Mennonites
& The Artistic Imagination

Presented by
Margaret Loewen Reimer

Winter Lectures 1998

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The 1998
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Mennonites and the Artistic Imagination

by

Margaret Loewen Reimer

Canadian Mennonite Bible College
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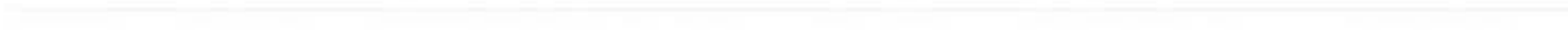

Lecture One

Graven Images

(Readings: Isaiah 45:9-13; I John 1:1-4)

In 1984, a film crew came to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to make the movie, *Witness*. (You remember the movie: Amish boy witnesses murder; Harrison Ford plays a Philadelphia cop who takes refuge in Amish community.) This invasion of Hollywood, both literal and artistic, caused an uproar among Mennonites. Local newspapers fed the feud with accounts of how Paramount Pictures had bribed the Amish for use of their farms, entered homes on false pretences and how the government of Pennsylvania had betrayed its vulnerable citizens. A Mennonite couple came under fire for renting their farm to the film company and the owner of the local Zimmerman general store evoked the wrath of his customers by letting several scenes be shot there.

The passionate debate continued in the *Gospel Herald*, the Mennonite Church magazine. The most vehement attackers of Hollywood's "exploitation" of the Amish were academics and "experts" on the Amish who themselves have brought considerable publicity to the Amish through their books, documentary films, and collections of photographs. One of these experts defended himself by saying that documentaries serve "historic and instructional purposes" whereas a Hollywood movie wants the freedom "to alter reality in any way that will entertain with maximum profit."

Jan Rubes, a Canadian who played the role of the Amish

father in *Witness*, said that the protests didn't come from the Amish community, but "from spokesmen for the Amish and professors . . . who write books about the Amish and exploit them more than anybody" (CBC's *Morningside,* Feb. 15, 1985). Rubes, a former opera singer, attended an Amish church service and wrote down some of the music (chants) that became the basis of the score. When the movie came out I asked John Ruth, a leading historian, story-teller and bishop among the Swiss Mennonites, what he thought. He told me he absolutely refused to see the movie at all. I don't know which was most offended—the storyteller or the bishop.

I found the whole debate extremely interesting and I've often thought about it in relation to Mennonites and the arts. Are some people or subjects off-limits to the arts? Who gets to tell the story? Which story? Personally, I found *Witness* a fascinating movie—it was in some ways a parable about the controversy which surrounded it. It conveyed the unresolvable tensions between an enclosed, pacifist community and the outside world, between the overt violence of American society and the unspoken coercion of communal conformity, of *Ordnung*. And it tried to portray the Amish as human beings, unlike the stifling stereotypes of most of our own "documentary" efforts.

We know that the Amish, like the rest of us, can't keep out the world or the arts. We live right in the middle of contemporary culture and, more important, it lives within us. I believe that our lives and our faith are fair game, are open to scrutiny, whether by Hollywood or by more serious artists. But it's difficult for us to allow others to handle our sacred images, especially because we are so uneasy about touching them ourselves.

The topic I was given for these lectures is "Mennonites and the artistic imagination." For me, this audacious topic is a marvellous opportunity to draw together and attempt to harmonize some of the thinking and writing I have done over the years.

So what will we be talking about? Not primarily the "Mennonite imagination" (is there such a thing?) or even Mennonites and the arts, although this will surely enter in. I want to explore with you what it means to imagine, what language we use to convey the truths of the imagination, and what imaginative creativity has to do with theology and faith. I'm not interested in building a systematic construct here—I want to explore this topic out of my experience as a student of literature and as a Mennonite journalist with a special passion for the arts.

By the way, I commend the planners for their wording of the topic. We are not focusing on a "Mennonite imagination" as such, but are placing ourselves within the broader context of the "artistic imagination" in the same way that our new Confession does not talk about a "Mennonite confession of faith" but a Confession of faith "within a Mennonite perspective." That's the way it should be.

Some of you may have heard the discussion on CBC's *Morningside* (July 2, 1996) when someone asked, "Why do so many good singers come from the Mennonite tradition?" Saskatchewan musician Connie Kaldor was quick to reply: "Because they can't dance." But what about that question? Why is the art of singing so acceptable, while the other arts, particularly theatre and dance, have been suspect? It's not just that we have always been a singing people (in fact, we haven't—Conrad Grebel, our eminent Anabaptist ancestor, was opposed to any music in worship), it is more complex than that. It has to do with the very essence of our faith and life.

Listen to this poem by Julia Kasdorf who comes out of a conservative Amish tradition in the U.S. which shunned all arts, including photography. It's called "The only photograph of my father as a boy."[1]

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[1]In *Sleeping Preacher* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

In Amish trousers and suspenders,
he's barefoot by the field lane,
blond hair bowl-cut, his face twisted.
He knows this shouldn't be—
this worldly uncle squinting into a box
camera, commanding, "Hold still."
That click, something flew out of him,
with "Don't tell your mother 'bout this."
And something flew in. The next picture,
high school graduation, he's grinning
on the rim of the world,
as confident as science in 1951.

In this poem, the camera—that instrument of illusion, of forbidden images, of pride—snatches away an essential part of the boy's heritage with a click of the shutter. "Something flew out of him and something flew in."

When Jacob H. Janzen, a long-time bishop in Ontario, came to Canada in 1924, he was already known among Mennonites as a writer of drama and fiction. (Another bishop and artist! Sort of skews our assumptions about Mennonites, doesn't it?) This is what Bishop Janzen said in an article in *Mennonite Life* in 1946: "When I came to Canada and in my broken English tried to make plain to a [Swiss] Mennonite bishop that I was a 'novelist' (that being the translation for '*Schriftsteller*' in my dictionary), he was much surprised. He then tried to make plain to me that 'novelists' were fiction writers and that fiction was a lie. I surely would not want to represent myself to him as a professional liar. I admitted to myself, but not aloud to him, that I was just that kind of 'liar' which had caused him such a shock."

Now, among Russian Mennonites half a century ago, the "lies" of writers such as Janzen and Arnold Dyck actually became quite popular. Their works reflected what we might call a "Low German imagination," the crude, earthy humour of rural

life, although they also wrote serious works in High German. But something else "flew in" that moment in 1962 when Rudy Wiebe's novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, destroyed the peace of Canadian Mennonites. This wasn't the first novel about Mennonites in English; in 1936, Gordon Friesen published a grim, violent novel about Kansas Mennonites called *Flamethrowers*. That work was simply dismissed by Mennonites as an angry attack and is lost to history.

Why was Rudy Wiebe's novel so threatening? For one, he was an insider, a churchman, editor of a denominational magazine. And he was looking at Mennonite experience in a way it had never been done in German—translating everyday life and religious life into the same language, as it were; scrutinizing the sacred and the profane through the same artistic filter. (Not one language for church and another for home.) What's more, he was exposing Mennonites to the entire world in the world's language—the language of English, the language of fiction. (A friend of mine says that for him the most shocking words in that entire novel were "McClelland & Stewart.") This novel signalled a new imagination breaking into Canadian Mennonite life.

The dangers of art

Art is dangerous, and Mennonites have always recognized that. It's not only that it is unpredictable or uncontrollable. At a fundamental level, the act of creating can be an act of hubris, of pride, of competition with the One Creator God who can't be defined or named and who demands that we make for ourselves no "graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20). This biblical warning against images has been used by various branches of the church to warn against any representations or visible depictions of God (such as statues or icons) or even against art itself. ("Woe to him who strives with his maker," said the reading from Isaiah. The Old Testament is

full of such harsh warnings.)

This commandment isn't just some quaint warning against foreign idols. At stake is the belief that God can't be understood or portrayed by even the furthest reaches of our imagination. At stake is the belief that divinity is something else than the world we know through our senses, the world out of which we create. Art, like religion, strives to imagine, to embody reality but it can never fully comprehend it. There is always something beyond. That is the first principle in my understanding of the artistic imagination.

The warning against images is very much part of the Hebrew understanding of its faith. Jahweh communicates with the Hebrews not through a tangible, physical presence but through speech, through the Word. God spoke the world into being. "In the beginning was the Word." American writer Theodore Roszak speaks of the Jews' "rough amputation of visual and tactile witness." In return, he says, "the Jews acquired their incomparable ear. They heard as no one else had ever heard."[2] The Hebrews were artists of the word—from poetic declarations of faith to harangues of fire and brimstone, from tender tales of mercy to turbulent soap operas filled with sex and violence. Not for them some abstract musings about transcendence and reality. They told their faith primarily through stories of people and real-life situations. Even the grand story of the creation of the cosmos moves quickly down to earth and becomes the tale of two individual people.

And what stories they could tell! (In a *Festschrift* that is being published in honour of Waldemar Janzen, my professor here many years ago, I wrote that Waldemar's classes in Old

[2]Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society* (Doubleday & Co., 1973), 103.

Testament spoiled the New Testament for me. This is what I said: "How could the sanctified Gospel narratives, with the exception perhaps of the Passion story, ever compete with the blood and thunder of the Israelite story? Where could one find a more stark cosmology or searing truth-telling than in the Hebrew texts?")

But the Word is more than story or poem or song for the Hebrews. It is also logos, the organizing principle by which we understand reality. But even that organizing principle is not some abstract, philosophical notion—it is personified in a person, Jesus Christ, the Word by whom we understand everything else. The Word is one legacy of the biblical imagination.

However, to speak about word and image and the biblical imagination is not a simple thing. For the biblical Word carries within itself a host of imaginative forms and elements that have inspired the artistic imagination through the centuries. The warning against images of God did not deter the ancient Hebrews from longing for the sight of God, for visible expressions of the invisible. "Show me your face," begged Moses (Exodus 33). But he only got to see the effect of God passing by—the back of God, says the story.

"I saw visions of God," proclaimed Ezekiel. "As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming bronze. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures, each with four faces and four wings" (Ezekiel 1). And then come the four great wheels and the firmament shining like crystal, and the great throne with the creature of light and fire. "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord," says Ezekiel. Such a fabulous vision, easily rivalling anything in *Star Wars*, is echoed in John's Revelation, where fantastic image is heaped upon fantastic image in order to

express the thrilling majesty and power and danger of God's presence.

