Thoughts on imagination, Plato, and Jamie Smith's "Desiring the Kingdom," apologetics, and my second book.

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Hey Everyone,

This is going to mark a departure for me. I'm actually going to start treating my website as a blog, someplace where I can think out loud about the stuff I'm working through (rather than just a place to post additions to the Movie Night Kit). So bear with me.

I want my second book (after *Popologetics*) to be about the Christian use of the imagination, specifically, what does an authentic Christian use of the imagination look/feel/sound like when used to create popular culture. So the first book is on how to interpret non-Christian popular culture apologetically (hence the title *Popologetics*); the second book would/will be reflections on how to creating an authentic Christian popular culture -- that is, how to creation a popular culture that would reflect the Christian imagination, something that would invite in non-Christians, stir up desires they didn't even know they had, challenge unbelief, and all the while not slipping into kitsch or propaganda. *That's* what I'd like my second book to be about. And a bunch of it is already written, too.

But there's a catch. I need to know what the hell I'm talking about when I use the term "imagination." Everybody has a slightly different notion, and not all of them are compatible. For instance, I've been reading through a fairly brilliant and dense book by the postmodern theorist Richard Kearney called *The Wake of Imagination* in which he's laying out a history of the idea. And as I'm reading, I'm finding that a lot of the criticisms about imagination (or popular culture, for that matter) that I hear from Christians stem ultimately from Plato. Plato famously distrusted the imagination. Thought it led us astray from the True and Good by its appeal to the senses (rather than pure ideas), it didn't teach us anything, so it was just decorative but not substantive, and so on. I hear some of these ideas in writers like Ken Myers who have had a huge influence on Christians (especially Evangelicals). So I know I have to tread very carefully and lay out *exactly* what I mean when I talk about the imagination.

I've taught on the imagination before, but it always felt to me as if I were shooting from the hip. So I'm doing some reading on the topic in Kearney, in Leland Ryken's collection of essays by thinking Christians called *The Christian Imagination*, and other folks. One of the books that was suggested to me was a book by Calvin College philosopher James K. A. Smith called *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation.* It's a pretty fascinating and provoking little (240 pp) book. Two things immediately attracted my attention: 1. Smith believes that worldview talk should be left behind because it obscures the *real* center of our humanness, which isn't beliefs, but *desires.* He says we're not believing animals as much as loving animals. And 2. the role imagination plays in this is crucial. It is the imagination that shapes desire, that guides us toward visions of human flourishing as this or that. I think these insights are right on (or spot on, as my British friends would say). And I think these insights have profound implications for the way we do apologetics.

Apologetics should never, in my opinion, simply be about "the facts" or "arguments," as if we could neutrally pull together a case for belief without actually engaging the constitutive bias of unbelief (see Romans 1:18 ff.). We ain't neutral thinkers, but committed scoundrels who shy away from the God of grace, and apologetics must take that into account (hence my admiration for Van Til). That's an argument I make in chapter 3 of the forthcoming book. But Smith's point goes farther. He believes that dealing with bias in belief isn't enough, but that we need to deal also with imagination, and particularly the way imagination has become inscribed into our very practices (what he calls ritual or worship). Everybody worships by default, and the direction of that worship can be read off of our practices (a trip to the mall is a worshipful experience, as is an NFL game, to take two of his

examples). And our practices shape our imagination; they shape our desires and our visions of human flourishing largely unconsciously. So worldview talk simply over-intellectualizes what is largely a non-intellectual process (he calls it "conceptualism").

My response is that he's partly right. Apologetics should integrate the imagination more fully than it does at present. That's why I want my second book to be about the genuine uses of imagionation by Christians who can create popular art (not "pop art," but art that reaches people in their everyday world). And I think imagination is the key. Imagination is the source of cultural resistance (the ability to see the world *as different,* and to act upon that).

But I have to demur when he boils it all down to practices that definitely *shape* imagination. That formulation is a little to neat. Practice x = imaginative vision/worship y. Imagination never works that cleanly; it is not some tame animal that we can train to perform as we wish. One look at the "conversion" discourses of fans (who are, if nothing, in the grip of imagination) shows otherwise. You don't hear stories of training desire, of shaping imagination. Rather, you hear stories of imaginative texts sneaking up on them and taking them down like a pack of wild dogs. "A friend said I should watch this show, and I did, and it caught me, and I was hooked." In other words, there is an *addictive* quality when dealing with the imagination (and this may be partly why imagination scares some Christians so). You don't shape imagination: it shapes you. And that is a process that blows this way and that, like the wind, like the Holy Spirit (John 3:8). Notice that I did NOT just say that the imagination was the Holy Spirit. But I do think that the Spirit can speak *through* the imagination in ways that rational argumentation sometimes cannot. There is a free, unpredictable, addictive quality to imagination that, to my mind, makes it slippery and not prone to the type of control that Smith envisages (that if we just live monastically and worship a lot, we'll be more Christian in our desires and imaginations). Not that I'm against Christian practice, discipline or worship. I'm just not sure that it will do all that he thinks it should.

An alternative strategy would recognize the importance of building enticing homes for the imagination, fictional worlds that *capture* the imagination (and so engage the addictive quality of the imagination). In other words, if the imagination is as I say it is, it is imperative that we create Christian popular culture that doesn't suck. I think much of the struggle the Church has had in post-Christian Europe and America boils down to this: Christians don't understand the imagination, and so they create kitsch and propaganda-led imaginative worlds that no one but Christians are interested in visiting, much less living there.

The other thing that I think Smith gets wrong is this: If it all boils down to embodied practice, and rational discourse only glances off of it like a nerf pellet off of titanium armour, then what is the point of apologetics at all? Smith mentions apologetics *once* in his book, and then says nothing about what a cultural apologetic would look like, how you would do it. I'm not ready to give up on apologetics. I think that rational discourse that engages unbelief still holds promise, but only if it strives to interweave imaginative texts and practices into its methods. What exactly that would look like is something I've only grazed the surface of. At the very least, it would mean engaging popular culture as part of the apologetical dialogue. But what more? It's something I still have to think on.

So that's what's been rattling around in my brain for the past couple of months. Sorry if it's been a tl;dr experience for you. But if you've made it this far, I'd love to hear your reactions.

Peace,

Ted

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