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Introduction to Through A Glass Darkly: Essays in the Religious Imagination

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INTRODUCTION

Tom's God was bright, and gave light to the world. My
God was different: was the darkness around the world.

—DAVID PLANTE, *The Accident*

I

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind

—FRANCIS THOMPSON

THE QUESTION THAT SO DISTURBED Christ's contemporaries resonates even now: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Paradoxically, the answers his disciples boldly or clumsily offer seem to define *them* far more clearly than describe their teacher. The New Testament stands as a record of their subsequent obsession with the question, with what they remember their answers to have been, and with how this radically creative interrogation ordered their remaining years. Throughout the centuries their own disciples, variously aided and obstructed by these confessions, used the question as a litmus test not only in their prayer and in their personal relations, but, eventually, in their global politics, as well.

Whatever else may be said about the writers of the New Testament, it is interesting that they would wish to portray their Messiah as someone concerned with the response to such a question—as if the call to imagine and give "shape" to this other person was crucial, for both the respondent and the questioner. Their conception of God apparently entailed imaginative "recognition," either on the spot ("You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" [Matt. 16:17]) or in retrospect ("Did not our hearts burn within

us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?" [Luke 24:32]) as a moment of conversion and Wordsworthian recovery—a powerful emotion recollected in tranquillity. What they had in mind reverberates with echoes of Eden, where Adam and Eve recognized the true identity of all around them and called everything by its appropriate name. The answer to this one question shaped their answer to all others.

At any rate, New Testament epiphanies proceed as an entrance into truth: there is room only for "yes, yes" and "no, no" in their newly imagined world. But in their subsequent ministry disciples soon enough saw that posing God as a question does not guarantee a response, let alone a "recognition." The question in some cases is spoken too soon, too loudly, or in a foreign tongue. "Each of us," as William Mathews notes, "has a question history that unfolds spontaneously within our lives" (35), and that spontaneity is a precious gift. Charles Darwin, for example, while fascinated by the world of nature, observed with some dismay that he was completely unmoved by questions of beauty in the arts: "I am a withered leaf for every subject except Science," he told a friend in 1868 (qtd. in Fleming 219). Shakespeare he found nauseating, and music and paintings oppressive. There are, it seems, some "questions" that a particular imagination cannot, for one reason or another, hear—as though a sense had been dulled or damaged, or has yet to develop.

But if the question should not be forced, neither should it be ignored. Imagination, after all, in both the larger social setting and the private world of the individual, requires a nourishing environment or it will atrophy—and imagination is at the heart of the question asked by any religious leader. Regarding the "moral" imagination, for example, Jonathan Jacobs notes that "an understanding of what it is to be a person or a rational animal is an appreciation of what it is to have a certain characteristic kind of life, and the special sort of subjectivity that that involves" (28). Walking an imagined mile in another's shoes, so the folk wisdom has it, pre-empts an objectifying alterity that frees us from moral kinship. But, if this is difficult enough when it demands empathy for those outside our family circle, what sort of subjectivity can a human being project for a *transcendent* other? Even in a theology

that centers on Incarnation, how can a moral imagination cope with the immanence and imagined familiarity of one like us in all things but sin?

Yet, the mention of “coping” suggests the expenditure of energy, veering possibly toward entropy—and this exhaustion, of course, is exactly what imagination counteracts. Martin Marty speaks of a “pastoral” imagination which, “when it catches on to the fact that it *gets* to be used [rather than *has* to be used] has less in common with the wings of an ostrich and more with the wings of a dove” (8). Imagination is a gift, given to some and not to all, and is not a burden. In this context, the question Jesus asks is not an inscrutable problem, incapable of solution; it is not even a koan, though that may come a bit closer to the truth. It is an opportunity for invention, for relaxation. The religious imagination has always been a *source* of energy, for better or worse.

If, in other words, the question remains hanging in the air, this is not for lack of answers. In fact, it is met throughout the ages with an uproar of competing responses. Joseph Feeney notes that American Catholics, for example, when asked to describe their religious experiences, resort to a matrix of images that may be classified as secular (e.g., sex, finance, music, nature) or sacred (e.g., saints, Scripture, parish events). In both cases what is remarkable, if sometimes controversial, is the volatility and ever-renewed versatility of the imagining. “In colonial America,” he writes, “the Puritans once tried to discipline the religious imagination by restricting its sources to the Bible and to common, everyday life. In modern America, by contrast, the Catholic imagination can—does—roam widely and, in Joseph-like fashion, puts on myriad colors” (219).

