

The Christian Literary Imagination

Edited by

Michael Scott

Blackfriars Hall, Oxford

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Series in Philosophy of Religion



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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Philosophy of Religion

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024932865

ISBN: 978-1-64889-902-7

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Acknowledgments

The Christian Literary Imagination series, symposium, and conference were sponsored by the Future of the Humanities Project at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., USA, a collaboration with Champion Hall, Oxford, and the Las Casas Institute for Social Justice at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford.

The series, symposium, and conference were convened by Michael Scott, Blackfriars Hall, and Joseph Simmons, Champion Hall, and they were joined by Michael Collins and Kathryn Temple from Georgetown. All these events could not have occurred but for the support of colleagues in all three institutions: at Georgetown University, the President Dr John J. DeGioia, the Vice President, Global Affairs, Dr Thomas Banchoff; at Champion Hall, the Master Rev. Dr Nicholas Austin, S.J.; and at Blackfriars, the Prior, Rev. Robert Gay, O.P., the Regent, Rev Dr John O'Connor, O.P., and the Director of the Las Casas Institute, Rev. Dr Richard Finn, O.P.

Our thanks are extended to the administrators of the series, symposium, and conference at the three institutions, but particularly to Julia Murillo at Georgetown and Margaret Scott at Oxford-Scott Education Ltd. Our thanks also go to the Georgetown University Association of Retired Faculty and Staff for its financial support and to all the contributors and audiences who made possible the success of the series, symposium, and conference and this ensuing publication.

We dedicate this book to the memory of our friend and colleague John C. Hirsh. John died unexpectedly soon after he completed his chapter on the "Prioress' Tale." He was a generous man, a fine teacher, and a distinguished scholar. He will be missed.

Preface

This book emanates from a series of Zoom talks (2021-2022) culminating in a symposium and conference held in Oxford in December 2022. These talks concerned the creation and reception of literary works produced within a Christian cultural and ideological tradition.

Our speakers for the series, symposium, and conference were asked to identify authors whom they might like to consider in the context of what could be termed “the Christian literary imagination.” Within this brief, the coordinators of the series were asking whether the authors chosen by the contributors were deliberately developing a Christian argument in their work or whether they were just being influenced by the Christian culture within which they lived and wrote. As the choice of authors to be discussed lay with the invited contributors, the series, symposium, and conference were necessarily eclectic—as is this volume.

As editors, however, we have structured the book in chronological order, from ancient Britain to the present day. *The Christian Literary Imagination* is a companion volume to *Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark*, which we edited for Vernon Press in 2022.

Special thanks go to Rev. Dr. Joseph E. Simmons, S.J. for his involvement in the inception and development of the series, symposium, and conference and to Margaret Scott and JoEllen Collins for their many intangible contributions to our work.

Part I. Introductory

The Christian Literary Imagination

Michael Scott

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Abstract: This introductory chapter references the interpretations and examples of *The Christian Literary Imagination* in the diverse literary works being considered by the contributors. Differences in time, approach, methodology, genre, style, faith, no faith, theology, and philosophy co-mingle as the contributors help expand horizons in interpreting the work of a variety of writers. But the Christian narrative is not only a way of thinking of God as a Trinity of three person in one Being. In the beauty of creation, it points to the iconic figure of God Made Man, proclaiming love, peace, forgiveness, and sacrifice for the sake of others. *The Christian Literary Imagination* gives rise thereby to the multifaceted expression of the love of God, for God and of God's works, within the Christian tradition.

Keywords: reason; imagination; faith; mediation; forgiveness; love

Where does the idea of the Christian literary imagination originate? Many discussions, such as that in Lucy Beckett's highly informative *In the Light of Christ: Writings in the Western Tradition*, look back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's definition of the primary and secondary imagination in his *Biographia Literaria* (1815-17), where the poet writes of the primary imagination as being "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (205). He then describes the secondary imagination as "as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation" (205-6).

In this, Coleridge refers to his belief that forms of creativity in humans reflect the creativity of God, who as "the infinite I AM" is the creator of all the creative acts in which we engage. It is a religious statement, a statement of belief. But what is the relationship between something which is "reasoned" and something which is "believed" or in which we have faith? Later in the same work, Coleridge notes "that Religion passes out of the ken of Reason only where the eye of Reason has reached its own Horizon; and that Faith is then but its

continuation . . . to preserve the Soul steady and collected in its pure Act of inward Adoration to the great I AM, and to the filial WORD that re-affirmeth it from Eternity to Eternity, whose choral Echo is the Universe" (414).

The reasoning is one within faith and, as Joseph Simmons notes in his thesis on *Theology through a Literary Imagination*, it is taken up as a concept by such Christian writers as George Macdonald (1824-1905) and William Lynch (1908-1987) in the context of a "Christian" literary imagination. In this volume, Lynch's work is considered further by Mark Bosco in his chapter on Flannery O'Connor. But what is God, "the infinite I AM" and "the filial word that re-affirmeth belief"?

"I AM" is the name God gives himself in Exodus (3. 14), when, appearing to Moses, he says "I AM THAT I AM" and instructs the prophet and leader of the Jews to tell the people that it is I AM who has sent him to them. The filial "WORD" comes from the opening of St. John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (1.1). The "Word" is God incarnate, that is, God made man in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

God is, in Christian belief, a Trinity of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The concept of God comes from the human imagination, transmuted by Scripture and tradition into a belief beyond the "ken of reason," beyond, that is, a material understanding of proof. Traditional Christian faith emanates from the Jewish Scripture in which "God said let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1.26). But that is an imaginative concept in itself and can as easily be reversed, in rational thinking, to "man made God in his own image and likeness." Whichever way round, God is an imaginative (but not for the believer an imaginary) concept in which we may believe and about which philosophers debate. As we will see later in the book, certain writers, like Anselm of Canterbury (who is considered in Rachel Cresswell's chapter), have striven to prove the existence of God, in one way or another, by reason. But pure faith, it can be argued, is something beyond the rational.

In this respect, Michael Collins, the co-editor of the book, proposes in the Appendix that "a more helpful description of the Christian imagination may come from an atheist, John Paul Sartre." Drawing on Sartre's analysis of the reader's creative interaction with a text, he proposes that "the Christian reads the world as if it were a book, finding through the activation of the creative imagination what is waiting to be found, the presence of living God in the world He has created and sustains. Thus, the imagination, for Sartre, for the Christian, becomes not simply a means of reformulating ideas and images, however complex or transcendent, but a way of discovering what the creator (human or divine) has designed to be discovered in his creation."

At the center of the design for the Christian is Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, mediated through the New Testament and the teaching of the Church which he

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