IMAGINING THEOLOGY

Encounters with God in Scripture, Interpretation, and Aesthetics

Garrett Green
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Toward a Normative Christian Imagination

Theologians have long been occupied with the question of how human beings can know God. Since the European Enlightenment, however, this question has assumed a new and more urgent form. For the Enlightenment inaugurated a radical change of worldview, beginning in seventeenth-century Europe and spreading eventually to the entire world. The factors leading to this change are many and complex, but one of the root causes—the one of greatest importance to Christian theology—was the advent of the “new science,” which has evolved into what today we call modern science. This new way of thinking about reality had its origin in the revolutionary astronomy of Copernicus (1473–1543), but its powerful impact on modern thinking was first felt as a result of the work of Galileo (1564–1642), who employed the new technology of the telescope to provide empirical proof of the Copernican system. By demonstrating that the mechanics of the heavens (the moons of Jupiter were his prime example) operate according to the same mathematically defined laws governing motion on the earth, he delivered a fatal blow to the Aristotelian-Christian worldview. This way of envisioning the world, as composed of concentric celestial spheres

with the earth at its center, had dominated classical and Christian thought for two millennia. It is no accident that the opening battle in the modern war between “science” and “religion” was provoked by Galileo’s work. And the controversy has continued to this day: questions about “science and religion” still occasion widespread interest and heated debates among believers, skeptics, and the general public.

The worldview of the new science truly came of age with the epochal achievement of Isaac Newton (1642–1727), whose *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* appeared in 1687. According to Newton’s system, the universe consists of an infinite expanse of space containing material bodies that move in accordance with universal laws that can be described in the language of mathematics, the lingua franca of modern science. This view of the world, unlike the one it replaced, is in principle fully accessible to the natural capabilities of human reason. The theological implication of this new worldview is epitomized in an exchange (perhaps apocryphal) between Napoleon and his former teacher, the mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon Laplace. The emperor, having been told that Laplace’s book contained no mention of the Creator, asked him, “Where is God in your system of the universe?” Laplace is said to have answered, “Sire, we have no need for that hypothesis.” The scientific account, by offering an explanation of the world devoid of theological grounding, thereby called into question not only the authority of the church but the truth of Christianity itself.

The antithesis of “science and religion” runs like a scarlet thread through the history of modern thought from its origins in the new science of seventeenth-century Europe to the global secularism of the twenty-first century. It has captured the imagination of most of the technologically advanced societies of today and seems poised to overwhelm the remaining traditional backwaters that continue to resist its advance. The scare quotes around the two central terms call attention to the way in which our notions of both “science” and “religion,” especially in their perceived incompatibility, have been shaped—and distorted—by the very forces that drive the advance of modern culture. If Christian theology is to escape this intellectual and cultural deluge, it will be necessary to deconstruct and demystify the mythical story of how “science” has displaced “religion” as the privileged key to understanding the world today. Only as we are able to see how the advocates of each side have misunderstood both themselves and one another can we regain our cultural bearings and form a truer picture of how modernity has shaped our world. And only then can theology begin to correct the misperceptions of the past and chart a better path forward.
The Metaphysics of Modern Science

Two influential books that appeared late in the nineteenth century epitomize and chronicle the way in which people in the modern West have imagined a struggle between science and religion that has now raged for more than three centuries. John William Draper published his *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* in 1874, and it was followed two decades later by Andrew Dickson White’s massive two-volume *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). The assumption that such a conflict exists is deeply rooted in the imagination of modernity and is shared both by advocates of “science” and by those who defend “religion.” Even those who believe this warfare to be unfounded cannot ignore the battle that continues to rage around them. The issue that should concern us first of all is not who is right, or even whether the whole struggle is futile or unnecessary, but rather how our culture came to view things under this set of images in the first place. E. A. Burtt, author of the monumental study *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*, maintains that “the ultimate picture which an age forms of the nature of its world . . . is its most fundamental possession.” Accordingly, he sets out to discover “the cosmology underlying our mental processes” by exposing the unexamined metaphysical assumptions bequeathed to modernity by the founders of modern science along with their revolutionary new empirical method of understanding the physical world.  

This new and unacknowledged metaphysics has achieved virtually universal acceptance in the modern world due especially to the authority accorded to Newton for his revolutionary scientific achievements. Modern philosophy, simply taking modern science for granted, has accepted uncritically the metaphysical assumptions of its founders along with their scientific method. Not only philosophers, however, have fallen into this unconscious error but modernity as a whole, including those religious thinkers who have engaged in an ongoing battle with science.

Burtt’s detailed demonstration of how these unexamined principles came to be presupposed in the modern world is a major scholarly accomplishment that has not been sufficiently acknowledged and taken into account by other interpreters of modern thought and culture over the past century—most especially by those who wrestle with the problem of “science and religion.” Burtt himself was concerned primarily with the way in which these “metaphysical foundations” have affected and distorted modern philosophy. What


disturbs him most of all is the “banishing of man from the great world of nature and his treatment as an effect of what happens in the latter.” His complaint: “Man begins to appear for the first time in the history of thought as an irrelevant spectator and insignificant effect of the great mathematical system which is the substance of reality.” But this displacement of humanity in the modern era is the consequence of a more fundamental shift in the metaphysics of modernity—namely, the displacement of God. The diction in Laplace’s response to Napoleon is a dead giveaway: we modern scientists, he says, have no need for that *hypothesis*. How did the God of the Bible, the God worshiped by Jews and Christians, become the “God-hypothesis”? At least one seventeenth-century European, Blaise Pascal (1623–62), recognized the immense difference between the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” and the “God of the philosophers”—by which he surely meant those modern philosophers who have adopted the implicit metaphysics of modern science.