In fact, one could say that the fundamental aspect of the biblical imagination is not iconoclasm (denouncing images), or an exclusive focus on the Word but an obsession with "image." For the Hebrews, of all people, were intensely engaged with making the invisible visible, with translating spiritual reality into human activity. We human beings, says Genesis, are images of the divine. Along with this image-consciousness comes an obsession with the body. The Hebrews were far more concerned with the body, with embodiment, than other cultures around them. The Bible is full of body language: Israel as God's body on earth, the church as the body of Christ, the resurrection of the body. The Hebrew faith was little concerned with ethereal visions, ideal forms and spiritualized states beyond this world—faith was serious, everyday business. What counted most was bodily obedience, right behaviour.

That's what makes the Hebrew imagination seem so humourless—it's earthbound, in many ways. Not too many playful frolics in enchanted forests (except maybe *Song of Songs*), or fun-filled adventures and magical meetings. But the other side of it is that the biblical writers never shy away from exploring the implications of this serious business of the body—in all its degradation and all its glory—culminating in the very embodiment of God in human form.

This vision of incarnation, the Word made flesh, is a central aspect of the biblical imagination. It holds in tension the mystery of divinity with the solid immediacy of human flesh. (The opening of I John which was read talks about the truth which we have heard, and seen with our eyes and touched with our hands: "the life was made visible and we saw it," says verse 2.) That is also the defining motive of art—to make the invisible visible, the untouchable touchable, in more ways than one. The biblical and the artistic imaginations overlap in many ways. Listen to this

poem by David Waltner-Toews called, "Corporeal love:"[3]

I love the body
earth's body
the body of Christ
your body.
Your mind is nothing without your body.
The spirit of earth is nothing without
the trees, mud, cats, snakes,
children, grandparents.
Victory in war is nothing
without bodies to count.
Bodies count.

I love bodies.
I want to kiss them, hold them, pity them,
refrain from embracing even
as I embrace.
I want to speak unspeakable emotions
in body language.

Whatever we cannot say
we are fated to embody.
Whatever we mean
is meant best with our bodies.
These are the words of God,
incarnation . . .
infinity embracing herself,
loving ourselves to life
even unto death.

William Blake, the English poet and artist, speaks of the imagination as "the divine body of Jesus." In Blake's mystical

[3]In *The Impossible Uprooting* (McClelland & Stewart, 1995).

scheme, Jesus the Imagination battles the demons of Reason and industrial power which are threatening spiritual reality at the beginning of the 19th century. I wonder what fiery verses Blake would compose in our computerized, materialistic day. Blake also said the Bible was not only the most instructive book, but the most entertaining because it is addressed first and foremost to the imagination.[4]

We don't believe that, do we? It strikes me that we spend a lot of energy trying to stifle or flatten out the imaginative elements of the scriptures. We want to safeguard it for our faith, to keep it sacred. We aren't sure what to do with all those horrible stories of rape and incest, or those bizarre encounters with angels and demons. In some ways, we have the same suspicion of the Bible's imaginative aspects as we have of other art. For the Bible shares many of the imaginative elements of other cultures—the stories of floods and monsters, accounts of dreams and miracles and magic, the myths of dying gods and the underworld and the end of the world.

Like good art, it doesn't all fit easily together—even the images of God seem contradictory—we see a God who hurls threats at his people and wreaks vengeance on the enemy, and at the same time a God who embodies grace and love of enemies. We are confronted with a grand vision of the universe as well as a messy, trivial world ruled by pettiness and scheming. The Bible is full of clashing images and contradictory messages which can only be held together by the imagination.

Let's look a little more closely at the word "imagination." First, it helps to distinguish between the imaginary and the

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[4]"Jesus the Imagination" appears in Blake's poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* The comment about the Bible as supreme entertainment was in a letter quoted by Kathleen Raine in *William Blake* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 102.

imaginative. Both, of course, come from the word image—a representation or embodied form of an idea or person or thing. But the word imaginary is closer to our understanding of illusion, or fiction, or fantasy, or myth, words we have unfortunately degraded to mean untrue or unreal. How can one possibly speak about biblical myth when one of the Webster dictionary definitions of myth is "an ill-founded belief held uncritically?"

In a literary or religious sense, of course, myth is "a traditional story that unfolds the worldview and beliefs of a people." The biblical myth is the great story of creation, fall, redemption and consummation—the greatest myth, according to literary scholar Northrop Frye. Frye has a helpful distinction between literary and religious language. The purpose of religious language, he says, is to convey a vision that continues to transform and expand our spiritual lives. Religious stories become "myths to live by," as purely literary myths cannot, says Frye. They take on ultimate significance, ultimate reality for us. The Mennonite myth is the story of persecution and immigration and non-conformity. These are ways of schematizing or outlining the central meaning or way of understanding reality. Given the problems with the word, however, it may be more helpful to speak about the "biblical imagination" or biblical worldview.

The imagination is a powerful force. It is the power to form mental images, to perceive something not present to the senses or something never seen in quite the same way before. Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the early 1800s made a helpful distinction between fancy and imagination. Fancy or fantasy is a mechanical function of memory, he said. It deals with superficial resemblances and makes connections between what we know or remember. Imagination is a power that seeks the deeper truths that underlie our fantasies and dreams, that shapes

and unifies.[5] The imagination seeks to bring together what's out here at the tip of our fingers with what's in our souls, to join the senses with the spirit in a new understanding. The imagination applies not only to art, of course, but to science and other disciplines as well. The imagination, bringing together disparate pieces of our experience, actually shapes a new reality.

For Northrop Frye, that great organizer of the mythical, the imagination is what makes sense of the world, not in the realm of facts and statistics but in the understanding. "The poet's job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens: not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place."[6] That is also a very helpful insight for reading the Bible: not to read it as a record of things that happened in the past but as timeless truth embodied in special people and events. Another way of saying this is that something is not true because it is in the Bible; it's in the Bible because it's true.

Literature and the biblical imagination

In my studies of literature, I have always been drawn to the intersection between literature and theology, or between literature and the biblical imagination. I am attracted to writers whose imaginations have been especially influenced by the uncompromising, harsh worldview of the ancient Hebrews. This Hebraic worldview is most clearly seen in writers emerging out of a "Puritan" understanding of faith which emphasizes a life of austerity, self-denial and moral struggle—from John Bunyan to George Eliot and Flannery O'Connor. Many Canadian

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[5]Samuel Taylor Coleridge made the distinction between fancy and the imagination in *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

[6]Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (CBC Enterprises, 1963), 24. See also his discussion of religious language in *The Great Code* (Academic Press Canada, 1982).

Mennonite writers also emerge out of this Hebraic heritage, revealed most clearly in a moral consciousness, whether didactic or tortured. Rudy Wiebe is the most obvious heir of this tradition. Even poet Patrick Friesen was accused in a recent review of being too preachy. A critic of his new collection of apocalyptic verse, *A Broken Bowl*, cited Friesen's "biblically parodic language" and stated: "I felt I was being lectured to by someone whose morality is presented as gospel" (Tim Bowling in November 1997 *Quill & Quire).*

It was my fascination with the interplay between the biblical and the literary that drew me to a doctoral thesis on "Hebraism" in English literature.[7] When I first entered doctoral studies at University of Toronto, the English department head advised me that with my interests I should go elsewhere—either into theology or comparative literature. But I stayed where I was and, with the help of an extremely compatible advisor, a Catholic, I had a wonderful time studying exactly what I was interested in. The starting point for my thesis was Matthew Arnold's claim that two forces—Hellenism and Hebraism—are the major shapers of western culture. Arnold defined Hellenism (or the Classical tradition) as the love of "pure knowledge," that which allows one "to see things as they are." Hellenism invests life with clearness and radiance, and is governed by flexibility and "spontaneity of consciousness." In contrast, Hebraism—a word he coined—is "the energy driving practice," the overriding obligation to "duty, self-control, and work," rooted in earnestness and "strictness of conscience." In other words, the Hebraic holds goodness to be the highest value; Hellenism puts beauty at the top. Now you know why I put Mennonites in the

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[7]My dissertation was entitled, *Hebraism in English Literature: A Study of Matthew Arnold and George Eliot.* Faculty of English, University of Toronto, 1993.

"Hebraic" camp.

My study delved specifically into the Hebrew/Jewish roots of Arnold's term "Hebraism" (why didn't he just use the terms Classical and Christian?). But the major part of my study used this understanding of Hebraism to analyze George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, a truly Hebraic work with a Jewish hero who calls decadent 19th century England back to its Hebrew roots. It's a fascinating novel, written in 1876, which few people have read (*Middlemarch* is considered her best).

The hero, Daniel Deronda, is an earnest, young Englishman whose discovery that he is Jewish ignites his messianic consciousness. Deronda has a gift for drawing people to him by his generous and self-sacrificial spirit. He gives up personal status and ambitions to serve his new-found community, sailing off to Israel at the end of the book. But underneath the portrait of this contemporary Jewish saviour flows a subtle critique. In my reading of the novel, the author brilliantly portrays the human complexities of radical goodness: Deronda's noble intentions are tainted by self-righteousness; his lack of self-awareness makes him at times an irritating prig; his passion to save others, particularly needy, young women, blinds him to his sexual power. The novel is made all the more interesting by the author's own ambivalence about her hero.

In literary terms, the word "Hebraism" has become identified with the preference for the natural (real) over the artificial (ideal), and the individual struggle over the realized universal. So by this definition, you could say that the thinking of our day is dominated by Hebraism, fed by the spirit of post-Enlightenment materialism that locates the "real" in the empirical world, not in the supernatural or ideal sphere. That poses an interesting dilemma for Mennonites. Our affinity for biblical Hebraism—the focus on morality and hard work, the land, our suspicion of fancy (pun intended)—has led us straight into the promised land of modernity. We tend to be uneasy with

art that is simply fanciful, playful or beautiful for its own sake.

Not that Mennonites have been exempt from the urge to create and beautify. Driven by the will to do all things well, we have an artistic history of beautiful gardens, embroidery, handcrafted furniture, quilts. But traditionally art has been considered a servant—a servant of function and of faith. We have been known for folk art (note the communal connotations of that word). Ontario girls used to exchange friendship bracelets made of buttons, but they never wore them because plain folks never wore anything "for fancy." Individual artists were thought to risk the sin of pride and undermined community. That's why congregational singing was so acceptable—it is the ultimate communal activity—a harmony of the aesthetic and religious. Writing hymn texts has thus been a popular art with Mennonites, but composing music was completely absent from our tradition until recently. Is that because music is more purely aesthetic? It's interesting also that the Mennonite ideals of simplicity and plainness, which put limits on creativity for Mennonites, can also be elements of beauty. We notice it today in the stark lines and polished wood of Old Order meetinghouses or in the neat rows of canned peaches on the pantry shelf.[8]

I was on the committee that put together an art exhibit for the bicentennial of Mennonites in Canada which was celebrated in 1986. It was a wonderful exhibit with many well-known Canadian artists who are of Mennonite heritage. The Mennonite motifs in their works were fascinating: Aganetha Dyck's bizarre collection of canned buttons, Bill Epp's bronze statue of grandmother in her rocker, Susan Shantz's needlework, Paul Epp's wooden chair. Gathie Falk, one of Canada's best known

[8]For Mennonite art as servant of function and faith, see my chapter on "Praise and Handiwork: The Art" in *Mennonites in Ontario* (Mennonite Bicentennial Commission, 1986).

