Playing Incarnation:
A Playful Pedagogy of Incarnate Imagination

by

Rev. Jeffrey Logan Kruck

Date: March 30, 2019

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
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ABSTRACT

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Playing Incarnation recognizes that the imagination is at the center holistic learning, and seeks to present a pedagogical model that focuses on inspiring and training the imagination through models of play. The model arose from an experience based model of learning implemented at Grace Lutheran Church of River Forest, Illinois, between 2012 and 2016; and the resulting research into neurological processes of learning. The research presented here begins with understanding how Christian education literature since the 1990’s has recognized and employed the imagination in education, finding Maria Harris’ model, presented in Teaching and Religious Imagination as foundational for a pedagogy of the imagination. Then, the imagination is explored through historical Christian thought to see how the imagination has been conceived by the western tradition of the church, drawing a theological picture of the divine imagination as a foundation for human imagination. This picture is influenced by Robin Stockitt’s Imagination and the Playfulness of God, and Jurgen Moltmann’s The Crucified God. The research then turns to understanding the neurological processes that form the imagination, following David Hogue’s Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past, and using the story of John, a student, as a case study. Finally, the structures and forms of play are explored, following Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens and Courtney Goto’s The Grace of Playing, and then using the faith education model from Grace Lutheran to understand how play structure triggers and trains the imagination in Christian forms of life. The result argues that faith education trains students’ imaginations to construe reality through the gospel, continually reinforced by experiences that practice Christian forms of life, resulting in forming a person as an icon of the Incarnation.
Dedication

I dedicate this work, first, to my wife, Kathleena, who pursues forming this world in an imagination of justice and fairness, and who continually pushes me to re-imagine each situation, and pursue wondrous possibilities. I also want to dedicate this work to Dr. Fred Edie, who has been a wonderful mentor and advisor, who not only has directed my academic imagination, but also seeks to form *incarnate imaginations* with high school students each summer through the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation.

Alongside Dr. Edie, I want to thank Dr. Timothy Crutcher, Dr. Marty Michelson, and Prof. Doug Forsberg, who have journeyed with me since my undergraduate at Southern Nazarene University, constantly keeping my theological education grounded in the work of the church, and challenging me to imagine the life of the church through the incarnate Christ. Further, I want to thank Rev. Dave Lyle, Julie Modrich, and the families of Grace Lutheran Church, for playing out Christ within our communities of need, and giving me the space and support to inspire, and become inspired by, the incarnate imaginations of the congregation. Finally, I want to thank my mother, Debbie, who taught me how to imagine the world through grace; my father, Mike, who gave me my foundational love for education and development, and my sister, Mika, who encourages me without end.
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Introduction: Forming Incarnate Imaginations

It was late. I was tired. I had corralled twelve middle school students into a meeting room, calling them away from a game of night tag. The laughter died down as we got into our circle and began to debrief from the day’s activities. We had finished working at a preschool program for homeless and impoverished children. I asked the question that I began with every night, “Where did you see God’s grace today?” The students told stories of three-year-olds that wouldn’t stop playing tag, toddlers who held onto legs, and instant-nicknames that children gave to the teens. Though many of these actions were rooted in psychological attachment issues, the middle-schoolers saw them as signs of children needing love, wanting love, asking for love, or even demanding love. And the middle schoolers witnessed that, for a very limited time, they could be that love.

Afterwards, while I tried to fall asleep on the hard church floor, I realized something profound: It was through playing with children in need that my youth realized the real, living, love of God. They played with children and accidentally played make-believe, pretending that they were icons of God’s grace. It was through the work-of-mercy of attending to homeless children’s needs that my youth touched, heard, saw, and felt the love of God in their own hands. At that moment, God’s love was real.

My students did something that is so natural for children. They imagined themselves as manifestations of God’s grace. They didn’t imagine it in a playful sense but in a reality-altering fashion. They were grace. Their imaginations were formed within a new reality full of possibilities. With this experience, their imaginations began generating possibilities of how to re-create grace in the future. They could work with children in the church. They could tutor kids at school. They could learn to become
teachers and therapists so that they could care for disenfranchised kids. They could be good parents and care for their own future children and other children in need. Suddenly, their futures were sanctified and transformed by God’s grace because God’s grace has transformed their imaginations to see these possibilities.

As teachers and faith-educators, we are called to facilitate the formation of faith and the transformation of our students’ minds. Our call to our students is, “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” and, “Let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 12:2b, Phil. 2:5 NRSV). However, adding more faith data — scripture verse memorization, theological tenets, moral codes, and holiness rules — does not renew one’s mind. Instead, it only gives Christian information to be processed by the preset logics and neural pathways in which our students and parishioners are already trained to think. Instead, we teachers must consider this question of transformation anew. The transforming of the mind is more than adjusting one’s cognitive thinking and concepts. The mind works throughout our entire bodies as thinking apparatuses. Thus, transformation of the mind is a formation of thinking patterns, habits, dispositions, and actions by providing experiences and forms of life shaped by the logic of grace. What we are transforming is a person’s imagination: their ability to perceive the world in the colors, images, forms, and possibilities of a different reality — the reality of God’s incarnate grace. As our students’ imaginations are transformed, they will begin to imagine themselves and others as bearers of God’s grace. Thus, our imaginations become incarnate imaginations, perceiving ourselves as Christians — living icons of Christ — and the world as God’s playground of grace.
Since imagination is the key concept of this work, it should be clarified here. Imagination is casually thought of as a pastime, akin to daydreaming, or something that children do when they play and explore. However, imagination is far deeper than the wanderings of the mind or a child’s undirected play. The root word of imagination is \textit{image}. The imagination is a process of the mind that recalls and forms images. In recalling images, the imagination works in tandem with memory and sensory experience. The images that it recalls are not merely visual pictures, but sounds, feelings, emotions, tastes, smells, and even previous thoughts. Our imagination depends upon our whole experience (body, mind, and soul) in order to recall images. In forming new images (visual, auditory, feelings, emotions, etc.) the imagination dissect all the images it recalls and compares them, taking pieces and forming them into new concepts. Though it seems basic, our imaginations continually work pre-consciously, as we passively observe and experience our realities, and consciously, when we actively process any information. Any form of reasoning or problem-solving is tied to the imagination, laying out steps toward future possibilities. Thus, the imagination is tied to every experience we have and possibility we employ, processing our reality and forming our possible futures.

Second, our imaginations form our realities, making us \textit{incarnate icons} of the reality we embody. The concept of incarnation will be explored in detail within the following chapters. However, when people think of icons, many of them will think of static pictures and objects that Orthodox or Catholic churches have in altars that represent a saint or person, pointing in witness to God’s divine grace. However, icons function in everyday life. Icons are anything that represent a larger reality beyond themselves. A
green light represents safety, movement, and the laws that ensure that safety. A person’s title — doctor, reverend, teacher, engineer, laborer, parent — is an icon that tells of their direct vocation and also points to the world of experience and expertise beyond them. When saying that people are icons, one means that each person is both who they are and that their form of life points to beliefs, values, cultures, traditions, and narratives beyond themselves. In the matter of faith, each Christian is an icon, being uniquely individual and pointing beyond themselves to Christ whom they represent. Imagination is foundational for a person’s function as an icon, for when one imagines who they are, or will become, they live in iconic ways pointing to that deep belief. When Christian educators work toward forming people’s imaginations in the practices, stories, and life of Christ, they are forming them as icons of Christ.

Chapter 1 explores how Christian faith-educators have provided foundational pedagogies of transformation through experiential education and Christian practices. The concept of imagination arises often in faith formation literature but without a deeper exploration of its role. We investigate various authors, leading to Jerome Berryman’s *Godly Play*, which explores the imagination in detail within the children’s classroom. Then, we move beyond the children’s classroom to the full reality of faith for all ages, considering Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass’ *Growing in the Life of Faith* and Frederick Edie’s *Book, Bath, Table, and Time*. These provide a foundation in Christian practices that gives forms of life to engage and train our imaginations in Christian logic and possibilities. Finally, Maria Harris’ *Teaching and Religious Imagination* gives us a framework for the pedagogical process of training the imagination.
Chapter 2 focuses on the concept of the imagination within an incarnate model: transcending from reality to abstract and universal concepts and descending from universal concepts into real possibilities, activities, and creations. Exploring the imagination’s philosophical development and how it works with human experience and reason from Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, and Coleridge, one finds that the imagination reproduces experience into abstract ideas (transcends) and produces possibilities into reality (descends). Then we look at Christian theology and the imagination in order to understand how our imaginations reflect God’s imagination — giving us an incarnate imagination. We explore a theological picture of God’s imagination through Robin Stockitt’s *Imagination and the Playfulness of God* as well as Jurgen Moltmann’s theology and Christology. This picture of God’s imagination allows us to understand how our human imaginations reflect God in the world. Our pedagogy of incarnate imaginations begins with and reflects God’s divine, loving, and creative imagination.

Chapter 3 looks into how the brain develops and employs the imagination through perception, memories, and active imagining, following David Hogue’s *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, James Smith’s *Imagining the Kingdom* and Harvey Whitehouse’s *Modes of Religiosity*. These authors show how perception, memory, and imagination work together to shape our view of reality and our possibilities of engagement in that reality. We will follow the journey of John, a student of mine who worked across socio-economic boundaries, and his imagination as he encounters a new environment, experiences the reality of others, imagines possibilities with them, and
creates new realities together. Here, we recognize how the imagination plays with reality and with others’ imaginations in order to create new playful realities to participate in.

Finally, Chapter 4 moves from the inner development and workings of the imagination (in chapter 3) to its function and activity in the world. The imagination functions in play. Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* lays a foundation for understanding play in all forms of life. Courtney Goto’s *The Grace of Playing* shows the spirit of play in *make-believe*, moving from formal games to informal play that negotiates and shapes reality through natural and relational improvisation. Here, the pedagogical model of *incarnate imagination* finds its functional form in developing environment for make-believe, inviting people to play together, wondering about the new truths discovered through play, and finding new form of life and reality based in grace. The world is God’s playground of grace. God invites us to imagine and play make-believe, as if we and those we play with are brothers and sisters in grace. When we play in God’s reality, our *incarnate imaginations* become icons of God’s imagination reshaping reality.
Chapter 1: Faith Forming the Incarnate Imagination

Teaching is an act of imagination. It is a way of narrating reality through images of literary archetypes, ancient myths, historical frames, mathematical logic, scientific experimentation, and personal experience. The learning environment is a microcosm of possibilities and comparisons for the student to combine, dissect, build, and form new thoughts and actions. In faith formation, the student enters a dramatic world that asks their imagination to wonder and play before the almighty God and alongside the incarnate Christ. All parishioners enter into the world of faith with their imaginations. Each Sunday, they imagine the worship service, anticipate the hymns, bring lists of prayers, and even hope for specific fellowship opportunities with friends. When they attend Bible study or prayer groups, they read the Biblical stories, imagine the questions and conversation, and prepare to pray for specific needs, hoping that God is listening and acting. Finally, when our parishioners find a worshipful experience within their everyday lives, they are inspired to imagine God’s fingerprints touching their own reality, echoing the Spirit’s voice in a friend’s words and Jesus’ actions in someone’s graceful aid.

We often excuse the imagination as childish fancy, quoting Paul in 1 Corinthians, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Cor. 13:11 NRSV). However, the imagination is not childish but the cornerstone of our faith, giving life to gospel stories, construing ourselves as characters in God’s divine drama, and seeing the world as God’s graceful playground. We never escape our childish imagination, for:

The many bodily ways by which infants and children find and make meaning are not transcended and left behind when children grow into adulthood. On the contrary,
these very same sources of meaning are carried forward into, and thus underlie and make possible, our mature acts of understanding, conceptualization, and reasoning.¹

Instead of putting our childish imagination away, we are called by Jesus to be like children: “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3b NRSV). When we come to Christ, we come as children in awe of him, imagining all the stories we have heard: miracles, parables, powerful humility, rebuking powerful leaders, and gracefully giving honor to the poor. Even more, our imaginations call forth the stories of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the empty tomb, and the scars, so that we can walk and play with the incarnate God, the hope and grace of our salvation and life. Christian educators are called to form their imaginations in the Christian faith, recognizing reality shaped by God’s grace, and inviting students to engage and play within God’s reality. By participating in God’s reality, students and teachers transform their imaginations into *incarnate imaginations* reflecting Jesus in the present.

**Imagination**

The imagination is a difficult concept to define. For many, the imagination is akin to daydreaming, fantasy, and make-believe. Children’s imaginations create play-worlds around them, seeing imaginary friends, foes, and environments to interact with. Artists use their imaginations to create artistic representations or interpretations of reality, ideas, and feelings. Fictional writers, too, belong to the realm of the imagination, dreaming of different worlds, pseudo-science, magic, and rules for reality. In all these

ways, the common definition of imagination follows St. Augustine’s divisions: images of things perceived, images called from memory and narratives, and images of reality’s frameworks (numbers, measures, diagrams, etc.). All of these are images or pictures that we are able to recall and reform. They fall short of reasoning.

However, we can glean something deeper in the common thought of the imagination. If artists use imagination to form representations and interpretations, if writers of fiction imagine full realities, and if children imagine make-believe forms of life, then the imagination functions deeper than providing images. It may begin by recalling images from our experience, but it drives us to combine all our images (archetypes, people, mathematical symbols, words, etc.) to form possibilities. William Lynch finds that the imagination is made up of “all the faculties of human beings, all our resources, not only are seeing and hearing and touching, but also our history, our education, our feelings, our wishes, our love, hate, faith and unfaith, insofar as they all go into the making of our image of the world.” In short, our imaginations arise from our experience of reality, assess and interpret reality, and forms our image of reality.

Our imaginations shape our perception of reality. When children play make-believe, they are playing real possibilities of reality, from interpreting family roles in playing house to interpreting moral frameworks in playing super-heroes. When adults work through a problem at work, they imagine possible outcomes and how to achieve them, forming a completed image of their future reality. In teaching, we explore data and stories, imaginatively combining and aligning information for possible meaning, and

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project images of possible outcomes. So, in faith formation, we are to imagine reality through the images, stories, and practices of faith. The imagination makes God’s grace through Jesus a real possibility for framing reality. This power of the imagination is hinted at in faith formation literature.

Recognizing the Imagination in Faith Formation

The imagination is key in forming a Christian framework for interpreting reality. Faith formation literature often references the imagination, assuming it plays a role in formation. However, much of the literature references the imagination without exploring the intricacies of its nature and function within faith formation.

First, there is a surface assumption about the imagination: it is a cognitive function of our intelligence. Craig Dykstra, a Leadership Education Fellow at Duke Divinity School and scholar of Christian formation, in Growing in the Life of Faith, finds that imagination is part of “intelligible action...action imbued with discernment and imagination, with understanding, purpose, and meaning...Intelligible action is full of imagery, concept, even theory.” Imagination, for Dykstra, is a piece of intelligible action, providing possible images for our discernment to judge and put into action. This surface-level imagination is the kind we think of in classrooms, in which the teacher provides data for the students’ intellect to assess and then teaches ways of interpreting

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4 Paul Ricoeur find that the imagination “has a prospective and explorative function in regard to the inherent possibilities of human beings...the imagination is par excellence, the Instituting and constituting of what is humanly possible; in Imagining the possibilities, human beings act as prophets of their own existence.” Paul Ricoeur, “The Image of God and the Epic of Man,” History and Truth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1965), 127.
that data through stories and case studies. Students then learn avenues for their intellect to imagine the data. Finally, we hope that students will put the data and interpretations learned into real action. Practically, Dykstra’s imagination as intelligible-action is like when one teaches the 10 commandments. We teach the data of the 10 commandments, having students memorize and repeat them. Then we tell stories and case studies ranging from honoring parents in a variety of parenting situations to murder in war, self-protection, and accidents. We then send students out of the classroom, hoping that they can imagine intelligible actions from our discussion.

Debra Dean Murphy, associate professor of ethics and church practices at West Virginia Wesleyan University, takes us one step beyond intelligible actions. In her work, *Teaching that Transforms*, imagination itself is a form of knowledge:

> [U]nderstood as participation, not mere contemplation... it requires bodily participation in the forms of life that shaped persons in the virtues and habits that makes such knowing meaningful and actual...To know in this way is to imagine new possibilities for existence; it is the conversion of the deepest self.⁶

Imagining is not just a cognitive premeditation of actions and their possible consequences. It is a way of understanding yourself, your role in the world, and enacting that role. This imagined role defines how you actively envision yourself. We are well-versed in imagining ourselves in the world — as father or mother, student or worker, religious or not. All of our titles that we have created determine how we imagine ourselves and the world, as doctors healing patients, as pastors mediating God’s grace for the faithful, as business persons producing for consumers, etc. Both Dykstra and Murphy understand that the imagination is a cognitive exercise in formation: providing images,

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⁶Debra Dean Murphy, *Teaching that Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 149.
archetypes, and forms for understanding; creating a self-image; and developing possibilities for how we act and practice life.

