

Culture and imagination as battlegrounds

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Questions:

Do you recognise the cultural conflict zones outlined within your university?

Does the stress on imagination make sense?

How could any of these hopes be realised in practice?

Abstract: Culture and imagination are viewed as principal battleground for meaning, values and religious faith. The proposal is that we need to enlarge our horizons by moving from a personalist stress to a more overt cultural awareness in education. The Ignatian role for imagination needs equally to be enlarged to include the prophetic functions recognised by contemporary thinkers. In this light how can Jesuit universities be creatively Ignatian for our post-modern situations?

Resume: In order to answer the crisis of identity of universities today, this paper highlights the fields of culture and imagination as conflictual. St Ignatius was concerned to nourish faith's struggle against individual and cultural deceptions. We need to recognise the powerful presence of culture as "hidden assumptions" and not simply as explicit values. Similarly, while acknowledging the centrality of visual imagination in Ignatian spirituality, we can learn from such thinkers as Newman, Ricoeur and William Lynch and in this way see imagination as both prophetic and central for our ministry of transformation of individuals, of institutions and of cultures. In short Jesuit higher education can deepen the Ignatian intuitions concerning imagination in the light of a newer anthropology of this human faculty of possibility. In this way they could become more wisely counter-cultural in an academic world where pragmatism and economic forces can sometimes undermine our best hopes.
Setting the scene

In recent decades, many commentators on university education have diagnosed a serious crisis of identity. On grand occasions such as graduations, eloquent speeches are made more or less in the tradition of Newman: universities are praised as vehicles of personal formation and not just of professional training. But apart from these moments of special rhetoric, universities seem increasingly unsure of their role in contemporary culture. Universities with a specifically Catholic tradition appear to be equally worried about questions of direction, identity and of how to embody their faith commitment. Some twelve years ago George Marsden, a historian at Notre Dame University, opened his study of the possibilities for Christian education with these provocative words: "Contemporary university culture is hollow at its core. Not only does it lack a spiritual center, but it is also without any

real alternative... ‘Wisdom’ is hardly a term one thinks of in connection with such studies, nor with our system of higher education generally”.¹ His comments are in harmony with a constant complaint voiced in recent years that Catholic universities can easily become “acculturated” in a negative sense of seduced by the dominant academic culture around them.² Against this large background, these few pages point towards a more specific and hopeful possibility that suggests a rereading of the Ignatian tradition in relation to culture and imagination.

Introducing the themes

For some months in 1948 Ludwig Wittgenstein lived alone in a remote cottage on the west coast of Ireland, a place that stimulated him to new clarities in his thinking. For years he had been pondering about perception in art, ethics and religion, zones that had seemed excluded from his earlier writings on logic. Now in Ireland he started to pose questions to himself about musical appreciation. Some people seem “aspect-blind” to music or art or humour or religion. In his notebook he wrote “What would a person who is blind towards these aspects be lacking?” and he replies “It is not absurd to answer: the power of imagination”. He went on to suggest that individual imagination will need to be nourished within a larger context called “culture” or belonging to a “tradition”.³ As often with Wittgenstein these are fragmentary hints but valuable ones. They give us three zones that seem crucial for reflecting on university education today from a Christian perspective: the Ignatian tradition (where we nourish faith), culture (where we mediate and incarnate faith) and imagination (a crucial human capacity that Christian education transforms).

There has been an avalanche of reflection on the changing cultural contexts for faith and education today. Some of this focuses on culture with a capital C, in the sense of artistic or intellectual frontiers. A more anthropological approach prefers to examine what is happening “on the street”, in the hidden assumptions that people live – a zone we could call

culture with a small “c”. Obviously the two levels are connected: what happens in the self-conscious world of the superstructure of ideas often has an indirect impact on the more tacit world of the infrastructure.

In these few pages I want I want to focus on the power of images and imagination in education. Historically Jesuits have been more inclined to deal with high culture and with imagination in its artistic or literary forms. From St Ignatius they have learned to value especially the visualising power of imagination in prayer. But today’s postmodern and pluralist situation calls us to revisit and update that Ignatian inheritance. Just as culture is more than its privileged expressions, so imagination today is seen as more than the visual or the artistic.

What does one think of immediately when the word “imagination” turns up? Answers will differ greatly. Something imaginary and therefore a fantasy or an illusion? That is too negative. Someone who is creative, intuitive, inventive? True but too special and exclusive. Something to do with visual images? True, but not the whole story.

