

# C. S. LEWIS AND FRIENDS



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Faith and the power of imagination

Edited by  
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## Foreword

Although in our contemporary culture ‘imagination’ is generally used in a positive sense, this has by no means always been so. Indeed, we need only return to Scripture and liturgy to find more negative usages. Think, for instance, of the comment in Genesis that ‘the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth’ (8.21 AV) or of Mary’s *Magnificat*, in which the proud are ‘scattered . . . in the imagination of their hearts’ (Luke 1.51 AV). Such talk might appear to indicate avoidance as the more godly course, but that is one option that is emphatically not open to the religious believer, for we live by faith and not sight and so must be constantly directing our minds beyond the immediately visible or tangible into hints of other worlds and other realities. The point in those negative scriptural judgments was surely not that the imagination is inherently evil, but rather that without some guidance, like all God’s gifts, it can be misused, even badly so. Indeed, in most modern translations some other word is usually substituted! However, if the imagination is directed by what God has revealed of the divine nature through biblical revelation and the created world, then the necessary aids are already in place to ensure, potentially at least, a rich exploration of how this material world might point beyond itself to that greater reality that is God.

Such use of images is of course fundamental to Scripture itself, as Ed Henderson so lucidly illustrates in his discussion of the work of Austin Farrer, but it would be a sad day for the Church were matters left there and no attempt made to bring those same (and related) images into living contact with modern culture. It is this task that is attempted so finely here, as the more directly artistic work of other friends of C. S. Lewis is explored. What emerges most clearly is the way in which imagination is anything but a flight from the harsh realities of this world. Thus Ann Loades stresses the effect of two world wars on the imagery of Dorothy L. Sayers, David Hein the impact of an illicit love affair on Rose Macaulay’s *Towers of Trebizond*, Ralph C. Wood the integration of sorrow and joy in the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Hefling how the greatest truths for Charles Williams come through the descent into Hell. Even Lewis himself, as Peter J. Schakel

## *Foreword*

observes, had to wrestle with his instinctive distrust of the imagination before reaching a more nuanced position in which it has become an indispensable adjunct to reason.

Charles Hefling takes as his motto a famous quotation from W. H. Auden, that it is thanks to the Incarnation that 'the imagination is redeemed from promiscuous fornication with its own images'. Precisely because faith provides some direction for the Christian's imagination, fiction written under that inspiration will still engage with truth. Although carrying us well beyond the world we know, it will yet remain firmly anchored in a world where sorrow and despair are firmly faced even as they are, as they were in Christ's own life, transfigured into hope and joy. It is the way in which both the original authors and their present commentators encourage us toward just such a vision that makes these essays so important and so stimulating for further reflection.

David Brown  
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# Introduction:

## Faith, reason and imagination

DAVID HEIN AND EDWARD HENDERSON

To many people, faith means giving cognitive assent to religious claims that seem impossible to credit in our scientific age. A widely used dictionary offers the following as its first definition of ‘faith’: ‘unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, to some Christians, faith means straining every nerve to believe doctrinal propositions – creedal assertions such as ‘born of the Virgin Mary’ – in the face of rational evidence to the contrary. God, they hope, will eventually reward their pious efforts – their credulity, their ‘faith’ – by granting them everlasting life in heaven. And that, they are confident, is basically what the Christian religion is all about.

Like many views of Christianity in the popular mind, this understanding of faith is unhistorical and misleading, not to mention theologically and morally questionable. Better always to recall what the Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler used to say: Christians were celebrating before they were cerebrating. Images (such as the pregnant image of the Supper, which Austin Farrer explores so richly), stories (of the Crucifixion, for example) and worship (proclaiming Jesus as Lord) came first. Doctrine (such as the Chalcedonian definition of the Person of Christ) grew out of the experiences and reflections of early Christians in their communities.