Though the imagination is cognitive, forming our self-image, it is also recognized as part of our cognitive assessment of others’ realities. Jack Mezirow, in his work, *Learning to Think Like an Adult*, explains that, “Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by ‘trying on’ another’s point of view.”7 When we are confronted by others’ stories or experiences, we create images of them within ourselves, cognitively experimenting with them. We compare them to our self-imagined reality, and we attempt to imagine the possibility of their story being true. Mezirow has recognized that we cognitively imagine other realities as possibilities, helping transform our own self-image of reality. However, he does not explore this function of the imagination further, seeing how our minds experiment and experience others’ realities.

So, we now recognize three functions of the imagination: imagining data into intelligible actions, imagining our own role and meaning in the world, and imagining others’ experiences and realities. The imagination has also been recognized as something larger than an individual’s cognition. Imagination is also something shared within a community. Murphy describes preaching as an imaginative act, “construing reality according to a particular vision, in full awareness of other options. Imagination... is a hermeneutical practice that functions... strategically, as a way of reading texts and

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construing worlds.” Preaching is intended to form a community’s understanding and interpretation of Scripture, making it a form of communal education. The communal act of preaching offers an individual’s inspired imagination of God’s reality, inviting people to imagine God’s possibilities together. Though Murphy focuses on preaching, all other communal activities in worship invite the whole congregation to imagine reality together.

Fred Edie, Duke Divinity School’s Associate Professor of Christian Education, in Book, Bath, Table, and Time, finds that the imagination creates a “liturgical vision” from Christian practices, deepening the imagination and shaping life beyond the structured times of the church. The church’s forms, stories, relationships, and practices create the basis for the imagination to experiment and practice in the world. Murphy and Edie have touched on the imagination arising from the Church’s communal practices, but they have left open the question of how those practices and experiences interact with or impact parishioners’ imaginations.

Still, the question remains of how the imagination itself uses these moments of shared reality to transform our imaginations. James Smith, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, provides the connection of self, other, community, and full reality. In Imagining the Kingdom, he draws these aspects together, saying:

I come to imagine the kingdom in certain ways — and come to desire that kingdom in unconscious, automated ways — because I have drunk up the stories of a people or a culture. I am incorporated into the habitus of a people, and that habitus is inscribed in me, because I have been immersed in the stories of the body politic. Liturgical animals are imaginative animals who live off the stuff of the imagination: stories, pictures, images, and metaphors are the poetry of our embodied existence.

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8 Murphy, Teaching that Transforms, 147.
10 Smith, Imagining the Kingdom, 126.
Smith draws all these surface interpretations of the imagination together. He recognizes that the Church’s communal imagination creates the environment for the individual to receive data and interpretive frameworks. It also provides a control environment to imaginatively experiment and practice our interpretation together, helping form our own imagined realities. Smith sets the imagination at the very core of our being, in which we identify ourselves with and live out of the stories, practices, and, most importantly, the habits of a community.

_Focusing on Imagination’s Function in Faith Formation_

If we live off the stuff of the imagination, then the imagination must be the primary, functional focus of Christian pedagogy. We also recognize that the imagination is larger than cognitive data interpretation, internalizing another’s experience, or even a community’s story and practice. All of these are components within the imagination, but the imagination is more holistic and formative. Jerome Berryman brought an imaginative and playful pedagogy into Christian childhood education in his work _Godly Play_.

“Getting involved with the imagination is always dangerous,” he explains, “It draws us into change. Seeing the world in a different way can change us as well as the world.”

Berryman has made two foundational claims about the imagination: it changes us and it shapes how we see reality. Berryman then connects the imagination to Christ, the center of our faith, saying, “Christ became the visible image of the invisible God of Genesis. Christ stimulates our imagination to know the God no one has ever seen by restoring

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God's image, which we had at the beginning but lost in the fall.”\textsuperscript{12} The core of faith formation is teaching our children to imagine Christ, as well as God and all reality through Christ. In doing so, our students’ imaginations will change them into icons of Christ and shape their reality to reflect God’s reality.

Berryman explores how the imagination functions, dividing it into three levels: experience, perception, and analysis.\textsuperscript{13} Experience is shaped pre-consciously through our fundamental categories of data reception. Perception “makes-sense” by bringing the preconscious sense-experience data into conscious awareness. This happens when one touches or thinks of a story containing water. That person perceives the water and thinks about it. Analysis is when we create images and meaning from our perception data. After perceiving water, one then thinks about it, draws up stories and memories of it, and think through various meanings — baptism, cleansing, hydration, flood, drowning, etc. These are images of realities connected to water that our imaginations can construe.

Berryman goes on to explore how imagination is the engine for creative thought and activity. For Berryman, the imagination is our adaptive ability to assimilate new experiences into our cognitive structures and accommodate new experiences by adjusting

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{13} Berryman introduces these three levels through music: “The first level admits into our experience what the sensory apparatus of the human being can take note of (such as a range of sounds). the second level of the imagination select certain bits from the sensory data of human experiencing for special recognition (music), this is perception. The third level of the imagination gives meaning to what has been selected by perception as a particular kind of perception (the mass). To begin with the most basic level, what are the fundamental categories by which human beings experience life? Answers to this question are assumed in the analysis of the second level of perception, where experience “makes sense.” The perception level and the level of fundamental categories are both assumed in the analysis of the third level, the meaning level.” Ibid., 119.
When we experience new things, our perception sorts and categorizes our experience for cognitive thinking, and then we analyze that data for meaning. When the experienced data fits into our normal categories, we assimilate it and can use it to help imagine meaning in future experiences. When the data conflicts with our categories, our imagination works either to reinterpret the data to fit, to stretch our categories to accommodate the data, or to dispose of the data. Berryman finds that this is how the imagination creates and adjusts our view of reality.

Berryman gives foundational insight into how the imagination forms and transforms a person’s faith and reality. Preconscious perception and cognitive analysis are two essential pieces of the imagination. Berryman assumes another piece but does not name or explore it: memory. David Hogue, Garrett Seminary’s professor of pastoral counseling, in Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past, renders the imaginative process as made up of perception, memory, and imagination (analysis): “Perception lets us know what's out there — what's going on in the world that is important to our survival, to our well-being. Memory maps our world and tells us where the treasures and dangers are. Imagination is the stage on which we play out what could be, the field of spontaneous play where the limitations of the real world are suspended for a time.”

Perception is the preconscious experience, unifying Berryman’s experience and

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14 Berryman, influenced by Piaget, explains this in detail, “As Jean Piaget has taught us in our time, the first step in adaptation to life is to attempt to assimilate a new situation into our present knowledge. We attempt to match the new event with what we know. When the situation is so different that assimilation cannot be done, we need to change to meet the new situation. Our response accommodates to what is new. This is a process that goes on from the level of cells to the level of complex thinking. In fact, it is this adaptive ability that gives us our complex thinking, so elegantly imagined by Piaget as the development of cognitive structures. This is surprising only because we are unaccustomed to thinking about human adaptation, both assimilation and accommodation, as the imagination in action.” Ibid., 130.

perceptive selection. Memory “draws a map,” or recalls past similar experiences for us to analyze alongside the present experience. It draws forth the data that our imaginations will analyze to assimilate, change to accommodate, or reject. Though Berryman assumes memory’s role in the imaginative process, he misses the necessary function of the memory in education. By employing memory, the imagination recalls our past narratives, influencing, reinterpreting, and even changing them with new experiences. In this way, our imaginations transform our memories, narratives, and view of reality.

Berryman’s pedagogical project assesses the world of a student’s experience in the classroom. The core of his book explores how to set up a classroom for play; how to engage the student in directed and exploratory play; how to construct classroom lessons, discussions, toys, and creative activities for children to experience; and how the work of the classroom shapes their imaginations for worship and community.\footnote{The core of Berryman’s work, found in Godly Play, chapters 2-5, focuses on in-church teaching.} Focusing on children’s education, he employs a Montessori-influenced pedagogy of play and discovery to inspire and shape children’s imaginative construal of their realities.

Though he focuses on children’s classrooms and formation, our pedagogical vision for faith formation must move beyond the classroom. Adolescents and adults are also formed by their experiences in the world beyond the classroom and their foundational memories. Their imaginations reimagine their world, memories, and reality in light of Christ. He is right that play initiates a child’s imagination to explore, assimilate, and accommodate new experiences. However, all people play in their worlds,
imaginatively exploring new experiences, reordering their memories, and adjusting their realities. Much of this work is done beyond the classroom.

In our exploration of the imagination in faith formation, we have found that one usually begins with the imagination as a cognitive function that we are aware of, an intelligible action when we are being thoughtful, curious, or creative. As a cognitive function, the imagination is isolated as the creative or fantasizing cognitive function. One may even realize that the imagination gives a person a picture of themselves and partitions their world into different realities. We realize this when we think about the compartmented realities of life: family, work, play, religion, etc. However, what many do not realize is what Smith has helped us see: that imagination is also preconscious, trained to write our realities by our habits and the biases of our community. Berryman and Hogue have helped us see how the imagination writes our reality through assimilation and accommodation, stretching and adjusting our memories and narratives to fit new experiences. The imagination is the foundation for how we consciously and unconsciously construe our reality. It is this picture of the imagination that drives us to explore the intricacies of the imagination at the core of Christian faith and how Christian pedagogy engages the imagination through playing with new experiences in the church and the world.

The Core of Faith: Incarnate Imaginations

Faith itself is an act of the imagination. Berryman places the Incarnation at the foundation of our faith-imaginations,
The Incarnation focused the fullest expression of the ambiguity of the imagination. The story of one who was completely God and completely human made the intensity of this ambiguity available to us. Even as creatures of space and time we can enter deeply into the image and life of Christ. Our story can merge with God’s story so that we could discover that we, too, are stretched on a cross, the cross of our human paradox. We are creatures of earth and sky, clay and spirit. We are an unstable mixture of the human and the divine. We need the stable paradox of Christ to stabilize our ambiguity and yet call us to use this unique quality to be creatures who are called upon to create rather than to destroy.17

It is by experiencing and imagining the Incarnation that our faith is inspired to see God’s grace as reality. The Incarnation invites our imaginations to see us in a relationship with God, to see the imago Dei within us, and to co-create the reality with God in God’s grace. Father O’Leary, in his article *Imagination: The Forgotten Dimension*, recognizes that faith “takes immense imagination to take the Incarnation literally, to identify God's signature on everything around us, to see God's face behind every face, to discover the Lover-God who comes to us disguised as our lives.”18 Here we see the necessity of our imaginations in faith. The Christian faith requires our imaginations to write our self-image, our image of others, and our full reality in witness to God’s grace. Faith requires us, as Smith said above, to live off the stuff of imagination: stories, pictures, images, metaphors, and practices shaped by the Gospel.

All people have faith that arises from their imaginations. Dykstra warns that, “We manufacture worlds of our own, of which we are the center and source.”19 We manufacture worlds. We create and form worlds out of the stories and ideologies that we trust and have tested as true. In this way, our faith becomes the framework for our imaginations. Whatever story we have faith in will inspire our imaginations to form our

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17 Ibid., 131.  
19 Ibid., 37-38.
worlds around us. The story of economics causes us to see people and relationships as transactions. The story of business creates people and relationships as producers and products. The story of nationalism creates people as citizen-servants of the nation and relationships as icons of the nation’s values. The story of the nuclear family creates people as parents and children and views all interactions as products of upbringing. And the Gospel forms people as brothers and sisters of Jesus, unified in the body of Christ, and they see their relationships as inspired by grace and reflecting God’s trinitarian love in the world. Thus, whatever ecology we live in will form our lives of faith in their structure. Therefore, faith is the gift of God’s graceful story which allows us to imagine the world as it is and what it can possibly become.

The imagination that lies at the core of the Christian faith is the sacramental imagination. This language may be foreign to many Protestant traditions, but it is foundational for Catholic theology and formation. The study On the Way to Life finds that the sacramental imagination is able to:

[G]rasp ‘similarity-in-difference’ so that things are understood in ordered relationships ... There is a sense in which the original ‘analogical relationship’ is created by God in the act of creation itself. Its source lies within the Trinitarian life in the union and distinction of persons. It finds its complete expression in the Incarnation and the gift of the Spirit, whereby all things are reconciled in God without ceasing to be themselves.20

The sacramental imagination is rooted in the Incarnation. John’s Gospel begins by acknowledging that “all things came into being” through the Word made flesh (John 1:1-5, 14 NRSV). The Incarnation re-creates reality in God’s image, unifying creation and

God’s graceful spirit. Further, the Incarnation points our imaginations to the triune nature of God in which three personas are unified and yet distinct. So, with an imagination formed by the Incarnation, we may imagine ourselves, our actions, and our whole realities as both distinct, particular realities, and as part of God’s graceful reality. The Incarnation also allows us to see how our imaginations are formed in the worshipping life of Christ’s body and remain distinct to be formed by our individual experiences. The sacramental imagination shows that our imaginations reflect the incarnate Christ and the trinity: simultaneously unique and unified to God.

Here lies the power of the imagination for forming people. We become incarnated by the reality that we imagine. Like the Triune God, we remain ourselves and yet part of a larger reality. Thus, I call it the *incarnate imagination*, the imagination that both affirms our uniqueness as a person and yet sanctifies and unifies us with the body of Christ in the reality of God’s grace. The goal of the *incarnate imagination* is found in Paul’s hymn:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5-11, NRSV).

As we are transformed by the *incarnate imagination*, we will see the possibilities of God’s graceful reality, empty ourselves of our own self-created images, and imagine ourselves as the servants of God’s grace, bringing honor and glory to all we encounter. The *incarnate imagination* allows us to be Christian, imitators of Christ, icons of Christ existing uniquely in the present while pointing to the reality of Christ.

**A Pedagogy of Incarnate Imagination**

If our imaginations function at the core of our faith, illustrating our reality through the gospel, then the pedagogical model of faith formation must focus on the imagination. Maria Harris, in *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, lays out a pedagogy of imagination, beginning with incarnation. She begins with a definition of teaching:

“Teaching, when seen as an activity of religious imagination, is the Incarnation of subject matter in ways that lead to the revelation of subject matter.”

If we are teaching the Christian faith, then we teachers must first develop an *incarnate imagination*. Here, the concept of faith’s core being the *incarnate imagination* becomes practical. Education depends upon the teacher’s own incarnation of faith. By forming our own incarnate

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imaginations, we recognize and actualize the possibilities of our faith in real life and then create possibilities for others to experience and be formed by faith.\textsuperscript{22}

The practice of teaching is an imaginative act; possibilities born from the teacher’s imagination invite the students’ imaginations to participate, play, react, and re-form. Harris presents an educational process that seems like respiration.\textsuperscript{23} First, we breathe in the world around us in contemplation. Before we engage the students, we have to be silent, see our context and our students’ contexts honestly, and allow our imaginations to see possible goals and structure possible lessons toward those goals. Here we engage in world building, creating and re-creating possible worlds of learning for our students.

Then we exhale, engaging the educational environment with our students and all the various pieces of learning. Here, we experience the learning environment uniquely, allowing ourselves and our students to interact and experiment with their environment, others, each other, and themselves. Engaging the educational environment also engages everyone’s imaginations in attempting to make sense of the environment.

Then we inhale, together, taking all the pieces that we have just experienced and pausing to give them a form and structure. Here, the experiences come together into understanding, providing a form of life, “the grounds of those ideas, the roots of learning, and the foundations of our lives: love, identity, death, intention, destiny, courage,

\textsuperscript{22} Harris says, “Essential to the teaching roll, then, is the work of creating possibilities, of handing on the belief that we have within us the capacity to alter our existence.” Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{23} Harris presents her educational model in five steps: contemplation, engagement, form-giving, emergence, and release. We will summarize its movement and reliance on the imagination. Ibid., 25-38.
hope.” As teachers, we have already contemplated some of the possibilities that may structure and form the experiences. However, we must be responsive to the students’ contemplation and imagination. The teacher may understand the limits of the forms, but they must be engaged in the playful group imagination developing possibilities. The teacher validates the students’ possible forms of life that they develop from the experience.

