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Theological Education and the Arts

Developing the Powers of the Imagination as a Theological Discipline

I am intrigued by the central question that the editors have posed for this Festschrift honoring Professor Albrecht Grözinger: «How practical is theology?» Currently in the United States there is a debate raging among educators, politicians and cultural critics about how «practical» higher education ought to be. That larger debate provides the context for my reflections on the question, «How practical is theology?»

Kwame Anthony Appiah, a philosopher at New York University, summarizes the opposing perspectives on the purpose of education:

> One vision focuses on how college can be useful – to its graduates, to employers and to a globally competitive America. When presidential candidates talk about making college more affordable, they often mention those benefits, and they measure them largely in dollars and cents. How is it helping postgraduate earnings, or in increasing G.D.P. [Gross Domestic Product]? As college grows more expensive, plenty of people want to know whether they're getting a good return on their investment. They believe in Utility U.
> Another vision of college centers on what John Stuart Mill called ‹experiments in living,› aimed at getting students ready for life as free men and women. (This was not an entirely new thought: the ‹liberal› in ‹liberal education› comes from the Latin *liberalis*, which mean ‹befitting a free person.› Here, college is about building your ***soul*** as much as your skills. Students want to think critically about the values that guide them, and they will inevitably want to test out their ideas and ideals in the campus community … Welcome to Utopia U.[1]

I find Appiah's use of the word «soul» significant. The word has very nearly fallen out of use in common American parlance. As the poet and literary critic, Edward Hirsch, observes: «We have almost lost the word *soul* as a figure of deep spiritual essence . . . When we lose a word we also lose its meaning. The

1 K.A. Appiah: The Education Issue. The New York Times Magazine, September 13, 2015, 18. Emphasis added.

depletion in our vocabulary leads to a dire loss of soulfulness.»[2] In light of that loss I would expect a philosopher nowadays to use the word «self» or «identity» rather than «soul.» But in order to do justice to those intangible «values that guide» us, Appiah employs the word «soul,» a word rich with theological overtones. The «soul» belongs not to the practical purposes of education that can be measured and quantified but to the «experiments in living,» to the values and dimensions of existence that are among the core concerns of theology, realities that we cannot graph or chart or store as digital data.

Although Appiah himself goes on to develop a much more nuanced and balanced understanding of education, his description of the two dominant positions is instructive. There is in America a strong bias in favor of what is utilitarian, what works in everyday life, what is practical. Ask people committed to Appiah's «Utility U.» the question «How practical is theology?» and you will most likely get either a look of incomprehension or the laughter of derision. Their response flows from a constricted understanding of «practical» that assumes the word applies only to what is tangible and quantifiable.

However, whether or not something is «practical» depends on our context and the project we are undertaking. My father, who was an excellent craftsman, owned a large collection of tools for working in both wood and metal. He was fond of saying «There's nothing more practical than having the right tool for the right job.» What is true of wood and metal is equally true of life and thought. If you are working on developing a smaller microchip for computers or vaccine to treat a new disease or a new model for statistical analysis, then theology is not very practical. But that does not mean it is never practical.

Before the question «How practical is theology?» can receive an adequate response, we have to acknowledge those realities that lie beyond our control and calculation, the depths of human existence that the word «soul» suggests. These depths include our subjectivity and the astounding range of dreams, yearnings, ecstasies, and sorrows that fill us with fear and hope, doubt and faith, hate and love. When we deal with this domain of reality, we discover the inadequacy of an education that is purely utilitarian. If we are going to do anything «practical» for the human soul, we need more than reason, calculation and control, we need a different way of perceiving, being and doing that enables us to engage all of

2 E. Hirsch: How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry, San Diego 1999, 257.

life: its fragmentation and chaos, its beauty and wonder. For me, this different way of perceiving, being and doing is theology. It is, however, not just any kind of theology, but theology that employs, develops and refines the imagination. Such theology disciplines the imagination in order to engage the soul with a vital and believable witness to God.[3] By «soul» I do not mean an ephemeral ghost that inhabits the body and flies away at death. Rather I mean the human creature in its totality before God. And by «imagination» I do not mean unrestrained fantasizing, but rather the capacity to empathize with others, to integrate disparate disciplines and experiences, and to envision possibilities that lie beyond the limits of our immediate situation. The development of each of these abilities is what makes theology «practical,» that is to say «capable of being used» to engage and address the deep needs of the soul.