The misunderstanding of science by both sides in the “science and religion” debate is rooted in what we might call the *teleological amnesia* of modern science. The revolution in science initiated by Kepler, Galileo, Newton, and their peers is rooted in a methodological innovation first articulated by Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum Scientiarum* (1620) and taken for granted in all subsequent science. Explicitly departing from Aristotle’s fourfold account of causality that had been the standard teaching for centuries, Bacon proposes a new experimental empiricism based entirely on efficient causality. In other words, the modern scientist explains the phenomena of nature inductively by attending to the immediately preceding conditions. Doing science this way, however, means ignoring what Aristotle calls “final causes”—that is, questions of end or ultimate purpose. The modern scientist thus excludes all *teleological* considerations in order to describe how things move and change in the present, how they come about in the light of the preceding conditions. By bracketing consideration of the end or purpose of things (the *why* question), they are able to observe and test the immediate causes of natural phenomena (the *how* question)—and thus to gain greater control over them. The importance of this last point—control—which Bacon emphasizes, can be seen in the stupendous technological advances that have flowed from the findings of modern science. What has happened, however, is that our culture, including many of its influential philosophical and religious leaders, has forgotten that the bracketing of teleology by scientists was a methodological choice, a presupposition of scientific method, not a conclusion induced

from observation of natural phenomena. Having forgotten that questions of purpose and ultimate meaning had been deliberately set aside, people now imagine that science has discovered that nature is devoid of purpose. This teleological amnesia has encouraged the widespread modern notion that “science” has proven the beliefs of “religion” to be mistaken or implausible since the natural world is devoid of purpose and is guided by no ultimate end. What has really happened is that a particular scientific method has been mistaken for a metaphysics. The fact that this transformation has mostly occurred unintentionally, even unconsciously, makes it all the more difficult to perceive and to criticize. Through a meticulous examination of the writings of the founders of modern science, Burtt shows how the transformation from method to metaphysics began in the thinking of Galileo, Descartes, and others in the seventeenth century—especially Newton—and came to shape the whole of modern thought and culture.

The “Religious” Misunderstanding of Science

The same misreading of science that seduced philosophers into uncritically adopting the metaphysical assumptions of the architects of early modern science has not been confined to the field of philosophy. Precisely because the underlying sources of confusion were unrecognized even by scientists themselves, the new metaphysics has transformed the thinking of nearly every modern person, including those religious thinkers who set out to defend the Christian faith. The abandonment of teleological explanations in favor of efficient causality in science has encouraged religious apologists to try to defend religion on the same assumption—that is, without recourse to teleological considerations. “With final causality gone,” Burtt summarizes, “the only way to keep [God] in the universe was to . . . regard him as the First Efficient Cause,” thus leaving behind the understanding of God as Supreme Good. Christian apologists who start down this road today can scarcely avoid arriving at the deism championed by so many of the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment. These well-meaning apologists have unwittingly adopted the metaphysics of modern science without realizing that in doing so they have reduced God to the First Efficient Cause of the world while claiming that they are justifying belief in the Holy One of the Bible. Looking for empirical evidence of God, they fail to see that they are treating God as an explanatory hypothesis, one of the contingent objects of the world (even if called the Supreme Being) that

may or may not exist. If they were to be successful in their arguments, they
would find that what they had proved was not God but an idol.

The warfare between science and religion has reached a stalemate because
both have been wrongly conceived. A lasting truce will require a demytholo-
gizing of both terms. A good place to begin is with a suggestion that Burtt
makes about how a scientific method came to be misunderstood as a meta-
physical discovery in the first place. He suggests that it resulted from “a
misapplication, to the universe at large, of a point of view legitimate enough
in a certain field,” an error arising from “the unwarranted assumption that
because man . . . can know and use portions of his world, some ultimate and
permanent difference is thereby made in that world.” A proper apologetic
strategy for religious believers must begin by acknowledging that empirical
science is not equipped to tell us the ultimate nature of reality but is rather a
means to better understand the workings of the natural world by bracketing
ultimate questions in order to investigate and gain control over its immanent
mechanisms. The founders of modern science were surely correct in blaming
medieval thinkers for confusing theological principles with empirical accounts
of nature. But they and their modern successors have made a similar error
by absolutizing their empirical methodology to arrive at conclusions that
exceed the legitimate capabilities of science, becoming in effect metaphysical
assumptions that carry theological implications. What is needed today is a
more modest understanding of the limits of empirical science, together with
a better way of distinguishing the realm in which it does its proper work from
the realm appropriate to metaphysics and theology.