Then we exhale, giving space for the students to experiment on their own, testing their forms to see which ones emerge as possible and tangible. The students will seek out similar environments to test their forms and slowly branch out to more foreign environments. It is like children walking: they succeed with their first steps, fall, get frustrated, attempt the steps again, achieve more and then fail, and build confidence until they are running without thinking about it. Teachers will still act as the foundational imagination, holding onto what is possible for the students while the students struggle to see and form their own possibilities. The students’ imaginations are mastering their experiences, gaining confidence in new forms of life, and dreaming of further possibilities. Once the students have mastered their own forms, we must release them from being students and understand them also as teachers, imagining and building possible worlds for new students.

Harris’ model of education makes contemplation the foundation to each step. The spirit of the teacher’s imagination will be the foundation for learning and structure the boundaries of what is possible. It is this incarnate imagination that forms the foundation

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24 Ibid., 35.
of a newly perceived reality. Let us explore Harris model deeper: contemplation, engagement, formation, and experimentation.

Contemplation: The Teacher’s Incarnate Imagination

Contemplation requires a teacher to listen, watch, and experience the life of their congregation and community. While they are experiencing the full life of faith in their community, the teacher begins to draw together their students’ frames of reference, their greater community’s needs and desires, and the formative stories of faith, imagining how all three interact and influence each other in God’s grace. Thus, contemplation requires the teacher to imagine through three lenses: the life of faith, each person’s frame of reference, and the reality of the larger community.

First, in order to contemplate the life of faith, a teacher must be engaged in that life. For Dykstra, the life of faith is, “the way of living that is organized by faith and that flows out of faith...We live in [the life of faith] ever more fully and let it do its work in every aspect of our lives.” 25 The organization of the life of faith is the practices of the church: worship, prayer, fellowship, study, and the works of mercy. 26 Participating in the

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25 Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 19.
26 Dykstra describes the life of faith, “As the church lives true to its own practices—of prayer and studying the scripture, of worship and showing hospitality to the stranger, of feeding the hungry and feeding each other, of allowing our own hungers to be felt and fed—it participates in the work of a God who, ultimately, is the source for satisfying all hungers.” Ibid., 12. He further enumerates these practices: “Worshipping God together, telling the Christian story to one another—reading and hearing the scriptures and also the church’s experience throughout its history, interpreting together the scriptures and history of the church’s experience, praying, confessing our sin to one another, and forgiving and becoming reconciled with one another, tolerating one another’s failures and encouraging one another, carrying out specific faithful acts of service, giving generously and receiving gratefully, suffering with and for one another, providing hospitality and care, not only to one another but to strangers and enemies, listening and talking attentively, struggling together to become conscious of and to understand the nature of the context in which we live, criticizing and resisting all those powers and patterns that destroy human beings, and working together to maintain and create social structures and institutions that will sustain life.” Ibid., 42.
full life of faith continues to ground the teacher’s imagination in a living, communal, incarnational faith. These experiences provide the archetypes and models of faith that will engage and form our students’ imaginations.

Second, before attempting to engage students, a teacher must imaginatively contemplate reality from the students’ frames of reference. Mezirow recognizes that each person constructs reality from their frame of reference:

[T]he structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions...It selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, feelings, and disposition by predisposing our intentions, expectations, and purposes. It provides the context for making meaning within which we choose what and how a sensory experience is to be construed and/or appropriated.27

Our frame of reference is the core neural map shaped from our previous experiences that we access and recall to help understand our present experience.28 It is built out of our underlying predispositions that shape our points of view — our passive judgments and categories of understanding.29 Mezirow explains that our “meaning schemes commonly operate outside of awareness...They suggest a line of action that we tend to follow automatically unless brought into critical reflection.”30 Thus, students function habitually in their realities, interacting with other people and things from within their own preconscious, preconditioned understandings.31

27 Mezirow, “Learning to Think Like an Adult,” 16.
28 James K. A. Smith talks about the primary and secondary maps or repertoires that we continually employ to pre-cognitively interpret our present. Smith, Imagining the Kingdom, 115.
29 Mezirow discusses the “Habit of Mind” as our precognitive dispositions that lay at the foundation of our frame of reference. He also discusses the “points of view” that arise from our predispositions. Mezirow, “Learning to Think Like an Adult,” 17-18.
30 Ibid., 18.
31 Mezirow affirms that, “Because of such affectively encoded experience each person can be said to live in a different reality.” Ibid., 16.
By contemplating our students’ frames of reference, we must first spend time with our students, listen to their stories, watch their activities, and attempt to discover what values and assumptions are driving their imaginations. Murphy understands that every parishioner brings multiple realities, multiple frames of reference, into the life of the church. For her, “The task of the catechist is to name those powers that come into the sanctuary space with us, to acknowledge their implications for shaping worshippers, to evaluate them in light of the gospel and it's witness, and probably most important to offer when necessary effective means of resistance to them.” This task begins with contemplating from each student’s perspective in order to discover the realities that each student lives in and how these realities shape their hopes and fears. Then we contemplate engaging those realities through the life of faith to help the students learn to re-imagine them in God’s grace.

Finally, this leads to our contemplation of the larger community. All of these frames of reference, these realities, are rooted in the life of the larger community: school, work, family, and social life. The community also has a larger imagination that we all share in. In contemplating, we look at our community to discover where our students are being formed and where the community needs to encounter God’s grace. Usually the community holds both the roots of our students’ imaginations and the environments that confront and reshape their imaginations.

In drawing these three things together: the life of faith, the students’ frames of reference, and the larger community, we can develop the learning environment and

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32 Ibid., 119.
activities to engage our students and ourselves (for we will also be formed by our teaching).

_Engagement: Students’ Imaginations at Play_

Once we have contemplated and imagined the life of faith that will best shape our students’ imaginations, then we engage them in those experiences. Engagement is _We’ll learn as we play_. This mode sets up the field of play, brings out the essential pieces and tools for play, and allows the players to fidget and experiment with the pieces. The rules are introduced as we play, experience, question, and need clarification. This mode of playing is like scrimmaging, letting one build skills and recognize where they need more understanding and tuning of the game. Though frustration can arise from “not knowing how to play,” or failing due to a lack of skill, one has some context and experience with the game so that the language, rules, and nuances of the game begin to make sense.

Engaging is inviting our students to play and experiment with faithful practices, roles, and relationships in the world.

Educators structure and provide alternative realities for parishioners to experience that will cause them to bring their frames of reference into critical reflection. These realities must be comprehensive and holistic, an entire _ecology of faith_. Edie describes the ecology of faith as “not only worship life on Sundays but the entirety of the church’s life before God. Patterns for worshipping become the patterns for communal living.”

We can also turn this last phrase and show that patterns of communal living become the patterns for worshipping. The ecology of faith is a full environment — practicing mercy

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33 Edie, _Book Bath Table Time_, 7.
in the larger community, corporate worship, group learning and synthesis, and private contemplation — that we invite students to engage and live in. Engagement is inviting students to go into the world and experience realities that will challenge their primary imagined frames of reference.

This will be a foreign reality to students, and it will be immediately judged by their habited frames of reference. It is in this foreign encounter that Mezirow recognizes something key: the imagination. He explains, “Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by ‘trying on’ another's point of view.”34 Faith-educators facilitate experiences, conversations, and encounters with the reality of Christ, activating parishioners’ imaginations to ‘try on’ Christ as a reality. In doing this, students’ previously imagined frames of reference are challenged and disoriented.

**Formation: Providing Pictures, Practices, and Language for New Imaginations**

A good teacher cannot leave their students disoriented. Instead, we must work with a student to assess the pieces of their disorienting experience and help them form a new reality from it. Here is where the other pieces of the ecology of faith enter. Students have gone into the world and experienced disorienting realities. Now they come back to their church, an orienting environment, for corporate worship and group synthesis. Teachers lead students to talk about their experiences among each other. They are practicing a communal imagination, allowing each experience to be compared and interpreted by others in the group. The teacher, having engaged in the experience with

34 Mezirow, “Learning to Think Like an Adult,” 20.
the students, now offers stories from scripture to help give context to their fragments of experience. Now, they can imagine their experience in light of the Gospel and within their community. We are providing the images, pictures, stories, and metaphors to help them integrate their experience into their imagination.

Here is where worship is paramount. Murphy makes clear, “What we bring with us to worship has everything to do with how we worship and how we are shaped by the worship we offer.”35 In formation, we are intentionally providing disorienting faithful experiences for students to bring to worship, allowing worship to provide forms and frameworks for us to re-imagine their experience. “Worship requires a bodily presence and the engagement of our bodies in the actions and gestures that make the liturgy what it is. And as our bodies are habituated in to the practices that would shape us as cruciform followers of Christ, we become signs to and for the world.”36 Participating in worship gives us language, prayers, stories, and actions to help us imagine the new realities we have encountered. These forms teach us to imagine our experiences sacramentally and invite us to re-engage the world as icons of Christ. This is the goal of catechesis: to transform ourselves as reflections of Christ.37 The imagination that is inspired by worship is an integral way of knowing ourselves as Christians — little Christs.

35 Murphy, *Teaching that Transforms*, 119.
36 Ibid., 133.
37 Murphy begins her discussion of worship based catechesis with this claim, “Catechesis historically has been about the reshaping of identity and the transformation of the self into the likeness of Christ. The catechumenate of the early church was an Endeavor in such transformation, an attempt at an intentional, ongoing, Community Center, liturgically driven transformation of persons so that they might become icons of the Risen Christ. it was and is recognized, however, that this transforming work is accomplished not by the catechist, nor by the priest, nor by the catechumen herself, but by the power of God through the Holy Spirit.” Ibid., 110.
Experimentation: Students’ Incarnate Imaginations

After contemplating—engaging—forming—re-contemplating—reengaging—reforming, etc., teachers introduce experimentation. Here, we allow students to imagine their own possibilities within their new imaginations and to attempt to enact them on their own. We may facilitate relationships or opportunities for them to experiment, but we send them out on their own. This is like engagement but without the presence of the teacher to coach them while they play in their new imagined reality. The teacher facilitates the student, sends them out, and then receives them when they return to help provide formation for their experience.

Here, the student has been inspired by the communal imagination and has taken ownership of their own, unique imaginations. This is the incarnate imagination taking root. They are at the same time unified with the Trinitarian God’s community of grace and becoming an individual icon of Christ in the world. They are imagining God’s grace as real and incarnating it within their lives, actions, and possibilities in the world.

The Incarnate Imagination

As we have recognized, the imagination is core to our faith. When our imagination is formed in the image of the incarnate Christ, we cannot help but recognize God’s graceful activity and framework throughout all of creation, seeing the possibilities of grace and enacting those possibilities into reality. We imagine each person in the image of God, recognizing them as our brothers and sisters, and we enact the possibility of those relationships into reality. Finally, we recognize God’s grace within ourselves, in
our flesh and breath, and we enact the possibility that God’s grace is incarnate within us, through Christ, creating a new reality. This may be the release phase of Harris’ model: we have recognized God’s grace as the framework of all reality, and now we habitually and naturally imagine the world as a sacrament of grace.

When we can imagine God’s incarnate grace in all creation, and within ourselves, we are creating the reality of God’s grace in the world. In this way, we become icons of the incarnate Christ. Robin Stockitt, in his book *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, finds that symbols underlay the language of the imagination. Symbols and icons function by the same rule: each “partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.” A symbol or an icon is both the thing present in front of us and the thing that points to a deeper more universal meaning beyond itself — like a rock being both a rock and a burden or Sisyphean task, or the number one being a mark on a paper, a numerical value, and the winner of a competition. It is like what my middle schoolers saw (in the introduction). Homeless and neglected children needing love were children as well as an image of the universal need for grace and an offer of playful grace to the

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38 Stockitt, in explaining Coleridge’s division of the imagination, says that. “The primary imagination likewise provides a gestalt ordering of our world. It is the means by which we perceive the symbolic nature of the world.” Robin Stockitt, *Imagination and the Playfulness of God: The Theological Implications of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Definition of the Human Imagination* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 65. He continues, “If ideas are constitutive...then they are the essential shaping forces within all human knowledge. When those ideas are in need of articulation they require a vehicle for that to happen. That vehicle...is symbol.” Ibid., 82. For Stockitt, the imagination orders the sensory symbols that it receives. When we need to express an idea, especially a logical or rational idea, our imaginations call forth symbols that represent the rational idea and put them in order. Then we express this imagined order as a well reasoned idea and communicate to others so their imaginations can form a similar order.

39 Ibid., 81.

40 Stockitt explains this dual nature of a symbol, “A symbol thus refers simultaneously to that which is actually presented in front of the observer and that which remains unseen and obscured.” Ibid., 82.
middle school students. They even saw themselves as middle-school students as well as manifestations of God’s grace and receivers of the children’s grace. Our imaginations see the real world in front of us as symbols, both reality and all the possible meanings that arise from reality.

If we are formed by the incarnate imagination, then we will recognize God’s grace within every symbol of reality. Stockitt recognizes that “symbols thus possessed a sacramental quality, both pointing to and partaking in the very essence of divine truth.”41 When our imaginations are formed by faith in the incarnate God, we recognize that all reality contains the grace of God, making God’s creation an icon of the Incarnation. In doing so, we also recognize that we are icons of the incarnate Christ. When this universal meaning is tied to every real thing, we cannot help but see the graceful possibilities of all creation and enact them, pointing back to the divine grace of God. It is as Father O’Leary exclaims, “It all begins with God. God's imagination is the key to who we are. All human imagination is a reflection of the divine imagination.”42 As teachers of the faith, we must, with God’s grace, recognize and cultivate within ourselves the incarnate imagination so that we may see all reality as the ecology of faith and employ our parishioners in the life of faith so that they, too, may be transformed in the image of Christ. In order to do so, we must begin with God’s imagination and grace so that we may understand our own imaginations and rightly order their power to create.

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41 Ibid., 84.
Chapter 2: Icons of God’s Incarnate Imagination

We are creative and imaginative. We can conceive of buildings and build them, picture nature and paint it, see the mundane and transform it into an enchanted world. We are creative in building our societies and educating our young. When our children ask “Why?” we imagine answers that will both capture their imaginations and enable understanding. We create science-fair volcanoes and tornadoes, allowing children to touch, hold, and interact with these small images to experience how they work. We can also play with our children to explain, having them jump and throw their arms in the air to mimic a volcanic explosion, or spin in circles to make-believe a spinning tornado. These models and actions become icons of something greater. And so we create a small world in our children’s minds, and we create icons of meaning. The volcano becomes an icon of anger, explosion, or overflowing. The tornado becomes an icon of speed, messiness, and chaos. We create these worlds and we play in them.

Our imaginations are icons pointing to something greater. J. R. R. Tolkien recognized our unique, iconic creativity, seeing that “we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”¹ Our creativity and imagination directs us to wonder about how we were created and how the things that are greater than us were even conceived. Father O’Leary directs us to our source.

It all begins with God. God's imagination is the key to who we are. All human imagination is a reflection of the divine imagination. It is, as W. B. Yeats put it, 'our evidence of God'.... Divine imagination is wider and wilder than we could ever dream of; and it is closer and more loving than we dare hope. God's imagination is at work

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in every aspect of creation from the heart of the cosmos to the heart of the tiniest insect and in the very core of our own being. We sense the divine creativity, in a most intimate way, in our own deepest desire — the desire to create, to be radically original, to break through our limitations, to fulfil God's dream in us, to become full of divine light. We reflect the imagination of God in our passion for the possible — and for the impossible, in our refusal to be subdued, in our everlasting hope even when all seems lost.\(^2\)

The divine imagination forms our very being, inspires our creativity, and transforms us. As teachers, we seek to understand the divine imagination, contemplate it, engage our students in its patterns and concepts, and to transform our imaginations into icons of the Incarnation. The Incarnation of Jesus reveals God’s divine imagination and calls us to transform our imaginations as icons of the divine.

In developing a pedagogy of incarnate imagination, a foundational understanding of the imagination must be established. First, the *incarnate* imagination requires us to explore the Incarnation as the model for our imaginations. Here, we will draw on St. Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation* to provide us with language and a picture of the Incarnation that may help us understand the human imagination.

The model of the Incarnation will provide us with a framework for organizing Christian philosophical thought on how the imagination functions within us as reproductive and productive. This exploration will begin with Augustine’s *spiritual* imagination reaching toward transcendent ideas and Aquinas’ *material* imagination rooted in sensory experience. Then, Kant’s *productive* and *reproductive* imaginations will move the imagination from abstracting ideas to synthesizing those ideas in reality. This will give a foundation for Coleridge’s *creative* imagination, connecting the imagination’s creativity and symbolism to God’s creativity and revelation. Coleridge’s

connection of human and divine imagination moves us toward a theological exploration of the imagination.