Before they set forth a doctrine of the Trinity, Christians were experiencing Christ as saviour, worshipping the Son as divine, and predicating of him powers and prerogatives appropriate only to God; they were experiencing the Spirit in their midst, guiding, inspiring, teaching, convincing. Faith as trust in this person, Jesus, was foundational; faith as intellectual assent to creedal propositions came later. Doctrine, the Scottish theologian David Brown has rightly said, is ‘secondary and parasitic on the stories and images that give religious belief its shape and vitality’.<sup>2</sup>

Better, in fact, to think of the life of faith rather than of faith on its own, for 'living a life' brings to mind the responsive, active side of faith. Thus: faith not as affirming difficult doctrines but as living into Christian truth-claims and discovering their meaning by doing the will of God. Faith as loyalty to the One God beyond the many gods and to this One God's cause. Faith as a trusting hope in God's future. Faith as the opposite not of doubt but of fear: faith courageously taking doubt within itself. Faith as the habitual orientation of a self whose character has been formed by images and stories and shaped by practices that sink these images deep within a person's mind and heart and will. Faith, then, as a dynamic involvement of the whole self and not an affair of any one aspect of the self – cognitive, volitional or emotional – alone.

Nor should faith be claimed as an accomplishment of the self in isolation from other selves, working out its separate peace with God. Faith means living a grateful life embedded in a community of forgiven sinners still *in via*. Indeed, faith points to self-forgetfulness rather than to self-assertion and individual achievement. Faith means loving God and neighbour in response to God's love for us. Christianity, therefore, should be seen as a religion to be practised, a faith to be lived, and not as a rigid system of doctrine. It is, in other words, a form of life that requires – in order to be truly grasped – the engagement of the imagination, the senses and the intellect.<sup>3</sup>

Faith and reason – *pace* some secularists – are not enemies; nor are they ships passing in the night. The faculty of reason enables us to think and to form judgments. More precisely, reason refers to our ability to analyse, to think systematically, to form concepts and to argue in a logical way. The rational faculty is concerned with the products of empirical discovery (perception) or with the results of logical analysis. While the imagination deals in concrete particulars, reason moves toward abstractions. Imagination integrates; reason analyses. Imagination thrives on creativity; reason is content to observe and deduce.<sup>4</sup>

Imagination may be a concept less familiar and hence harder to grasp than either faith or reason. In a sense, we know imagination when we see it; or, rather, we know it when we experience its effects. Consider two sermons. They have the same factual matter; they make the same logical argument. Outlines of their underlying doctrinal content would overlap completely; a bare-bones précis of one would

look just like a précis of the other. But the first sermon strikes us as dry and underwhelming; the preacher leaves ideas hanging out in mid-air somewhere between pulpit and pew. The second strikes home in a way that makes connections to our lives; it even turns out to be – memorable. David Brown observes that although facts ‘sometimes attract our attention’, it is the imagination that brings out their significance for us: ‘It is through appealing to our imagination that they are enabled to become “truths for us”, as it were.’<sup>5</sup> The first preacher competently laid out the facts, but the second one revealed their meaning for us in our everyday lives; and her extra effort made all the difference. A large part of the achievement of the imaginative writers discussed in this book is their success not simply in stating facts but in showing us how the truths of faith can live in the particularities of our own lives.

The friends of C. S. Lewis recognized him as a master of the art of using vivid imagery to connect old truths with contemporary life. He spoke of the Incarnation, for example, not in a way that supplanted Scripture but in a manner that heightened his listeners’ sense of this event’s relevance for their own time.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in his *Broadcast Talks*, Lewis described God as ‘landing in this enemy-occupied world in disguise and starting a sort of secret society to undermine the devil’.<sup>7</sup> Lewis never wished or claimed to say anything new about the Christian faith. What was fresh and invigorating was the way he brought together imagination and facts. His wartime analogy could not have failed to alert those who, worriedly residing in the UK in the early 1940s, confronted a very real enemy whose plans of conquest and domination were quickly being realized.<sup>8</sup>

Although we speak of imagination as an individual faculty, the theologian David Harned reminds us that imagination may be thought of not as ‘a single power . . . of the self, still less merely the source of its dreams and fantasies’, but as ‘the sum of all the resources within us that we employ to form accurate images of the self and its world’. As a specialist in Christian ethics, Harned finds images and imagination useful precisely in their distinctive ability to enable human beings to see themselves and others – both their strengths and their weaknesses – more clearly: thereby to equip and empower persons for richer life in the real world. Even when imagination’s genre is creative fiction, its task is still to discover ‘potentiality and new possibilities’ for the self, because ‘it is oriented first . . . toward actuality.

