CHAPTER 1

Introduction: imagination, theology and visual culture

This book attempts to describe how a way of thinking about the world and God, an "imagination," that was uniquely Protestant, and in particular Reformed, developed from the Reformation to the eighteenth century. The particular focus will be on the interaction of theology and visual culture, and the way this interaction shaped the world Reformed Christians inhabited. Two problems present themselves immediately for anyone foolish enough to embark on such a project. The first has been invariably raised whenever I have tried to describe my project. Oh, came the usual response, did the Protestants have an imagination? For there is probably no more settled opinion on the part of most people, especially those with any sensitivity to religious traditions, than that the Protestant tradition (especially that part associated with Puritanism) has generally lacked what we think of as imagination. It might seem that our findings might run the risk of resembling the meager chapter that Dr. Samuel Johnson claimed to have seen in a natural history of Iceland. The chapter on snakes consisted of one sentence: "There are no snakes to be found anywhere on the island."[1]

The general feeling that Protestants lack imagination is usually connected with the view that this tradition has, in the main, not been influential in the development of the fine arts. To accept the commonly held view, outside of Protestant Holland one is hard pressed to find a part of the world where Protestant influence has been influential in the development of the fine arts in general and the visual arts in particular. Andrew Greeley has recently presented evidence for the continuing presence of this supposed handicap. Greeley claims his research on American Christians found that the worship environment of Protestant churches seems to impede the development of an artistic imagination. Comparing a sample of Catholic and Protestant churchgoers, he found that frequency of church attendance

[1] Quoted in Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religion and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 95.

correlates dramatically with fine arts involvement among Catholics, but does not correlate significantly with such activity among Protestants.[2] But that is not all. Greeley developed what he called a "grace scale," to measure people's sensitivity to religious imagery. Respondents were asked to describe their view of God – as mother versus father, lover versus judge, spouse versus master, friend versus king. For Catholics again there was a high positive correlation between a high score on the grace scale (that is a preference for the first item of these pairs) and fine arts involvement. For Protestants, it turns out, the more frequently they went to church, the lower the score on the grace scale! These findings support the assumption that Protestants seem to lack a particular kind of imagination that is usually associated with fine arts production and enjoyment.

In a similar study Peter Marsden uncovered data that provide a somewhat different perspective on these matters – one that is directly relevant to our study. Using data from the 1998 General Social Survey, Marsden found that conservative and mainline Protestants were *more* likely to feel that art brings one closer to God – 75.9 percent and 79 percent of these Protestant groups as opposed, for example, to 67.6 percent of Catholic and 62.5 percent of Jewish respondents. Even among those who claim to have experienced art in worship, Protestants again led Catholic and Jewish respondents 41.2 percent to 18.1 percent and 35 percent respectively.[3] But as in Greeley's study the figures are reversed when it comes to visiting art museums or classical music performances, fewer (especially conservative) Protestants participate in such events. So it would seem that the problem is not with art in any general sense but with particular kinds of art. There may in fact be more interest in the experience of certain arts, perhaps those that represent what might be called popular arts as opposed to "fine art."

WHAT IS THE IMAGINATION?

Clearly the common assumption that Protestants lack imagination begs the question this book seeks to address. Is it the case that the Protestant tradition has not encouraged a creative imagination, or has it encouraged a different and equally creative way of shaping the world? This immediately

[2] Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), p. 42; the grace scale is discussed on p. 43.

[3] Peter V. Marsden, "Religious Americans and the Arts in the 1990s," in Alberta Arthurs and Glenn Wallech (eds.), *Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life* (New York: The New Press, 2001); data is from the table on p. 76. In the latter comparison conservative respondents even led mainline Protestants 41.2 percent to 38.8 percent. Is this because these identify "art" with "music"?

