



Guest Editorial

Jock Stein

One of my weightier Christmas presents last year was *The Road to Xanadu*, a book by J. L. Lowes about the poet Coleridge, and subtitled *A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*. 25 years ago Handsel Press published John McIntyre's Margaret Harris Lectures as *Faith, Theology and Imagination*. McIntyre was as aware as any Reformed scholar that imagination has often deserved its bad press, but in that book he seeks to give it a rightful place in human and theological endeavour.

I remember, listening to his New College lecture asides, which were often more memorable than the lectures themselves, how he commented that while religion should not properly be thought of as a sixth or seventh sense – since that slots God too neatly into a gap in human knowledge – it is very hard in practice to do without that kind of model of faith, which over the centuries has supported many believers. It is no accident that C. S. Lewis was drawn to Platonic idealism as he pictured heaven in his wonderful Narnia books.¹

McIntyre also paid tribute to George MacDonald, who said of the poet's craft, 'Is not [...] the Maker a less suitable name for him than the *Trouvère*, the *Finder*?'² – a thought that applies also no doubt to the theologian and the preacher. Imagination takes off from our individual and shared human experience, but as Einstein said of his discovery of relativity theory, what comes is a gift which you have to receive humbly – and Einstein says he found it hard to receive because he had to let go of the accustomed way of seeing things.³

I understand imagination as a natural gift which like all gifts can be offered to God and to others, but unlike gardening and golf (say) has a colossal scope to picture the good, the bad and the ugly in ways which can shock us and delight us as well as teach us and inspire us.

Film features in one of the papers in this edition of *Theology in Scotland*. In a film the imagination of the script-writer and director

join with the imagination of each viewer to take us all sorts of places – though some would say that books give more room for our imagination than do films, especially the sophisticated films of today. Yet films can do great service in other ways too – they can give us a view of different cultures today and in the past.

By the time of the Enlightenment, Scotland was entering its second great cultural shift in identity since the Middle Ages – described by Will Storrar as the secular vision of ‘a moral nation’, following the Catholic vision of ‘a free nation’ and the Reformed vision of ‘a godly nation’.⁴

When drafting this editorial I was on the train going south. A man was sitting in the corridor, a woollen hat on his head and three beautiful Alsatian dogs sprawled at his feet. When I tried to engage him in conversation, he was courteous but definite: ‘No thanks’. I was curious about these three dogs, but their keeper had nothing to say to me.

Unlike the man in the corridor, the historians can find plenty to say about the three ages with their different visions. But do they have the same providential Keeper, as Christians believe? And what might this divine Keeper wish us to know about them? Are they ‘beautiful’ in his sight? Are they even of the same species? If we disturb them, will they growl or wag their tails?

In prayer and study we have the privilege of dialogue with thinkers of the past as well as of our present hard-to-label age. We all create our own film sequences in our imagination. Put yourself for a moment in the well-crafted shoes of Allan Ramsay, who would ‘crack with kings’ on the brae of Edinburgh’s eighteenth-century High Street, and enjoy a brief conversation about people of high rank in the reflective prayer below (which is of course in a later and less formal idiom):

God, how do you remember Robert, the Bruce of Bannockburn? Is he alive, really alive, or just in your long memory? Did he positively unite Scotland, or was it just that they disliked the English more in those days? What would he say about our Referendum? Come to that, what is he thinking now about old Barbour giving him a hike onto horseback, half a century after

the battle?⁵ Or am I curious, God, about the wrong things – should I stick closer to theology?

God, is it OK if I say I'd like to meet Knox in heaven? Not to talk about Mary, but about music, and love, and ballads, homely things he enjoyed. To ask him about the great gulfs in our culture, between religion and spirituality, between Church as we know it and the Arts. To find out how he imagined Scotland.

And Carlyle? Or maybe Jane, his poor spouse. How did women see their culture? Would she have enjoyed a talk with Knox's young wife, or Bruce's Elizabeth, shut up in Windsor Castle? What does our story look like through the eyes of women and children?

God, great Keeper of our culture, help us celebrate what is good, look honestly at what we see around us and within us, resource and free our imagination, and seek whatever will grace and perhaps unite each human age: faith, and hope, and love.

Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Along with Dr Robin Hill's paper on "Film in Church: Education, Entertainment and Outreach", in this issue we also publish Dr Eirini Artemi's article "Gregory of Nazianzen: On Being a Theologian" and Mark MacLeod's extended study on "Recent Sacramental Developments in the Kirk".

Notes

- 1 E.g. the 'worlds within worlds' in the last chapter of *The Last Battle*.
- 2 The quotation is from MacDonald's essay, "The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture" (in a collection called *A Dish of Orts*, and now available online at www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9393). [A *trouvère*, in medieval northern French was, more accurately,

a poet-composer, from the Old French verb: *trover* – ‘to compose in verse’. MacDonald’s suggestion, however, is still of interest. – *Ed.*]

- 3 This comes in Einstein’s book *Out of My Later Years*.
- 4 William Storrar, *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1990).
- 5 None of the early sources have Bruce on horseback – Barbour was likely using a lot of imagination to punt the royal fame when he wrote about Bannockburn so much later on.