Where else indeed could genuine possibilities be found?' At their best, he says, images represent the self and its world, actual or possible, in a fashion 'that has an immediacy and concreteness which conceptualizations lack'. Because they are concrete, 'images are more important for the exercise of human agency than are conceptual prescriptions'.<sup>9</sup>

David Harned reminds us that images and imagination enable us to make moral decisions because 'we are free to act in some purposive fashion only within the world that we can see. Before our decisions, supporting our approach to moral life, distinguishing us from our neighbors, there is our way of seeing . . .' Our perceptions shape our decisions, for good or ill; and how we see is 'a function of our character, of the history and habits of the self, and ultimately of the stories that we have heard and with which we identify ourselves'. The ways in which we see, Harned notes, are 'determined by the constellation of images . . . that resides within the household of the self'.<sup>10</sup>

A person might naturally infer, however, that because the imagination has to do with forming 'images', it is therefore concerned with mere appearances rather than with underlying reality.<sup>11</sup> But that is not what distinguishes imagination from reason. David Brown notes that 'there need not be any necessary conflict between the resources of reason and of the imagination', for both can provide 'access to the truth'.<sup>12</sup> What imagination offers is something alluded to in our earlier description of effective and ineffective preaching and vividly demonstrated in examples from C. S. Lewis and his friends: the power to make connections. The imagination, Brown points out, 'has one undoubted advantage over either reason or ordinary perception in its ability . . . to think laterally, to allow combinations that are not themselves necessarily present either in the mind or in nature'. Sometimes imagination will follow a trail that leads nowhere, but often 'image and metaphor can help detect connections that had not previously been identified'.<sup>13</sup>

According to Peter J. Schakel, who has written at length on reason and imagination in C. S. Lewis's work, imagination meant various things to Lewis. Most of all, Lewis understood this faculty to be concerned with the discernment of meaning. Reason finds factual truth, but imagination and metaphor are necessary in order to fully grasp the significance of truth.<sup>14</sup> For Lewis, reason is, in Schakel's words, 'the capacity for analysis, abstraction, logical deductions'; while

imagination is 'the image-making, fictionalizing, integrative power'.<sup>15</sup> Both must be present 'in a balanced personality', Lewis believed: the 'clarity and strength of reason' complementing the 'beauty and creativity of imagination'.<sup>16</sup> Lewis saw that myth has the capacity to achieve and present this balanced perspective: by 'joining the outside view with the inside view, contemplation with enjoyment, and the rational with the imaginative'.<sup>17</sup> In sum, 'Imagination, for Lewis, can be defined as the mental, but not intellectual, faculty that puts things into meaningful relationships to form unified wholes.' Imagination accomplishes this feat 'not through a logical or intellectual process but through association, intuition, or inspiration'. Examples are easy to spot when we look around us. Composers of music connect notes and themes in ways that are both fresh and unified; visual artists arrange lines and colours to form new, integrated compositions; writers bring together not only words but also images and sounds to express emotions, characters, thoughts and experiences in arresting ways.<sup>18</sup> Thereby, Schakel says, 'Imaginative experience enables us to enter the lives of others while yet remaining ourselves'.<sup>19</sup>

C. S. Lewis knew, however, that most of us are not creative artists. Instead, we are listeners, observers and readers – in fact, ordinary mortals trying to make sense of our lives and of the world around us. Fortunately, Lewis was primarily concerned not with imaginative producers but with imaginative receivers. Thus he thought deeply and wrote carefully about ways to nourish imagination so that more people would be equipped to grasp essential truths for living.<sup>20</sup>

In Christianity, the ordinary believer is assisted on this path to greater awareness and enlargement of being through what we can call the 'sacramental imagination'. This centrally important way of construing reality is based on the idea that in the Incarnation, in the words of a Roman Catholic theologian, 'God in Christ addresses us as a human being among human beings, thus making all of human life and every human encounter potentially revelatory of the grace of God'.<sup>21</sup> Christian faith is not the belief that certain abstract ideas are true; it is a lived relationship with a God who has come and still comes in the particularities of life. To recognize and engage with the effective presence of God in the midst of these particulars, imagination is not just helpful; it is necessary: 'the immediacy of God's presence to our souls', said the theologian John Baillie, 'is a mediated immediacy'.<sup>22</sup> As mediators of divine presence, images are sacramental.