raises the second problem this study faces: What is meant by imagination? In an important sense, of course, the modern notion of imagination began only with David Hume and Immanuel Kant, after the period this book explores. For Hume the imagination and memory play the role of guaranteeing uniformity to our experience, by maintaining in our mind images that over time tend to fade.[4] Though his writings coincide with the end of the period examined here, they arguably continue an emphasis that characterizes a Protestant way of thinking about the world and especially the working of the mind. In 1748, writing in a Scotland very much influenced by Presbyterian (Reformed) ways of thinking, he argued that a critical part of science involved discerning the various operations of the mind:

> To separate them from each other, to class them under their proper heads, and to correct all that seeming disorder in which they lie involved when made the object of reflection and inquiry . . . And if we can go no further than this *mental geography*, or delineation of the distinct parts and powers of the mind, it is at least a satisfaction to go so far.[5]

Kant went further and proposed the imagination, this mental geography, involved the capacity not only to shape our world, but to discover and, if one were an artist, to create symbols of some finality of form that is pleasurable. "The imagination," says Kant, "is namely very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it. We entertain ourselves with it when experience seems too mundane; we transform the latter."[6] As Mary Warnock describes this process: "What we perceive as sublime in nature, or what we appreciate or create in the highest art, is a symbol of something which is forever beyond it."[7] And it is precisely the imagination that connects the object to feelings of pleasure. As Kant puts it: "In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object or cognition but rather relate it by means of the imagination . . . and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure."[8]

The modern usage of imagination then is inevitably associated with creativity and the ability to appreciate, or shape, images that go beyond what is immediately visible, that give pleasure, and that usually are connected

[4] See D. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), p. 9.
[5] *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 10; emphasis added.
[6] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: 314, p. 192.
[7] Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 63.
[8] *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 204, p. 89.

with some deeper reality. Modern people mostly believe this is not only a good thing, but that it is an essential part of the way we find and make human meaning in the world. While this study seeks to avoid imposing these views on the past, such modern assumptions will obviously infect any discussion of this subject; indeed it will become clear that the historical perspective on imagination and current assumptions are related.

The most obvious continuity is in the fundamental understanding of imagination: the ability to shape mental images of things not present to the senses. From the first usage of "imagination" in the Middle Ages to the present this has been the core understanding of the word. The massive change which makes our probing difficult is represented in the fact that this function of the mind has been transformed from something negative and dangerous to a universally praised capacity. Much of this has to do with a change in the understanding of "creativity." In one sense it has always been recognized that the human mind can create images that did not previously exist. It can be creative. But, while, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such creativity is precisely its problem, this is for us its virtue.

Jonathan Edwards, for example, who did so much to develop (or at least anticipate) the modern notion of imagination, reflects this negative view. Writing in 1746 he seeks to counter some of the excesses of the recent religious awakenings. Clearly the mind can make up powerful and moving images of something that is not present to our senses, as the recent revivals had amply shown, but this, he argues, has no necessary relation to the work of God's Spirit. These "impressions which some have made on their imagination, or the imaginary ideas which they have of God or Christ, or heaven, or anything appertaining to religion have nothing in them that is spiritual or of the nature of true grace."[9] This has largely to do with the "creative" character of these experiences. By contrast the real work of God in affections has nothing to do with the emotionally striking character of such abilities, it rests squarely on the promises of God's Word, for God cannot lie. "If a sinner be once convinced of the veracity of God, and that the Scriptures are His word, he will need no more to convince and satisfy him" (p. 223). Edwards belonged to the stream of Reformed theologians who allowed imagination a role in enhancing or highlighting the work of grace. But the idea that the imagination can create the true experience of grace would have been unthinkable for him.

[9] *The Religious Affections*, vol. 11 of *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 210. He goes on to say such external ideas are the "lowest sort of ideas," since they are generated from the animal part of human nature (p. 211). Future references given as page numbers in the text.