The historical and philosophical study of the imagination gives a trajectory of thought. However, these thinkers could only consider their own thought processes when considering how the imagination works. They did not have the tools of modern neurological and biological science. Their thoughts about the imagination are correct: the imagination does reproduce images from experiences and memories, preparing them for abstract thought, and the imagination produces new, unique images and possibilities from abstract thought to employ in the real world. But, they fall short in trying to outline some form of linear flow from experience to imagination to abstract thought and then from abstract thought to imagination to experience in action. Following their philosophical trajectory, Chapter 3 will look at how modern neurological thought has understood how the imagination assesses reality, reproduces images, produces new possibilities to be acted upon. One will see that the imagination is far more complex, being constantly employed alongside our experiences, memories, rationalizations, abstractions, and our actions in the world. Further, one will see that the imagination is continually working in the preconscious background, developing possible actions and reactions from our habited neurological framework.

Second, using the model of the Incarnation and the language of reproductive and productive imagination, we will turn our attention to the divine imagination as the primary analogy for our imaginations, enabling us to possess an incarnate imagination. This section relies on Jurgen Moltmann’s picture of God’s nature in *The Crucified God*.
and on Robin Stockitt’s discussion of the divine imagination in *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*. The Incarnation not only models human imagination but the divine as well. First, we will explore the possibility of God’s reproductive imagination stemming from the divine love between Father, Son, and Spirit. Second, we will look at God’s productive imagination in creation. Then we will explore God’s continued reproductive and productive imagination within the history of God’s revelation, setting a foundation for human imagination. Finally, we will look at God’s imaginative activity in promising and creating the future, inviting us to imagine and play alongside God. Chapter 3 will continue from this exploration, seeing how the neurological complexity of the imagination causes one to be playfully creative following the divine imagination.

The final section lays out a pedagogy of incarnate imaginations stemming from the foundational divine imagination revealed in Jesus Christ. This section will return to Maria Harris’ educational framework (contemplation, engagement, formation, experimentation, and release), tracing it through the gospel narratives and teachings of Jesus. Then, we will conclude on how God’s imagination invites our imaginations into playful, incarnating creativity. This divine playfulness is the basis of the pedagogical model proposed in chapter 4, focusing on how the imagination is refined by playful learning.

**Imagining Imagination as the Incarnation**

Since our goal, as Christian educators, is to form *incarnate imaginations* within our parishioners, transforming them into icons of Christ, let us begin with the Incarnation.
as a model for understanding the imagination. Athanasius finds that the Incarnation of
the Son, the Word, draws together God’s and humanity’s realities, saying, “At one an the
same time — this is the wonder — as Man He was living a human life, and as Word He
was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son He was in constant union with the
Father.”3 In becoming incarnate, Christ descends into human life and the created order,
acting and creating within it. Simultaneously, Christ also transcends the created world in
his union with the Father. Thus, the Incarnation provides us with a model for
understanding the imagination. In some way, the imagination functions between reality
and concepts: transcending our real experiences toward abstract concepts and descending
from abstract concepts back into concrete reality.

However, Athanasius recognizes another key aspect of the Incarnation that is
essential for our model. He continues, “He sanctified the body by being in it.”4 By
descending and becoming a part of creation, the Word sanctifies both his created body
and the body of all creation. The Incarnation transforms creation, helping it transcend its
own finiteness, so that all creation can be transformed and transcend in relationship to
God. If the Incarnation is a model for understanding the imagination, then we must also
explore how the continued transcending and descending transforms us and our realities.

This model provides the necessary framework for understanding how Christian
thought has understood the imagination: as transcending from reality, descending from
abstract thought, and transformative in enabling creative activity.

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4 Ibid., 46.
Transcending from Creation toward Divine: Augustinian and Thomistic Imagination

As experiencers and thinkers, humans have long recognized that there is some connection between sensory experience and abstract reasoning. In Christianity, this connection is at the center of questions about divine revelation, creation, incarnation, and salvation. For example, “How can human experience point us to divine activity?” Or, “How can divine activity interact with the physical world?” Earlier understandings of the imagination begin with one side of the Incarnation — the human transcending to the divine. Augustine and Aquinas recognize that the imagination is rooted in physical experience, reproduces the experiential data, compares it, and elevates it to universal types or categories.

Augustine, in the fourth century, questioned how the human mind accesses and understands divine revelation. He explored the imagination in connection with memory and in understanding revelation. He believed that knowledge was gained through three sources: corporeal (sensory experience), spirit (memory and imagination), and intellect (abstract thought beyond sense images). The soul is the seat of the imagination in which,

[W]e see nothing with the eyes of the body but in the soul behold corporeal images: whether true images, representing the bodies that we have seen and still hold in memory, or fictitious images, fashioned by the power of thought. My manner of thinking about Carthage, which I know, is different from my manner of thinking about Alexandria, which I do not know...A man, a tree, the sun, or any other bodies in heaven or on earth are seen in their own proper form when present, and are thought of, when absent, in images impressed upon the soul. There are two ways of seeing

them: one through the bodily senses, the other through the spirit, in which images are contained.6

The imagination of the soul is rooted in our memory of past experiences by which we can recall images of past objects or interactions. As Augustine shows in his imagining of Carthage and Alexandria, the imagination is the power of thought in which we can recall various images from various memories (Carthage, which I know) and also the power to compare these remembered images, divide an image into its parts, or amalgamate various images into a new possibility (Alexandria, which I do not know). Though Augustine calls this act of imagination “fictitious,” it is not creating false images but is attempting to create possible images, based on real images. The imagination creates an abstract form or type of what it is trying to understand, transcending experience to universal concepts. When Augustine imagines Alexandria, it is a fictitious city made of real data from experienced streets, buildings, markets, houses, etc., and from what knowledge Augustine has of Alexandria from stories and descriptions. This imagined Alexandria must conform to the transcendent form of a city. It is fictitious, but it is striving to understand what is real.

For Augustine, the soul is the place in which a sensory object becomes a sign of its type or species.7 The soul then acts as an intermediary between the corporeal and the intellect, imaging the sensory information and elevating it from the sense-inspiration to

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7 Augustine explains signs at length in *The Fourth rule of Tichonius*. He says, “by the species the part, and by the genus the whole whose part is that which is called the species” Augustine. On *Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1958), 3.34.47. Augustine, in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, finds “there are signs, such as the images and likenesses of things, which demand an intuition of the mind to be understood; and when they are not understood he [Paul] says they are in the spirit, not in the mind.” Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 188. He further explains that the spiritual sense is “the sense of a power of the soul inferior to the mind, wherein likenesses of corporeal objects are produced.” Ibid., 189.
the possible types and species of meaning that the object may point to. It is then the job of the intellect to sift through the possibilities of the spirit’s imagination to find the true meaning of the sign. Augustine’s explanation of a sign helps us understand his divisions of knowledge and their interaction. The corporeal receives sensory knowledge which the spirit receives as a sign, arousing the spirit to recall and imagine images and possibilities relating to the sign. These imagined meanings then arouse the intellect to compare possibilities with true forms of knowledge to find understanding. For Augustine, the spiritual imagination acts as a bridge between the finite corporeal signs and the infinite intellectual forms.

While Augustine focused on the imagination as a bridge toward transcendent knowledge and ideas, Aquinas recognizes the that transcendent knowledge arises from the imagination inspired by a composite of experiences. Aquinas, influenced by Aristotle, finds that human knowledge is a cooperative composite of the corporeal body, spiritual imagination, and intellectual thought. There is an active and a passive intellect. The passive intellect is unaffected by the senses, remaining independent. The active intellect is the “higher and more noble agent which...causes the phantasms received from the senses to be actually intelligible, by a process of abstraction.” Here, one may recognize another form of knowledge, the bodily sense-experiences that one naturally and passively receives by living and acting in the world.

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8 Augustine speaks about this as a process of prophecy, saying, “Hence those to whom signs were manifested in the spirit by means of certain likenesses of corporeal objects had not yet the gift of prophecy, unless the mind had performed its function, in order that the signs might be understood...” Ibid., 189.

9 Aquinas says of Aristotle, “he held that the sense has not its proper operation without the cooperation of the body; so that to feel is not an act of the soul alone, but of the composite.” Aquinas, Summa Theologica, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 1.84.6.

10 Ibid., 1.84.6.
So, knowledge begins passively either in natural sense experience or in unaffected intellectual thought. Knowledge becomes active in the imagination, makes intelligible images from sense experience, and orders those images by abstract intellectual thought. Aquinas finds that knowledge begins with the material cause of the senses. But knowledge is made up of composite causes. The sensory material cause inspires our imaginations to recall similar patterns and forms, search for the possible agent who created or moved the material, and develop possible purposes for the material cause. The active-intellect then takes all of the imagined possibilities and orders them into something intelligible. Knowledge is dependent on the cooperation of all three stages. In this form, the imagination functions as an essential part of the whole, forming every possible image for the intellect to reason through.

Practically, the Augustinian and Thomistic imagination functions in its most basic form. It moves us in the language of metaphor, from experienced life to abstract concepts. When we experience a rock, we are able to sense its color, texture, density, size, and possible motion (if the rock was falling or rolling). Now that we have this rock, our imagination can create an image within our minds, and the imagination can recall memories of rocks that we have experienced in the past. Some of these memories may be about rocks of similar size, others of similar density, and even others of color or movement. It is here that the rock is a sign. We can sense and imagine the rock as it is and see how the rock inspires deeper categories, meaning, and possibility. The intellect then takes all of these possible meanings and reasons with them as concepts apart from the rock itself. Here is where Thomistic cooperation makes sense. The intellect is
dependent on the imagination for the abstract concepts. It is also dependent on the corporeal senses to provide the inspirational experience that can be extrapolated into intellectual concepts.

These early thoughts on the imagination help us see one way in which imagination is incarnational. The imagination is inspired by the corporeal and experiential world. In this way, the imagination breathes life into finite experiences and corporeal objects, transcending them from the immediate present, connecting them with the community of similar past experiences and objects, filling them with the possibility of future purpose and meaning. The imagination then inspires the pure intellect with these possibilities, allowing each to be given the right meaning, purpose, and function within the true image of all things. Just as Athanasius said, “He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the mind of the unseen Father.”

When God the Son became incarnate, our corporeal humanity, body and experience, were united with the infinite God. In this way, the imagination acts in the same form as the Incarnation, bridging the finite with the infinite, the corporeal with the transcendent, and elevates our material signs to their eternal possibilities and meanings within God.

Transcending and Descending: Kantian Reproductive and Productive Imagination

Whereas early Christian and scholastic thought understood the imagination as transcendent, translating the finite and corporeal to the infinite and intellectual, Kant understood the imagination as something different: as both reproductive (transcendent)

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and productive (descendent). Kant began in a similar place as classical thought, dividing knowledge into three parts: pure intuition (corporeal), synthesis (spiritual), and cognition (intellectual). 12 In short, pure intuition is the diverse experiential data of objects, synthesis is the imagination drawing together the data into a whole image, and cognition is the reasoning and abstraction about the synthesized data. The imagination, for Kant, is the first actor of cognition, synthesizing “different representations to each other and of comprehending their diversity in one cognition.” 13 The imagination synthesizes all the various categories of experience (temporal, movement, size, color, etc.) into a whole, primary concept (sign) for our cognition to reason with. It also synthesizes the experiences within ourselves — the memories of similar objects and previous cognitive understandings — with the present experience in order for our present cognition to reason with. Ernan McMullin explains, the imagination “makes possible the unity both of perception and of understanding as it combines the disparate elements of experience into a single coherent whole.” 14 The imagination is more than just a translator for the intellect. It is the synthesizing engine of reason in order for us to gain any understanding whatsoever.

The synthesizing function of the imagination works in both directions. First, it is reproductive, “subject entirely to empirical laws” in creating images from direct

12 Kant explains these categories in a similar way to Augustine’s discussion of corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual. Kant says, “The first thing which must be given to us for the sake of the a priori cognition of all objects, is the diversity of the pure intuition; the synthesis of this diversity by means of the imagination is the second; but this gives, as yet, no cognition. The conceptions which give unity to this pure synthesis, and which consist solely in the representation of this necessary synthetical unity, furnish the third requisite for the cognition of an object, and these conceptions are given by the understanding.” Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (New York: Wiley Book Co., 1943), 207.
13 Ibid., 205.
experience. This reproductive function of the imagination allows us to recall specific images, like the color, size, texture, and attitude of our pet dog. In this way, the imagination is able to reproduce many experiences and similar images for comparison and categorization.

Secondly, the imagination is productive, “an operation of the understanding on sensibility, and the first application of the understanding to objects of possible intuition.” Here, the imagination works from an abstract concept arising from our cognition and can develop possibilities of how that concept will apply to sensory data. The productive imagination is not bound by empirical rules but is free to create possible situations or experiences for a concept to play out. This is our ability to imagine what will happen if..., or, if this is true then..., working out new possible forms or activities in the corporeal world.

The imagination, then, follows the model of the Incarnation, transcending the corporeal experience into the abstract, universal intellectual forms and descending universal forms into possible corporeal experiences. In short, the imagination allows us to contemplate the abstract reasons, laws, and concepts from our experiences; and it allows us the ability to create new experiences and objects from our abstract contemplations.

Practically, the reproductive imagination follows the hellenistic form of creating metaphoric ideas from concrete experiences. For Kant, we already have the a priori categories of knowledge: texture, size, movement, color, etc. When we experience a

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16 Ibid., 270.
rock, our imaginations synthesize the experience with our categories, breaking the experience down into these categorical concepts. Then, the imagination uses each category to recall previous comparative experiences to synthesize together into universal concepts and meaning. In this way, the reproductive imagination reproduces the initial experience and comparative experiences. We can imagine a rock, recall similar rocks, and then abstract rocks into thoughts about hardness, color, texture, and even how rocks function.

The productive imagination, on the other hand, moves the opposite direction. It moves from the possibilities created by abstract concepts and seeks to produce them in tangible, functional, and experiential ways. Take the idea of movement. Our imaginations think about movement and all things that move. Then the imagination begins synthesizing all of these ideas into possibilities of new movement. We know how legs move in a rotation of stepping. We know how circular objects move in a similar rotation. We also know how pulleys move in a rotation caused by a cord or rope. It is possible that if we put all of these rotations together we can form a cooperation of movement that will allow us to move faster with less effort. In this way, we can produce a bicycle-like object, the rotation of the legs creating a rotation in a pulley system, driving larger rotations within the wheels. The imagination can bring universal concepts down into material creations.

Here we see the other side of the incarnate imagination. Just as the imagination is able to take abstract, universal, and transcendent concepts and make functional creations and relationships with them, so too does the word of God form creation. The Gospel of
John grasps the productive imagination of God’s word inherent in the Incarnation, saying “the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1b-3). The Word of God produced all things. Even further, the Word of God produced itself within creation, unifying Word and flesh together, as John testifies, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). By becoming incarnate, unifying Word and creation, God’s word produced a functional relationship, uniting the divine and human essence and experience and elevating our imaginations to see the true possibility of God’s grace. Athanasius tells us that, “God the Word, Who was united with [the body], was at the same time ordering the universe and revealing Himself through His bodily acts as not man only but God.”

God, in the Incarnation, was creating a new reality for all of creation and revealing God’s reality through produced bodily acts and relationships.

Our imaginations are icons of the Incarnation. We, too, envision possible objects, relationships, and rules for creation. Then we produce them. Like the Incarnation, we incarnate the transcendent concepts into a functional object or relationship that both shapes the framework of all creation and reveals the truth of the transcendent concept in its function. When we experience our produced objects or relationships, it will inspire our imaginations to elevate the experience back to the transcendent concept that was embodied.

17 Athanasius, On the Incarnation, 46.
**Transforming Reality: Coleridge’s Imagination Unifying Divine and Human Realities.**

We have seen how the human imagination fits the incarnational model in two ways: first, in transcending from finite creation/experiences by reproducing them in abstract and infinite concepts; and second, in descending from infinite concepts by implementing (producing) them within finite reality. Kant’s concept of the imagination helped us unify the transcendent intellect into the synthesizing and descending function of the imagination, reproducing experiences for abstract thought, and producing real objects and actions from abstract concepts. However, we still have yet to see how the imagination interacts and transforms reality as a whole.

The romantic philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge helps us understand how the imagination envisions possibilities and transform reality. For Coleridge, the primary imagination is “the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.”18 The primary imagination is the creative imagination that seeks to produce functional realities from transcendent concepts. (Coleridge uses primary as foundational, not as a level of importance.)19 It is the foundational imagination that inspires our writing, building, cooking, storytelling, programming, etc. It also provides our reality’s order and unity, synthesizing all symbols together into full understanding.20 Our primary imagination, then, is a passive imagination that continually works to synthesize all the parts of our

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19 McMullin explains, “The primary imagination is primary only in the sense of being necessary, shared by all humans, involved in knowing.” McMullin, “Enlarging Imagination,” 239.
20 Stockitt says, “The primary imagination likewise provides a gestalt ordering of our world. It is the means by which we perceive the symbolic nature of the world.” Stockitt, *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, 65.
reality into a whole, understand the literal and symbolic meaning provided by all the parts and relations within our reality, and how we become creative actors within our reality, creating functional symbols of transcendent meanings.