Imagination in Science and Theology

The most important change in our understanding of science since the found-
ing of modern science occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century.
Anyone wishing to think seriously about science today must take into ac-
count Thomas Kuhn’s Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Kuhn proved that

8. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (1st ed., 1962; Chi-
cago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). A number of other scholars played important roles
in the new understanding of the history and philosophy of science, including Paul Feyerabend,
Norwood Russell Hanson, Michael Polanyi, Max Black, Margaret Masterman, and others;
but Kuhn’s book was primarily responsible for the revolutionary change in the way we think
about science. For a more complete account of this movement and its importance for theology,
see Garrett Green, Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination (Grand Rapids:

Garrett Green, Imagining Theology
many of our common assumptions about how science works— notions that have gained virtually universal consensus in the modern era—are mistaken. Through a close examination of the history of science, he shows how actual scientific work proceeds much differently from the common assumption that scientists simply observe nature objectively in order to gather facts that are then verified by experiment and added cumulatively to our store of knowledge about the natural world. His most important contribution is the concept of *paradigm*, which identifies the analogical exemplar of the whole that underlies every particular scientific enterprise. Kuhn draws on the insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who used the figure of the “duck-rabbit” to show how the recognition of parts depends on prior apprehension of a whole, the constitutive pattern by which the separate parts can be recognized as such (fig. 1). Wittgenstein’s philosophical insight was derived from the work of Gestalt psychologists, who showed why one person viewing an object can see something quite different from another viewer (e.g., one sees a duck where another sees a rabbit). Such examples show how even objective observation is dependent on an implicit grasp of the holistic paradigm that governs what kind of object the observer observes.

Kuhn has brought to light the essential role played by *imagination* in science. The importance of paradigms throughout the history of science demonstrates the necessary contribution of imagination to the ongoing work of science. Most of the time scientific research proceeds without an explicit awareness of the paradigms it presupposes; Kuhn calls this phase “normal science,” which consists mainly of “puzzle-solving.” Contrary to the commonly held view of science, however, scientists do not simply discard their working hypotheses when experiments fail to verify them. Instead, they continue to pursue their research in spite of experimental anomalies. Eventually, however, the pressure of anomaly—“a phenomenon . . . for which his paradigm had not readied

the investigator”¹¹—may lead to a crisis in the normal practice of science, in which the paradigm that has hitherto given shape and direction to scientific research appears to falter. What happens next is unpredictable. Scientists may succeed in overcoming the apparent dilemmas by correcting errors in their previous work or refining existing theories. But it may also happen that some new and unorthodox way of doing science appears on the scene and succeeds in attracting scientists to a new way of thinking on the basis of a quite different paradigm. This event is the “scientific revolution” of Kuhn’s title—such as the famous examples of the adoption of Copernican astronomy in the seventeenth century and the transformation from Newtonian to Einsteinian mechanics in the twentieth century. Not all paradigm changes in science are as dramatic as these, but such transformations have occurred and will continue to occur, though often so gradually that the participants may be unaware of them at the time. It is nevertheless the case that all scientific research takes place under the influence of specific paradigms. Following Wittgenstein, Kuhn appeals to the work of Gestalt psychologists, whose experiments have shown “that something like a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself.”¹² In the same way that we remain unaware of our seeing “paradigmatically” until we encounter something akin to the duck-rabbit figure, so scientists may proceed without awareness of the implicit paradigms guiding their research until, say, a series of anomalous experiments calls into question their basic assumptions. Such crises have occurred repeatedly throughout the history of science. Whether in visual perception, scientific work, or religious experience, people remain unaware of the paradigmatic commitments underlying their thinking until some crisis, some breakdown of “normal” experience, gives birth to a new way of seeing.

This dramatic change in our understanding of how science actually works ought to transform the way we view the problem of science and religion. The key element is the recognition of the role played by imagination in both. For the first time since the advent of modern science we catch a glimpse of something similar in the work of the natural scientist and the theologian: the essential role of paradigmatic imagination for both enterprises. It is not the case, of course, that this similarity dissolves the real differences between them. On the contrary, recognition of the essential role played by imagination in both scientific and theological thought puts us in a better position to grasp the real differences between them, and to see why the long-standing notion of their “warfare” is an illusion produced by an inadequate understanding of both.

¹¹. Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 57.
Let us begin by acknowledging the qualitative difference between knowing the things of this world and knowing those aspects of reality that transcend our cognitive abilities. That such a distinction exists can be illustrated by an everyday analogy. Try to imagine a dog’s conception of human beings; let’s call it canine anthropology. Anyone who has spent time communicating with dogs has learned that they do in fact have knowledge of humans: they can recognize the difference between humans and other animals, and between one human and another; they are able to communicate to us at least some of their needs and desires; we can teach them to obey certain spoken commands—and so on. Yet their canine anthropology does not begin to approach human reality as we know it. And no amount of training or education could ever enable a dog to achieve the kind of knowledge we possess about our own species. Now compare this canine epistemological quandary to the situation of human theology. Our creaturely attempts to know God confront us with a comparable but far greater quandary—not the watered-down, domesticated God of modern deism and religious apologetics, but the biblical God, the Holy One of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ, the God of the church fathers, of St. Augustine and St. Thomas, Luther and Calvin, and of myriad ordinary believers throughout the ages.

