a stronger sense of our place in the world and the possibilities that are open to us.

George MacDonald, whose work *Phantastes* "baptized" C. S. Lewis's imagination, offers a pair of illuminating metaphors for construing the relationship of intellect and imagination. The intellect is a laborer who fashions a building, step by step; but the imagination is the architect who sees the blueprint and directs the construction. Or again, the imagination is the visionary guide who "sweeps across the borders" in search of a more spacious place, and intellect is her plodding brother who follows behind.^[3]

That's very different than the way we usually think of the relationship! MacDonald's point is that the imagination stimulates our intellect by getting us

to ask, “What about this? What if this were true? How would the world open up? Let’s try this and see what happens.” Engaging the imagination means seeking to show what new and fruitful possibilities faith could facilitate. It means showing how a life with Christ could offer a better and more beautiful story.

Indeed, the imagination is important because the imagination is the faculty with which we hope. And apologetics is, as Peter reminds us, deeply invested in explaining and exploring the Christian hope (1 Peter 3:15)—a proper confidence grounded in what we cannot physically see (Hebrews 11:1). The Christian hope challenges and expands our hopes, surprising us with what is beyond our wildest imaginings. For none of us would have imagined the Cross, and that the ugliest instrument humans could think up would become—in God’s hands—the most beautiful.

Perhaps, to borrow a line from Lewis, our Lord finds our imaginings not too strong, but too weak. And if the imagination is a muscle, we shall have to exercise it if our work is to bear the weight of glory. Our imaginings must be challenged and changed, transfigured and trained by the Christian story, reshaped according to the cruciform logic of the gospel. But we do this important work by discipling the imagination, not discounting it.

Notes

[1] Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” Available at <https://poets.org/poem/archaic-torso-apollo>.

[2] Mark O’Connell, “The First Church of Marilynne Robinson,” May 30, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-first-church-of-marilynne-robinson>.

[3] George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts* (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1996), 11, 14.