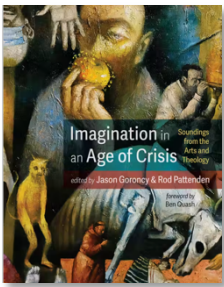


[Review] *Imagination in an Age of Crisis: Soundings from the Arts and Theology*, edited by Jason Goroncy and Rod Pattenden



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In his portion of the opening remarks, Rod Pattenden introduces the collection of essays, art pieces, and poems by revisiting theologian Rowan Williams's three modes of pursuing theology: celebratory, communicative, and critical. While the arts (read: imagination) have traditionally been used in the service of the celebratory mode as vehicles for worship, Pattenden asserts that the arts have an equally potent function through witnessing, communicating, and challenging the status quo. This challenge aligns with the critical mode of theological inquiry and is especially relevant in the post-colonial world of contemporary Australia, where the authors of the collection are from. Pattenden and Goroncy propose that the function of artistic expression can be "to thrust us into actual emergencies." Rather than merely describing what is, artists can help humanity find a new understanding of the past, reconsider contemporary realities against the backdrop of the global pandemic and envision a different future. In the editors' words, art can be "a point of departure rather than a point of arrival for a world that...needs new interpretations instead of better descriptions."

And so, we arrive at art as action. But as action, the editors and collection contributors recognize art's implication in the evils of past centuries, such as in crafting an iconography for the third Reich. The editors, in my opinion, spend an unreasonable number of introduction pages wallowing in the plethora of horrors that art has sustained and (arguably) caused. But finally, there is a glimmer of light as Goroncy's narration turns to hope as "a wholly unanticipated gift from a stranger...a promise that there is a love that is stronger than death." Hope is tied to paying attention, and paying attention means using the imagination to place oneself in the situation of another. Only this way, through imaginative play, is any collective meaning possible. Imagination fuels empathy and thwarts narrow ideological thinking. Imagination, interlaced with hope, is risky business. But so is any enterprise that puts its stakes on the unseen. Ultimately, it is indispensable. "The arts can unmoor us," Goroncy concludes. "Like the furnace wherein hope is forged, the arts can disrupt the worlds we assume and open up possibilities for futures we can hardly imagine."

The collection of essays that accounts for the bulk of the book begins with "Yolnu Scriptures and Hermeneutics" by Maratja Dhamarrandji with Jione Havea. Here, the authors underscore the importance of non-written works, including Dreamings (First Nations stories), images, and "culinary tutorials" as sacred texts that were overridden by written works during colonial conquest. The authors invite readers to recognize that oral and visual sacred works can be multifunctional, depending on the context (generational, environmental) they are embedded within.

Such indigenous artistic expressions are a central, enriching component of what the narrower definition of “sacred text” has assumed from a settler perspective.

Trevor Hart’s contemplation of “Why Imagination Matters” finds that imagination should not be counterposed against reason. Instead, it is a vital condition for reason and our core foundation for hope in the global scope. The third essay, “The Objects of Our Loyalties and the Power of Inanimate Objects” by Robin Jensen, takes the Old Testament story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as a contemporary case study for youthful resistance when faced with religious persecution, while Scott Kirkland’s “Hope at the End of History” is another case study, this one about nonviolent resistance at Parihaka (in Aotearoa) which demonstrates how communities can exist outside a colonial capitalist framework.

Several essays analyze music without words and words without music as sites of imaginative play in an era of crisis. For example, in her essay “If I Say...” Anne Elvey explores the relationship of poetry to ecological, social, and religious trauma, while in her paper “I am Making Everything New!” Jennifer Wakeling analyses wordless music as theological meaning-making in periods of loss and change. Imagination takes center stage in her discussion grounded on a framework developed by semiotician Charles Peirce. The study of imagination at the juncture of writing and activism continues with Adrienne Dengerink Chaplain’s review of the oeuvre of Chinese artist, writer, and activist Ai Weiwei, followed by Lyn McCredden’s essay “Imagination and the Sacred: Contemporary Australian Fiction of Hybridity.” Here, McCredden discusses new, secular ways of representing and addressing the sacred through vernacular language, literary techniques, and imagination.

The final third of the collection explores imagination in the dramatic arts and folk religions. Specifically, Katherine Rainger reviews the films of Rolf de Heer (director) and David Gulpilil (lead actor) as those exemplifying the First Nations perspective and questioning the narratives through which Australia tells its story. The collection’s editor, Jason Goroncy, assesses how Samuel Beckett’s plays address trauma and invite viewers to reinterpret assumptions about narrative and “interpretive agency” in his essay “My Past Has Thrown Me Out.”

In the last few essays, the one that stands out for the Christian reader is Amina McIntyre’s “Goin’ to the City’: African American Folk Ritual for Communal Healing.” In this thoughtful paper, McIntyre outlines ways in which black folk religious rites and rituals can heal and transform groups by emphasizing culture, memory, and imagination. Although historically the tendency has been to steer away from folk religions in an attempt to create a “purer” religious form, McIntyre proposes to integrate such practices to gain a richer understanding of the past and work toward a fuller vision of the future.

The collection of essays comprising *Imagination in an Age of Crisis* is augmented by poems by diverse poets and brief discussions of visual art works in the artists’ own words, interspersed between the heavier reading. In this manner, the monograph becomes not merely a collection of scholarly papers but soundings – the lifting up of vision and voice forming a thick tapestry of perspectives tied together by imagination on a backing of turmoil.

Because of the range of perspectives, art forms, and types of interactions with them and through them, it is hard to profile a reader who would benefit from reading this book cover to cover. However, many readers will find portions enlightening, educational, and inspirational. For instance, scholars interested in First Nations narratives from Australia and New Zealand will appreciate works foregrounding the soundings from local perspectives. Environmentalists and students of theology may benefit from exploring novel points of view, while

poets and visual artists will appreciate the dialogue with fellow creatives. The largest number of essays and compositions will be interesting to those exploring the cross section of imagination and glocal trauma, as the title of the book suggests.

As I read *Imagination...*, I often returned to the question the editors of this collection tacitly pose: what to make of a diminished thing? What can be done in the face of a global environmental crisis, enduring footprints of settler mentality, unhealed wounds, and an inability to move forward? While the authors gathered in these pages lean heavily into the harm that has been done, the underlying function of imagination seems to be an avenue toward the future. After all, if we cannot imagine a better one, we cannot reasonably expect to attain it. It is in this emphasis on hope that the collection rescues itself from becoming another self-flagellating, absurdist, deconstructed cacophony of learned helplessness. Instead, it presents itself as a multivocal hymn of empowered action, greased by imaginative thinking.