Simply put, the primary imagination passively allows us to understand our situation, see the possibilities within it, choose a possibility, and produce it within our situation through our actions. When we produce the possibility in reality, we transform reality by introducing new and unique possibilities. When I leave my house, I unconsciously perceive the reality of going out of my door, closing the door, and my house then being empty. I intuitively imagine the symbolic meaning of an empty house, the possible threat of theft, and what I could possibly do to avoid that. Then I produce an action from that possible meaning — I lock my door. Reality has then been changed from an unlocked door (and all its possibility) to a locked door (and all its possibility). Though this may be a habited action, the primary imagination still unconsciously goes through this reality building process. In this simple action, my imagination takes the pieces of reality, unifies them together, extrapolates possible and transcendent meanings from them, chooses a possibility, and then actualizes that possibility in an action, transforming reality.

The secondary imagination, for Coleridge, is the more active and cognitive imagination. It coexists with the primary imagination’s creative will but actively “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify.”21 The secondary imagination is the active, conscious creation of possibility. When we encounter a new

21 Ibid., 65-66.
experience or a new object, our secondary imagination engages, dissecting the experience into all of its parts, comparing them with previous experiences, and attempting to understand how all of the parts fit together into a meaningful whole. It is also active alongside abstract concepts, breaking down the concepts into their parts, comparing them with previous uses of the concepts or similar ideas, and then unifying them again into a new, whole, deeper understanding, or engaging the concept into a creative action.

When I am working with a student on a project, I engage my secondary imagination to break down the situation, discerning the student’s needs and capabilities, the project’s instructions and goals, and the data and tools needed for the project. I then compare this situation to previous similar situations. In synthesizing all this information, I can imagine the possible courses of action for the project. I then discuss the possibilities with the student and we choose a course of action. This is active creation. It is also how an artist paints, a writer writes, a chef cooks, or a builder builds. They experience things in the world and imagine possible meanings, then they understand possible meanings and create them as things in the world. Each creation transforms reality.

The imagination functions with reality through signs and symbols. Here we must recognize that what Augustine calls a *sign*, Coleridge calls a symbol. Coleridge defines a *symbol* as, “characterized...above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the
A symbol is itself, the immediate reality which it is found, but it also represents more eternal and abstract concepts. Earlier, we recognized that Augustine’s imagination (spirit) was the translator of signs from the corporeal to the intellect. Augustine defines a sign as “things used to signify something,” and then explains, “every sign is also a thing, for what is not a thing is nothing at all; but not every thing is also a sign.” Augustine recognizes that objects and events in reality are both things, present and meaningful in their immediate reality, and signs, pointing to a more universal meaning transcendent from the present. In recognizing that not all things are signs, Augustine helps us understand that a thing is what it is. It is our imaginations that move a thing from an object to a sign, connecting the immediate object with other, similar objects, and together creating the deeper meaning.

Augustine also helps us see how our imaginations turn things into signs. As we discussed earlier, Augustine explains signs through species and types. An object carries attributes within itself that connects it to other similar things (species), and it points beyond the immediately similar to the conceptually similar (types). In this way, a pencil is both a pencil like other pencils (species), but it also signifies the concept of writing and communicating (types). Therefore, a thing is a sign in that it is both itself and contains within it the possibilities of deeper and varied functions, meanings, and realities.

What Augustine calls a sign, Coleridge calls a symbol. For Coleridge, symbol is the language of the imagination, tying objective reality and transcendent concepts together. Stockitt explains that reality, for Coleridge, was a “balance of opposites: the old

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22 Stockitt quoting Coleridge. Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 81.
23 Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 1.2.2.
and the new, the same and the different, real and ideal, sensuous and spiritual, temporal and eternal, immanent and transcendent. These apparent dichotomies were not seen as being in opposition...but were regarded as being in polar tension.”\(^{24}\) Simply put, reality is made of both the immediate, objective present and the transcendent, universal concepts acting and reacting in tension with each other. This is the exact nature of a symbol: both an objective thing and a transcendent reality together. It is the imagination that unifies the objective present and transcendent concepts together into reality. The imagination, “takes symbols drawn from the external world of the senses and unites them with ideas proposed by reason. Imagination has therefore an inter-connecting instrumentality” in transforming reality.\(^{25}\) We know that the imagination connects objective signs to transcendent meaning. However, Coleridge also found that humans are creative. When we create, we make signs. When we have an idea it is articulated through a sign (whether by word, action, or object).\(^{26}\) When we express our ideas, we express

the outward expression of an inward mental image...it also correlates directly with and participates in the external reality that the internal image has initiated. By judicious and creative use of the imagination humankind is capable of forming something that is truly new, a symbol that unites the oneness of all things within and behind the multiplicity of the many.\(^{27}\)

Thus, by enacting concepts in reality, we actualize a possibility as real, and what we create points to that deeper possibility within the new reality. When we create something, we create the actual thing and imbue it with all the possibility that our

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\(^{24}\) Stockitt, *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, 70.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 72.
\(^{26}\) Stockitt explains, “If ideas are constitutive...then they are the essential shaping forces within all human knowledge. When those ideas are in need of articulation they require a vehicle for that to happen. That vehicle...is symbol.” Ibid., 82.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 82.
imagination utilized to form it. We participate in transforming reality through our imagination’s interpretation and actualization.

When I plan my wife’s birthday, I am imagining a possible reality and enacting that possibility into objective reality. I recognize that my imagination understands the concept of a birthday from my past experiences. I also recognize the objective reality that there is a singular day on which my wife was born, and we celebrate it yearly. These realities inspire within me the transcendent concepts of celebration, love, marriage, community, laughter, etc. Then, I take these concepts and imagine how they fit together to create a new celebration of my wife’s birthday. I see all the possible ways to celebrate, and then I choose one. I choose a day and time for this possibility to become a reality, invite friends and family to come and participate in this reality, choose the food, drink, and activities that will shape our experience of this reality. Then, this possibility that I imagined becomes a reality, bearing within it the real experience of the transcendent concepts: family and friends come together in love to celebrate my wife as a community. The event that we enact is both an immediate reality and transcendent, connecting to celebrations and birthdays throughout time. It transforms reality by providing a new experience of these transcendent meanings, reinterpreting our past memories, and projecting new future possibilities.

When we imagine a possibility from transcendent concepts and enact it, we are incarnating those concepts into reality. A birthday party is incarnate with the concepts of family, friends, love, celebration, marriage, etc. In this way, enacted realities are signs possessing “a sacramental quality, both pointing to and partaking in the very essence of
divine truth.” (emphasis added). We understand the *sacramental quality* in the written words of humans when they witness to God in Scripture, bearing God’s grace and truth. We recognize it in the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ or the baptismal waters become the passage from death to life. Our actions are also sacramental, containing within them the conceptual meaning behind them. In this way, our imaginations are icons of the Incarnation. When we worshipfully enact the concept of grace into reality by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and imprisoned, and providing for the poor, each action is a sign pointing to the deep reality of God’s grace in Christ. If our imaginations are formed by the concepts of God’s grace, mercy, wisdom, and justice, then our actions will incarnate those things in reality. “The imagination,” for Coleridge, “repeats in a finite way what God does in an infinite way. It walks the earth but touches the heavens as it does so. It is as if the human imagination is described as being God’s co-worker on earth both mirroring and sharing in the activity of the divine.”

Our minds may become the mind of Christ if we imagine it so (Phil. 2:5).

**Incarnate Imagination and the Divine Imagination**

We have seen how the Incarnation provides a model for our understanding of the imagination: transcendent (reproductive), descendent (productive), and transformative.

- Transcendent translation: Augustinian thought calls the imagination *spiritual knowledge*. It translates experience into signs pointing to more abstract and universal concepts.

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28 Ibid., 84.
29 Ibid., 65.
- Transcendent order: Thomistic thought found that the imagination allows material experience and the rational intellect to cooperate, giving form to experience so that the intellect can order it correctly.

- From transcendent reproduction to descendent production: Kantian imagination drew experience and intellect together through synthesis, constructing experience within our intellectual categories, and ordering our intellectual categories by our experience, in order to achieve understanding and produce actions or objects from our ideas.

- Transforming reality: Coleridge’s imagination goes beyond Kantian cognitive synthesis. Here the imagination synthesizes present reality with transcendent concepts in order to develop possibilities for creating whole realities.

The imagination has moved from service to intellectual thought, to the bridge between ideas and experience, then to the engine of inner cognitive understanding, and, finally, to the foundation of understanding the world and creating within it. Further, the intellect is not independent of our experiences, but it depends on them as the foundation for imaginative intellectual abstraction. The philosophical history of the imagination has moved from a siloed intellectual reality, in which experience, imagination, and intellect were all separate, to a interdependent intellectual reality, in which all three pieces are part of the same process. Chapter 3 will further explore makeup of the brain processes that requires this interdependency. We have moved from an activity of the inner self-transcendence to a process of holistic understanding and activity within reality.
While the imagination began as a one-way process to elevate our understanding to the transcendent, we’ve discovered that the imagination is more incarnational, drawing our present reality and the transcendent together in order to imagine and enact possibilities into creation. In this way, the human imagination functions as an icon of the divine incarnation in which God’s transcendent Word unified with a real body and participated in temporal reality in order to create and enact possibilities of God’s grace and life within our reality.

Since we are exploring a pedagogy of *incarnate imagination*, we should explore the shape of the divine imagination that becomes incarnate within us. If the human imagination is an icon of the divine incarnation, then we should attempt to articulate a picture of the divine imagination that enables and underlies our transformation. We must first recognize that we are bound to our imaginations. Any picture of God that we attempt will be both a reproduction of our experiences and memories that witness to God and a production of possibilities about God that help form reality. Second, only a picture of the divine imagination can be provided to aid the pedagogical model of the incarnate imagination. This picture is a threshold to a larger systematic-theological project investigating the graceful imagination of God. What is proposed here is an informed imaginative picture of the divine imagination. This presentation relies on Karl Barth’s picture of divine revelation in *Church Dogmatics*, Jurgen Moltmann’s depiction of God’s nature in Christ from *The Crucified God*, and Robin Stockitt’s exploration of the divine imagination in *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*. Though there are other
theological pictures of the divine essence and will, these sources provide us with language and metaphors that allow the language of imagination to apply to God.

Our imagining of the divine imagination will follow the model of the Incarnation that we have used so far: transcending from experienced reality to divine possibility, wondering about the possibilities of the divine essence, descending from divine possibilities to reality, and the promise of divine possibilities to transform our reality.

Transcending: We will begin with the Incarnation as a model for understanding God’s imagination. By starting with the Incarnation, we begin where the human imagination begins: in our experience. In exploring God’s activity in human experience, we will transcend reality and wonder about God’s essence.

Wonder: We will attempt to imagine the trinitarian essence of the divine imagination. The dynamic loving relationships of the trinity set the foundation for the divine imagination, providing a foundational analogy for the essence of our imagination.

Descending: We will trace God’s productive imagination throughout creation and history, culminating in the model of the Incarnation. In every instance the Incarnation is the constant model of God’s creative imagination.

Transformation: We see that each creative act of God transforms reality. These acts are promises that imagine the future in divine possibilities. They are also invitations for us to imagine, create, and play in reality alongside God.
Beginning in Reality: God’s Incarnate Activity Inspires Our Imaginations

Using our imaginations, let us begin with the things that we know. As Christians, our faith and imaginations should always begin with God’s revelation through Jesus Christ. We have experienced the stories of the gospels, enacted the dramas of Christmas and Easter’s Holy Week, practiced the words, and spoken the lessons of Jesus. These experiences are the foundation of our ability to imagine Jesus and, thus, to wonder about God. Further, we believe that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, fully God and fully human who lived in our reality. So, we begin with Jesus because Jesus is the fullness of God’s revelation. We see God the Father fully through the Son. Karl Barth finds that God’s “Revelation in fact does not differ from the person of Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in him. To say revelation is to say ‘the word became flesh.’”

Therefore, all imaginings that we have of God either begin with Jesus’ life and witness and raise our imaginations to the transcendent God, or produce the image of Christ when we synthesize the concepts of God. In short, anytime we imagine about God it must look like Christ, following the Incarnational model.

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30 As the previous discussion of imagination makes clear, human knowledge and imagination begin with our experiences and what we know. Jurgen Moltmann begins his exploration of Jesus by investigating the economic revelation of God. He says, “According to ancient theological doctrine, the order of knowing (ratio cognoscendi) works in the opposite direction from the order of being (ratio essendi). What is the last thing for human knowledge is the first with regard to being. Whereas Jesus is not recognizable as the Son of God until his death on the cross and his resurrection, in the order of being he is the Son of God before this history takes place. All knowledge begins inductively ‘from below’ and is a posteriori, and all historical knowledge is post factum; but that which is to be known precedes it.” Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 91.


32 John 1:18, 14:6-12.

Jesus, as Immanuel, God with us, is the apex of God’s imagination. In Kantian terms, it is the Trinity’s productive imagination that witnessed created reality, saw the possibility of sending the Son on earth, and enacted that possibility in the event of the Incarnation. We must be clear that God did not create the Son in Jesus but that the Father, Son, and Spirit, together, imagined this possibility and acted together in the Son becoming incarnate in Jesus, in a specific time in history. Stockitt exclaims,

Nowhere is the notion of the imaginative particularity of God more startlingly realized than in the Incarnation itself...The imaginative creativity of God that is so apparent within the created order is demonstrated supremely in the novel, surprising, unexpected, and unpredictable intervention of God in humanity with the Word made flesh in Bethlehem.\(^{34}\) We are able to see the imagination of God come to fruition in Jesus Christ. And it is in Jesus Christ that we see God reveal God’s true persona. Moltmann explains that, in the Incarnation, “the divine nature is originally identical with the person of Christ...the divine nature is at work in Christ not as a nature, but as a person.”\(^ {35}\) God’s nature is transcendent and, thus, something that our imaginations must be directed toward. God’s personhood is functional and relatable, something that can be experienced. Our imaginations can experience the person of God in Christ, pointing us to God’s true nature. But, we must acknowledge the limit of our imagination. Though God’s revelation is true, our imaginations can only draw possible pictures of God. If these pictures reflect Christ, then they are symbols of God’s reality, but they are still human-made symbols.

\(^{34}\) Stockitt, *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, 152.
\(^{35}\) Moltmann. *The Crucified God*, 231. Robert Jenson understands God as *person*, saying, “The God of Israel claims to precede this structure, to have and introduce a specific and integral personal identity prior to our projections. He claims to be an actual person, who therefore indeed essentially dwells in community but is *who he is* for his community. The one who rescued Israel from Egypt and raised our Lord Jesus from the dead is, if not a double illusion, the God of sovereign election, whose reality among us is determined by his free decision and thus is located in events contingent within the cultures to which they occur.” Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 53.
Christ incarnate is both God and a God-communicated symbol. “The divine generation of symbol is most explicitly seen in the events of the life of Christ,” Stockitt expounds,

In Christ, the invisible God is made visible; the infinite is made present in the finite and the eternal within the temporal. The events of the life of Christ are the visible and historical part of an invisible and eternal redemptive plan. The actions of Christ in scripture are continuous with the activity of Christ within each person… Whilst Christ stood before people and revealed God to them, he did so as God. There was a perfect correspondence between what Christ represented symbolically and the one he represented.36

Through God’s imaginative creativity God dwells among us as a person and as God.

Similarly, when I act in a situation I am at the same time myself within the situation and a symbol of my whole self — my entire history and personality. Thus, the Trinity’s productive imagination created a possibility for God to communicate God’s self among us in the incarnate Christ. This means that Christ, as God, inspires our imaginations to journey toward God, beginning in possibilities grounded in Christ.

Transcendent Imagination: Imagining God from God’s Productive Activity

The Incarnation is the result of God’s productive imagination, living with us and revealing God’s trinitarian persons among us. By acting and becoming incarnate, we can recognize that the Trinity acted upon a possibility. The Trinity’s productive imagination invites us to imagine God through reproducing God’s witness in reality, transcending these witnesses to wonder about the divine truth. In acting out an imagined possibility, the Triune God has touched the human imagination, inspiring us to wonder about the

36 Stockitt explains Christ as God’s symbol using Swiatecka’s The Idea of Symbol. Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 144.
Trinitarian possibility. Here, we will look at a picture of the Triune God’s activity in the
death and resurrection of Jesus and wonder about the possibility of God’s essence.