But how are theological students to learn this practical discipline? Although I am strongly committed to the tradition of teaching systematic and biblical theology, I have discovered that these disciplines in themselves are not adequate to equipping theological students for the practical demands of ministry. For example, when I teach homiletics to students who are first beginning to preach, they often begin their studies with me after having taken biblical studies and systematic theology. Their preaching not infrequently falls into one of two patterns: they draw extensively on their academic theological studies but in a way that is too abstract and filled with theological language to engage most listeners, or they fail to utilize the academic disciplines because they do not see how to relate them to the real life situation of a congregation. In both cases what they need is a more highly developed theological imagination so that they can empathize with their congregations, integrate the riches of theological study with the existential realities of their listeners, and envision possibilities of a world transformed by grace and justice. It is not responsible education to assume that students will automatically figure these things out on their own. Some who have highly developed imaginations will, but others will not, and they will need help developing a theologically disciplined imagination. Where can they find such help?

I have found help for my own development as a theologian in the work of creative artists: musicians, painters, dancers, and especially poets. They have

3 I am drawing here in part upon G. Green: Imagining God. Theology and the Religious Imagination, New York 1987.

strengthened my capacity to make theology practical by instructing me in how to discipline my imagination.

Rather than simply presenting my argument as a generalized principle about the need to relate theological education and the arts, I will draw upon a poem in which the poet demonstrates how theology can discipline the imagination while the imagination simultaneously makes theology a practical means of addressing the deepest concerns of the soul.

The poem is by the Australian poet, James McAuley (1917-1976). Following the devastation of World War II, McAuley was concerned about «the agony of a civilization which seemed to have lost its principle of coherence, unable to bring together the twin themes of order and justice in the *polis* and order and justice in the soul.»[4] The poet believed that the most practical way to address this fragmented world is to revitalize the imagination. In his essay *Ars Poetica*, he quotes approvingly from Wladimir Weidlé:

> When the real world threatens to collapse, what importance can one attach to the collapse of imaginary worlds? Compared with the torments inflicted on living human creatures what are the pangs of creation or the deprivations of the fictive faculty? But in fact the matter is not as simple as one might at first be inclined to think, for the power to create is the noblest of man's abilities, and whatever impedes our imaginations may connect with deeper causes, causes more worthy of attention than all the other woes that befall us.[5]

In his poem, «An Art of Poetry,» McAuley provides an *apologia* for writing explicitly Christian verse, and in the process he demonstrates how an imaginatively rich theology is a practical way to address the needs of souls, especially souls that are lost to «the agony of a civilization which seemed to have lost its principle of coherence.»

> Since all our keys are lost or broken,
> Shall it be thought absurd
> If for an art of words I turn
> Discreetly to the Word?

4 J. McAuley: Poetry, essays and personal commentary, ed. L. Kramer, St. Lucia 1988, 224.

5 McAuley: Poetry, essays and personal commentary (n. 4), 190. The source of McAuley's quotation is W. Weidlé: Les Abeilles d'Aristée, Paris 1954, 289.

Drawn inward by his love, we trace
Art to its secret springs:
What, are we masters in Israel
And do not know these things?

Lord Christ from out his treasury
Brings forth things new and old:
We have those treasures in earthen vessels,
In parables he told,

And in the single images
Of seed, and fish, and stone,
Or, shaped in deed and miracle,
To living poems grown.

Scorn then to darken and contract
The landscape of the heart
By individual, arbitrary
And self-expressive art.

Let your speech be ordered wholly
By an intellectual love;
Elucidate the carnal maze
With clear light from above.

Give every image space and air
To grow, or as bird to fly;
So shall one grain of mustard-seed
Quite overspread the sky.

Let your literal figures shine
With pure transparency:
Not in opaque but limpid wells
Lie truth and mystery.

And universal meanings spring
From what the proud pass by:
Only the simplest forms can hold
A vast complexity.