We can start from a fascinating line of the poet Emily Dickinson: “The possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination”. In her inimitable way she invites us to understand imagination as able to glimpse and grasp possibilities, or as her metaphor implies, a gradually explosive power of new perception. In this light imagination has a key role in how we experience the world, interpreting it and responding to it. It involves an alternative form of rationality, or better a holistic rationality, larger in its scope than the Enlightenment model. It is an area of pre-conceptual sensibility that shapes our horizons and worldviews. Thus we can begin to see its crucial role for religious faith and for religious education.

The approach of this short paper sees culture and imagination as key battlegrounds for meaning, values, and in particular for religious faith. The proposal is that we need to ponder two enlargements of our horizons: moving from personalist to cultural model of education,

and from a visualizing to a prophetic understanding of imagination. In order to establish this mini-thesis we will call various expert witnesses to give evidence in support of this case.

Culture as concealed conflict

A first group of witnesses underline the concealed and conflictual nature of culture as well as the central role of culture both for education and faith. Michael Warren, a New York theologian with a background in youth ministry, has written that “culture is the greatest and most overlooked educational influence in most lives”.⁴ He insists that the cultural space around us, which inevitably enters our educational institutions, is far from neutral. Hence religious meaning cannot be communicated today without a spirit of critique and without building communities of resistance to the dominant values. In this spirit Warren asks young people a provocative question: who is imaging your life for you?

On what level does this cultural influence happen? A well-known business consultant offers a challenging perspective. Edgar Schein tells the leaders of organisations that if they want to understand the cultural factors at work in their world, they need to probe deeper than is usually envisaged. He proposes that there are three levels of culture: the level of visible “structures and processes”; the level of “espoused beliefs and values”, and a third level of “underlying assumptions”, where people’s feelings and unstated perceptions of what is “taken-for-granted” have great influence.⁵ Thus Schein highlights the importance of what Charles Taylor would call the “social imaginary”, which involves an “inarticulate understanding of our whole situation”.⁶ In similar fashion Bernard Lonergan stressed that empirical culture is a matter of meanings and values inherent or underlying a whole way of life.⁷ All of these authors push us towards the realisation that if culture is nine-tenths invisible, its hidden presence shapes the dispositions and horizons of our pupils and indeed of ourselves as educators. The fine mission statements of universities remain, inevitably, on the level of “espoused values” but the other level of unrecognised assumptions can in fact be the

real “driver” of an institution. Ultimately it is this tacit level of culture that forms our collective imagination of the real, and in this sense the urgency of learning skills of cultural discernment is clear for all to see. Indeed I would argue that the valid concern with a globalised world cannot remain merely sociological or economic in focus, but should open to cultural and imaginative themes.

With specific reference to education an important voice to hear is that of the educational psychologist Jerome Bruner, especially in his book *The Culture of Education*. In his view culture “provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conception of ourselves and our powers”.⁸ (p. x) Once we realise that that education is more than “explicitness” of information, we run into the challenge of how to educate people towards collective and individual roots within the complex currents of a pluralist culture. Bruner summarises his vision as follows: “A system of education must help those growing up in a culture find an identity within that culture. Without it, they stumble in their effort after meaning. It is only in the narrative mode that one can construct an identity and find a place in one’s culture”.⁹ In Bruner’s view the formation of a stable identity in a complex cultural context requires two fundamentals: “intersubjectivity” and narrative enactment. Perhaps these two concepts could be translated for our Jesuit context as uniting the witness of a relational ethos together with a meditative initiation into the Christ story. In Bruner’s words, “school is a culture, not just a preparation for it” and therefore the more interpersonal and imaginative wavelength of narrative “can help students understand the stories they construct about their worlds”.¹⁰ Like many other contemporary thinkers, including Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor or Paul Ricoeur, he highlights narrativity rather than a narrow rationality as our key way of developing anchors of significance (that can include religious faith).

A final witness concerning culture offers us a note of caution. According to a recent article by Kathryn Tanner, Christians can be tempted either to Tillichian over-acceptance or Barthian over-rejection of the surrounding culture. Or else we can remain with vague aspirations, advocating either general resistance to the dominant values or calling for the transformation of the world. According to Tanner the key issue is “judging the practices of the wider society” in the light of the gospel, and this cannot be achieved without interdisciplinary discernment of the complexities around us and also of our own “often messy, ambiguous, and porous” efforts to live in a Christian way.¹¹

By way of summary: some of these newer insights on culture challenge us to be less innocent about our power to influence individuals through education. If “context conditions consciousness”, as Marxists used to say, then a merely personalist focus in spirituality or in education can prove inadequate for our Christian hopes.