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avant garde artists, has created many strange assemblages that include a collection of ceramic red shoes, 56 huge oil on canvas paintings of quilts stuffed with fibre glass to give a quilt effect, and endless paintings of the sidewalk in front of her house. Gathie probably articulated the creed of many Mennonite artists when she said: "I feel that unless you know your own sidewalk really intimately, you're never going to be able to look at the pyramids and find out what they're about."

You'll notice that I've been speaking a lot about the biblical imagination. I began with that for several reasons: in Mennonite lectures, one always starts with the Bible, right? (That's a good place to begin.) But if the Bible has been the foundation for Christian faith, it is no less the foundation for Western art. And that is because its faith is expressed in terms much closer to the language of art than to the more common languages of proposition or fact or history. The religious imagination and the artistic imagination are very close together, and often indistinguishable. By that, I am not saying that religion is art and art is religion—I am saying they share languages and ways of thinking about the world. The life of the spirit cannot be calibrated or computed or easily pinned down. It requires thinking in more than one dimension. That is why one speaks of faith, of God, in images. A visual image like a statue has literally three dimensions. Verbal images, too, try to get at the multi-dimensionality, the different angles of spiritual truth.

Mennonite images

Let's look at one image that Mennonites hold sacred: martyrdom. I find it interesting that the title of the *Martyrs Mirror* is actually *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenceless Christians*. The bloody theatre. Why did we drop that title? Was it too theatrical, too violent? It's a vivid image—it comes from the Roman theatres in which Christians fought the lions; it catches the sense of drama and bravery as the

staunch Anabaptists march to their deaths while the world looks on.

Magdalene Redekop, University of Toronto English professor, has talked about the other side of our martyr identity: the struggle to escape and survive (1992 lectures, University of Winnipeg). For most Mennonites, remaining faithful has meant trying to escape from the bloody theatre, wandering as refugees to safer places. That's the other side of the martyr story and it has come to the fore among Mennonites in Canada. We escaped, some of us even by devious means, and came to this country and made good. It's this side of our identity that has led to the amazing flowering of literature that celebrates survival and life in this world instead of self-sacrifice and future fulfilment. Images shape our self-understanding, but we have to be careful of pinning them down too neatly.

Someone from the U.S. was telling me recently how the Amish have become a cultural artifact in the U.S. They have become symbols of certain values the Americans hold dear—family, faith, hard work, simple life. Again there is the sense of theatre, of acting out your role for the benefit of others. And the Amish themselves are capitalizing on this with their own tourist trade, selling their quilts, even posing for pictures. (Do you know how many picture books there are of these people who refuse to be photographed?) And think about how Mennonite good deeds attract media attention these days. Sandbagging for the cameras. Pages of photographs of the Ontario relief sale in the *Toronto Star*. We are on stage but we are still surprised by the attention. And we are shocked when the Mexican drug smugglers or the war criminals among us get front-page coverage.

Paul Tiessen, who teaches film at Wilfrid Laurier University, wrote in the September 1995 *Ontario Mennonite History* newsletter: "Mennonites are given to what I am calling 'theatrical' expression, or at least to forms of rather distinctive

visual self-representation: plain churches for some, a publicly-acclaimed children's choir for others; horse-and-buggy travel for some . . . Selfhelp Crafts shops in fashionable commercial districts for others," he says. A barn-raising or a Mennonite Disaster Service project is a kind of "theatre-in-the-round" for neighbours or tourists, newspaper photographers or documentary film-makers. The project becomes a sort of morality play—a dramatization of neighbourly charity and good deeds. And, as performance, it invites interpretation.

Key point. If we are performing for an audience, and we are, we open ourselves to interpretation. No matter how expert our public relations, we can't control the reviews. Like the Amish in Lancaster County portrayed in *Witness*, we are all fair game. And it's been good for us. But this gives a slightly different spin to the comments I made earlier about hubris, about creating as an act of pride. Maybe the refusal to create, to perform, to keep our creativity to ourselves, is a greater act of pride. Sectarianism is built on separation, on self-righteousness, on protecting what we have. To write for the public, to paint, to compose, is an act of vulnerability, of risking criticism and misunderstanding.

Listen to Di Brandt talk about publishing her first collection of poetry in 1987 (only a decade ago): "I was surprised . . . how long it took me to recover from the trauma of breaking through the strict codes of separatism and public silence I grew up with in the Mennonite community . . . how difficult it was to actually break centuries-old taboos against self-expression and art-making and public speech . . . . Not only did this act of rebellion and subversion shatter my identity as I knew it at that time—having to recognize in myself the 'rebel traitor thief,' willing to sell out, blow up, throw away the family stories and the official narratives of the culture, for art—but also, it scared the bejesus out of me: what if the Mennonites came after me? What if they killed me for this act of utter betrayal? Well, they didn't quite kill me, but negotiating those heady, scary years

when I was writing myself into scandal and success . . . was a kind of death."[9]

Those words cannot be taken lightly. For some artists among us, the risk of creating and going public has brought new life—a kind of resurrection. Artists have given us new angles on ourselves, giving us a chance to be the audience watching ourselves, as it were. The energy of visual art and literature growing out of the Mennonite community is an astonishing phenomenon for which we can only express gratitude. When my daughter was quite young she was amazed to hear me talking about Mennonite literature. "What's Mennonite literature?" she asked sceptically. "Is that like Anabaptists go to the circus?" That theatrical image again.

Listen to how poet Jean Janzen plays with several Mennonite icons—from canning to clean living—in her marvellous poem "Peaches in Minnesota."[10] This is embodiment from a female perspective.

Mrs. Nachtigal, Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Tieszen
each in their separate steamy kitchens
ripped the slats off the perfect rows
of peaches and said as they bent over, plump
and panting, not to eat a single one fresh.
These rows of peach buttocks, the skins
turning rosy after the long train ride
from California in the refrigerated miracle car,
were now in the hands of Mrs. Nachtigal,
Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Tieszen who said no,
not one. First the scalding dip
to slip off the furry skins, then the quick

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[9]Di Brandt, *Dancing Naked* (The Mercury Press, 1996), 9-10.

[10]In *The Upside-Down Tree* (Henderson Books, 1992).

slice to take out the pit, the careful slide
and pour into the Mason jars, the steam bath
until the lids snapped in with their safe
seals, and then the shining rows on the drainboard,
breasts of peaches under glass to be brought up
from the dank cellar when it was time,
the syrupy flesh delicious in the mouth
as snow ticked against the windows, cherished
like the low sun of January. Altogether different
from California where we eat them ripely sweet
from the tree all summer long, whenever we
have the urge, and as many as we want, even as
the fallen ones rot in the hot furrow, and
the air conditioner hums and hums in monotone.

Artists, not only Mennonite, are peering at our sacred images from all sides and giving us new perspectives to consider. They are also helping to link our story to a wider story, to merge our experiences with the experiences of others around us. Sometimes perceptions clash and people of religious faith feel violated by art. Artists too are sometimes tempted to shrink experience into one dimension and miss the complexities. That's why the church and the artist need to talk to each other. In the next lecture I want to talk more about the clash of values, the shattering of images and the role of the religious imagination in a post-modern culture.

I want to end with Patrick Friesen's poem, "bible,"[11] which embodies something of what I've tried to say about both the biblical and the artistic imagination:

the bible was a telephone book

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[11]In *Flicker and Hawk* (Turnstone Press, 1987).

of levites canaanites and reubenites
it was a television set
my favourite program being revelation
until someone told me what it meant
the bible whispered to itself at night

I thought I heard the song of solomon and lamentations
maybe job and later second thessalonians
in the morning there were always new underlinings

it was a vacuum cleaner once
a week later it was close shave

the bible was a cockroach
scuttling its dark way through the house
would it survive the holocaust?

it was a black dog behind the couch
I could see its muzzle from where I sat at the piano

the bible took me aside
and taught me how to squint
it grasped my hand
and showed me how to shake

once

I remember it was fall
the bible took me to a show
of time-lapse photography

you could see flowers open in seconds
wounds and mouths and skies
a city strayed from dawn to night in a moment

you could almost hear it cry
or maybe it was someone in the crowd

the bible was a whorehouse
leaning at the edge of the world
I took some pleasure there
had regrets

I could say the bible taught me everything
but I remember how I once threw my life away
when I was unafraid and prodigal
I wish it would happen again

and though I don't quite believe it myself
this afternoon   while I was going through my photographs
I heard the bible laugh

Lecture Two
Shattered Images

(Readings: Ezekiel 8:7-13, 16-18; Deuteronomy 31:16-22)

I understand this college had quite a debate over whether to stage *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Reviewing the movie version of that rock musical was the first assignment I had after being hired by *Mennonite Reporter* (Sept. 3, 1973 issue). I went prepared to hate it. I'm not crazy about musicals and I don't usually like what Hollywood does with religious subjects. But I was completely charmed. I loved the way the Jesus story was translated into the 70s rock culture; I liked the juxtaposition of the ancient and modern—from Galilean cloaks to blue jeans and halter tops. I liked the ambiguity of human reactions, the humour and the glorious energy of the dancing. The message that came through to me was not, "Who was Jesus?" but "How do I relate to this Jesus?" (a focus on human response instead of attempting some objective portrayal of this god-man). I find the same freshness in a movie like *Jesus of Montreal*.

Jesus Christ Superstar illustrates how art attempts to translate faith into contemporary language, embodying truth in new forms. That's always risky. Just as I was working on this very section of the lecture I got a phone call from a man who was objecting to a picture we had printed of two liturgical dancers at the General Conference sessions here last summer. The two dancers were from CMBC, he said. What are they thinking? Who would want to support a college that teaches liturgical dance?

I talked this morning about how the biblical imagination, like the artistic imagination, always seeks to incarnate truth, to make it visible through story and image. We talked about how the Bible is obsessed with body language: the church as the body of Christ, the resurrection of the body. At the same time, the warning against image-making reminds us that matters of the spirit can never be fully perceived through the physical world, through our senses. (The grim reading from Ezekiel 8 is a picture of post-modern disintegration: the sacred has lost all its meaning and all that's left is superstition or pornography. Listen to verse 12: "Have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, every man in his room of pictures? For they say, 'The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.'" What a startling image.) What is our response to this biblical warning? As I asked this morning, which is the greatest act of pride—to dare to create or to spurn art in order to protect ourselves?