The difference between the two kinds of knowledge sought by theologians and empirical scientists is not simply quantitative but qualitative, for my desire to know God is vastly more complex and problematic than the efforts of my dog (a fellow creature) to know me. There are many ways in which the immeasurable difference between knowing the natural world around us and knowing its Creator, Sustainer, and End has been expressed: the difference between time and eternity, earth and heaven, creature and Creator, imminence and transcendence, contingency and necessity, this world and the world to come. The apostle Paul puts it like this: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes our knowledge of being from our knowledge of Being‐Itself, who is God. Theologian Katherine Sonderegger, employing another term from scholastic theology, speaks of the divine aseity, God’s Reality a se, in himself and not simply as known from the standpoint of the created world. She puts her finger squarely on the central error of modernist theology, one that has

13. It will be helpful in reading the following to have in mind Gary Larson’s famous cartoon about human and dog communication (https://terriermandotcom.blogspot.com/2010/07/dogs-are-not-verbal.html).
prevented it from doing justice to the divine aseity: “the importation and concentration of causality into Divine Power,” which “forces Divine Will off the stage.” In this way God’s freedom “has been hopelessly compromised by the notion of Absolute Cause, an efficient Power that can brook no rival.” She sees this error epitomized in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who “has recognized the full collapse and reduction of causality in the modern age into efficient cause, and has embraced it with radical confidence.”¹⁵ Here, in the theologian who has had so great an influence on Protestant theology over the past two centuries, we see the consequences of adopting the metaphysical foundations of empirical science into our theology. By trying to conceive God according to the metaphysics of efficient causality, theologians have fundamentally misunderstood the radical difference between the biblical God and the things of this imminent and contingent world. Theology cannot import its metaphysics or its methods from the sciences without distorting its vision of God, the proper object of theology, as its very name implies. The task of the scientist is to imagine the natural world, but the task of imagining God is something altogether different.

There has been, and still is, great resistance on both sides to the claim that imagination is centrally implicated in both natural science and theology. The reason is clear: people commonly assume that what we imagine must be imaginary. This notion, however, is manifestly false. The human imagination serves various purposes that may be distinguished into two broad groups on the basis of its use. On the one hand, imagination can be employed in fictive or fantastic ways for a variety of purposes, including the literary and aesthetic. But the fictive imagination also has its darker uses, ranging from misrepresentation (whether intentional or unintentional) to deliberate deceit. On the other hand, imagination can be employed realistically, in the service of truth. Even at the level of simple visual perception, the realistic imagination works to focus and supplement the data that our eyes take in directly. (I can’t see the other side of the cup into which I am pouring my coffee, but I am willing to trust my imagination that it isn’t missing or full of holes.) The realistic imagination functions throughout human experience, enabling us to envision the whole of things, to focus our minds to perceive how things are ordered and organized—in other words, it allows us to see what is really there, rather than just a blooming, buzzing confusion. This is the kind of imagination employed by scientists and theologians alike. Of course, the realistic imagination is not infallible and sometimes misleads us. And as already noted, imagination can be deliberately employed to produce unreal, imaginary outcomes, whether


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for good or for ill. So it isn’t really surprising that many scientists and many religious believers resist the thesis that imagination plays a crucial role in their respective enterprises.

One way to reduce that resistance is to pay close attention to how imagination actually functions realistically in both areas. Philosophers of science have made great strides in the past half century toward that goal in their own field of inquiry. A corresponding account of religious imagination must begin by acknowledging just how different the object of theology is from the objects of empirical science. Accordingly, the theologian and the scientist have very different relationships to their respective objects of study. That difference is concisely expressed in a German term that—regrettably for Anglophones—requires a more complicated explanation in English. We can say, using the German term, that God is unverfügbar and that whatever the theologian says about God must therefore take into account God’s Unverfügbarkeit.

The straightforward translation of the verb verfügen is “to dispose,” implying that verfügbar means “disposable.” Unfortunately this word has a wide range of meanings in English (are we talking about diapers, perhaps, or beverage containers?), and the theologically significant meaning is rare in current English usage. The definition of the verb dispose that comes closest to the German verfügen reads as follows: “To make arrangements; to determine or control the course of affairs or events; to ordain, appoint,” as in the proverbial expression “Man proposes, but God disposes.” The best way to express the meaning of God’s Unverfügbarkeit in contemporary English is to say that God is not at our disposal. Unlike the natural phenomena that the scientist studies (which are verfügbar, at our disposal), God cannot be brought under our control, is not subject to our manipulation. We cannot bring God into the laboratory in order to subject him to experimental analysis or search for evidence of his existence in the natural world. Such methods would ignore the sovereign freedom of God, what Sonderegger calls God’s aseity, the essential attribute of his nature.

Even though paradigmatic imagination is a necessary component of both empirical science and theology, the vast qualitative differences between their

16. The Oxford English Dictionary lists nine definitions of the verb dispose (plus numerous subdefinitions), several of them obsolete.

17. A translation of the Latin “Homo proponit, sed Deus disponit” (from Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ 1.19). This saying may ultimately derive from the Bible; the closest parallel is Prov. 19:21: “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.” The Living Bible (TLB) actually translates this verse, “Man proposes, but God disposes.”

18. Sonderegger writes that “little else remains in the doctrine of God when His Aseity is lost.” Systematic Theology, 1:309.
objects of inquiry require them to deploy that imagination very differently. But since both of them understand their use of imagination to be realistic—a means of gaining a better understanding of reality, rather than an exercise in fiction or fantasy—both of them must wrestle with the question of how to govern the use of imagination, how to employ it properly in the service of truth. One reason for the widespread suspicion of imagination, whether in science or religion, is that imagination can be used to serve many different masters, to achieve many different ends. It is, of course, possible to “mis-imagine” reality while seeking to understand it, and some people even appeal to imagination deceitfully, seeking through false analogy or other means to deceive others. What the legitimate seeker after truth needs, therefore, is a way to identify the normative use of imagination, some set of rules or guidelines to govern its use and to curb its excesses. The remainder of this chapter will sketch out some of those guidelines for Christian theology.