Imagination as central

Just like “culture”, “imagination” can be a problematic term. In everyday usage we often tend to use the word with a pejorative slant, “you’re only imagining it”, or “it’s mere imagination”. That little word “mere” is dangerously dismissive and appears in various guises, as in “a mere symbol”. But the “mere” reaction usually comes from a cramped sense of reality and can imprison us there. The American poet Wallace Stevens, a great celebrant of the imagination, and one whose long explorations brought him to Catholicism at the end, once quipped: realism is a very limited way of meeting reality.

On the importance of imagination for religion our first witness can be another poet. T. S. Eliot, in a radio talk of 1945 located the crisis of faith principally on the level of imagination rather than as a question of doctrines. In his words “the trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did”.¹² It is on this level of

feeling or sensibility or imagination that we are invited to recognise the battleground of our culture. Imagination is where the quality of our lives is shaped and where we shape our vision of everything. Imagination is the location both of our crisis and of our potential healing. It is crucial for the quality of our seeing, because it can save us from superficiality and torpor and awaken us to larger hopes and possibilities.

For our second witness on imagination we go back to the nineteenth century. John Henry Newman, himself a great educationalist (and shortly to be beatified), was a prophetic figure in recognising the central role of imagination in the mediation of faith. His most famous statement in this respect was that “the heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination”.¹³ In other words if God does not become “real” to the imagination, faith can remain dangerously unexistential or “notional”. For him the presence of imagination guaranteed a participatory quality to knowing, where the person was necessarily involved, not simply detached. Imagination, in his view, could foster an experience of personal synthesis, linking intellect and heart, doctrine and feelings. Without imagination education can never hope to reach, challenge or change values, or to influence the field of action.

Our third witness is the philosopher Paul Ricoeur who offered many rich reflections on imagination – in the context of his development of a critical hermeneutics. He sees it as one of our key human gifts and in particular as a threshold towards embracing new possibilities, including the possibility of God and faith. Each life is a story always evolving, and it is through imagination that we steer our existential openness, through narratives of the past or projected futures. Echoing Newman, but going beyond him in terms of theoretical sophistication, Ricoeur holds that imagination is our principal way of transfiguring experience.

In an essay entitled “L’imagination dans le discours et dans l’action”, Ricoeur interprets imagination from the point of view of metaphor or semantic innovation, and hence as a faculty of human possibility. A metaphor is like a spark that ignites new meaning and that extends our rationality. But imagination is more than linguistic play. It is a vehicle of potential ethical transformation, including redemption from the isolated ego and an entry into the horizon of others. Thus it becomes a necessary threshold of social awareness, and ultimately a vital dimension of religion. Can imagination spur us towards action? Ricoeur’s answer is strong and positive: imagination has “a projective function” and there can be “no action without imagination”.¹⁴

In this spirit Ricoeur offered some fascinating hints on spirituality and discernment. Without self-transcendence imagination can remain aesthetic and not reach its potential as a source of religious conversion. The inner imaginative adventure of great poetry, he argued, is not invalid in itself but it is “not committed” to further hopes. For imagination to serve “religious experience”, Ricoeur suggests three conditions: 1) “opening an element of commitment”, 2) “belonging to a certain community”, and 3) connecting to a social or ethical stance. He concludes that “there is an element of promise and commitment in the religious attitude which is different from the pure play through imagination” that much poetry offers.¹⁵ Thus religious imagination for Ricoeur invites us beyond aesthetic pleasure into trusting a promise, a revelation, a call. As such it is more likely to bring prophetic rupture than to reaffirm our existing horizons. All this is close to the Ignatian logic of the Spiritual Exercises, but of course Ricoeur’s philosophy of imagination is more explicit and ambitious than Ignatius, taking us beyond the visual into the prophetic.

Our fourth and final witness for the importance of attending to imagination in education and in theology is less known. I want to draw on some ideas from Fr William Lynch, a New York Jesuit who died in 1987 and who published several stimulating studies of

imagination. In an early book entitled *The Image Industries*, he discerned that “the imaginative life of society” was being increasingly shaped by the new mass media, and that a precious zone of human freedom could easily be imprisoned and flattened by these “techniques for the fixation of imagination”.¹⁶ More positively he proposed that the artist and the theologian share a concern to set “free the imagination and with it the whole human personality”.¹⁷ Lynch saw imagination as incarnational: it is our ordinary way shaping our lives, and hence the scene of our struggle to live by images that are worthy of us and of God. Imagination becomes recognised as a form of thought, indeed the natural and central vehicle of cognition for most people most of the time. In Lynch’s words “faith is a form of imagining and experiencing the world”.¹⁸ Moreover Christ is “the creator and the actuality behind a new imagination”, an imagination that subverts all our previous images of life.¹⁹ And through Christ as Lord of the imagination we are invited “literally to imagine things with God”.²⁰ In what Lynch called the transformation of our images we have a quick summary of the fruits of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and also a goal of Jesuit education.