At *Mennonite Reporter*, now *Canadian Mennonite*, we have tried to keep in touch with what Mennonites are doing in the arts. That's because we believe that the artistic imagination and the religious imagination are so closely related to each other. But we keep getting the same questions: How can you call Di Brandt a Mennonite when she deliberately spurns the church; or how can you call Ben Heppner a Mennonite when he grew up in the Alliance church? Several assumptions have guided our thinking at the paper: 1) In literature, at least, there is an identifiable body of art that is shaped by a Mennonite ethos—by the beliefs and customs of a distinctive community. 2) Mennonite artist is a useful code word for those whose art reflects their experience of the Mennonite community. (I've noticed that the more famous tenor Ben Heppner becomes, the more comfortable he is simply accepting "Mennonite" as his identity. It's a handy label.) 3) Artists' responses to their Mennonite heritage vary greatly—from condemnation to comedy, from nostalgia for an

idealized past to deep religious commitment in the present.

But is there really such a thing as a Mennonite ethos or a Mennonite story? Mennonite historians in the past few decades have moved decisively into a polygenesis theory of Mennonite origins, disrupting a lot of assumptions about a single Anabaptist story. Mennonite artists are deconstructing our assumptions, and our presumptions, in even more discomforting ways.

"Be careful, memory will trick you," says John Weier in *Steppe: A novel.* "It tells you everything you wish to know. Nothing you remember is true. Father remembers only the good things. That's his story, the good and happy story. The rest he can blame on the Russians. Mother remembers nothing. Was it really that bad?"

There are lots of stories. Which are true? Be careful, memory will trick you. Your parents will trick you. Your church will trick you. Look deeper to find meaning, if there is any. That's the creed not only of artists but of many seekers in our time. There is no such thing as one truth, one story—there are as many stories as there are individuals and everyone has the right to tell them. This kind of thinking is often called post-modern: the code we had to decipher meaning has disintegrated and we are left with discontinuous pieces and silences. Our attempts to create are only games we play against the darkness. How do we maintain belief in such an environment, we who assume meaning not only in words, but in The Word. (If the code to our faith is lost, we are left with nothing more than superstition.)

Ironically, even as art deconstructs or reconfigures meaning, it offers perhaps the greatest potential for renewed faith. I believe profoundly that the artistic imagination can help us hold together the many clashing realities we all live with, to bridge the vast gulf between biblical understandings and the creeds of our own time, between the competing gods of our culture and our personal truths. (Remember the passage about Moses that

was read. Isn't it interesting that after all his preaching, his political leadership, his great deeds, he leaves the Israelites with a song? This is his last contribution to his people. How appropriate to gather all these experiences together in poetic form.) We move between many worlds and we need more than one language, one understanding, to make any sense of life and to lift us above our confusion. We know the imagination can be dangerous and unpredictable, but it can also help us face the contradictions and hold them together within a larger circle. Listen to the voice of Patrick Friesen:

> I can't speak for the others
> almost don't have the heart to speak for myself
> think of me as lost   living with one foot in the shade
> trying to be true and double-crossing you every step of the
>   way . . .

The poet here is the lone individual standing right on the divide between sun and shade, truth and deception, a lost soul who yet dares to speak a word. He also stands on the divide of history as he looks back at his Mennonite boyhood in the following:

> I know the Steinbach boy is dead
> betrayed and murdered seventy times seven by me and anyone
>   else who helped
> and still I go to the cemetery again and again
> because it's a beloved place
> where horses used to wheel and boys played with fire.[1]

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[1]These two poem fragments by Patrick Friesen are from *Unearthly Horses* (Turnstone Press, 1984).

The Steinbach boy may be dead, killed by a too-narrow vision and by other factors, but the poet still goes back to the cemetery; it's still a "beloved place" which shapes his imagination. That doesn't sound post-modern to me. It's the expression of a delicate balance between past and present, the Mennonite child and the modern man. In fact, many Mennonite artists find themselves in exactly this space.

In the Summer 1990 issue of *Prairie Fire*, a Manitoba journal which featured new Mennonite writing, editor Hildi Froese Tiessen said that many Mennonite writers could be seen as occupying "the discomforting gap" between belief and empty practice, between the coherence of a Mennonite ethos (where purpose and faith sustain meaning) and the fragmentation of a world in which social and religious beliefs are merely "abandoned monuments." She goes on: "Insofar as the writers...continue to feel the pain and confusion that attends the demise of a coherent order, they are modernists. Where the pain shows signs of disappearing altogether, their work may begin to reflect something of the numbing solipsism of the postmodern temperament . . . ." It is into this "discomforting gap" between the coherence of the past and the disarray of these times that our imagination projects us.

Poet Sarah Klassen speaks these words to us:

Abandon foolish dreams of arrival.
Resign yourself to the absolute
necessity of departure. Dead weight
of cumbersome luggage must be cast off.
When you become translucent, luminous
as morning

you can travel where you will.[2]

Abandon foolish dreams of arrival. Learn to live with the uncertainty, the incompleteness. Strive to become translucent, says the poet, permitting the light to pass through. Not to be the container of light but the transparency through which it can pass. It reminds me of Leonard Cohen's *Anthem* (from *The Future* album): "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Good art, like good theology, has that transparency—it allows truth to shine through it to illuminate the human condition. It may not give us answers, but it provides, as Robert Frost said, "a momentary stay against confusion." And no matter how much today's writers mutter about the loss of the external referent or the impossibility of meaning, I believe that every creative act is an assumption of coherence, of meaning, because all art imposes some kind of form and order on it subject.

Coherence or connections

As I mentioned earlier, my doctoral thesis at the University of Toronto traced the theme of Hebraism in English literature. It had to do with the influence of the Old Testament imagination on English writers, particularly in the nineteenth century. During my thesis defence, my examiners became most agitated over my assumption of coherence. How could I assume a direct connection between the biblical worldview and the views of nineteenth century British writers, they asked. How could I imagine that one could trace a strand of thought through different centuries? In a literary climate enamoured with

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[2]Sarah Klassen, "Reasons for delay," in *Borderwatch* (Netherlandic Press, 1993).

disjunction and discontinuity, it was difficult to communicate.

But that is the problem we all face today. How can we presume connections between the world of the Bible and the world of television, for example? How can our children, reared on *The Simpsons* and *X-Files*, make any sense of the Sermon on the Mount? And yet, as Christians, we believe that there is a continuity through the ages, that our story is somehow linked to the biblical story and to the history of the world. If we believe that, then we must also believe that biblical truths are related to other truths, that the Bible, in fact, is part of a much larger canon that includes the many artistic and religious "texts" that are shaping our culture.

I mentioned this morning that we have this protective attitude toward our Bible—we want to safeguard it from misuse and misinterpretation, even from its own wild imaginings. So we keep it shut away in a religious closet, safely set apart from the other things that inspire us every day. We don't want it to be part of this broader canon: we prefer to confine the Bible to an intra-textual debate instead of opening it to inter-textual dialogue with our culture. Do you remember the outrage a few years ago over the movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*? Many Christians thought that the film, which most refused to see, was sacrilege because it dared to speculate on the life of Christ. (Personally, I thought the movie was awful, but only because I find Kazantzakis' book on which it is based so magnificent.) This Christian outrage is the same impulse that fuels the Muslim death-threat against Salman Rushdie: we fear blasphemy of our sacred scripture. What we've really done is create an idol out of our scriptures, withdrawing them further and further from the marketplace. That is simply causing the Bible to become more and more irrelevant to the conversation between church and culture.

(This reminds me of a David Waltner-Toews poem with one of the great titles of all time. It's called "A request from Tante

Tina to the Mennonite women's missionary society to put Salman Rushdie on the prayer list." Talk about disjunction!)[3]

Do we ever read the Bible just for fun? Or just for its literature? One of the great pleasures of my studies in literature was discovering the medieval mystery plays. These were biblical drama cycles, performed each year on the Feast of Corpus Christi, that went through the whole story of the Bible—from creation to doomsday. The plays were performed in the marketplace, each scene by a different guild in the town. Even reading them five centuries later, these dramas brim with action and humour and ingenious characters. These dramatists were not afraid to take sacred figures from the Bible and plop them straight into the hurly-burly of contemporary life, and then laugh at them. The heroes were humanized in often startling ways and the "bad guys," especially the devil, made obscenely wicked.

One of the most ingenious plays, the "Second Shepherd's Play" from the Wakefield Cycle, plays off the divine mystery of Christ's birth with a comic tale of human jealously through the story of Mak the sheep stealer and his shrewish wife Gill. The scene sets up an ingenious contrast between Mak's stolen sheep and the Lamb of God. Far from blaspheming the sacred, this lewd tale heightens the contrast between the two realities by putting them side by side.

Perhaps inspired by this medieval audacity, I wrote a Christmas pageant about 10 years ago in which I took seven biblical scenes not usually related to Advent to portray unusual moments when God enters the world. An angel and devil framed the action. One of the scenes was a spiteful squabble between the prophet Hosea and his unfaithful wife Gomer over their marriage, over the ridiculous names of their children and over

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[3]David Waltner-Toews, *The Impossible Uprooting* (McClelland & Stewart, 1995).

his calling to be a prophet. My 10-year-old daughter played Gomer and her friend was Hosea. They hammed it up for all it was worth. It was hilarious but the congregation was not amused. They couldn't connect this farce with the biblical message, especially the message of Advent. Some were quite irate. For me, it was one of the most satisfying encounters with the Bible I have ever had. The voice from the past was suddenly speaking to us in our language, in cultural forms that even 10-year-olds can understand.[4]

Religious language

How do we read the Bible today? We know that religious language is different from the language of history or social science or mathematics, but we understand these modern disciplines much better. The enlightenment of our Reason, which helped us to prove that the earth is not flat, had the unfortunate effect of flattening out our imagination. Modernism tried to convince us that the demonstrated reality of science is more true than the demonstrated reality of faith, that empirical truth is more real than metaphorical truth. The result was what one scholar (Conrad Hyers in *The Christian Century*, Aug., 1982) has called the "hermeneutical fall," the descent into an obsession with dissecting texts and reducing biblical thought to the realm of fact. (Biblical criticism, unfortunately, has often helped to literalize what was literary.)

But today we are also seeing a different reductionism. Postmodern passions seek to escape the limits of scientism by floating away on the clouds of self-help spirituality and celestine prophecies. They are no closer to the spirit of the biblical word.