**Normative Imagination in Christian Theology**

The first rule for the normative use of theological imagination in Christianity is foundational and underlies all the others:

1. **The Bible embodies the concrete paradigm on which all genuine Christian theology is based, enabling the faithful to rightly imagine God.**

   Christians have affirmed from the earliest times that our knowledge of God is grounded in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Christian theology is thus a hermeneutical discipline, one that necessarily involves interpretation of a foundational text. But that way of putting things disguises the complexity of the task, for it would be more precise to say that theology requires the interpretation of many texts, since the Bible is a collection of sixty-six (or so) writings over many centuries by authors known and unknown, some of which incorporate materials from earlier texts or oral traditions. So before even starting to interpret the Bible, theologians must wrestle with the definition of the biblical canon itself, a task that led to more than three centuries of often contentious debate in the early history of the church and is not a wholly settled matter even today. But the task of defining a canon already is interpretation, since it requires us to decide what qualifies a text to be considered canonical.

   The principle at stake in this case is the Christian teaching that the Bible is the Word of God, which implies that Christians understand Scripture to be the place where God speaks to us. Everything depends, however, on how
we imagine that communication to take place. One popular but wholly inadequately approach is to claim that Scripture contains the Words (plural!) of God—a teaching that would bring Christian reading of the Bible close to the way Islam reads the Qur’an. This doctrine is often called by the misleading term “literalism” but is more accurately labeled the theory of divine dictation. It has led to the modern heresy of creationism, a particularly contentious theory that has shaken the faith of many conscientious but uninformed believers and led critics to accuse the church of being the enemy of science. Sonderegger offers a devastating critique of this popular heresy. “Were Christians to teach a doctrine of inspiration that truly and directly taught divine dictation,” she writes, “the Divine would be understood to destroy the human through its own manifestation. The human mind would be annihilated, replaced by the Divine Word, a searing and molten Presence that extinguished all creaturely thought and word.”

Though motivated by the pious intent to affirm the truth of the Bible as the Word of God, this false doctrine is a consequence of the unacknowledged metaphysics of modern science being absorbed into Christian theology. Creationists, confusing scientific language with biblical narrative, claim that the biblical accounts of divine creation contradict the findings of evolutionary science.

The remedy for the hermeneutics of divine dictation begins by recalling that the Bible itself identifies the Word of God not with the words of Scripture but with Jesus Christ (John 1:1–5). He is the Logos, God’s own Word, incarnate in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Christians call the Bible the Word of God in a secondary sense, because it contains the witness to Christ the Logos, the testimony of those who “have seen with our eyes” and have “looked upon and have touched with our hands” the living Word of God himself (1 John 1:1). To assert that this testimony contradicts evolutionary science is to make a massive category error, rooted in the unintentional metaphysics of modern science. This error is a major reason for the surviving notion that religion and science are at war. Worse still, creationism encourages readers of the Genesis creation narratives to overlook the real and powerful theological message: that God speaks not simply in the words of the Bible but in its embodied language as a whole, including the prescientific thought patterns and images of the ancient Near Eastern priests and prophets who first related these stories. God speaks not by putting words into the mouths of passive ancient authors but by capturing their imagination and enabling them to utter truthfully—using their own culturally specific and time-bound conceptuality—the mysteries of the One Eternal God, Creator of the heavens and the earth.

One final quibble about creationism: its advocates seem unaware that evolutionary science is not about creation at all. Science does not, and cannot, say anything about the origin of the natural world, because that is one issue that cannot possibly be accounted for by appeal to efficient causality. If there is any Christian doctrine that might be affected by evolutionary theory, it is not creation but providence, God’s ongoing provision and care for the world he has created. But that is a topic for another day.

One more mistaken hermeneutical theory needs to be headed off if we are to point the way to the normative use of imagination in theology: the view that takes interpretation itself to be the problem. One sometimes hears, especially among conservative Christians, the claim that we ought simply to read the Bible without interpretation. Would that this were possible! Such advice, if followed, would encourage readers of Scripture to ignore their own context as readers, their own assumptions and preconceptions—in a word, their own prejudices. Hans-Georg Gadamer has done us a great favor by showing that Vorurteile are not necessarily harmful prejudices but unavoidable and necessary prejudgments that are implicit in all our reading of texts.20 No appeal to a “literal” reading of the Bible can bypass the need for right interpretation—that is, for a hermeneutic that enables us to find in Scripture a normative way to imagine God. Even the resurrected Jesus turned to interpretation of Scripture in order to open the eyes of the disciples on the road to Emmaus by showing them how the pattern running throughout the entire Scripture is focused on himself (Luke 24:25–27). Calvin gives us a compelling image of how Scripture can be used normatively when he suggests that it functions like spectacles, like a pair of corrective lenses that refocuses our flawed spiritual vision and “clearly shows us the true God.”21 This visual metaphor invites us to use the Bible not simply as something we look at but through in order to see the world and its relation to God in a new way.

2. Right imagination of God is a movement not only of the head—our mind or intellect—but also of the heart, our feelings and affective responses.