What is unthinkable for him has become for us indispensable. We universally celebrate the power of the "imagination" to deliver us from the bondage of everyday life and live creatively. To take but one example consider William Wordsworth's lines from the end of *The Prelude*. Never have I fallen, he says, to the perceptions of "mean cares and low pursuits":

But shrunk with apprehensive jealousy
From every combination which might aid
The tendency, so potent in itself,
Of use and custom to bow down the soul
Under a growing weight of vulgar sense.
And substitute a universe of death
For that which moves with light and life informed
Actual divine and true. To fear and love,
To love in prime and chief, for here fear ends,
Be this ascribed; to early intercourse
In presence of sublime and beautiful forms.[10]

Not only are love and fear identified with this power of imagination, they are "actual divine and true." Interestingly though this love must be hallowed by a higher (divine) love, this Spiritual Love cannot act or even exist without imagination

which, in truth,
Is but another name for absolute power
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind
And reason in her exalted mood.

While this study will not be using the imagination with its modern celebration of creativity, even these widely shared cultural assumptions are significant for the developments that we are tracing. For the uniquely modern notion of "imagination" can be traced back through Kant and Hume to John Locke and René Descartes who became influential during our period. As Mary Warnock points out, these all share the assumption that to find meaning one has to turn one's attention inward, and examine the contents of the mind.[11] This assumption, in our view, owed an important debt to the characteristically Protestant way of giving the world its contour. Though it is not our purpose to describe the development of modern notions of the imagination, or to trace lines of descent in any precise way, it

[10] W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed. J. C. Maxwell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 519. The following lines are from page 521.

[11] *Imagination*, p. 13. It is true that Warnock's concern is more narrowly with epistemology. But it may be that this inward turn of Protestantism may have facilitated the increasing preoccupation with the contents of the mind. In this respect, it may not be accidental that René Descartes was a student of William Ames at the University in Franeker in the 1620s.

will become clear that we are exploring some of the antecedents that were later developed in these familiar ways.

We will use *imagination* then in the general sense of the way people give shape to their world, in particular through the images and practices that express this shape. We will be concerned more with what Germans call a *Weltbild* (world picture) than with a *Weltanschauung* (world view), or perhaps more accurately, with what the Annales historians would call a *mentalité*. In the present work of historical and practical theology we will seek to demonstrate how Reformed Protestants, in ways analogous to other religious traditions, developed an "imagination" that is a characteristic way of laying hold of the world and of God that comes to expression in their material (and especially their visual) culture. We will argue that at the Reformation a major shift in the use of the imagination took place. This was both a reaction to and a further development of various medieval devotional trends. Briefly this involved making a clean break with the visual mediation of faith the reformers inherited. This iconoclasm, however, had a positive and not only a negative influence on the developing culture. In place of previous practices the reformers promoted an internalized faith that privileged the ear over the eye, but that nevertheless embodied structures that were in themselves visual. These tendencies influenced visual culture in various ways. This transformation has often been described in terms of a loss of metaphor and the rise of a literal mindedness.[12] But we will argue with Peter Burke that this did not involve so much an abandonment of metaphor as "a change in the conception of metaphor from objective correspondence to mere subjective 'analogy'."[13] The emerging disposition involved a kind of mental and narrative structuring of the world and life according to theological realities, that resulted in a moral and ethical order which pressed into service the practices and objects of everyday life, and that issued in a unique aesthetic. These structuring principles, however, were often invisible, especially in their influence on the developing culture, and so have been misrepresented or, more often, simply overlooked. This mental orientation, we claim, made certain developments in the arts impossible, but it facilitated others. While we seek to correct misconceptions our goal is critical understanding and explanation, rather than simple approbation.

The imaginative picturing and reflection of God will be central in our discussion; for the people of this study the shaping of the world was through

[12] As John Bossy puts this commonly held view, a typographical world replaced a sacramental one (*Christianity in the West 1400–1700* [Oxford University Press, 1985], pp. 97–104).

[13] "Strengths and Weaknesses of the History and Mentalities," in *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 180.

and through theological. Their lives revolved around their relations with God in ways that modern people find difficult to conceive, a fact which in itself may account for some of the incomprehension associated with modern perspectives on this period. In this work of historical and practical theology we explore ways in which theology became effective in the lives and communities of these believers.