As Mennonites we still take the Bible very seriously. While

[4]A good text on medieval drama is David Bevington's *Medieval Drama* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975).

we may be leaving modernist models behind to some extent, we're still not very good with religious language. We may not be arguing any more about whether the creation story is scientifically accurate (although some still are), but we're still in the middle of arguing about the gender of God and about the biology of the virgin birth. And while we worry about whether the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary with actual semen, we miss the point of the story—that God was present in a unique and mysterious way in Jesus. That's a statement of faith, not of genetics.

My husband teaches systematic theology so he is trained in philosophy and the arts. He is constantly amazed at people's assumptions about theological ideas and the language of faith. Take the notion of dogma or creed. For most of us, dogma conjures up an image of the stone tablet—fixed belief rigidly encased for all time. For my husband, dogmas and creeds are the poetry of theology. Like poetry, they attempt to express the truths of our faith in distilled form. Their language is fluid because our way of describing the core of our faith changes with each generation. The word "confession" is proving a bit more malleable. Mennonites are known for the many confessions they have formulated over the centuries. I'm waiting for the day when our new confession of faith is distilled into a poem that we can recite or sing every Sunday morning in church.

Bill Phipps, moderator of the United Church, caused quite a stir last October with his pronouncement that he didn't believe Jesus was God. He's committed to a sensible faith that modern people can believe in, not this otherworldly, divine stuff. "I have no idea if there is a hell. I don't think Jesus was that concerned about hell," he said to the media. To me, this kind of pronouncement is a monumental failure of the imagination, not because it questions sacred doctrine but because it indicates a complete inability to imagine what these beliefs mean and why they are important. Why is the doctrine of hell important? Not

as a threat to keep people in line, but because the image of a place of punishment gives the terrorized and abused and exploited people of this world the hope that someday, somewhere God will make sure that evil is punished and the innocently slaughtered are vindicated. Why would a church leader choose to plead ignorance rather than to inspire people to approach the mystery?

Now Phipps is a pastor of great integrity who wants to translate faith into contemporary terms, but he needs a little more imagination. My husband met him recently and asked him, "Are you the guy that's embroiled in all this trouble in the church?" Phipps laughed and said, "Yeah, but isn't it great. Now everyone is talking about Jesus."

A much wiser response came from a theologian who is working on this new Q document which supposedly predates the gospels. An article in the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* about two weeks ago declared that this document will create a crisis of faith for Christians because it doesn't mention the divinity of Jesus. One of the theologians (John Kloppenborg from Toronto) calmly pointed out in the article that Christians struggled until the fourth or fifth century to work out how they understood Jesus' divinity. "I don't think anybody was making up statements about Jesus (after the fact)," he said. "It was rather a matter of trying to develop a language that was an adequate response to their experience."

Northrop Frye titled his 1963 CBC Massey Lectures, *The Educated Imagination*. In them, he outlined the variety of disciplines we study and the various languages we need to know to be able to understand them. Frye was primarily concerned, of course, with literary language, the language of the imagination, and he never let us forget that the Bible is the foundation of literary language. Fortunately, biblical scholars these days are also recognizing that the imaginative artistry of biblical expression is central to understanding.

A few years ago a letter appeared in a Mennonite paper. The writers said they were sick and tired of the Mennonite emphasis on peace and nonviolence. "When the Battle of Armageddon is fought, some Mennonites will be standing on the sidelines crying 'peace.'" How will Christ be able to fight Satan? (*Christian Leader*, March 26, 1991). The first thing that strikes me is the confusion of languages here. Mennonite ethics is suddenly transported into the mythic realm of the final conflict. But both realms—the everyday practical and the cosmic spiritual realm—are part of the biblical reality. Is our Mennonite imagination large enough to encompass both?

"May God us keep / From Single vision & Newton's sleep!" cried poet William Blake (letter to Thomas Butts, 1802). His mystical visions were a fierce protest against the one-dimensional thinking of Newtonian science and a mechanized universe. It's no wonder that medieval interpreters insisted that there are at least four levels of meaning in the Bible, four ways of reading: 1) the literal, not literalistic, level is a straightforward, surface reading of the words. 2) The second level, the allegorical, is the symbolic meaning. 3) Third is the moral level which tells me how to live. 4) Fourth is the anagogical or mystical meaning which speaks of future hope. All of these are important, for they apply to different aspects of reality and experience. Origen, a church father from the second century, ingeniously labelled the different levels of meaning as body, soul and spirit: 1) the body or flesh of scripture (the obvious interpretation), 2) the soul (the level of wisdom), and 3) the spirit of scripture.[5] He also believed that God arranged for certain "stumbling blocks" and impossibilities to be put into scripture to keep us on our toes.

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[5]From *Origen on First Principles*, trans. by G.W. Butterworth (S.P.C.K., 1936).

We need different languages for different realities. But what if these languages don't harmonize? Think about the Tower of Babel, with its confusion of voices. We usually see the Pentecost story as the restoration of communication, of unity. But look at it again. At Pentecost we still have all the different voices. They may hear truth differently but they manage to communicate. How do we keep the discordant voices together and make sense of them?

We can look to art for analogies. Art is created out of tension, even violence. "Art begins in a wound, an imperfection—a wound inherent in the nature of life itself," said critic John Gardner (*On Moral Fiction)*. The metaphysical poets of the 17th century were known for forcing together opposing ideas and discordant images in startling ways. In this poetry, said Samuel Johnson, "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." In this way, the poet forged new and unexpected meaning. Art springs from the coming together of the senses, the intellect and emotion; art is "the sensuous apprehension of ideas," said T.S. Eliot (*The Sacred Wood*). It can help us bring together the different realms of our experience.

One of the highlights of our sabbatical year in Europe in 1994-95 was seeing the Issenheim altar by Grünewald in Colmar, France. The large centre panel of the Advent scene shows the conventional mother and child in the centre. But above Mary is a luminous vision of the God of hosts. The God figure is almost pure light, surrounded by the suggestion of a mounted army (reminding us that hosts really means armies—the God of armies). But my favourite part of the scene is on the left where a lively angel orchestra, led by an enthusiastic cellist, is serenading the mother and child. But look closely, in the back of this bright orchestra lurks a demon.

That demonic figure amidst the angels speaks powerfully to me. It says that the images that jolt my comfortable faith, that clash with my preconceptions, may in fact have the most to teach

me. Art that brings together the contradictions can push out the boundaries of my faith and help me contemplate a larger coherence. This larger universe also includes the gaps and the silences. Those of you who have watched a play by Harold Pinter know how the dialogue is filled with pauses, of lost connections, of miscommunication. It sounds a lot like a conversation between me and my 14-year-old. A friend of ours who is studying art recently had an assignment to draw a chair. But she was supposed to draw the spaces, not the visible parts, not the spindles but the part between the spindles. Those spaces are also part of the picture, aren't they?

For Mennonites, the spaces may include many things. Behind our image of the pacifist Jesus is the God of armies. Behind our humble servant stance lurks the demon of self-righteousness. Behind our glorious choral harmonies are discordances and unresolved cadences. They are part of the picture too and an imaginative faith seeks to integrate them into the picture.

Children seem much more adept at absorbing hosts of conflicting impulses and learning to live with them. They don't worry about what's secular and what's sacred, or what's imaginary and what's imaginative, but there usually comes a time when their empiricist education catches up with them and the categories begin to harden. With my own children, I tried to inspire an inclusive imagination, to place the Bible alongside other treasures of our cultural and religious heritage. Like many parents, some of my most delightful hours were spent exploring the worlds of fairy-tale and myth with my children. I tried to introduce the Bible to them in the same way—as exciting tales of treachery and heroism, violent deeds and shining goodness. I tried to resist moralizing, for these stories illustrate truth just in their telling. Television provided another opportunity to probe connections: How does Hercules compare to Samson? Star Wars to Israelite wars? How does sexual abuse in our culture relate to that of Lot's or Tamar's culture?

Above our kitchen table hangs our family Summa, our little compendium of essential knowledge. On it, the Nine Orders of Angels are listed alongside the Nine Muses; the Seven Virtues beside the Seven Deadly Sins; the list of Olympic gods is followed by an outline of the House of Israel (not quite parallel). It's quirky, but perhaps a nudge to the imagination.

Morality and art

But what about all the immorality and violence? What about the excess of today's art, its seeming lack of boundaries? One of the difficulties of art is that it defies boundaries and therefore community. It is rooted in subversion and often rebellion. Can one talk about a moral imagination? I think so but it's a tricky notion.

Someone once asked Rudy Wiebe about the meaning and purpose of art: "The whole purpose of art, of poetry, of story-telling, is to make us better. Okay? Let's leave it at that" (*Books in Canada*, Feb., 1980). How does art make us better?

An article in *The New Yorker* (Aug. 16, 1993 by Joan Acocella) linked morality and the imagination in an interesting discussion of Dorothy Parker, the cynical New York writer who died in 1967. The tragedy of Parker's career is that she had no imagination, said the writer. "People are always telling us how there is no connection between moral strength and artistic strength: how Picasso preyed on women, how Wagner hated Jews, how you can be a terrible person and still be a great artist. But the case of Parker reminds us that, while the relation between morality and imagination may be a complicated one, it does exist. Hope, forgiveness—these are not just moral actions. They are enlargements of the mind. Without them, you remain in the tunnel of the self. Parker was morally a child all her life. She had a clear vision of the bad, but it never taught her anything about the good."

Enlargements of the mind. Expanding our thinking. Much of

what passes for art today is not giving it to us. Remember when the big battles used to be between good and evil, the good guys and the bad guys? These days, the final conflict is usually between robot aliens and humans who personify the virtues of bodybuilding. The other extreme is the banal antics of young adults who know nothing beyond immediate self-gratification. Those are the images of our time. (I confess to enjoying *Seinfeld* on occasion.) Evil is not really the problem here—we're dealing with excess and inanity. (Instead of complaining about sex and violence, maybe we should be petitioning TV networks for real sex and real evil.)

Excess and vacuous silliness are the enemies of art, in my opinion. To counter excess, we clutch at political correctness and ideology—two other enemies of art. Some of us, especially in the church, take refuge in nostalgia and a yearning for the way things used to be. One of the things that irritates me most is sentimentality ("emotional promiscuity" Norman Mailer calls it). For me, sentimentality (romanticism, nostalgia) represents one of the biggest dangers to the artistic and religious imaginations. A Presbyterian editor used to talk about the religious poetry he received for publication: it was the kind of sentimental doggerel, he said, that "imparts a warm glow to the semi-literate." It's the kind of art that is supposed to be edifying or uplifting. I think this quasi art may be more dangerous to the human spirit than a Mortal Combat movie or a rock video.

