

**Engaging Imagination:
An Introduction to the Inaugural Issue of Practical Matters**

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The inaugural issue of *Practical Matters* on the theme of “Imagination” began with a seemingly simple statement in our call for submissions: “Without imagination, human beings could neither come to know their world as it is nor consider possibilities for the future.”

Our statement grew, in part, out of reflection upon contributions to the Consultation on Imagination in Practical Theology and Religious Practices hosted at Emory University in October 2007 (described in more detail in the Reviews section of this issue). During the Consultation, students and faculty considered the theme of imagination within their own work, including fields in theology and religious studies such as homiletics, liturgical studies, ethics, systematic theology, theological aesthetics, historical studies, and anthropology and sociology of religion. Their contributions pointed to ways in which religion offers interpretations of our experience of the world as well as shapes our visions of what the world might become. In doing so, our religious traditions foster our habits of imagining the world and its possibilities. In turn, imagination influences religion as we play with the images and narratives offered by our traditions in efforts to understand our experience.

Hoping to build upon those conversations about imagination, we sent out a call for submissions structured by three sub-themes. The first, “Understanding Imagination,” focuses on defining imagination and its relationship to similar concepts such as creativity and fantasy as well as describing various types of imagination (for example, theological, moral, or political imagination). “Imagining Transformation” centers upon the role of imagination in transforming our world from

what it is toward what we believe it ought to be, particularly insofar as religion shapes our visions of transformation. Finally, the third sub-theme, “Engaging Practices of Imagination,” concerns experiences of imagination and how those experiences shape what we do in religious contexts. These sub-themes often overlap and are somewhat arbitrary; many of the responses to the call connect to all three sub-themes. Nevertheless, the sub-themes offer an overall organizing structure for this issue of *Practical Matters*, a structure connected to three video features that the editorial staff composed.

The first feature corresponds primarily to the sub-theme of “Understanding Imagination.” In “A Song to Sing, a Life to Live,” Professor Emeritus of Theology and Worship at Emory University Don Saliers discusses with his daughter, singer-songwriter Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls, the role imagination, particularly through music, plays in connecting Saturday nights in smoky bars to Sunday mornings in incense-filled sanctuaries. Lance Pape’s article, “Narrating Congregational Life,” draws similar connections. In his reflections on a sermon that related the message of John the Baptist to the work of a particular church in a juvenile detention center, Pape demonstrates the need for preaching to invite congregations to imagine their own lives as part of God’s ongoing work in the world. The conversation between Saliers and Saliers also touches on connections between imagination and embodiment, which appear again in Michelle Voss Roberts’s article. In “Neither *Bhukti* nor *Mukti*,” she explores Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* in light of the *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu*, a sixteenth-century text that was foundational for the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement in Bengal. Through a comparative study of specific Christian and Hindu aesthetic practices, she examines relationships between imagination and embodiment for the development of what Hans Urs von Balthasar has called a “new sensorium” for experiencing the divine. Finally, the interview with Don and Emily Saliers addresses specific practices, such as inter-generational hymn singing, for fostering vivid and expansive imaginations among participants in religious communities. Frank Rogers’s article, entitled “Learning and Living the Story,” similarly discusses practices that cultivate religious imagination. Rogers describes a play created and performed by church youth that intertwined biblical narratives with stories from African-American history and the biographies of specific congregants. He draws on this play to construct a model of narrative pedagogy where learners identify and engage communal narratives that promote the religious imaginations of their communities.

As an entrée to our second theme, “Imagination Transformation,” we offer a second video feature, “Imagination and Multireligious Cooperation,” an interview with Dr. William Vendley, the Secretary General of Religions for Peace. In this conversation, we explore the role of imagination in multireligious cooperation and social change. An important theme Vendley discusses is the ability of religious communities to make the imaginative shift from using the sectarian “primary language” of faith to developing a public “secondary language” for discussing issues of common concern such as armed conflict, poverty, and HIV/AIDS. Addressing this theme from a different perspective, Arthi Devarajan and Harshita Mruthinti Kamath analyze the re-imagining of *The Nut-*

cracker in classical Indian dance. Together, the authors and Vendley explore what happens when communities imaginatively bridge gaps across cultures and readapt religious resources for the sake of art or other forms of human welfare. Another interesting conversation involves imagination and otherness. In his work, Vendley helps diverse religious communities to confront otherness and to find commonalities through imaginative, impactful acts. In her article, Sandra Selby discusses using imagination rooted in sacred stories and liturgy to confront otherness of a different kind—environmental otherness here exemplified by the strange mystery of Antarctica.