PROTESTANT SUSPICIONS

But surely puzzlement over the association of Protestantism and imagination cannot be eliminated by the simple expedient of changing the definition. For clearly the Protestants inherited (and further articulated) a long-standing suspicion toward "image making" – which must be central to any discussion of imagination. In many ways they did not differ greatly from Plato who believed that making images had to do with shadows rather than reality and therefore was inherently illusory. They further shared his suspicion that the faculty of "imaging" fed and watered passions, which are wild and unruly unless kept in check by reason. In portraying only the image and not the substance of reality, Plato says, "paintings and works of art in general are far removed from reality, and . . . the element in our nature which is accessible to art and responds to its advances is equally far from wisdom."[14]

This tradition of suspicion continued in the original usage of the word "imagination" in English, which antedated the Reformation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives this primary definition: "The action of imagining, or forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses." From the beginning its usage was associated with the worry that such activity would distract from or distort what was actually present to the senses. The first usage listed in the *OED* is Hampole in 1340: "Travails my soule in vayn ymagynacion." "Vain" and "imagination" were invariably associated in early usage, which well into the eighteenth century had a generally negative connotation. A related word, which often comes closer to modern ideas of imagination, is "fancy." Though it is often used by Protestants interchangeably with imagination, it more properly meant a surface delight in what is sensible, or in the specters the mind can produce. Richard Hooker in 1594 can speak of "Beasts . . . in action of sense and phancie go beyond them [men]" (*OED*). Like imagination it was associated

[14] *The Republic*, ed. Francis M. Cornford (Oxford University Press, 1945), x.602, pp. 334–5.

with the spectral or illusive productions of the mind which often, so it was feared, distracted one from the concrete life of obedience to God's truth.

Richard Sibbes, an influential Puritan professor at Cambridge University, writing in the 1620s describes the typical struggle believers had with the "imagination." In "The Soul's Conflict with itself,"[15] he notes that in our search for a well-ordered soul we often feel we lack the spiritual means to persevere. This is because, he argues, we depend too much on the imagination. This faculty, he argues, is nothing else than "a shallow apprehension of good or evil taken from the senses" (p. 178). Because, in our fallen state, judgment has yielded to imagination, we set too great a price on "sensible good things." These stir our affections and in turn our spirits, so that the life of many is nothing but "fancy." This must be counteracted by laboring to bring these "risings of the soul" into obedience to God's truth and Spirit – which reveal to us realities on which our soul can properly feed: the greatness of God, the joys of heaven and so on. In tones reminiscent of Plato he notes: "Whatever is in the world are but shadows of things in comparison of those true realities which religion affords" (p. 180). The special danger of the imagination is to present shadows as though they were real, for, Sibbes notes, it "shapes things as itself pleaseth" (p. 180.) There is another side to the use of imagination, however. Having once regained this divine perspective on things, Sibbes believes, the imagination can be reclaimed: "[The] putting of lively colours upon common truths hath oft a strong working both upon the fancy and our will and affections"(p. 184). Thus can we make fancy "serviceable to us in spiritual things" (p. 185).

So while we will be interested to discover what the suspicions toward the making of images excluded, we also want to ask what they made possible. Indeed we will inquire into the way in which particular images – the light of God, joys of heaven – did in fact structure their lives, sometimes in highly "imaginative" ways. On the basis of this, one might say it is precisely the serviceability of imagination to spiritual things that we will want to explore, both in ways these theologians intended, and, sometimes, in ways they did not.

THEOLOGY AND VISUAL CULTURE

The particular nature of this study involves theological reflection on the visual and material culture of Reformed Protestants, those particularly

[15] *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), vol. 1, pp. 130–294. Future page references in the text are from this work.

under the influence of John Calvin. Though it is primarily a work of historical theology, it will necessarily transgress onto fields occupied by people not ordinarily consulted by theologians: historians of art and popular culture. The multidisciplinary nature of the study will raise suspicions of its own and therefore calls for some explanation.