Another enemy of art is obscenity. Good art, like a good sermon, requires distance, proportion, some larger pattern. It requires respect for its subject. Oskar Werner, a German actor, once said: "We live in an age, not of impressionism or expressionism, but excrementism. Some works are so destructive that you don't know if you should have dinner afterward or commit suicide" (*Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 24, 1977).

When I ponder the arts from a Christian perspective I always

come back to that fierce southern American Catholic writer, Flannery O'Connor. She summarized her own artistic creed with characteristic bluntness: "My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." Christians are in the best position to delve into the world's evil, she says. "My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable . . . . Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live." There is a story that when Michelangelo was painting the "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel, people started complaining about the writhing bodies and distasteful scenes. The pope told Michelangelo to make it suitable. The artist replied, "Nothing to it; the painting can easily be made suitable. Let the pope make the world a suitable place and painting will soon follow suit."

Interestingly, bad art or false art is the real violation of the commandment against images, for it circumscribes and limits the possibilities of the human spirit. Bad art pulls us down and confines us to what Rudy Wiebe has called "the petty bedroom-bathroom problems that small people have." To depict "real life" for a good artist is not only to depict what comes naturally because the most natural is not necessarily the most human. Good art, even sometimes through abhorrent means, strives to expand our experience of reality, to reveal more angles instead of fewer. The good artist, like the person with a religious sensibility, simply "lives in a larger universe," as O'Connor puts it. Good art does not only reflect our questions, it transforms the very questions themselves.[6]

In these fragmented and uncertain times, Christians are not immune to the erosion of what they thought they knew for sure.

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[6]The Flannery O'Connor quotations are from *Mystery and Manners* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969).

We share the world's bewilderment with too much information and too little knowledge, the pain of too many feelings and not enough understanding. We have entered the writhing pains of a creation yearning to be reborn, as Romans puts it. Can we still speak truth in this situation? Perhaps it will be a more tentative truth, a more vulnerable truth. Patrick Friesen, in *You Don't Get to be a Saint* (Turnstone Press, 1992), makes a moving statement of resignation. In the midst of loss and limitation, the artist fashions a poignant creed:

I don't love the prayer rug obedience or disobedience nothing
 that absolute I love the babylonian body and the human
 wound I love the surprising word the sinuous approach I
 like the world approximately . . .
I love words in the air balanced between mouth and ears I
 love the way they're smoke before they're stone
but it's true I think there's not much a voice can say there's a
 limit I guess to art there's no end to desire.

Last November, I heard an extremely moving speech on "Literary Echoes of Postmodernism" by Robert Detweiler of Emory University (presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion). It was moving for several reasons: Detweiler, of Mennonite background, is a highly respected literary scholar who has been a key figure in the dialogue between literature and theology. He had a severe stroke about two years ago and it was a miracle that he could give this speech at all. It was really an end of life speech (like Moses' song), a heartfelt plea for resurrection and healing.

"We live in an era of excess," he said. Our very language is excessive—we speak in inflated numbers—6 million Jews, 27 million dollar sports salaries. We hear this violent excess already in the Old Testament: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." But the Bible also gives us examples of good

excess. Mary Magdalene invades Jesus' privacy in a fit a bad manners and pours expensive perfume on his feet. She displays what we might call an "excess of imagination." And this good excess is evident in our time also in the "stubborn will to believe," says Detweiler. In the midst of the postmodern shattering of the reality we knew, we reach out to infinity for rescue. This requires an act of the imagination; it is an act that "divinizes our anxious time," he said. One of the most memorable images he used was the medieval image of Christ as the harrower of hell, prying open with his cross the jaws of Satan, forcing the beast to vomit up the bodies of the damned. This excessive image portrays the energy of resurrection, he said, as excess is transformed by the cross.

I experienced the power of such a transforming image in 1995 when our family visited war-torn Croatia. This experience captured for me the complexity, disjunction and hope of this present age. The image was a child singing outside my window one Sunday morning. Let me tell you the story. We helped a family immigrate to Canada during the war and when we spent a sabbatical year in Europe, we visited Croatia and were royally hosted by the relatives of this family. We spent some time at their summer house in a little fishing village on the island of Korcula. It used to be paradise, but the tourists had fled, the economy was in shambles, the boys were off fighting and people were very depressed. One couple we got to know in this tiny village were musicians—they had entertained in several countries in Europe, but now they were caught by the war and the future looked hopeless.

Their son Robbie was exactly our youngest son's age and they played together. One Sunday morning, I woke up to what sounded like chanting. I looked out and here was Robbie, dressed in his Sunday best, a Bible in his hand, chanting the scripture he would sing at mass that morning. He was an altar boy and the only one with enough nerve to sing the readings, he

said. Of course we all went to church. It was packed with kids—they spilled out of the choir loft and surrounded the priest up front. Since independence in 1990, all Croatians had been encouraged to go back to church and it was still a novelty to the kids. But Robbie's parents weren't there. For Robbie's dad had grown up in the church and attended all through the communist era. For this teachers at school penalized him—lower marks, his future prospects tainted. Then in 1990, when it became politically correct, these same teachers returned to sit proudly in the pews each Sunday. I can't attend such a church, said Robbie's father. It had lost its truth for him. But Robbie talks of becoming a priest.

Robbie singing in Croatia forces me to hold together in one image both the terrible bleakness of our times and the tremendous hope. To have faith that these disparate pieces embody some larger meaning demands that we pitch our imaginations far beyond the political and social and religious categories we are used to. This image of Robbie can't be easily explained or reconciled, but it points the way.

Let me end with a thought from Northrop Frye. "If I had been out on the hills of Bethlehem on the night of the birth of Christ, with the angels singing to the shepherds, I think that I should not have heard any angels singing. The reason why I think so is that I do not hear them now, and there is no reason to suppose that they have stopped."[7]

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[7]Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path* (Indiana University Press, 1971).

Lecture Three
The Resurrected Imagination

(Readings: Exodus 26:1-6; 28:15-21; Revelation 10:1-7)

Several years ago, I reviewed a book called *Art of the Spirit: Contemporary Canadian Fabric Art* (Dundurn Press, 1992). It's a collection of liturgical art, art for worship—clerical vestments, altar cloths, banners, even coffin palls, coverings for coffins. The art collected in this book was all lovingly woven and quilted and stitched by women and some men for the church. The book simply bowled me over. I felt that for a Mennonite reader like me, the book should contain a warning: Beware the shock of encountering the spirit made visible. The bold designs and vibrant colours, the imaginative leaps had the effect on me of too-rich food after a life of bread and butter.

There was one Mennonite artist included in the book—Susan Shantz, now teaching in Saskatchewan. Her work was entitled "Cathedral II" but it was the only work not meant for public worship. Her multi-media piece shows a conservative Mennonite couple sitting in an enclosed space that resembles the gothic structures of grander spaces. The description in the book says that her "person-sized" construction is a play on the tension between her "imageless heritage and her own need for a more visual and sensual religious expression."

That statement captures what I've been exploring in these lectures—the tension between our imageless heritage and our need for sensual expression, for visible expressions of our faith. Ironically, one of the great liturgical art works in Canada, a 27-

foot high banner by Nancy Lou Patterson hanging in a Lutheran church in Kitchener, was stitched by Mennonite women. (Nancy Lou is also the woman who designed the magnificent, very un-Mennonite, stained glass windows in the Conrad Grebel College chapel in Waterloo.) Why do we have such "artless" sanctuaries? Is it because our Reformation spirit is still intact or do we simply lack spiritual imagination?

The Bible readings this morning illustrate the ambivalence we have inherited about art. The Old Testament soundly denounces images and any physical representations of divinity, and yet the temple is to convey all the splendour and beauty and colour they can possible muster. Only the best gems and cloths and wooden artifacts are suitable for the worship of Jahweh. We notice, also, that while three-dimensional images are firmly rejected, the Israelites certainly had no qualms about constructing glorious verbal images—the many metaphors for God, for example, and the personification of faith in stories and parables, which are really extended metaphors. The book of Revelation is especially intriguing. In John's vision, the angel says, "Don't write this down. All the mysteries will be revealed at the end of time." Meanwhile, of course, John writes furiously, giving us some of the most fantastic images in all of literature.

In these lectures we have touched on many kinds of imagination: the biblical imagination, the postmodern, the educated and the moral imagination. Earlier we spoke about different kinds of reality and the different languages they require. We talked about word and image, and the power of metaphor to suggest what can't be fully perceived. We talked about redeeming postmodern excess and holding together the contradictions of our experience. You'll notice I have been speaking as much about the religious imagination as the artistic imagination. I can't separate those two. I believe they are interchangeable in the sense that art, like faith, strives to express in word and image realities that are beyond form. Art, like faith,

engages body, emotions, mind and spirit to explore different levels of experience, different realities. The artist may not work within a Christian code, but shares with religion an instinct for the mystery within and behind, even while sometimes doubting its reality. As I said earlier, I believe that every artistic act is an assertion of the possibility of meaning. Art and faith have much to offer each other. Now I want to talk about new ways of seeing, and how we hold together the paradoxes of our faith through sacrament, image and worship.

Sacramentalism

I have a son whose thinking is decidedly unmodern. For him, the visible world, what we call the real world, is only a metaphor for what resides in his imagination. In other words, the idea of something is more real than the actualized thing—a sort of Platonism. When he was very young, he was enchanted by some beautiful roses that were growing in our front yard. They look just like real ones, he said to me. But they are real, I said. No, I mean like the ones in pictures. When he was baptized just over a year go, he said that the significance of that momentous act only sank in during the communion service which followed when he ate the bread. He said he understood for the first time that when we say "This is the bread of the world" we mean that God is actually part of the natural, physical world, the world of the senses, not only a spiritual force.

While most of us believe that God is present in the world, we tend to confine that presence to the spiritual realm, not the physical. We don't want to equate God with nature or with human beings, even though we believe that God's spirit is evident in creation. We certainly don't recognize a physical presence in the bread and wine. The new confession of faith speaks of the Lord's Supper as a "sign" of God's presence. (That's a better word than "ordinance" with its connotations of law and order. I've even seen ordinance confused with the word

"ordnance," which means military supplies.) For us, the visible presence in communion is confined to memory—the memory of Jesus who is our only image of God. Is that enough? Like the ancient Israelites, we've developed a good ear, but we remain a little wary of receiving God's grace through other sensual experience.