In the final feature, which addresses the theme “Engaging Practices of Imagination,” we enter the world of “Making a Mandala,” which follows the Tibetan Buddhist monks of Drepung Loseling Monastery in Atlanta, Georgia as they carry out the week-long ritual of creating a sand mandala. Our imaginations are stirred as we ponder how and why this ancient practice forms and transforms the monks and what we come to know in watching it. In “Luther’s Wedding,” Barry Stephenson immerses us in another world-making practice, this time a German community recovering and rebuilding its convivial culture through a festival that evokes imagination. Both scholarly works explore transformative, communal practices that enable fresh visioning and enacting of the world. In addition, contributions to this issue by Steven Gelberg and Heather Stolz bring insight to individual practices of imagination that function similarly. Gelberg’s photo essay, “The Camera Lens as Third-Eye,” examines the use of the camera for focusing his own vision of the world around him. A former Hindu monk, Gelberg has turned to photography as a practice that requires him to look for a sense of spirit within the subjects of his photos. A striking pairing, Gelberg’s photographs differ from mandalas made by Tibetan Buddhist monks in both form and philosophy, but placing these two pieces in conversation illumines how religious practices shape our visions of the world and its possibilities. In contrast to Gelberg and the monks from Drepung Loseling Monastery, Stoltz’s chosen artistic medium is the quilt. In her essay, “Re-imagining Eve,” she describes her work on two quilts that retell the Genesis creation stories. In doing so, she not only re-imagines Eve; she also re-imagines the ancient Jewish practice of midrash in terms of her work with thread and fabric. Stoltz’s careful description of her artistic process further elucidates how and why particular practices form and transform their practitioners and their imaginations.

Each of the three features share links with submissions throughout the issue. The articles discussing imagination and pedagogy in the *Teaching Matters* section, however, carry on a discussion internal to themselves. Two interesting conversation partners are Elizabeth Shively and William Barnard, who reflect on pedagogies involving narrative, performance, and imagination. While Shively discusses pedagogy that helps learners experience biblical narratives through storytelling and acting, Barnard describes learning through performance in an undergraduate anthropology of religion course. His students work in groups to write and perform primordial myths, which allow students to integrate experiential learning with course discussions and theoretical readings. Common to these authors is the belief that narrative and performance help spark the imagination of learners. Another common theme among the articles in *Teaching Matters* is the connection

between body and epistemology, which all of these authors address, especially Gretchen Wegner and Robyn Neville. Wegner analyzes improvisation as a mode of inquiry and argues for a re-envisioning of education, based on the recognition that imagination and the body are integral to learning and knowing. Neville offers a similar argument, although she bases her reflections upon her analysis of differences in how medieval monastic communities conceptualized imagination and how they actually practiced imagination. She suggests that reading historical texts in ways that encourage seminary students to experiment with the imaginative practices used by medieval monastic communities, exemplified in the *Rule* of St. Benedict, gives them a more robust, embodied sense of their Christian heritage. Discussing a range of imaginative pedagogies, the four authors contributing to *Teaching Matters* offer ways to provoke the imagination of learners, making education more creative, embodied, and experiential.

So in this first issue of *Practical Matters*, we consider imagination as lived experience, presented here not only in word but also in image and sound. We encourage you to enter this issue through the video features, but also to continue your exploration with the expectation that with every mouse click, you will find something new and surprising. We welcome any contributions, recommendations, or comments from viewers (Courtney Goto at cgoto@emory.edu or Amy Levad at alevad@emory.edu).