Here, we will follow Moltmann’s picture of the Trinitarian personalities and
relationships as he sees them revealed in the death and resurrection. Though there are
other depictions of God’s nature within the death and resurrection, we will use
Moltmann’s because it reveals God’s inner-trinitarian experience as a foundation for the
divine imagination.

In the Incarnation, God reveals God’s self as a person, living with us, interacting
with us, reacting to us, and even being acted upon by us to the point of death. We
recognize Jesus’ activities and life as the life of God through the death and resurrection.

The experience of the disciples as they encountered the risen Christ creates a new reality
that redefines all their previous experiences with Jesus. Moltmann shows this re-
imagining of Jesus, saying, “By his resurrection Jesus is qualified in his person to be the
Christ of God. So his suffering and death must be understood to be the suffering and
death of the Christ of God.”

Though some may interpret the death and resurrection as God’s actions upon the human Jesus, denying
Jesus’ divinity, the resurrection is often pointed to as the re-defining revelation of Jesus as the divinely
incarnate Christ. Karl Barth claims, “Revealing could obviously not be ascribed to His existence as such.
His existence as such is indeed given up to death, and it is in this way, from death, from this frontier, since
the Crucified was raised again, that He is manifested as the Son of God.” Barth, Church Dogmatics I.1,
323. N. T. Wright claims clearly, “Without the resurrection...it is simply inconceivable that anyone would
have regarded Jesus as Messiah, especially if they had not regarded him thus beforehand… Granted that the
resurrection of Jesus would force his followers to re-evaluate the meaning of his crucifixion, it would not
have given to him, his life or his death a ‘messianic’ meaning had such a meaning not been in some way
Wright helps us see that Jesus had revealed his messiahship (and, I would argue, his divinity) in his
teaching and works. Though these experiences presented the data of Jesus’ divinity, Wright shows us that
the resurrection caused the re-imagining of that data to reveal the picture of the divinely incarnate Christ.

Moltmann, The Crucified God, 182.
reveals to them the full meaning of his identity. We can hear their imaginations process this new reality — “If Jesus is risen then his promises of the suffering Messiah were true. If Jesus is risen, then all of his words and actions were also actions of God. If Jesus is risen, then it means he is not just a son of God like all people, but he is the Son of God. If Jesus is risen, then when he said “The Father and I are one,” he meant that he is in someway divine as the Father (John 10:30 NRSV). Surely Jesus is the Son of God!”

We may also imagine the death of Jesus as more than the death of a human person but the death of God. The ‘death of God’ means that God experienced death within God’s self as only the divine can experience. Thus, it is true that God experienced the Son’s death on the cross, but we may only imagine how this is possible within our own limitations.

The cross reveals an image of God’s personhood. We hear the Son cry out to the Father in abandonment, in love and forgiveness for all people, and in surrender of his spirit. Moltmann clarifies, “When Christ, God’s son, suffers death, the Father of Jesus suffers the death of his only, his beloved Son...Christ’s passion lays hold of God himself too, and becomes God’s passion.” Passion is an apt illustration for God’s self-revelation. It entails both love and suffering, great joy and great sorrow. However, A person can only experience suffering or love, passion, in relation to another person, event, or thing. The event of the cross creates the environment for passion as the Father,

42 Moltmann gives this double meaning of passion: “The word passion has the double meaning of suffering and overwhelming feeling and ardour; and because of this double sense, it is extremely well suited to express the central truth of the Christian faith.” Ibid., 44.
Son, and humanity to relate and struggle with one another. The death and resurrection of
Christ reveal that God is persons, Father and Son, in an active relationship. And within
this relationship we find the foundation of the Trinity. The passion shows that,

The Son suffers in his love being forsaken by the Father as he dies. The Father
suffers in his love the grief of the death of the Son. Whatever proceeds from the
event between the Father and the Son must be...the spirit of the surrender of the
Father and the Son, as the spirit which creates love for forsaken men, as the spirit
which brings the dead alive.\textsuperscript{43}

The death and resurrection of Jesus calls us to imagine the love of God originating in the
perfect love of the Father, Son, and Spirit, in constant, perfect relationships with each
other.

\textit{Wonder toward the Essence of Imagination: God’s Love as the source of Possibility}

Our imaginative journey has started in our experience of God’s revelation in the
incarnate Christ, reproducing its stories and concepts. We have begun our transcendent
wondering, moving from these stories to the possible nature of God. We have pictured
God as the trinitarian persons acting together in life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
Now, we will imaginatively wonder about the Trinitarian persons’ essential nature and
the possibility of divine imagination. In imagining the essence of the divine imagination,
we are also discovering the core of our incarnational model of the imagination: the
dynamic grace that imagines and produces divine possibilities.

The Incarnation is the product of the divine imagination. The death and
resurrection of Jesus invites us to imagine the possibility the Incarnation, as well as to the
divine trinitarian relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit. It is here that we can see a

\textsuperscript{43} Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}, 245.
picture of God’s transcendent imagination revealed. Stockitt explains that for the divine to will any product of creation it requires a personality, “for only a person is capable of willing.” An object cannot will or act on its own. A person can will and act out that will, employing objects and other persons in the processes willed. A fork cannot will food onto itself. I, as a person, can will the event of eating dinner with my wife, and, in so doing, I can put food onto the fork.

However, for God to be a person, God, “must be in relationship with the Other, yet that Other must also be intimately connected to the Absolute Will.” Here we see the other that is connected to God’s absolute will — the Father is other to the Son and Spirit, the Son is other to the Father and Spirit, and the Spirit is other to the Father and Son. The essence of the Trinity holds within it all possibility of being, including its own. The Father eternally begets the Son, the other. The Son, as the divine Word, is eternally begotten and other from the Father. The Spirit is the eternal love shared between self and other, Father and Son, Son and Father. The Trinity is both the essential being of God and the constant will of God. The three persons are in perfect loving relation with each other and that loving relation is the will of God for God's self.

44 Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 106.
46 Stockitt uses Coleridge’s language of Identity, Ipseity, Alterity, and Community. “Identity (Godhead)—absolute subjectivity, whose only attribute is the good...essentially causative of all possible true being (including its own).
-Ipseity (Father)—The eternally self-affirmant, self-affirmed; “The I AM who i am,” of the “I shall be that I will be;” the Father. In the eternal act of self affirmation, the Good as the HOly ONe, co-eternally begets.
-Alterity (Son)—The Supreme being.. The supreme reason: the Son; the WOrd; whose attribute is True; … the relativity objective, deitas objectiva in relation to the I Am as the deitas subjective; the divine objectivity...The great idea needs only for its completion a co-eternal which is both, that is, relatively objective to the subjective and relatively subjective to the objective.
-Community—The eternal life, which is love; the Spirit; relatively to the Father, the Spirit of Holiness, the Holy Spirit; relatively to the Son, the Spirit of truth, whose attribute is wisdom. Good in the reality of the True, in the form of actual Life.
Ibid., 107-108.
It is out of these relationships and will that we can conceive of God’s imagination. Willing is the productive imagination’s final act. There must be an imagined possibility that the will can produce. If God were only one, static being, God’s possibilities would also be static. It is akin to the predestinarian position of God’s one, infinite act of creation, which leaves no possibility in creation beyond God’s singularly willed reality. If God is one dynamic being made up of three persons in perfect loving relation, then there is possibility. These possibilities arise out of the continual actions and reactions within the perfect relations. Within the Trinity, we can see God’s self-activity as a basis for God’s productive imagination. First is the experience of perfect love, which requires a self and an other to be in relation. Because otherness exists between the Father, Son, and Spirit, each person of the trinity perfectly loves the other two. This love of the other allows the possibility of God loving something other than God. Second, God is active: the Father’s eternal begetting, the Son’s eternal begotteness, and the Spirit’s eternal loving respiration. This eternal loving activity within the Trinity, eternal begetting/begotten, holds the possibility of begetting something beyond God. Thus, the loving activity within the trinity holds within it the possibility of creating and loving creation. Therefore, God’s trinitarian relationships provide a picture of possibilities, God can imagine loving beyond God’s self, and all the possibilities of others that may receive God’s love. In imagining these possibilities, God then chooses and wills certain possibilities into existence, exercising God’s productive imagination.

Now, we have pictured a possibility of the divine imagination that is essential for the incarnate imagination. God’s unifying, trinitarian grace is the dynamic and perfect
experience of God within God’s self. This divine self-experience inspires the divine imagination to reproduce these experiences continually. In the imaginative reproduction of the divine experience within God’s self, God imagines possibilities to produce love both within God and beyond God’s self, in creation. The divine imagination’s possibility is created in us as creatures and invites us to participate. In this way, the divine imagination lays the foundation for the reproductive and productive human imagination.

Descendent Imagination: God’s Graceful Imagination Producing and Relating to Creation

We have imaginatively reproduced and wondered about God’s divine imagination, full of graceful possibilities, and we have received a glimpse at the core of our imaginations. We have followed one side of the incarnate model of the imagination: transcending toward the divine. Now, we must follow the other side of the model: descending back to creation to see how the possibility of the divine imagination produces our reality. By seeing how the divine imagination produces reality, we begin to understand how our imaginations participate in God’s production of reality.

Each result of God’s productive imagination reflects the Incarnation. “It is possible to perceive the imagination of God as a direct derivative of his love,” Stockitt claims, “in that it is the medium, the conduit, by which God’s love penetrates the world of the sinner and is the ground of his immanence ensuring no loss of his transcendence.”47 The first is creation, in which God’s Word forms material creation and orders it in God’s good will, incarnating God’s love, order, and wisdom in the very

47 Ibid., 114.
framework of creation.\textsuperscript{48} When God creates humanity, God does so in God’s image.\textsuperscript{49} God imagines the possibility of an image of God, a sign of God in some way reflecting back to God. God then produces that image in humanity. Once creation is formed, God lives in relation with creation. In this relationship, God is imagining the future of all creation and the future of God’s relationship with creation. On Sinai, God reveals God's self to Moses as I Am who I Am.\textsuperscript{50} Stockitt finds that this is the foundation of God’s imagination:

\begin{quote}
The...imagination rests upon the self-designation of God in Exod 3, ‘I AM who I AM.’...The phrase ‘I AM who I AM,’ formed in the imperfect tense in the original Hebrew, is normally used to indicate an uncompleted action...This suggests the the self-disclosure of God is to be understood as ongoing, being continually renewed and refreshed.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

God’s name suggests that God is perfectly God and yet consistently imaginative and creative both of creation and of God’s self. We can trust that God will come and act and that God’s activity will be perfectly unique to the situation, creating new possibilities for both us and God.

It is also in Exodus 3 that God reveals the nature of how God relates to creation: God sees, hears, knows, and comes alongside us to act.\textsuperscript{52} God moves from a productive imagination to a reproductive imagination. God sees and hears—experiences—all creation, especially the situations that are unjust, acting against God’s created order of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Proverbs 8:22-31. Wisdom speaks of herself as the master worker, keeping all things ordered to God’s assignments.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Genesis 1:26-27.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Exodus 3:14.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 128.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Exodus 3:7-8.
\end{itemize}
In seeing and hearing, God knows each person’s situation. This kind of knowing is an imaginative knowing in which God reproduces our situation within God's
self. From this reproductive imagination, God turns to productive imagining. God knows the possibilities of our situations, and God acts on those possibilities, coming alongside us and creating that possibility as reality. In this way, God set the Israelites free from captivity in Egypt, re-created them in the waters of the Reed Sea, and renamed them as a “priestly kingdom and holy nation” (Exod. 19:6 NRSV).

God’s graceful imagination culminates where we began, in the Incarnation. God has seen, heard, and known all of human history. God has come with us in semi-incarnate ways, through pillars of fire and smoke, manna, prophets, kings, foreigners, widows, orphans, and even enemies. We can see God’s imagination pointing toward the true incarnation in Jesus Christ. Stockitt finds that:

God’s projection of himself into the state of the other who is a sinner is a profoundly imaginative activity, based on his deep understanding and empathy for the person standing before him. In this imaginative penetration, God does not lose any of himself nor does he become the other. He remains distinct and transcendent yet displays all of his attributes within an imaginative engagement.54

ourselves in powerlessness, but in his own free power, in His innermost being: moved and touched by Himself, i.e., open, ready, inclined to compassion with another’s suffering and therefore to assistance, impelled to take the initiative to relieve this distress.” Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics II.1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 370. Moltmann echoes Barth’s concept, saying, “If love is the acceptance of the other without regard to one’s own well-being, then it contains within itself the possibility of sharing in suffering and freedom to suffer as a result of the otherness of the other. Incapability of suffering in this sense would contradict the fundamental Christian assertion that God is love...The one who is capable of love is also capable of suffering, for he also opens himself to the suffering which is involved in love, and yet remains superior to it by virtue of his love.” Moltmann, The Crucified God, 230.

Thus, we find that if God is trinity, then the trinity is made of three persons. These three persons must relate to each other as other in order to be persons. This continual relatedness is the essence of the trinity as love. Since perfect love is the essence of the trinity, perfection must be understood as dynamic acting and reacting to each other. This dynamic action and reaction creates possibilities for love to be actualized. In this way, we can say that God perfectly and continually experiences love within God’s self. Creation is an actualization of possibility created by God’s love to create the other external to God. In order for God to perfectly love creation, God must act and react with creation, experiencing the love and suffering of creation, and allowing creation to experience the full love of God in their continual relatedness. Thus, the God of perfect love experiences God’s creation.  

54 Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 113.
God’s imaginative activity in the Incarnation shows that God can both experience the human condition within God's self while also maintaining God’s perfect persona.

We can recognize when our imaginations take on someone else’s condition while also maintaining our own personality. It is empathy. Hogue shows us how we are able to empathize: “The brain automatically and unconsciously rehearses the movement as though it is performing the act itself and then draws the distinctions between the self and the other as a way to understand the experience of the other.”55 We do this unconsciously, recreating the experiences of others in our minds, re-imaging them as if we are experiencing it ourselves, and yet recognizing that we are still ourselves. However, God is able to do this in a way that we are not. God becomes incarnate, becomes one of us, enters into our experience and takes it as God’s own, actual experience.56 And yet God remains God. This is the wonder of the divine imagination that our human imaginations reflect and bear witness.

Transforming Reality: The Divine Imagination as Promise, Invitation, and Play

Having looked at the divine imagination through the incarnate model, we have transcended from our reality and witness to God toward the divine imagination. In wondering about God’s essence and imagination, we pictured God’s dynamic love as the foundation for God’s imaginative possibilities. Then, we descended from God’s graceful imagination to God’s producing graceful possibilities into reality. These possibilities are

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55 Hogue, Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past, 41.
56 Stockitt emphasizes this, saying, “When God acts...in Christ, he makes himself immanent towards humanity, he draws close in order to empathize, to understand, to sit exactly where humanity sits in all its frailty and woundedness. This personal action on the part of God is made without insisting on a reciprocal and corresponding response.” Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 113.
the foundation of our realities and our imaginations. Now, we will look at the final piece of the incarnate model of the imagination: creativity.

The Incarnation of God in Christ is the definitive revelation of God’s imagination. It is the surprising act that shows God’s graceful creativity. By becoming incarnate, God dwells with God’s creation, with us, and inspires our imaginations to see the possibilities of God’s grace. God’s grace is the Word that is incarnate among us, the same word that created all things and continues to give life to all creation. The beauty of God’s imagination is that it is graceful possibility arising from God’s self. It is not necessary nor dependent on anything but God’s essential grace.

God’s essential grace is revealed in the incarnate life of Jesus. Jesus lived with his disciples, acting and reacting, inviting, engaging, and re-engaging them. Each invitation and engagement was a surprise for the disciples. The call to follow, the miracles, the humbling lessons, the transfiguration, and the death and resurrection were all surprises that engaged the disciples’ imaginations to see the possibilities from God’s grace. Stockitt finds that, “The element of novelty and surprise that the Incarnation evokes is surely indicative of the creative playfulness of the Father and Son in their mission.”

The way that the Incarnation plays with us, engaging our imaginations, shows us how God’s grace is imaginative and playful within all of God’s activity.

All creation is an act of God’s graceful imagination. God did not create out of necessity. If God needed the world, God would not be free, but dependent on creation. Nor did creation arise out of God as some divine accident, without God’s will, and thus without meaning. Instead, “When [God] creates something that is not god but also not

57 Ibid., 152-153.
nothing, then this must have its ground not in itself but in God’s good will or pleasure.”

God’s good will and pleasure is rooted in the shared grace between Father, Son, and Spirit. God’s grace and pleasure allowed God to imagine the possibility of creation and, thus, create. And God calls it good. Stockitt clarifies, “The response of God to what he had created was that it gave him pleasure to behold.” God’s imagination was rooted in God’s grace and so too was God’s imaginative creation, forming all things in grace.