Emphasizing the centrality of imagination in theology can sometimes lead to a serious misunderstanding of Christian experience. The centrality of the visual metaphor (suggested by the word imagination itself) can tempt us to overemphasize the rational or intelligible. Scripture, conceived as the spectacles of imagination, may then appear to be primarily a means of seeing


Garrett Green, Imagining Theology
clearly, which can mislead us into thinking that right imagination is mainly a matter of mind or intellect. But nothing could be further from the truth. Everything depends on the concrete paradigm that is fueling our imagination in a particular case. If, for example, I imagine the world I live in as a battleground in which I am constantly assaulted by forces that threaten to overwhelm me, I will not only think in certain ways but also feel very differently from my neighbor who imagines herself to be the unique creature of a powerful and loving God who continually watches over her. Imagination is from the outset an integral movement of intellect, will, and affections; there is no need to coordinate or integrate them as though they were separate faculties.

Here is a point at which the empirical scientist and the theologian differ dramatically in their use of the imagination. The responsible scientist must always maintain a disinterested stance when conducting research. Any admixture of subjectivity in the outcome, any emotional involvement in the experimental process, can compromise the necessary objectivity of the scientific enterprise. To carry over this scientific virtue into theology, however, leads to confusion and error, as in the attempt by Enlightenment thinkers to construct a religion of reason, purged of all “positivity,” of everything “merely” historical or particular in Christianity. Even when trying to understand our fellow human beings, it would be foolish to omit emotional factors. How much more obvious it is that theology, in seeking to know God (a thoroughly personal relationship), must attend to the affective, as well as the intellectual and volitional, dimensions of the relationship.

3. The theological use of imagination must always remain open to the Mystery of God, resisting every temptation to rationalize, demystify, or control the divine.

An even more dramatic difference between the scientific and theological uses of imagination has to do with the question of mystery. For the scientist, mystery is something negative, a problem to be solved by further research and experiment. Kuhn describes the essential activity of normal science as puzzle-solving. How different the approach of the theologian, whose object of study is the One Holy God, who in his aseity is not at our disposal, who in his freedom remains ever mysterious, who, we might say, simply is Mystery.

23. For an explanation of the concept of positivity and the distinction between positive and natural religion, see Garrett Green, Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 26–30.
This divine quality is not just a troublesome consequence of our finitude but rather a constitutive attribute of God himself. To say that God is Mystery is not to say (or imply) that God is unknown or unknowable. Divine mystery is not an excuse for agnosticism. Rather, we know God precisely as Mystery. It is a quality implied by his Eternity. However much “progress” we make in our effort to know God, we will never exhaust the mystery, for he remains the infinitely Knowable One.

Such a mystery contains and expresses a truth that is beyond our control. In a culture like ours, in which our collective imagination has been captivated by the marvels of science and its resulting technology, this lack of control appears to be something negative, a limitation to be overcome. From the perspective of the Christian gospel, however, the issue of control looks very different. Theology is a joyful enterprise, for the gracious Lord of Mystery never ceases to extend and enrich our knowledge of himself, which flows forth from its Source in a never-ending outpouring of wisdom and love. For the theologian, a mysterious truth is not a lesser kind of truth: we can affirm it without being able fully to comprehend it. Not only is this kind of knowledge beyond our control, but it cannot be known at all until we abandon the attempt to control it. Theological knowledge is never an achievement but always a gift. We interpret the meaning of the mystery so far as we are able, knowing that we can never exhaust its meaning. The affirmation of mystery by its very nature thus necessitates humility on the part of the knower. The wise person is open to the possibility of genuine mystery, which implies that there is more to reality than we are able to comprehend; the foolish person assumes that anything beyond our rational grasp is unreal or untrue.

In theology, unlike science, the mystery surrounding its subject is not a problem but rather a hermeneutical key. God’s mystery is an aspect of his grace—an expression of his love, not a barrier to be overcome. It is a sign of his infinity: there is always more to be known about God; he is always new without changing or losing his identity. The appropriate theological response to divine mystery, therefore, is not puzzlement but praise.

4. In accordance with its biblical paradigm, theological imagination always remains open to novelty, eschewing every attempt at metanarrative or systematic closure.

The impact of postmodern continental philosophy on academia has encouraged theologians as well as other thinkers to adopt an attitude of “incredulity

24. Theology is the truly joyful science, the fröhliche Wissenschaft, despite Nietzsche’s attempt to claim the title for himself.
towards metanarratives,” defined as “totalising stories about history and the
goals of the human race that ground and legitimise knowledges and cultural
practises.”

It is important to see why a paradigm (in the sense developed
by Kuhn) is not a metanarrative, and why the scriptural canon understood
paradigmatically cannot therefore be characterized as a metanarrative.

Expressed in simplest terms, a paradigm tells us what something is like.
The figure of the duck-rabbit, so revealing to Wittgenstein and his followers,
is deliberately constructed so as to balance two visual aspects in order to
demonstrate and bring to awareness the “paradigmatic” nature of all our seeing.
Viewing the figure according to the duck paradigm causes the viewer to see
something wholly different from another viewer who sees it according to the
rabbit paradigm—yet both are viewing the same figure. Their experience
highlights something true of all seeing, that it depends on a prior but implicit
way of organizing the visual data into a meaningful whole. The duck-rabbit
is artificially devised to demonstrate this truth and thus has no realistic or
moral significance: one way of seeing it is no better or worse than the other.
But in real life it can make a huge difference which paradigm is determining
our vision. All our seeing, whether we are aware of it or not, is a seeing-as. We
may misimagine some aspect of the world, and it might even turn out to be a
matter of life or death. In the twilight the soldier saw the approaching figure
as one of his own unit, while his companion saw him as an enemy combatant
and ducked for cover just in time. Christians see the world as the “theater of
God’s glory” (in Calvin’s elegant phrase) while others see it differently—as a
living hell, perhaps, or as a place of unlimited opportunity for material gain.