According to one Lewis scholar, because Lewis was a ‘sacramentalist’, he believed that ‘Reality tends toward the concrete.’ Attempts to apprehend reality, this scholar notes in summarizing Lewis’s view, ‘are very far from being exhausted by [the] logical, the discursive, or the propositional’ – that is, by reason alone. Hence, ‘Lewis, for all of his rigorous and remorselessly logical manner of pursuing an argument, was at bottom a “catholic”.’ The sacramental imagination is closely related to faith’s ability to apprehend reality, for ‘that which faith grasps is characteristically mediated to us via solid images, most notably the Incarnation’.<sup>23</sup>

Imagination, therefore, is necessary because reality is a reality of particulars, not of generalities. No one has ever seen humankind in general, only particular persons. Love your neighbour as yourself; live by faith in hope with love; do not bury your talent in a field out of fear; do not use religious practices as a way to show off and gain the approval of people; and so on. These scriptural teachings must be lived in a world vastly different in its concrete particulars from the world in which Jesus and the earliest Church lived. As abstract principles they do not carry instructions within themselves about how to live them in the concreteness of our world now. Further abstractions cannot help; imagination must intervene. Therefore, Lewis and friends use their imaginative genius to show how the faith of the scriptural world is not limited to the world in which it arose but can be lived in other worlds, including especially our own.

In Christianity, as David Brown has clearly demonstrated, imagination, not historical fact alone, is crucial to the development and discernment of revealed truth. But he issues a realistic, historically grounded word of caution: imagination is not an infallible guide to right doctrine. Indeed, its effect can sometimes be stultifying, and he provides examples from past centuries of the misprisions of imagination. The human understanding of revealed truth can be enriched by imagination, but the products of this imagination must also be tested against doctrine.<sup>24</sup>

For all their keen appreciation of the wonders of a vital imagination, C. S. Lewis and his friends realized that imagination is not enough; in fact it can become dangerously subjective. Self-centred, it may spend all its time spinning illusions and aiding escape, taking the seeker not closer to truth but farther from it. In such cases, the imagination does not connect with the actual but instead misleads,



disabling the self in its efforts to grasp reality. Excessively indulged, this imagination – a factory of wish-fulfilling fantasy – takes a person in the wrong direction, toward moral failure and spiritual decay. Examples of deluded characters, engaged in self-absorbed reveries and convinced of their own wisdom or heroism or martyrdom or deep spirituality, abound not only in Lewis's fiction but also in that of Tolkien, Williams and Macaulay. Sometimes persons do become 'scattered . . . in the imagination of their hearts.'<sup>25</sup> Therefore, imagination needs to be balanced by – and to work with – reason and facts, as faith seeks understanding.<sup>26</sup>

Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) eventually came to see the importance of a balance between reason and imagination. In the first chapter, Peter J. Schakel examines the development of Lewis's ideas about these powerful human faculties, tracing how the two sides of his person – the imaginative and the reasoning – grew and changed, but remained in tension with each other. In his twenties, Lewis, influenced by an old-fashioned, nineteenth-century rationalism, believed in a Coleridgean sense of Imagination (with a capital 'I') as Spiritual Awareness, and he held an elevated sense of Reason. Both strands of his person contributed to his conversion to theism, then to Christianity, in 1929–31; and his conversion changed his ideas about both.

Dropping the capital letters, Lewis adopted a lower view of reason and imagination as complementary and equally necessary pursuits, reason being the organ of truth, imagination the organ of meaning. Reason and imagination in complementary fashion appear in his writings about Christianity and in his fiction, but not initially in equal balance: in the 1940s he privileges reason, showing a greater trust and confidence in it; but in the 1950s the balance shifts as he places more confidence in imagination, and especially in myth as a powerful and meaningful literary form. His last imaginative works, *Till We Have Faces* and *Letters to Malcolm*, are arguably his best. In them he shows the limits of reason and both the use and the misuse of imagination in the acquisition and living of faith.

Austin Farrer (1904–68) differs from the other friends in that his thought about the power of imagination was focused largely on Scripture. Edward Henderson considers Farrer in explicit relation to Lewis's thought about the power of myth as it was expressed in Lewis's

1944 essay 'Myth Became Fact'. By explaining Farrer's answers to several philosophical questions, Henderson shows how Farrer saw the master images of Scripture not as accidental ways of presenting truths that could be known apart from the images but as the very form of understanding by which persons have engaged with God and through which God makes God's Self known. Henderson goes on to argue that the Christian Myth or Story can be reasonably believed to be true because the imagery in which its understanding of reality is carried satisfies what Farrer believed was the supreme aim of reason: to know 'what is most worthy of love and most binding on conduct', and to know it not as an intellectual exercise but in a way of life in which God is engaged and believers made more truly lovers of God and neighbour.<sup>27</sup> The images of Scripture, however, come from other times and places than our own. The continued vitality of the Christian faith requires that the Christian story enable faithful engagement with God in our own world. Bringing the old old story into the present world is precisely the work of imagination, and it is the work to which Lewis and his fiction-writing friends dedicated themselves.