It is like a child drawing, humming, or chasing an invisible being in their yard: imaginatively creative in pure pleasure. Proverbs 8:30-31 tells us of God’s wisdom delighting in creation: “I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race” (NRSV). Here we receive an imaginative and poetic witness to God’s nature in creation. The description of wisdom is a source of delight and playfulness, playing in God’s presence, inspiring God’s graceful pleasure, and playing among God’s creation. In some way God the Father and God the Logos are playing in, among, and with creation. And this is the basis of who we are as creation. We are God’s delight and joy, players and partakers in God’s graceful imagination, playing with God and delighting in God’s good possibilities.

59 Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 137.
60 The hebrew word used for “Rejoice” is מְשַׂחֶקֶת the Piel Participle of מַשָּׂחַ which may be translated as “Play, Sport” F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, The Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 965. Stockitt provides this definition for rejoice, as well as expounds on the playful nature of wisdom, saying, “The prevailing characteristic of this wisdom is described as his source of delight (sha’sha’a) and playfulness (sachaq). Wisdom plays before the face of or in the presence of Yahweh, a highly suggestive theatrical image with wisdom as the actor playing for and delighting in Yahweh who enjoys the performance. The Sapiential tradition thus depicts creation in a dramatic and intensely loving manner. The entire portrayal is filled with a sense of delight and appreciation both for the creator and for creation itself.” Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 141.
And God continues to play within creation. God’s creativity comes through spoken words, arising from God’s imagination. God sees all possibilities within creation, and God speaks creatively to us and with us. These creative words of God are promises. Now, we must be aware that God’s promises are often cast as covenants. When God establishes the covenant in Exodus 34, God begins with God’s naming of God’s self. The name is a promise, that God is and will be a God of חֶסֶד (chesed: covenantally-faithful love), which entails love and forgiveness to the thousandth generation, but punishment for those who break the covenant to the third and fourth generation (Ex. 34:6-7). Here, we see that God’s covenantal promise holds the possibilities of creation and destruction within it. God’s promises function as both destruction and creation, as Jeremiah 1:10 makes clear “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (NRSV). Promises are pure acts of

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61 Moltmann explains the marks of a promise:
- A promise is a declaration which announces the coming of a reality that does not yet exist.
- The promise binds man to the future and gives him a sense for history.
- The history which is initiated and determined by promise does not consist in cyclic recurrence, but has a definite trend towards the promised and outstanding fulfilment.
- If the word is a word of promise, then that means that this word has not yet found a reality congruous with it, but that on the contrary it stands in contradiction to the reality open to experience now and heretofore.
- The word of promise therefore always creates and interval of tension between the uttering and the redeeming of the promise. In so doing it provides man with a peculiar area of freedom to obey or disobey, to be hopeful or resigned.
- The fulfilments can very well contain an element of newness and surprise over against the promise as it was received.
- Experience of history gave them a constantly new and wider interpretations.


We can see that a promise is an act of the imagination in that it sees a possible reality and announces it into existence. In promising, we then shape our reality and interpret our past memories in light of this real future possibility.

62 Here, there is a place for further exploration and research on the theology of sin and the imagination. Each person’s imagination is a great gift from God, a piece of the imago Dei, that allows us to dream and create new realities, and that enables us to incarnate another’s experience while maintaining our own personhood. These possibilities for the imagination make it the gift from God that allows us to be co-creators with God, or that allows us to create realities and gods, construing ourselves as the ultimate
imagination. The imagination sees possibilities that arise from present reality and then chooses one. In choosing a possibility, the imagination moves us to will it into reality. When we promise, we verbalize a possibility as if it is reality, and we create the future. In striving to create this future, we begin to imagine our present and our past in light of the promise. We trace the trajectory of the promise through our history and into the future. In this way, a promise both creates the future and re-creates the present.

God speaks words of promise. Abraham’s entire history was re-narrated when God made the covenant promise that he would be the father of many nations and a blessing to the world. The Israelite slaves’ received God’s promise of redemption and becoming a priestly kingdom and holy nation, and it re-created the meaning of their slavery. Manna, quail, water, and Torah were all promises of a future formed and sustained by God, created in small ways in the present through daily bread and teaching.

Alongside God’s promise of life to the Hebrew slaves, was the promise of destruction to Pharaoh and Egypt. This promise resulted in plagues, disease, and death, climaxing in the waters of the Reed Sea drowning Pharaoh’s army. God’s promises also sent Israel and Judah into exile, due to the reality produced by the Israelites. In Ezekiel 10:18-19, God’s presence departs from the temple of Israel, abandoning them to the

creators. The King James translation of the bible often translates imagination alongside sinfulness: Gen. 6:5 “that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”; Gen. 8:21 “the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth”; Deut. 31:21 “And it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are befallen them, that this song shall testify against them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed: for I know their imagination which they go about, even now, before I have brought them into the land which I sware”; Prov. 6:18 “A heart that deviseth wicked imaginations”; Jer. 7:24 “But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward”; etc. Our imaginations can transcend our human finiteness toward the infinite and graceful God, the source of all possibility. It can also confine us to ourselves, distorting our view of reality, and elevating our own creative powers to godhood. Our goal, in faith formation, is to direct the imagination toward its source, beginning each person on the never ending journey toward the beautiful vision of God and graceful relationships with God, and shaping all reality around us in its wake.
promise of exile. However, God’s creative promise continues in the midst of destruction and exile. Ezekiel 37’s vision of God’s breath reconstituting the bones of Israel speaks a promise of new creation held within the promise of exile and destruction.

At the apex of God’s promises is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Here, God imagines and promises a new future in the kingdom of God. Through Jesus, God invites us into the promise, to imagine the future through God’s grace. Jesus walks with us, engages us, and inspires us to play new forms of life with God and each other. Every word and act of Jesus is a promise that shapes our imaginations. The resurrection is the fullness of God’s imagination and promise, showing us God’s grace playing within our world, inspiring love and care for all creation, and inviting us all to play in God’s imagination, an imagination that humble service is true power, that grace is reality, and that playing in grace is path to true life.

**The Imaginative God and Forming Incarnate Imaginations**

Using the model of the Incarnation (transcending, descending, and transforming), we have seen how our historical understanding of the imagination follows the Incarnation. Our reproductive imagination reproduces our real experiences, dissects them, categorizes them, and then transcends them toward abstract and universal concepts. Our productive imaginations draw together possibilities from our universal concepts and descend them into reality through our activity. In actualizing new possibilities in reality, we transform reality and give rise to further possibilities.
Then, we used the model of the Incarnation to imaginatively investigate the possibility of the divine imagination, in order to form a foundational model for our imaginations. We reproduced the witnesses of God’s grace in our reality, found them imaged in the incarnate Christ, and then transcended these concepts toward the divine essence. We wondered about the divine essence, attempting to synthesize and draw a picture of God’s dynamic and perfect grace as the foundation of the divine imagination. Then we descended alongside God’s productive imagination, seeing how God created divine possibilities in creation. Finally, we saw how God’s divine imagination invites us to transform reality, playing in God’s imagination and promises of the future.

Now we turn to the incarnate Christ as a foundational model for the pedagogy of *incarnate imagination*. We have seen the larger scale of how God’s divine imagination sets the foundation for all creation and creative activity, including our imaginations. However, by focusing on Jesus’ pedagogy, we will see how God invites and forms our imaginations to participate in God’s divine imagination as icons of God’s imagination.

By entering into creation and incarnating the experiences of creation, God becomes the basis of faith formation. As we saw in the first chapter, teachers must be like God, becoming incarnate in the worlds of our students and incarnating the subject matter within ourselves.63 Using Maria Harris’ model for imaginative teaching, we will see how Jesus, the incarnate Christ, formed his disciples’ imagination (and continues to form ours).64

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63 Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*. xv
64 This model was described in Chapter 1, pages 22-31. Harris presents her educational model in five steps: contemplation, engagement, form-giving, emergence, and release. Ibid., 25-38.
Contemplation:

As God saw and heard us, entered into and experienced the full human experience, God knew our context fully. By entering into our context, God contemplated it fully and was able to imagine all the possibilities to reconcile us to God and reform us in God’s image. We can see this time of contemplation in the desert temptations of Christ, as Christ experienced the temptation of self-sustenance in providing bread from stones, public-power in calling angels to save him publicly, and political power in bowing down to the power of the world. In the desert, Jesus is silent for 40 days, being led by the spirit into the wilderness, and Jesus contemplates his own reality and the reality of all humanity.

First, Jesus confronts his own humanity in his hunger and thirst. In so doing, he faces the temptations of hunger and thirst of Israel in the wilderness and the reality of God’s provision of manna from the dew and water from a rock. He recognizes widows and orphans: Ruth as she goes to Boaz’s fields and gleans the fruit left behind to feed herself and Naomi, or the widow that Elijah visits and God’s provision of bread. He knows what it is to be poor and need the basics of human life. These are temptations to steal or to be like Pharaoh and build storehouses for food while others starve.

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65 Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13. N. T. Wright understands this as a struggle with Jesus’ self, “The struggle is precisely about the nature of Jesus’ vocation and ministry. The pull of hunger, the lure of cheap and quick ‘success’, the desire to change the vocation to be the light of the world into the vocation to bring all nations under his powerful rule by other means—all of these would easily combine into the temptation to doubt the nature of the vocation of which he had been sure at the time of John’s baptism. If you are the son of God…” Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 458. The fact that this was a temptation to the Word of God incarnate, the Word by which all things were created, it was a temptation not only to the person of Jesus, but also to the very framework of reality. If you are the son of God… This is a temptation to reshape reality in a different divine imagination—not by God’s love, but by God’s power and control.

66 Hare spells out the connections with the Torah in his commentary on Matthew. Douglas R. A. Hare, Interpretation: Matthew (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 24-26.
Second, Jesus confronts how to trust in God: will he test God for physical signs of angels, or will he trust in God’s wisdom? Will he attempt to manipulate God as an idol to act on his behalf? This is the temptation of the golden calf and of the prophets of Baal who danced and cut themselves on Mount Carmel. Will he seek to control the spirits of the world to act in his favor?

Finally, he contemplates the situation of the world around him, the violence of armies, the power of Caesar, the economics of Rome, and the oppression of others. He knows the reality of oppression under Pharaoh, under Assyria, under Babylon, and under Macedonia. In this is the history of Israel’s and Judah’s kings making treaties with the nations for power. And each time it resulted in exile or occupation. These are possibilities of violence, uprising, and coercion. They are also the possibilities of service, peace, and of normal people. In this imagination, Christ perfectly imagines the world and God’s presence within it, trusting God to provide the grace of daily bread, to wisely order the world, and to gracefully rule all creation. The Incarnation rightly imagines all the realities that we live amidst in the world and the true reality of God.

*Engaging Forms, Forming Engagement*

*Engagement:* Jesus then engages those around him in the reality of God. Immediately after returning from the wilderness, Jesus announces the kingdom’s reality and its goals. He first goes into the synagogue, the community that should already be immersed in this imagination, and reads from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV). Jesus then announces these words as a new reality: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:20 NRSV). However, this first invitation fails and those in the synagogue force Jesus out. Then, Jesus goes out into the Israelite community on his own, living in the imagination of the kingdom. Demons are cast out, the sick are healed, and Jesus continues to proclaim the reality of the kingdom. Jesus does something radically different. Instead of calling those who should be formed by God’s imagination, Jesus engages those on the margins of the community: fishermen, tax collectors, women, etc. Jesus calls them, and they respond immediately, leaving everything and following Jesus.67

Engagement goes beyond the mere invitation to follow. It is the teacher’s job to engage the students’ bodies in imaginative actions and their minds in imaginative interpretations of reality. Jesus does this by engaging his followers in the formative symbols of the people: purity, sabbath, Torah, and temple. These symbols “formed the boundary fence around the people of Israel, the nation of the Jews.”68 Jesus’ imagination understood that Israel was formed by a concept of holiness in which they were set apart and purified for God. Within this concept also lived the fear that purity was only given by God and that contact with anything impure transferred the impurity onto them, making them unholy. However, Jesus reimagined holiness, where, “holiness, not uncleanness, was understood to be contagious. Holiness — the power of the holy, of the sacred —

68 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 388.
was understood as a transforming power.” Holiness touches and transforms the imagination by engaging with us as we are and engaging us with others in need of God’s grace.

The first activities that Jesus engaged the disciples were part of the invitation. We find, in Luke 5, that Jesus calls the first disciples, then heals lepers and a paralytic, and then calls Levi, the tax collector. By engaging the disciples as witnesses of these healings, Jesus announces to them a deeper truth, “restoration to membership in Israel of those who, through sickness or whatever, had been excluded as ritually unclean. The healings thus function in exact parallel with the welcome of sinners.” The disciples’ understandings of belonging to God are both affirmed and challenged to imagine something greater. Those things which exclude a person from belonging — illnesses, handicaps, and sinfulness — can be touched by God’s grace and transformed. Even fishermen, tax collectors, widows, and prostitutes belong to God first.

Jesus also engages the disciples in reimagining the sabbath’s rest and restoration. In Luke 6, we find that Jesus invites the disciples to pluck and eat grain on the Sabbath and to witness Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath. These actions broke Sabbath law by working but are not antithetical to Sabbath rest. Instead, they are the fulfillment of Sabbath rest by including all in God’s rest: the hungry may eat and the handicapped are restored. Jesus finds that “the sabbath day was the most appropriate day, because that day celebrated release from captivity, from bondage, as well as from work.”

70 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 191.
71 Ibid., 394.
Form-Giving: After engaging the disciples by inviting them on the journey and having them witness Jesus’ reimagining of God’s invitation and Sabbath, Jesus then gives a time of form-giving. Form-giving is the act of drawing together the students’ experiences with formative concepts in order to reimagine core concepts and beliefs and provide a new form of life. Luke 6:20-49 is a lesson of form-giving. Here Jesus provides the core of his imagination, the grace of God. Grace becomes the defining framework of Jesus’ imagination, and Jesus invites the disciples to contemplate this grace and test out its forms in their lives. Jesus calls us to “love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36 NRSV). Here, we must notice that Jesus rephrases Israel’s call to holiness: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2 NRSV). Jesus defines God’s holiness by God’s mercy and grace. The disciples are invited to imagine new forms of life through this reimagining of God’s core holiness.

Emergence

We can see Jesus’ cycle of teaching continue throughout the gospel. He tells parables, heals, restores, and feeds any in need, having the disciples aid and witness along the way. Then, he sends the disciples on their own missions in order to enact and test the forms inspired by Jesus and the disciples’ imaginations. They preach God’s kingdom, invite freely, and take nothing with them. They practice a form of life that is fully dependent on God’s provision (taking nothing), and invoking grace in all people (staying

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when invited, shaking the dust off their feet when rejected).\textsuperscript{73} When they come back together, Jesus brings them together for teaching, along with five thousand other people. In this teaching, Jesus engages the disciples in the forms of God’s graceful abundance, allowing them to distribute and collect food produced from a meager five loaves and two fish.\textsuperscript{74} It is here that they become both participants and witnesses of God’s imaginative grace. It is here that the disciples begin to be formed by Jesus’ imagination. After this parable, Jesus’ asks who the people think that he is. Jesus invokes their old imaginations, bringing forth answers of \textit{John the Baptist, Elijah,} and \textit{an ancient prophet.} Then Jesus asks them a question that challenges their old imagination with the new forms they have witnessed. He asks, “But who do you say that I am?” and Peter answers, “The Messiah of God” (Luke 9:20 NRSV). Here, we see the beginning of their imaginations’ transformation. They are beginning to perceive the the world through God’s imaginative grace. Jesus and the disciples continue to engage with God’s grace and reform their lives in line with God’s grace.

As Jesus allows space for the disciples’ imaginations to emerge, we notice that the disciples continually attempt, struggle, and fail. This is the nature of emergence — students are given space to experiment and try on their own, and they will fail. After seeing Jesus as the Messiah, they argue about who is the greatest.\textsuperscript{75} Jesus knows that their imaginations are still being formed, challenging the old imagination of the king-Messiah with the new imagination of the servant-Messiah. And Jesus must call the disciples back to engage them and help them imagine new forms to challenge their old

\begin{footnotes}
\item[74] Luke 9:10-17.
\end{footnotes}
imaginations. This challenge continues up to Jesus’ death. The disciples continue to argue about greatness, even as Jesus reimagines the Seder meal, the symbol of God’s redemption and transformation of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, as the sacrifice of his own body and blood for all people. Jesus reimagines the core symbol of God’s powerful love for Israel as the humility of his own body, pouring out God’s love for all, even the enemies that kill him. Here, there won’t be a spirit of death striking down the first born of oppressors but only a spirit of life for the oppressed and the oppressors alike. And yet, the disciples argue about who is the greatest.76 Jesus has given them a new form to follow and yet suffers the doubt of any teacher — ‘What have my students actually learned?’