As the essays collected here hope to demonstrate, this variegation in religious imagination (the “pied beauty” of Hopkins’s poem, in one sense) has a history, like the ripples in a pond that expand out from a remembered splash. In Part I the examples to which our chapters resort are principally Christian, but their implications touch upon any form of imagination that deals with the transcendent—with, in Justin Kelly’s words, “the question of how the absence of God becomes the presence of God” (1). Like a great sculptor approaching a marble block, we use our religious

sensitivities as “the means by which the still hidden truth declares itself to us” (4).

The reference to David Plante’s novel *The Accident*, which begins this introductory essay, recalls Kelly’s reading of Yeats’s poem “The Song of Wandering Aengus.” Yeats speaks of plucking “The silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun,” and Kelly concludes that they are, of course, the very same apples, seen first by moonlight and then by sunlight. “And the metamorphosis of one into the other symbolizes the very movement from ideal to real, from one nocturnal glow of imagination to the full daylight of vision” (5). Though the two characters in Plante’s novel live side by side, they inhabit two quite different worlds.

The full daylight that Kelly describes, and the various procedures of metamorphosis that lead individuals to this “clearer” vision, are addressed in the essays that follow. Some are directly historical studies, some tangentially so, and others explicitly ahistorical. Brenda Deen Schildgen’s, for example, follows Paul Ricoeur’s lead and considers the Gospel of Mark not so much as a document of its age as a symbol system that follows the rules of mythmaking from many cultures and times. Such a study, interested in structures and patterns, attempts to examine a sort of knowledge beyond that familiar to Darwin: in fact, a “poetic” knowledge.

Christiaan Lievestro’s, on the other hand, is an examination of context as much as content, and offers an interesting working-through of the relationship between the Ignatian and Erasmian notions of humanism, especially as played out in Jesuit schools of the Renaissance. Where might their imaginations have taken them if their respondent had not been there to narrow the focus, or to light unlikely alleys? Edward Oakes’s study directly addresses the “in-between” area embodied in historical narratives. His focus is on narratological questions regarding the gaps between fact and fiction, and the search for transcendent meaning through immanent story-telling. Truth—what is that?—remains another biblical question that reverberates through time.

Like Lievestro’s, Paul Crowley’s essay draws its inspiration from recent celebrations of the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Society of Jesus. But Crowley’s essay, beginning with Pozzo’s ceiling in the Gesù church in Rome and moving to the

meditation techniques employed in Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, examines the baroque imagination prompted by the attempted visualization of a space somewhere between heaven and earth. Such an attempt typifies the baroque confidence and verve that celebrates the invasion of one space by another. Where cannot the religious imagination focus in its search: on the foreground, on the backdrop, on the shifting interstices?

Jane Kristof's discussion of Georges Rouault is both a contextualization and a literal visualization, a reminder that this most important Roman Catholic painter of his day was a member of a revival of religious imagination that stressed both individual expression and pious tradition. What is the role of the larger community in the shaping of one's notion of God? A tradition of piety like that of Rouault is given a detailed treatment by Franco Mormando in his humorous examination of Bernardino of Siena, the most popular preacher of his day. Bernardino's highly imaginative and startlingly graphic sermons made this Franciscan the most important student of the discernment of spirits until Ignatius. His interplay between pious interiorization and sensuous description has been, and remains, a controversial source of religious energy. And to what ends is such energy to be directed?

William Franke and Jo Ellen Parker also focus their studies on precursors, and on the anxiety of the influence they wielded. As Franke shows, Milton's task was to "protestantize" Dante by separating image from truth. The image, so important in Roman Catholic imagination, no longer functions for Milton as an outward manifestation of how things "really" are, but rather feeds the reader's personal experience of his poem, in which truth can be encountered, it is hoped, with greater spiritual immediacy. Where, then, for Milton does this reality reside? Is God, in fact, the process of encounter that the poet hopes his work will promote? And is this not imagination itself? In Parker's essay, George Eliot must contend both with a massive tradition of typological reading of the Bible and with Ludwig Feuerbach! The layers of responses to earlier imaginations are put on like multiple sweaters, and can disguise the shape within. As Parker demonstrates, Eliot seeks to expose the inadequacy of Feuerbach's representation of the Protestant iconography of celibacy and marriage. In whose interest would Feuerbach so imagine the topic?

II

"Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his"

—GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

The essays, taken together, seek not only an answer to the questions asked by Jesus of his disciples, but also to anticipate an equally contentious query: *How* do you say who I am? Thus, in the book's second section we turn our attention to the contemporary scene, a world in which divisions between religious cultures are less fixed and the avenues for imagination intersect in interesting ways. If Part I demonstrates the effects of time on the "Christian" imagination, Part II suggests even more clearly the variety of imaginative paradigms that one can bring to question transcendence. One might say that we are now living in an age of imaginative permeability, an age, some would argue, of postdenominationalism. At the same time as the close of our millennium engenders apocalyptic fears in some, defensive fundamentalisms dully erect a Maginot line against the beauty and wit of other belief systems. And to what purpose? What god worth his or her salt would willingly lie in Procrustes's bed?