To our present world, in which it is common to regard doctrinal commitments as unimportant and attachment to them even as perverse, Dorothy L. Sayers and Charles Williams are very clear: such Christian doctrines as creation *ex nihilo*, the Incarnation, Trinity and Atonement are not abstractions to be thought so much as patterns of life to be lived.

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) directly faced the hardships, destruction and moral challenges of the two world wars. Indeed, she did much of her theological thinking while reading Dante in the bomb shelters. Ann Loades traces the development of Sayers's work, showing us how in detective fiction, addresses, essays and plays, Sayers made herself and her readers face the pervasive effects of war and the fact of universal guilt. In the late 1930s Sayers began to write plays in order to put central Christian dogma literally on the stage. Loades shows us how Sayers, in her 1946 play *The Just Vengeance*, presents the idea of substitutionary atonement as anything but an angry God's bloody vengeance. There Sayers takes us to 'the place of the images' in and through which God makes God's Self present and lets us see the substitution as a divine action full of grace, beauty and joy.<sup>28</sup>

Charles Williams (1886–1945) shared with Sayers the conviction that Christian doctrine is essentially important, presenting it as descriptive of the facts in the drama of the soul's choice. In his chapter on Williams, theologian Charles Hefling discusses a writer whose work deals with 'the most significant experiences anyone can have' – to love and forgive, to be loved and forgiven. Concerned with helping people to see something of what it means to have a Christian apprehension of the wholeness of things, Williams, like Sayers, sees dogma as vital and illuminating, not boring: theological doctrine uncovers the great facts of existence. Through his writings, Williams aims to give his readers a sense of what he calls 'the pattern of the glory' of God. In its own way, his fiction can be compared to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which he greatly admired.

Thus, for example, in his comprehensive theology, Williams shows how romantic love can take *caritas* within itself. Indeed, the events in the soul of the romantic lover become isomorphic with the events of the Gospel narrative and the Incarnation. Co-inherence – characteristic of the Incarnation, of the Trinity and of the Church – can also characterize in fact, as it already does in principle, the relations of human beings as members one of another. Something like the substitution that lies at the heart of the Atonement may be witnessed in striving to bear one another's burdens, reflected most deeply in the event of forgiveness: a remembering (not a simple forgetting) that moves ahead and does not hold grudges. Williams embraces the redeemed imagination, which discovers meaning not in solitary striving but as it finds its place within the co-inherent 'pattern of the glory'. Its images are worded meanings, embodied accuracies, which are ordered in relation to the meaning-filled and meaning-conferring reality of the Incarnation. This event grounds ordinary human existence – enabling it to find its place – because incarnation means the presence of God in the human which is at the same time the taking of humanity into God.

Rose Macaulay (1881–1958) stands in a more ambiguous relation to Christian doctrine than do Sayers and Williams. David Hein focuses his chapter on her last, highly acclaimed novel, *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956) and on her personal biography. Interpreting the novel through her biography, Hein presents us with a story that speaks with special poignancy to those modern seekers who are both inside and outside the Christian religion and who are especially in need of

## *Foreword*

observes, had to wrestle with his instinctive distrust of the imagination before reaching a more nuanced position in which it has become an indispensable adjunct to reason.

Charles Hefling takes as his motto a famous quotation from W. H. Auden, that it is thanks to the Incarnation that 'the imagination is redeemed from promiscuous fornication with its own images'. Precisely because faith provides some direction for the Christian's imagination, fiction written under that inspiration will still engage with truth. Although carrying us well beyond the world we know, it will yet remain firmly anchored in a world where sorrow and despair are firmly faced even as they are, as they were in Christ's own life, transfigured into hope and joy. It is the way in which both the original authors and their present commentators encourage us toward just such a vision that makes these essays so important and so stimulating for further reflection.

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