I remember an argument between a Catholic and Protestant over transubstantiation—the belief that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. The Protestant argued that transubstantiation is a misunderstanding of metaphor. "Religious language is always metaphor," said the Protestant. "Yours is the misunderstanding," said the Catholic. "For I know that I am not eating human flesh and drinking human blood. But I know at the same time that the bread and the wine have truly become the blood and body of Christ as I partake of them." This statement by the Catholic moves us beyond metaphor to mystery, from memory to sacrament.

One of the most disturbing religious poems I know is John Updike's "Seven Stanzas at Easter."[1] He wrote it for a religious arts festival. I find it disturbing because Updike seems to insist that the metaphor of the resurrection be understood in physical, literal terms. "Let us not mock God with metaphor," he says.

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
   reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;

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[1]Found in *Verse* (Fawcett Publications, 1965).

making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
   faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
   grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
   opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
   embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

There is some powerful reality in our faith that we cannot just leave as metaphor, says Updike. We may try to literalize it, on the one hand, or spiritualize it, on the other, but it defies both categories. It is a mystery, a miracle, and we believe it by faith. It takes us through all that we know to the "other side of reason," as someone put it. It reminds me of what my youngest son said a few years ago. He told me he was setting his alarm for sunrise on Easter morning because "I want to catch the Holy Spirit at its freshest." That's not a statement of fact or fiction—it's a vision that captures the reality of resurrection by freeing us from necessity, from the tyranny of cause and effect, by opening our eyes to a different universe. In theological terms

we might say that it opens our eyes to ontological reality—it helps us to see the reality of being, the foundation of life, behind the empirical manifestations of it. In imaginative terms, we can say that faith opens our eyes to an enchanted world, a world full of sacred magic.

That sounds almost pagan, doesn't it? One of the things that early Anabaptists rejected was the notion that certain images or certain spaces were more magical, more sacred, than others. In denouncing art and cathedrals and priestly ceremony, Anabaptists believed that they were making all of life sacred. God was glorified not only in beauty and ceremony but in the ordinary, every day things. But what happened? The magic and the mystery almost vanished altogether and we found ourselves allied with the modern spirit that secularized (de-sacralized) the world and the church. We became materialists, relegating our belief in spiritual reality mostly to Sunday morning worship. One of the ironies about atheistic communist was that the people in the East Bloc remained much less materialistic than we in the West. A Canadian who lived in Poland in the 1970s told us: "The Poles can hardly get bread or milk or butter in the shops, but they can buy flowers on every street corner." They knew what nourishes the soul.

A sacramentalist believes simply that the greater may be perceived in the lesser (the world in a grain of sand, as Blake said). To see sacred magic in the physical world is to have a sacramental view of the world. A colleague of mine, a Catholic priest who edits a Catholic paper in Saskatchewan, brings together his sacramental tradition with a keen social conscience. He sometimes sounds more Mennonite than I do. "We don't receive sacraments; we become them," he says (Andrew Britz in *Prairie Messenger*, Feb. 19, 1997). We are Christ's body in the world. Another Catholic writer talks about Christians being "a living mystery." A Mennonite friend of mine talks about the family as sacrament—there are moments in the experience of

family when the divine breaks into our lives and God takes on flesh. We embody the sacred. We are the means of God's grace to the world. That's a wonderful union of sacramental and Mennonite thinking.

Today, we see evidence of a renewed imagination among us. The environmental movement is trying to recover the sacredness of nature; spiritualist movements are discovering God in every tree and animal and human being. Current theology, particularly feminist theology, is giving heightened significance to the body as the basis of theology. These movements reveal the human yearning for a more organic view of the world in which every object is significant, even sacred. But what kind of sacramentalism is this? There's something that bothers me about it. These emphases play too easily into our culture's sanctification of body and of personal experience without enlarging our capacity to appreciate the Otherness of reality—that which lies outside ourselves and our world. We have much art of the body these days. But does it convey the spirit which gives it life?

This Advent season, I was haunted by a phrase from Hark the Herald Angels Sing: "Veiled in flesh the godhead see." Veiled in flesh. We don't usually think of the flesh as a veil. Isn't it the spirit that veils the flesh? This image turns incarnation inside out. The real, the substantial, is not the material but the spiritual. It's like the comment by Teilhard de Chardin who said, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." That's a different way of seeing. It turns the usual categories on their heads.

My younger son says: "The heaven and hell theory is vice versa to what we think." He says heaven should be thought of as depth—like the bottom of the ocean where it is purer, where there is less pollution. Above the ground it is far less pure. Good point. Sounds like Paul Tillich's emphasis on God as the ground of being, instead of the more usual image of divinity coming

down from on high. We need new ways of seeing, new ways of imagining God's presence in our world today.

Changing images

One of the things we have experienced in the past two decades or so is the intense, even primal power of images and symbols. Look what happens when we challenge the image of God as father. Or when anyone questions the virgin birth or mode of baptism. The intensity of our responses does not come from rational argument or acts of the will. Our associations with certain symbols of the faith arise from deep within us; they have shaped how we experience faith and how we think about it.

Recently a group of abuse survivors met at a retreat centre in Ontario. During worship, they were invited to symbolically lay down their burdens by placing stones around the foot of a small wooden cross. For some, the cross was a symbol of comfort because it represented Christ's own experience of abuse. For others, it triggered the most painful associations and it had to be removed. They had opposite responses to this image of the Christian faith.

"It is psychologically and spiritually unsound, and perhaps dangerous, to try to alter people's fundamental images by fiat or instruction," said Mary McDermott Shideler writing in the *Christian Century* (July 2-9, 1986). "Images are not metaphors to be interpreted; they represent profoundly personal perspectives. And we do not choose our images. They reverberate from something within us deeper than intellect or external forms."

Remember the outrage over the "Re-imagining" theology conference a few years back where Christian women imagined how they perceive God and Christ today? These women brought charges of heresy down on their heads and the church papers were in upheaval over this event. Imagine being so scared of the imagination. The event was really a lightning rod for postmodern

anxieties in the church: fear of feminism, New Age theology, inclusive language—all those things that symbolize the breakdown of certainty, of traditional values and comfortable belief. Underneath the fear is a profound uneasiness about overstepping acceptable boundaries of imagining. And it's a legitimate concern. We can't suddenly change symbols or doctrines because they don't suit us any more.

But what about symbols that become harmful or misused? Take the image of God as father. Now, no one would say that God is male (well, maybe some would) but how do we reshape that image for our time? One of the current answers is to add the image of mother or parent, or to seek out additional images of God, as nurturer, for example. Those don't get at the real problem, in my opinion. We've simply ended up in a fight over gender, which is not where we want to be. In our rigid ideological climate, God as mother is just as limiting and just as sexist as God as father. How can we move beyond that to contemplate the person of God in the 21st century? We need some radical re-imagining on that one.

I don't think we pay enough attention to the power of images. Think of baptism. For some, baptism demands a literal cleansing by water (immersion); for others it is enough to symbolize an inner cleansing with a few drops of water. But look at the biblical images of salvation—death of the old person, being reborn, cataclysmic change. I think the picture conveyed by baptism is not the water that washes but the flood that drowns. (Manitobans can relate to that one.) Can our muted practice of sprinkling really convey the power of that symbol? Another symbol that has become entirely too domesticated is the cross. If we really want to convey the meaning of the cross, why don't we erect a gallows, or even better, mount an electric chair in the front of the church?

Sometimes I think Mennonites are visually impaired when it comes to worship. I've been in sanctuaries that actually militate

against worship. We seem to think that nobody is looking; we're all too busy listening or singing. Meanwhile we unconsciously create images that speak louder than words. In the church I grew up in, my eyes were drawn to two conflicting symbols: one was the rich red-velvet curtain that lined the platform (the only colour in that stark white sanctuary); the other was the ugly little plaque with the Bible verse behind the choir loft. What did they convey, appearing together like that? One of the clearest images I have of church conferences is three people on the platform—two men who take turns leading the meeting and a woman sitting quietly and taking notes. That conveys a powerful message, one we disown in our words. Something else I've wondered about ever since I reviewed that book on liturgical art. Why is it that Mennonite women, known for their needlework and quilting, have not applied their gifts to worship? Why don't we have sewing circles producing communal art for the sanctuary? Is it simply Mennonite iconoclasm or is there a bit of that traditional hesitation to allow women's gifts behind the pulpit, as it were?

I mentioned how difficult it is to change our perceptions. But images do change and take on different meaning. Just look at the swastika—it was simply a Greek cross until 1935. Never again. The virgin Mary has taken on different meanings at different times, from glorious virgin queen to loving mother to revolutionary. In the demythologizing culture of my youth, Mary was the disgraced unwed mother whom God used for great things. If a recent sermon by my daughter is any indication, Mary today is a model not of submission or glory but of courageous faith. All of these contain part of the truth—we need all of them to see the fullness of her significance for Christians.

Sometimes it just seems easier to choose whatever meaning fits our experience or is the most politically correct at the moment. These days, God as parent is definitely more palatable than God as judge. And it's easier to speak about the Jesus of

good works than about the Christ who was before the creation of the world. You can't get a more contradictory image than Jesus Christ—fully man and fully God. It's hard to keep such clashing images together. But that's the paradoxical imagination we have inherited. Christian poet Luci Shaw talks about the God who mixes his metaphors. God's poetry is occasionally obscure in its pairing of opposites, she says. We want so badly to reconcile everything and hold truth in measurable, understandable bits, but faith isn't like that and neither is the world. At John Howard Yoder's funeral a few weeks ago, another theologian said that Yoder understood that faith has to be large enough to make room for those who disagree with us. He knew that God is to be found in our deepest enemy. That's a challenge for our deepest imagination.

In reflecting on the variety of images that inform our religious worldview, I thought about the variety of women in the Bible. Each one I thought of sent my mind spinning off in a different direction. Here's a short list: Sarah, Hagar, Rahab, Tamar, the maiden in the Song of Songs, Mary Magdalene. Together they illustrate the vast panorama the Bible invites us to consider.

Sarah may be the matriarch, but she is also a cynic and she's pretty nasty to her step-son (at least she laughs; there are so few that laugh). She is also part of the larger story, wrestling with God to claim the promise of fruitfulness and nationhood. Hagar is the classically wronged servant girl, gullible enough to believe that having her master's son would ensure her security. Rahab is the spunky adventuress, the prostitute who made it into the official genealogy of Jesus himself. Tamar's is the heartbreaking story of rape and incest in the royal family, almost unbearable to read. We often forget the lovely young maiden pining after her lover in the lyrical Song of Songs. Mary Magdalene for me invites the most speculation of any woman in the Bible, especially if one combines the several portraits that may or may not be the same woman. She is insane when she first

meets Jesus, and continues in rather bizarre behaviour (pouring out all that expensive cologne on his feet), but she is the first person Jesus wants to see after the resurrection.