So what does all of this have to do with the Bible? Gestalt experiments have
shown that a subject viewing the duck-rabbit for the first time surrounded by
images of rabbits is more likely to see it as a rabbit. Christians, immersing
themselves in Holy Scripture, find themselves surrounded by a “cloud of wit-
nesses” (Heb. 12:1) all testifying in their various ways to the reality of God
and the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But what a diverse and confusing
set of testimonies the Bible gives us! We need to think of them not as a series
of precise doctrinal instructions (though some of them may be) but as a col-
lection of eyewitnesses, all reporting in their own voices what they have seen
and heard, employing their own genres and thought forms. Some readers will
hear in this collection only a cacophony of conflicting voices, while others
(careless readers though they be) imagine the Bible to be a kind of rule book
to be applied randomly and without any attention to context.

25. This summary comes from Ashley Woodward, “Jean- François Lyotard (1924–1998),”
In the natural sciences, as Kuhn has demonstrated, a paradigm retains its usefulness only until the next revolution, when accumulating anomalies open the way for a new and better paradigm to emerge and take its place. Here, too, the theological situation differs because of the character of its object, “the One God’s Utter Uniqueness.” If a paradigm tells us what an object is like, how is a theological paradigm even possible? Where is the theologian to find a likeness to the Utterly Unique? The answer is found in the scriptural witness to Jesus Christ: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). Christians affirm that the varied testimonies of the Old and New Testaments are all to be heard in relation to this central focus on Jesus Christ. Viewed in this light, Scripture begins to take on a coherent shape. The apostle Paul expresses it like this: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). In the sciences, too, a paradigm is open-ended, suggesting new ways in which our knowledge of the natural world might be clarified and extended through further research. A paradigm is not the same as a theory (though it may encourage the development of new theories). No one can say in advance how far and in what ways the paradigm may lead to scientific discovery. In theology the situation is similar, only more so; for the object to be illuminated by the biblical paradigm is itself open-ended, unlimited, and inexhaustible.

Confronted with the task of trying to speak about the One Utterly Unique God, theologians have always acknowledged the necessity of inspiration, for it should be obvious that there can be no likeness, and therefore no paradigm, of such a God unless it be revealed by God himself. Thus theologians have followed the Bible in emphasizing the essential role played by the Holy Spirit, the One who inspires the imagination of the witnesses. If the Bible is to be read and interpreted rightly—that is, if theology is to be possible—God’s Holy Spirit must not only have inspired the writers of Scripture but must also illumine the minds of its faithful readers. “God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word,” writes Calvin, “so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”

Such a living and open-ended relationship of the biblical paradigm to its Holy Object and to the believer is unlike a metanarrative or any other kind of premature closure. Any attempt to guarantee its content or to set its

27. This inexhaustibility finds expression in the final verse of John’s Gospel: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25).
limits systematically—any attempt at closure—would constitute a betrayal of its mission.

5. Because theological imagination is dependent on the Holy Spirit, it is an enterprise of faith, appearing uncertain and circular from a worldly perspective, depending on the certainty of God’s revelation for its claim to truth.

When Karl Barth, in his final course of lectures before retirement, set out to describe Christian theology, he noted that it is “not supported by what is usually considered sound evidence” but rather “seems to the onlooker to be situated in mid-air.” Barth pictures theology as a series of concentric circles, moving (outer to inner) from the Word, to the Witnesses, to the Community (i.e., the church). At the center, he locates the Spirit, on whom all the others depend. Thus theology can never “seek to secure its operations” but simply does its work without presuppositions, relying wholly on the power of the Holy Spirit.

So central is faith to Christians and to Christian theology that the whole enterprise is known as the Christian faith (a better descriptor than the troubled and contested term religion). When we speak of faith in the context of modern culture, however, we encounter once again the distorting lens of the metaphysics of modern science. Assuming that all true knowledge is based on efficient causality, people today typically take faith to be just a weaker kind of truth claim, lacking the rigorous evidence found in empirical science. But as we have seen, the spiritual foundation of Christian faith gives rise to a very different kind of truth-seeking and a very different relationship between the knower and the object to be known. Because, unlike the worldly objects studied by natural science, God is Spirit (and therefore free, unverfügbar, not at our disposal), the right relationship to him is one of faith—even, we might say, our epistemological relationship to him. As such, faith is not a lesser way of knowing God but the right way, the only way.