Relevance for universities today

The application of these insights to higher education is both urgent and difficult. In the complex field called culture a three-fold distinction can summarise what was already seen: culture as conscious creativity; as unconscious codes; and as hidden conflict.²¹ Traditionally universities have engaged in a conscious study and creative shaping of human meaning. But, today the anthropological or “lived” version of culture is the one that has most influence on people’s way of imagining the meaning and goal of existence. The third interpretation highlights culture’s frequent collusion with the “rulers of this world”. Perhaps this analysis of culture as a deep battlefield is of particular relevance for religious-based universities. The scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann speaks of the shadow of an antihuman empire over today’s lived culture, showing itself in “technological individualism”

and “unbridled corporate power”. In his judgement, there “are times when church and cultural context can live in some kind of mutuality; but this is not one of those times, for gospel rootage requires resistance” to such dehumanising influences.²² This is a valid and important perspective, but the wisdom of Ignatian discernment is needed here if we are to avoid excessive negativity and blanket judgements.

What emerges from consulting, even briefly, such a series of experts is a reminder of the complexity of cultural contexts for education today and also a call to revisit the Ignatian stress on imagination in the light of more ambitious theories available to us. If culture is more multifaceted and conflictual than is often realised, at the heart of that conflict lies human imagination. The struggle of culture is not just of explicit meaning and values, but more hiddenly a clash of images – rather like the contrast of images proposed by St. Ignatius in his meditation on the Two Standards. The Spiritual Exercises offer a scaffolding for readiness for various transformations of our imagination through the grace of God, and these conversions involve struggle. In this spirit we can re-read our contemporary culture, seeing it as often blocked from faith not on the level of creed or doctrine but rather in the ante-chambers of faith, on the level of disposition and imagination. But if imagination is the area of vulnerability or “dis-affection” from faith, imagination can also be the zone of healing for new possibilities.

My underlying question here has been how Jesuit universities can be faithful to Ignatius’ double intuition concerning imagination as a mediator of faith and faith as a struggle against cultural deceptions. How can they be creatively Ignatian for our postmodern culture? How can they find the courage to be different or counter-cultural in an academic world where pragmatism and economic forces have much influence and can easily undermine our best hopes? My suggestion has been that an important key lies in the direction of a more nuanced reading of the complexities of culture, realising also that at the core of culture lies a

battle of human imagination. In short Jesuit higher education is invited to deepen the Ignatian intuitions on imagination in the light of a newer anthropology of this human capacity.

¹ George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, New York, 1997, p. 3.

² A more detailed discussion of these questions can be found in my article “University and Culture: towards a retrieval of humanism”, *Gregorianum* 85 (2004), 149-171.

³ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: the duty of genius*, New York, 1990, pp. 531-533.

⁴ Michael Warren, *At This Time in This Place: the Spirit embodied in the local assembly*, Harrisburg, 1999, p. 1.

⁵ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Third Edition, San Francisco, 2004, p. 26.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge Mass., 2007, p. 173.

⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, Toronto, 1974, p. 183.

⁸ Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, Cambridge Mass., 1996, p. x.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹¹ Kathryn Tanner, “Shifts in Theology of the last quarter century”, *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), 39-44. Quotations from 43-44.

¹² T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, London, 1957, p. 25.

¹³ J. H. Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*, London, 1909, p. 92.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action: essais d'herméneutique*, Paris, 1986, p. 224.

¹⁵ *A Ricoeur Reader*, ed. Mario Valdès, Toronto, 1991, p. 455.

¹⁶ William J. Lynch, *The Image Industries*, London, 1960, pp. 10, 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁸ William F. Lynch, *Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination*, Notre Dame, 1973, p. 5.

¹⁹ Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination*, New York, 1960, p. xiv.

²⁰ Lynch, *Christ and Prometheus: A New Image of the Secular*, Notre Dame, 1970, p. 23.

²¹ This paragraph echoes a section of my article listed in note 2 above.

²² Walter Brueggemann, “Always in the Shadow of Empire”, in M. L. Budde and R. W. Brimlow, eds., *The Church as Counterculture*, Albany, 2000, p. 39.