The period of history we survey, roughly the late 1400s to 1750, is one of the most important periods of religious history, and it is well plowed by historical theologians. But theologians traditionally have focused their study on texts, too often without regard to their social and cultural contexts.[16] Part of the impetus for this study lies in the need to contextualize the theological texts of this period. We want to ask: what was the effective theology of these people? This inquires not only about the theology written in texts, but the theology that actually shaped and structured believers' lives. It is increasingly recognized that an understanding of the use which is made of theological texts is as important for the study of theology as the exegesis or precise understanding of those texts. Obviously, since we deal with a period in which theological questions dominated people's minds (and imaginations!), and a period in which literacy rates were rising dramatically, theological texts play a critical role. For the culture of this time in fact one could say reading theological texts and listening to sermons made up much of what today we would call popular culture. Any study that seeks to comprehend this period must make careful use of such texts. But it should also ask: how did the people read and understand them? And, more importantly, what practices resulted?

It is typical, for example, that Lady Margaret Hoby, a prominent puritan woman living in Scarborough around 1600, read regularly *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* or theologian William Perkins alongside the Scriptures. But it is equally important to read this entry in her diary on a particular Sabbath: "I went to the Church, then I came home and praied [and] after dined. Then I read in Perkins till I went againe to the Church." Or this description of a typical day: "After privat praier I read of the bible: and . . . after dinner, I continued my ordinarie course of working, reading and dispossing of

[16] This oversimplifies a very complex field of course. An excellent recent example of a correction in this regard is Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). But see also Pierre Hadot, who argues that it is impossible to properly understand ancient texts outside of the (highly disciplined) communal practices which produced them (*Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase [University of Chicago Press, 1995]). See also Margaret R. Miles (*Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* [Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 1985]), who demonstrates that undue concentration on texts systematically excludes the perspectives of what she calls the nonlanguage users (the illiterate, who for most of the history of Christianity made up the majority of the population).

business in the House, till after 5: at which time I praied, read a sermon and examined myself."[17] Her reading was a constituent of a larger cultural world in which church attendance, sermons, private prayer and self-examination all played critical roles. The reading was a part of the devotional life by which she laid out her life and which shaped her world. Her reading no doubt illumined that world, but the structure of that world in turn influenced the ways that she interpreted what she read.

Our method, then, will be to begin our consideration of each period by listening to the prominent theological voices: John Calvin, William Ames and John Cotton, and Jonathan Edwards. Our study of their writing will seek especially to discover the theological impetus behind their attitudes toward images, the arts and visual culture more generally. A focus throughout will be developing attitudes toward the imagination. Then we will seek to describe the larger cultural practices in which these attitudes were reflected, with special attention to the visual elements of culture, and, where possible, what we today call visual art. In the earlier period at least, visual elements at times anticipated, at other times reflected, theological developments. As Craig Harbison says of the early sixteenth century, "due to [its] very suggestiveness art seems to have been an active agent in the formulation of religious thought and feeling."[18] There is no question of course of playing texts and practices, or the visual and aural, against each other.[19] Rather we will attempt to discover some ways these interacted during our period, and the significance of this for understanding their way of shaping the world. The assumption is that theological propositions were influential, though not always determinative, in the ways people constructed their lives, and that this construction, in turn, influenced the direction that theology developed. For example, the antinomian debate in the 1630s in Massachusetts was the result of some very specific teaching about God's working in individual lives. But this debate itself was to have some impact on the way theology developed and, as a result, on the cultural embodiment of that theology.

[17] Dorothy M. Meads (ed.), *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby (1599–1605)* (London: Routledge & Sons, 1930), pp. 97, 67.

[18] Craig Harbison, "Some Artistic Anticipations of Theological Thought," *Art Quarterly* n.s. 2 (1979), p. 85.

[19] Our argument will seek to nuance Walter Ong's claim that the Reformation replaced an oral with a written culture; see especially Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). It will become clear that putting things in these terms oversimplifies the dynamic way that text and oral practices interact. See above all Ruth H. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). She wants to question the whole idea that "technologies can be taken as self-standing or regarded as of themselves having consequences" (p. 12).