The way of faith, however, is indirect, for God, unlike the objects of the created world, is invisible, hidden in the world he has made. Sonderegger makes much of this divine attribute, seeing it as exemplifying the humility of God. This divine hiddenness results “not from absence but rather from divine presence,” she says, claiming furthermore that “this affirmation of

the One Lord’s commanding presence in the midst of His Mystery and Hiden-
deness is knit into the very structure of biblical revelation.” 32 (Notice here
how the biblical paradigm informs the imagination of the theologian.) One
of the ironies of the modern secular world—the world that has no need of
the God-hypothesis—is its unintentional acknowledgment of God’s hidden-
ness. “Modern atheism,” Sonderegger writes, “even against its will, glorifies
God in this way.” 33 Against all modern expectations, the God of the Bible,
Holy and Almighty as he is, is no tyrant, no supreme autocrat, compelling
his creation to conform to his divine will. On the contrary, Paul writes, “God
chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak
in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the
world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor.
1:27–28). When this God wants to interact with his creation, he arrives on
the scene incognito, in the form of a slave (Phil. 2:7), as a newborn child in
a stable, as a king who reigns from a cross. What appears to worldly eyes as
weakness, however, is in reality the power of Almighty God. “For the foolish-
ness of God,” Paul writes, “is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is
stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:25).

The apparent foolishness and weakness of God are also manifested in
theology, which, because it is based on faith, appears in this world in the form
of uncertainty and circularity. “Naturally,” writes Oswald Chambers, “we are
inclined to be so mathematical and calculating that we look upon uncertainty
as a bad thing. . . . The nature of the spiritual life is that we are certain in our
uncertainty, consequently we do not make our nests anywhere. . . . Certainty
is the mark of the common-sense life: gracious uncertainty is the mark of
the spiritual life.” 34 The uncertainty that is endemic to theology reflects the
close relationship of faith to hope in the New Testament. As Paul writes to
the Christians in Rome, “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes
for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with
patience” (Rom. 8:24–25). In empirical science, as in worldly discourse gen-
erally, uncertainty is always a negative, an indication that we have not yet
attained a full knowledge of whatever it is we are trying to understand. In
theology, as in the discourse of faith generally, uncertainty plays a different
and positive role, reminding us that certainty about God can never be the
product of our own thinking, because all things divine are unverfügbare, not
subject to our manipulation. Theological certainty is always a gift of grace,

32. Sonderegger, Systematic Theology, 1:68.
33. Sonderegger, Systematic Theology, 1:53.
34. Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest, reading for April 29.
always lying beyond our own devices and desires, not subject to our control—a gracious uncertainty.

And yet, as Chambers has expressed it, “we are certain in our uncertainty”—a statement that sounds to modern secular ears like either a patent contradiction or an exercise in circular reasoning. Acknowledging this consternation forthrightly, Barth takes up the challenge. Theology is by formal definition, he states, “the human logic of the divine Logos.” It is “science seeking the knowledge of the Word of God spoken in God’s work—science learning in the school of Holy Scripture, which witnesses to the Word of God.”35 The word science sounds jarring to us in this context, which is testimony to the near-total absorption of the word by the modern, anti-teleological understanding of science.36 Barth acknowledges the circularity of this theo-logic but argues that not every logical circle is vicious; some are circuli veritatis, “circles of truth,” or what we might call “virtuous” circles. Theology, he maintains—so long as it remains based on faith—is in fact the circulus veritatis Dei.37

6. Theological imagination belongs to the present age, the regnum gratiae, the era of our earthly pilgrimage, when we “see through a glass, darkly.” We will no longer need to imagine God in the world to come, when we shall see him “face to face.”

Theology, as we have seen, because it is based on faith, knows God indirectly, by hearing the testimony of the scriptural witnesses to the Word of God. Imagination, the mode in which we have that indirect knowledge in this world, has no place among the Last Things. Since faith is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), we need imagination now because we lack direct vision of the God we worship and seek to know.

The widespread modern suspicion of imagination, rooted in the misleading metaphysics inherited from the founders of modern science, has fostered naïve and distorted understandings of both science and religion. But it has become clear in recent years that both the natural sciences and Christian theology depend on the right use of imagination. That use is governed by paradigms, those concrete likenesses that seed the imagination, opening it to new discoveries by showing us what its object is like. The radical differences between these two enterprises indicate not that they are competing ways

35. Barth, Evangelical Theology, 49.
36. In Barth’s native German, Wissenschaft has retained more of the older, broader connotations that science has all but lost in modern English. In German usage today, all academic disciplines are called Wissenschaften.
37. Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. II/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 244–47.
of knowing the same reality, but that they both make use of paradigmatic imagination in their separate quests to know very different aspects of reality.

Theologians are (depending on one’s point of view) the daring or foolish pilgrims of the Spirit who, leaving behind the comfortable world of familiar ideas and common sense, venture forth, Bibles in hand and heart, in search of the Celestial City that one can approach only by means of a scripturally formed imagination. Like the natural scientist, theologians find orientation and guidance in the paradigms they employ along the way. The sources of their paradigms, the likenesses they discover in the scriptural witness, are open-ended like all paradigms, but never arbitrary. The temptation to indulge their own imaginations and fantasies always lies close at hand and can be restrained only by faithful adherence to the scriptural norm, which has been defined and disciplined by the long tradition of exegesis and articulated in doctrine, which codifies the “grammar” of Scripture. But 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.

Theological Explorations in Faithful Imagination

Normative Christian imagination is the employment of the human imagination in ways that remain faithful to the biblical paradigm. The following chapters are offered as examples of how one theologian has tried to carry out that vocation. As such, of course, they represent just a few of the myriad ways in which Christians might interpret their own tradition and the world around them through the eyes of faith. Their arrangement is not sequential or systematic but rather exploratory, seeking to demonstrate though a variety of examples how the theological followers of Jesus might practice their profession today.