In a study similar to our own, Stanley Hopper notes that the deeper themes of current literary works focus on "modern man's search for a soul, for comradeship, for inner peace, for a 'place' in the cosmos, for hope, for creative satisfactions," and he goes on to suggest that "it is an odd paradox that just as religious dogmas were being relaxed through the liberalizing movements of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries, the literary world should have been renewing these and making them a point of appeal" (xi). This estimate is at least optimistic, if not outright wrong; many in the Western world would point to contemporary literatures as evidence of *despair* over the hope for transcendence rather than of renewal.

We therefore turn our attention to religious imaginations that some will find unfamiliar or questionable, and we begin with one very close to home: Andrew Greeley's. It is simplistic to describe his approach to God as sexual, but it will do as a place to start. He is by no means the first priest to write controversial novels

for religious purposes (think, for example, of Queen Victoria's chaplain, Charles Kingsley), but he is the first to be so prominently displayed at the checkout line in local supermarkets. His essay confronts head-on the criticism of his celebration of the "happy fault" that leads his characters to a very attractive God.

Gavin D'Costa then introduces us to a methodology for approaching unfamiliar religious imaginations as a pre-catechesis for an approach to God. As he notes, "Imaginative empathy in this new mode is the key to understanding the Other." His intriguing argument attacks the false objectivity of the secular imagination, and opts for the greater honesty of engaging the other from within one's own committed belief system. The Bakhtinian overtones of the "conversation" D'Costa envisions become the structural framework for Norman Cary's examination of the Islamic imagination of Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah. K. D. Verma shows the Hindu imagination that led to Sri Aurobindo's political philosophy, and how this had such important ramifications in the life of Gandhi and his followers. Joyce Zonana, in turn, demonstrates the interesting ramifications of "orientalism" in the nineteenth-century's assimilation of Jewish stories for political purposes much closer to home. With passing reference to Confucianism and Taoism, Sheng-Tai Chang provides an overview of Buddhism's influence in the literary imagination of China, focusing on the dialectic of "simultaneously detaching oneself from the world and engaging it."

Finally, T. R. Wright takes a surprising look at deconstruction. "Right from the beginning," he writes, "there was a deeply religious vein in Derrida's thought." In a sense, what Wright says about Derrida might be said of our own collection, as a whole: "for Derrida, all representation will always be incomplete, always in need of interpretation, . . . enmeshed in codes. . . ." We hope that our collection will be a helpful examination of some of those codes.

We feel there are many persuasive reasons for continuing such an examination, and one of the most compelling is offered by Emmanuel Levinas. As he notes in his controversial 1948 essay on reality and its "shadow," "the phenomenology of images insists on their transparency," but he sees them as opaque.

The intention of one who contemplates an image is said to go directly through the image, as through a window, into the world

it represents, and aims at an *object*. Yet nothing is more mysterious than the term "world it represents"—since representation expresses just that function of an image that still remains to be determined. (134)

Levinas offers a challenge to the esthete who would celebrate the atemporality of such images—the beautiful stained-glass windows that fix, forever, a never-to-be-repeated time of innocent belief, a little gem of human history. He condemns the evasion of responsibility that any such fixed reality might falsely allow, and calls instead for the imposition of criticism to chart the distance between the myth proposed by any art and *reality*, from which questions of transcendence may emerge:

In the vision of the represented object a painting has a density of its own: it is itself an object of the gaze. The consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there. The perceived elements are not the object but are like its "old garments," spots of colour, chunks of marble or bronze. These elements do not serve as symbols, and in the absence of the object they do not force its presence, but by their presence insist on its absence. They occupy its place fully to mark its removal, as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection. The painting then does not lead us beyond the given reality, but somehow to the hither side of it. It is a symbol in reverse. (136)

Such astringent philosophy scours from any superficial picture of God the sense of completion; it erases from any narrative theology the sense of an ending. In effect, it asks once again: Who do you say that I am? With this sharp reminder of the limitations of the human imagination, this introductory essay concludes by returning to David Plante, the author with whom it began. His recent novel, stereotypical of the contemporary quest described by Stanley Hopper, centers in a rape and the search for a Russian painting of the Annunciation—reminiscent, somehow of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan." Plante's book concludes with ambiguity, and with a stark faith in the imagination as the language of transcendence, arising anew in each culture, age, and individual:

Falling asleep that night, Claude thought: No, I don't believe in God, but I can imagine him. I imagine him as the darkness in

which images occur, the darkness that, when I shift my attention from an image to what is around the image, I see spreading in all directions beyond my sight. That vast dark space behind the image of a sunlit glass of water is the only way I can imagine God. (*Annunciation* 346)

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