We know, where Christ has set his hand
Only the real remains:
I am impatient for that loss
By which the spirit gains.[6]

The opening stanza provides a metaphor for «the agony of a civilization» that has lost its «coherence:» «all our keys are lost or broken.» Such a situation leaves the soul bewildered and adrift. There is no collection of data, no app that we can add to our smart phones (McAuley lived before smart phones but the observation still is germane) to speak to such a situation. Instead, McAuley will «turn/discreetly to the Word.» The «Word» is capitalized because it is the Logos, the living Word through whom all things were made and the Word that became flesh in Christ (John 1). But note that adverb «discreetly.» McAuley is not promoting some naïve, primitive Biblicism, but a nuanced understanding that deals with the wonder of how that Word meets the soul: «Drawn inward by his love, we trace/art to its secret springs.»

This kind of encounter is theology in its most practical mode: for it has the capacity to «Elucidate the carnal maze/With clear light from above.» Those two lines provide not only a summarizing principle for «An Art of Poetry» but also name the practical work of theology. To «Elucidate the carnal maze» is to bring clarity and meaning to the complexities of the «soul» that I named earlier: «our subjectivity and the astounding range of dreams, yearnings, ecstasies, and sorrows that fill us with fear and hope, doubt and faith, hate and love.»

However, such an art, (such a theology!) is not limited to the soul as an idiosyncratic, privatized reality. Instead, this kind of art leads to an expanded vision that extends far beyond the limits of the self: «Scorn then to darken and contract/The landscape of the heart/By individual, arbitrary/And self-expressive art.» Instead of darkening and contracting the landscape of the heart, the poet (the theologian) is to enlighten and expand it. This is immensely practical work because in a world where «all our keys are lost or broken» it helps us rediscover that deep source from which «universal meanings spring,» those meanings that can heal and reconcile the fragments of a civilization that has lost its «coherence.»

6 J. McAuley: Collected Poems, Sydney 1994, 85f.

In summary: yes, theology ***is*** practical, profoundly practical when it employs the imagination to engage the deepest quandaries and yearnings of the soul. Our difficulty in seeing this may arise from the history of the relations between the soul and the imagination. Thomas McFarland in his book *Originality and Imagination* observes:

> There was an enormous acceleration, beginning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, of the sense of imagination's importance ... imagination became so important because soul had been so important and because soul could no longer carry its burden of significance. That significance was an assurance that there was meaning in life. No soul, no meaning. But even if soul wilted under the onslaught of science and skepticism, so long as there was imagination ... then at least there remained the possibility of meaning.[7]

The power of McAuley's poem lies in his overcoming the dichotomy between soul and imagination. The love of Christ draws him to «trace/Art to its secret springs,» enabling him to connect the divine to the imaginative work of artistic creativity. Christ himself is the artist as revealed «In parables he told,/And in the single images/Of seed, and fish, and stone,/Or, shaped in deed and miracle,/To living poems grown.» In McAuley's work, soul and imagination do not compete, but complement one another, and when that same mutually interactive relationship is manifest in theology then theology is practical indeed.

Therefore, one of the central tasks of theological education is to help students develop the powers of the imagination as a theological discipline that can address the voracious yearning in the depths of our being:

> Forever in the heart there springs
> a hunger never touched by things,
> and if unmet, this inward need
> goes prowling as incessant greed:
> we reach and reach for more and more
> while with each gain we still seem poor.[8]

7 Th. McFarland: Originality & Imagination, Baltimore 1985, 151.

8 Th.H. Troeger: Borrowed Light. Hymn texts, prayers, and poems, New York 1994, 131.

«Incessant greed» can take many insidious forms, from despotic power to obsessive consumerism to environmental destruction. There is nothing more practical than a theology that can redirect that fierce hunger to the only source that will ultimately satisfy it.

Abstract

The article explores how theology becomes profoundly practical when it employs the imagination to engage the deepest quandaries and yearnings of the soul. Such exploration begins by acknowledging that we need a way of perceiving, being and doing that enables us to engage all of life: its fragmentation and chaos, its beauty and wonder.

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