At the end of the biblical story, in John's brilliant vision of the end of the world, two magnificent female images are played off against each other. "And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations.' And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Revelation 17).

Against this startling picture is the glorious vision of the "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery." Then comes the great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. "His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Revelation 12). How can you top that? I'm always amazed that Revelation made it into the Bible, especially after the sober gospels and the sermonizing of Paul. But what a way to launch the Christian imagination!

The vision of the first woman, the "mother of harlots," is part of a disturbing thread of images throughout the Old Testament.

Forget Adam's rib which has given women so much difficulty through the ages. A far more difficult image to deal with is the picture of Israel as the wife of God. Israel appears over and over again as the whoring wife, punished by the righteously angry divine husband, through the most gruesome violence imaginable: the husband (God) threatens rape, murder of her children, dismemberment, and all kinds of horrifying things. Nahum 3:5: "Behold I am against you, says the Lord of Hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face, and I will let nations look on your nakedness." What do we do with this? Do we write it off as sexist ignorance from another age? Do we forget the image and move on to the meaning of the covenant? It's a difficult one, along with all the other images of a warring, vengeful God.

But these are all part of the Bible's artistry, just as they are intrinsic to our own culture. Think of the sexism, the endless violence and abuse we absorb daily from movies and television and news media. We complain occasionally, we struggle to balance the bad with the good, and we try to explain to our kids that Christians don't act that way. We live with the images our culture offers us because they reflect part of the reality we live in. Hopefully we try to interpret, to analyze, to see the larger picture. And that's what we do with the Bible. Imaginative reading of the Bible and imaginative reading of our own culture go hand in hand for the Christian. We can reduce both to an impoverished literalism, or we can be inspired by their imaginative power.

Flannery O'Connor in 1955 wrote a novel called, *The Violent Bear It Away*. The title comes from an enigmatic verse in Matthew 11: 12: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent bear it away." The book is a truly terrifying vision of faith, as all her books are. O'Connor, a fierce believer and sceptic at the same time, wrote a lot about keeping one's mind open to a larger world. "Cultivate Christian scepticism," she said. "It will keep

you free—not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you."[2] That's a profound word for our time. We know that truth cannot be contained or enclosed; it cannot be fixed in one place and time, in one medium. It is more like a magnet, drawing us to its centre. Our creations, our images, are attempts to reveal, to give form, but we know that just as biblical images cannot enclose divinity, so our creations and imaginings remain incomplete approximations of the truth we seek.

Worship

What does all this mean for worship? There are some interesting attempts these days to expand our appreciation of the arts in liturgy. Last Easter I attended an Easter vigil which began at 11:00 p.m. on Holy Saturday. It included a candle-lit procession through the dark, ceremonies of penance and other exotic rites, and the dramatic uncovering of banners and decorating of the altar with greenery right after midnight. But the drama couldn't really take off in that drab little room, and the glorious readings got bogged down by the stumbling lay voices which sounded more intimidated than inspired by poetic power. It was all a bit awkward. But maybe that's also part of the contradiction—we mortals trying to convey the immortal.

I've talked a lot about the language of the imagination. Worship also has a language. The very least we need to know is the difference between public and private language, between the vernacular and the colloquial. The vernacular is the tongue we speak—English for most of us. Colloquial is conversational language and I suggest that it is too flimsy for public worship. That doesn't mean we have to return to the King James Bible,

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[2]From *Mystery and Manners* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969).

although on occasion we may want to. Much as I love Elizabethan language, I am convinced the church must speak in a living language, in words and images that communicate today. But that doesn't mean casual liturgy. I have a special problem with muted Bible reading and awkward translations. In some traditions, the whole congregation rises in respect when the Gospels are read. As a so-called biblical people, the least we can do is make the Bible reading a heightened moment, the dramatic focal point of worship. Familiar passages require an especially fresh presentation, maybe in our own words, so that they are heard. Public worship also demands the distance we talked about in relation to art, a stepping back from the strictly personal into more stylized form and action.

Martin Marty, that entertaining interpreter of American religious life, has said: "I prefer almost any slightly awe-inspiring and demanding forms of worship to the hummy-strummy, chummy forms one gets in the casual God-and-Jesus-I-just-wanted-you-to-know style" (*Christian Century*, Jan. 24, 1990). Liturgy and ritual is not affectation; it is an attempt to lift us above the limits of mortality and give us a glimpse of the mysterious eternal. That's what ritual and liturgical art attempts to do. Worship must nourish not only our personal emotions, but our communal soul, not only our minds but our collective imagination.

Annie Dillard, an American writer with a mystical eye, is amazed at how casually and unconsciously we gather on Sunday mornings to worship the creator of the universe. 'We should all be wearing crash helmets," she says. "Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."[3] Do

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[3]From *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (HarperCollins, 1988).

our liturgies reflect our belief in an almighty God?

Fortunately, we are becoming more self-conscious about our worship. Maybe some day we'll figure out why we accept special robes for the choir but not for the pastor, or why we use the lectionary but pay no attention to colours of the church year. We are becoming much more open to new forms and to traditional forms developed by other denominations over the centuries. It's a sign that we are losing our sectarian defensiveness. It's no coincidence that Dutch Mennonites, who never really had a sectarian identity, produced great artists and poets during the flowering of culture in the Netherlands in the 1600s. It's happening to us three centuries later. We are coming to appreciate a larger Christian tradition than just our own and our artists are forcing us to pay attention. I think that's good. But the opening up of our religious imagination begs for much more conversation between the artist and the church, between the church and culture. I hope I have contributed a little bit to that conversation.

Let us end with a hymn, like Moses did in the Deuteronomy passage we read yesterday. This hymn is a poem by David Waltner-Toews called "The editor's song."[4] It's about creativity—our creativity and the source of all creativity.

Let us sing now a hymn to the healer
physician of the broken tongue,
judge of the merciful sentence . . .

Let us sing also between the lines,
the harmony of spaces,
the resonance of what is left unsaid;
sing the witless howl, on leash,

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[4]From *The Impossible Uprooting* (McClelland & Stewart, 1995).

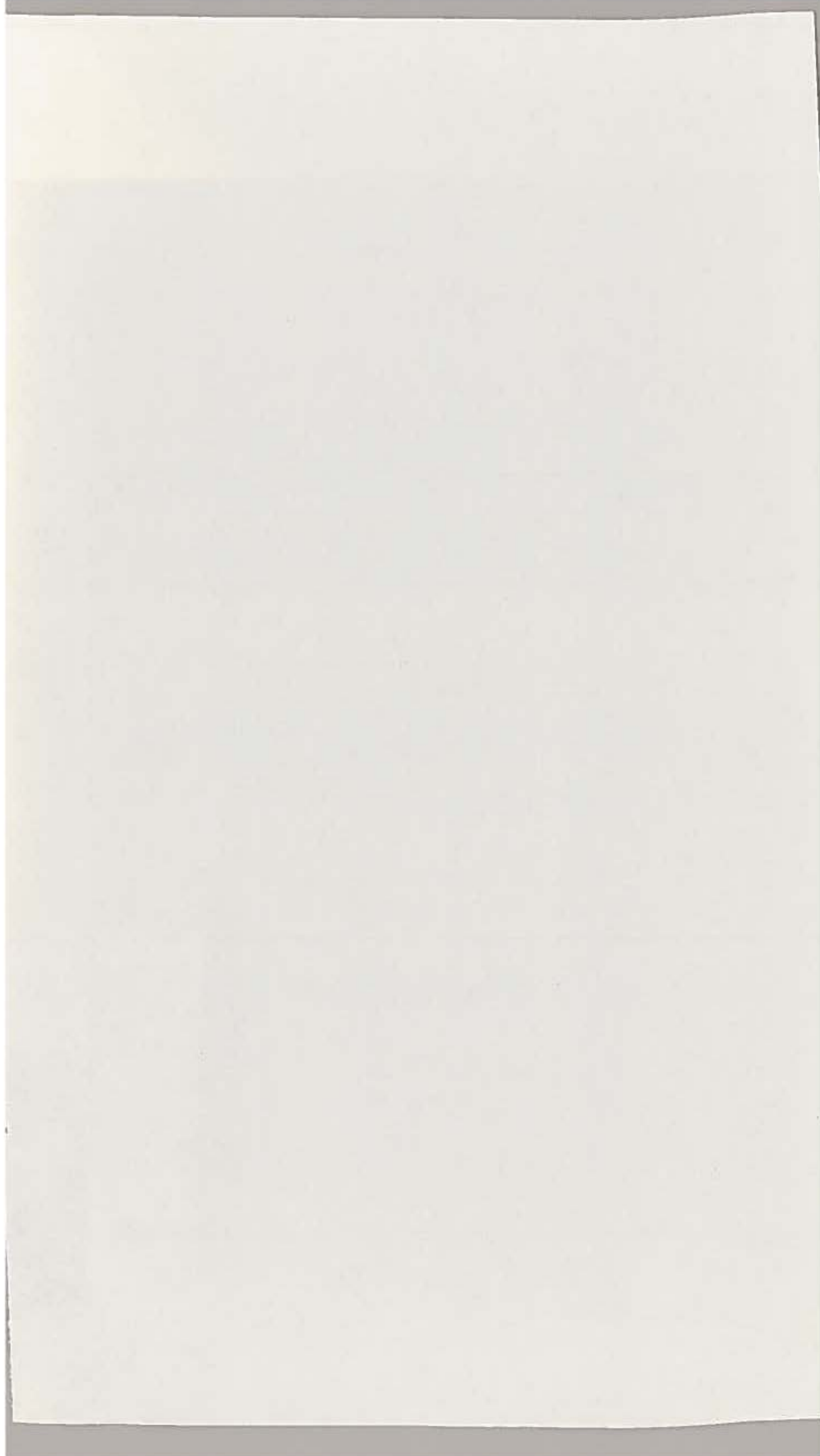
unleashed.

Let us sing to the Healer
who gathers our voice in the night
and returns it again on the Wind.
In the singing, in the returning song,
we can almost believe
in our beauty.

At the edge of the clearing
at the edge of the forest primeval
at the verge of believing
at the cliff of becoming
on the wind, turning,
our howl is returning, the round song
the word, spurning void.

In the night of our singing
the light we are given, have given,
is gathered, is given once more
in the round perfect moon of our singing.
In the pale of our night
by the wit of our tone
by the translucent bone in the teeth of our tongue

we are singing our souls into Light.



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