It is Jesus’ death that gives the final challenge to the formation of the disciples. With Jesus’ death, their imaginations come into conflict. If Jesus was the kingly-Messiah, then the story of the Messiah was false. How could one of such power die? If Jesus was the servant-Messiah, then the story of loving one’s enemies is false. Love is weak against the powers of violence and empires. This moment of doubt opens the greatest opportunity for formation. It breaks down the rigidity of what they imagine as real. Now, because nothing is real, anything could possibly be real.

It is the resurrection that inspires their imaginations to be transformed into the imagination of Jesus. It is here that their imaginations emerge along with the risen Christ into a new reality. They recognize Jesus in the form of bread and wine, in the scriptures, and in the words of their friends. And it is realized in the real, resurrected Christ walking

with them. Now, they can imagine nothing else other than Jesus’ reality founded upon God’s creative grace.

Release

As any teacher must, Jesus releases the disciples into a new world formed by their incarnate imaginations. They are to “be [Jesus’] witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8b NRSV). Jesus’ ascension is the release. The disciples now see a world through the incarnate imagination of Jesus. Now they are to go into the world, practice the forms of life among other people, and invite them to be transformed by the same imagination.

Conclusion

Jesus’ teaching embodies the divine imagination and forms the disciples’ imaginations as icons of the divine imagination. In essence, Jesus invites and forms the disciples’ imaginations as incarnate imaginations. Now they are fully involved in the incarnate model. All of their experiences are touched by God’s grace, allowing them to reproduce God’s grace within themselves and transcend toward God in wonder and contemplation. They recognize God’s graceful possibilities and descend these possibilities into reality, producing them as actions, words, relationships, and creations. In doing so, they transform reality alongside God, inviting others to imagine, wonder, play, and be transformed by God’s grace. Jesus’ teaching also invites us to imagine, wonder, play, and be transformed by God’s divine imagination. We recognize that our
imaginations, reproducing our reality within ourselves and producing possibilities in reality, are iconic reflections of the divine, graceful imagination. Here, we have recognized the ideal of the human imagination in the divine imagination (reproductive), and now we contemplate how it is possible to actively reflect, witness, and participate in the divine imagination (productive).

Now we turn our attention to the human imagination and how our brains naturally develop and employ our imaginations. As we investigate the natural development of the imagination, we want to keep the divine imagination as a foundational analogy.
Chapter 3: Forming and Transforming Imaginations

As Christians, our minds are to be shaped by an incarnate imagination. This is the work of faith, living in such a way that our thoughts, habits, and possibilities are formed by God’s imagination and promises. Slowly, our imaginations journey to become reflections of the Incarnation, marrying God’s and our human imagination together so that the possibilities we see and God’s possibilities for us are the same. As we imagine reality together with God, we will live in the eschatological promises of the resurrection, shaping our present reality into God’s creative future.

However, we must pause and look at how our God-given imagination functions within ourselves. Having looked back on the imagination’s philosophical development, we have seen that the imagination is reproductive, depending on our physical experiences for comparisons, abstractions, and possibilities. The imagination is also productive, depending on our intellectual abstractions to assemble possibilities within our reality and enact them in the physical world. In order for the imagination to be simultaneously reproductive and productive, it must be tied to our physical bodies and experiences. Our reproductive imagination depends on the neurological wiring produced by our experience, coloring our perception of reality. Our productive imagination also depends on our neurological makeup to produce and actualize future possibilities. In this chapter, we will explore the imagination within the individual, focusing on perception, memory, and imagining. Following the story of John’s experience at Kidz Express, we will see how the imagination functions in real and present situations, forming real future possibilities. Then we will explore how individual imaginations encounter each other, forming mutually creative social imaginations.
**Perception, Memory, and Imagination**

We have seen through Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, and Coleridge, that the imagination works with our sense experiences to gather data, recalls stories from our memory, and develops our intellectual reasoning. It is able to move from finite objects to infinite ideas, to hold both objective meaning and universal abstractions together, and to playfully create possibilities out of all of these. Through the imagination, we experience the world around us, the capacity to make new worlds within ourselves, and create new possibilities within the objective world. With the neurological studies of the brain, we have gained a better understanding of how the imagination develops and functions.

David Hogue, in his work, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, draws together studies and discoveries of neuroscience in order to look at how the imagination functions. He breaks the processes of the brain down into perception, memory, and imagination. He explains that,

> Perception lets us know what's out there—what's going on in the world that is important to our survival, to our well-being. Memory maps our world and tells us where the treasures and dangers are. Imagination is the stage on which we play out what could be, the field of spontaneous play where the limitations of the real world are suspended for a time.¹

These three functions serve each other: perception feeds experiential data to the memory and the immediate imagination, memory gives storied contexts to organize perception data and a catalog of stories and symbols for the imagination, and the imagination helps interpret the possibilities of perceived experience and construct narratives and symbols from our memories.

We see this kind of imaginative functioning reflected in God in Exodus 3, when God reveals God's self to Moses. Here, God says, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them” (Exod. 3:7-8a NRSV). God observes: God perceives the objective reality of the Israelites and takes that reality into God’s mind. God hears: God takes heed and remembers the past experiences and promises, drawing them into the present.² God knows: God experiences what God sees and hears within God's self, imaginatively knowing the reality of others.³ And so, God comes, entering into reality with the divinely conceived possibilities of a new future. We will explore how the imagination develops alongside how God reveals God’s own mind: Perception: to see; Memory: to hear; and Imagination: to know; and Enacting: to come. We will follow this narrative through the story of John, a student who entered into a foreign culture and saw the possibilities within a small after-school organization.

**Perception: We See**

John took a breath after telling me about his day at school. We drove a mile and a half from our suburban church into the South Austin neighborhood of Chicago. As we parked, evening was descending, and we got out of the car in a neighborhood that was primarily African American. We stuck out as the only caucasian people on the block. As

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² Terence Fretheim points back to Exodus 2:24, where God heard and remembered. He says that to hear is, “to take heed of; to hear and respond to,” and that to remember is to be “actively attentive to that which is remembered; it is a divine sense of obligation to a prior commitment.” Terence Fretheim, *Interpretation: Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 48.

³ Fretheim explains, “For God to “know” the people’s sufferings testifies to God’s experience of this suffering, indeed God’s intimate experience. God is here depicted as one who is intimately involved in the suffering of the people. God has so entered into their sufferings as to have deeply felt what they are having to endure.” Ibid., 60.
we walked down Laramie, we passed a lingerie shop and a family owned quick-mart with half empty shelves. We approached a small storefront with a loud sign announcing “Kidz Express.” But this bombastic sign did not fit with the shuttered and barred windows and the heavy, locked steel door. When we entered, we saw a dingy building that had been converted into classrooms, a kitchen, a larger resource room and cafeteria, and the loading garage had a basketball hoop hung over the garage door and metal electrical piping weaving around the walls. Then, we were paired with students, learned their names, and helped tutor them for an hour, gleaning parts of their stories from little questions and insights. Our first journey to Kidz Express was one of new sensory experiences: the colors, sights, smells, voices, differences, similarities, all colliding within our minds as new and untested information.

We are perceiving. We are engaging our “psychological and neurological processes by which we take in information about an object in the environment and identify or recognize it.” As we walk down a foreign street, our senses are heightened attempting to read every face, hear every word, and recognize familiar signs. We are also perceiving our own place and disposition within the new environment. We recognize our own comfort and discomfort, perceive changes within ourselves as we impulsively evaluate each new experience. As we oscillate between objective perception and self-perception, our emotions are activated in response to the new situation. Emotions activate because, “Our brains are hardwired to respond automatically to certain types of

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4 Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 22.
5 Hogue shows the simultaneous perception of an object and our relation to it, saying, “While recording the presence of the object, the brain is simultaneously recording its own posture in relationship to that object, all of which is been recorded in memory.” Ibid., 29.
events in the world and to overlook others. Movement, novelty, other persons, pain, fear, and expectation all attract our attention even before our conscious mind can register their presence, let alone identify them.”

Thus, our perception creates initial experience data packages containing both objective sense data and our emotional reaction to the data. Each emotion tags the data in order for it to trigger similar emotive memories for comparison. So, as I, John, and the other students walked into this new environment, our minds were absorbing each minute experience and tagging it with our feelings of uncertainty, curiosity, fear, tenacity, and even comfort (inspired by our limited group).

Perception is not merely acquisition of data but also the first order of the imagination interpreting each piece of data. James Smith helps us understand the depth of our initial perception. He finds that “Perception and evaluation are inextricably intertwined: as soon as I take in a scene, before I ‘think’ about it, I’ve already evaluated it on the basis of predispositions I bring to the situation.”

Our perception arises from a background built up “of possible ways of construing the world that I have inherited and imbibed from others… my background is the buildup of habits and inclinations that dispose me to regularly construe my world in certain ways.” Smith’s background, Hogue’s self-perception, and Mizerow’s frame of reference are the same concept: those habited reactions, feelings, and interpretations about the world that are formed from our

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6 Ibid., 36.
7 Hogue finds that these emotional tags are the first and quickest acting triggers in the mind. He explains, “many of the images our brains record, then, are automatically tagged with an emotional label, alerting us grossly to whether we want to approach this object in the environment or runaway as fast as we can… One neural circuit operates very rapidly, yet gives us only a very general idea about the desirability of this new experience.” Ibid., 36.
8 Smith, Imagining the Kingdom, 34.
9 Ibid., 51.
Our dispositions set the rules for our interpretation and are also challenged by our new experiential data. Our dispositions are not static and dictatorial rules. Instead, they are active interpreters of a situation, negotiating and exploring the situation in order to find the best possible interpretive framework and rules for us to follow. Our dispositions are continually interpreting with each new person, word, feeling, adjusting our framework for acting. Perception is linked to memory and imagination as we constantly recall memories of normative experiences and rules and imaginatively compare our new experience with our rules to determine immediate possibilities. All of this is immediate, instantaneous, and constant. Thus, when we perceive, we immediately activate our first order imaginations to create possibilities by synthesizing new experiences with normative memories.

Any form of education must understand how to employ new experiences, supplying new data to challenge the normative memory background. Education, for Smith, is “training people to ‘see situations the right way.’”11 This is an act of training the imagination by requiring it to call forth normative memories and habits and challenging them with dissonant data. Smith recognizes that the imagination we are training is “our emotional perceptual apparatus,” which is trained by narratives.12 When we enter a foreign environment, our imaginations begin to “try on” the new data, seeing if it fits within our wardrobe of memories.13 The more we enter into the same foreign

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10 Mizerow’s frame of reference was covered in Chapter 1, in the Transformation section. Mezirow, “Learning to Think Like an Adult,” 16.
11 Ibid., 36.
12 Ibid., 36.
13 Mezirow finds that transformation is founded in the imaginative ‘trying on’ of another’s experience. Ibid., 20.
experience, the more normal that experience will feel, slowly adjusting our imaginations
to create and narrate new possibilities as normal, comfortable, and habited.

By entering into a new world, we are ‘seeing’ another’s situation, just as God has seen ours. This new experience that we are ‘trying on’ is someone else’s normative experience and narrative. By entering into their world and experience, we have also given others new experiences within their normal experiences, causing them to also perceive the situation anew. As we learn a different environment and get to know new people, they also have to learn who we are and imagine us as part of their world. Thus, we become mutual players in imagining a new reality. Negatively, we can remain strangers and continually perceive each other as disruptors to each other’s frame of reference. Positively, we approach each other, learn each other’s names and stories, and begin to integrate each other into a new frame of reference. God perceived the situation of the Hebrew slaves and tried it on, experiencing it within God’s self. God perceived humanity as a whole and tried it on in the Incarnation, creating new possibilities for God’s relationship with us. We are called to perceive in the same way, introducing the data of someone else’s normal experience into ourselves so that we can begin to incarnate it within ourselves.

Every week, I would return to the South Austin neighborhood with John and other youth. Every week we would see the same buildings, sidewalks, and faces. We would listen to new stories from voices that have become familiar. By continually entering into this situation, John’s perception of South Austin moved from foreign uncertainty to a comfortable, regular experience that was part of his weekly story. He learned the names
of kids he worked with and made friends with them. However, each time he entered into this situation, he was challenged by a new story, a new face, a new crisis that a child faced. And so, while John was training his imagination to “see the situation the right way,” he was also challenging his own background by encountering people and stories who challenged his preconceived rules of race, social class, economics, education, and other normative narratives he lived by. Each one of these experiences became a memory to be called forth by John’s imagination to write new rules and possibilities. And so, like God, John saw the South Austin neighborhood in its joy, suffering, poverty, and wealth of life.

**Memory: We Hear**

Every week, John would end his tutoring session by playing basketball with the kids in the old loading garage. He learned the students’ names and knew their jokes. They played with each other as if they belonged to each other. John heard the stories of kids who were abused at home, in danger at school, and at risk on the streets. Each time he heard one of these stories, his memory pulled forward all the previous stories, building a long narrative of risk. He also saw how much the kids loved playing basketball. He saw their smiles, heard their laughter, and witnessed their skill. John heard the fears and joys of the students, telling similar stories each week. And, every so often, one of those stories would rise to the top, and John couldn’t forget the words that he heard, or the look on a kid’s face, or the feeling of the chair and table that they were sitting at. John’s experience was akin to Fabian’s, described in Simon Harak’s *Virtuous Passions*. Fabian
went to a Jamaican orphanage to build relationships with the young boys. While playing soccer, one boy scored a goal. Fabian went to give the boy a pat on the shoulder, and the boy recoiled away. “He discovered what must have been the truth,” Harak expounds, “that every time someone had raised a hand to that little boy, he had been struck. Now, even when a hand was raised in congratulation, the boy had no choice.”14 Having realized the boy’s reality, Fabian was “moved” toward a new perspective and form of life with him.15 So, too, was John continually moved by hearing and confronting each student’s story at Kidz Express.

The more we entered into the same situation, the more our perception became passive and comfortable. This is because our present perceptions were being compared to past perceptions of the same information stored in our memory. Every time we walked down the same sidewalk, entered the same building, and saw the same students, our minds were recalling and rehearsing similar layers of information. Our minds were accessing memory maps of the world, navigating familiar experiential territory.16 We were activating the same neural pathways in our mind, and each time we activate it, we train our neurons to fire in a certain order to recall a certain experience.17 Everytime we recall a familiar memory, we are practicing a number of neural pathways to access experience from the different areas of the brain. Memories recall past images made of,
“the sounds, smells, textures, and taste with which we experience them.”\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, each time we recall a similar set of memories, we habit our neurons to recall different sights, sounds, smells, and emotions, allowing us to be comfortable within our present situation. Our memories become the basis of how we interpret a situation, whether we construe it in comfort, hope, or anxiety.

There are various kinds of memories that our minds employ. Harvey Whitehouse, in his work \textit{Modes of Religiosity} outlines the various kinds of memory:\textsuperscript{19}

- Implicit memory or working memory: knowledge that we are not aware of knowing, like how to use our hands, or walking, or talking. When I am thirsty, my mind calls forth some information making my right hand reach for and grip my glass and raise it to my mouth to drink. It is natural, unthoughtful, and I have no memory of ever learning how to do this.

- Explicit memory: memories at our conscious level, allowing us to recall specific information and concepts to think about. This arises when I’m working on a specific problem and recalls specific information that I have to think about, like hammering a nail, or teaching a student how to write a paper.

- Semantic memory: General knowledge and concepts that we know but don’t remember acquiring. I know that 2+2=4. I don’t remember learning it. I assume I learned it in kindergarten or first grade. However, I employ this information specifically when I need it.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 27.

\textsuperscript{19} I’m expanding the details from Whitehouse’s list of memories. Harvey Whitehouse, \textit{Modes of Religiosity: a Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission} (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004), 65.
- Episodic memory: those memories of specific events and experiences that come with great detail. These are stories that I tell when I’m teaching a student and I want an anecdote from my own life.

The frequency and intensity of a perceived experience helps shape the way that our memories are formed. First, actions that are ritually “performed daily or weekly rapidly come to be processed, to a considerable extent, in procedural or implicit memory.”\(^\text{20}\) The more we do the same action, the more normal that action becomes, and the less we have to activate specific memories to do it. Instead, our neural pathways become habituated to fire in a certain direction without cognitive thought.\(^\text{21}\) For John and I, going to KidzExpress weekly became rote. My car knew the direction through the roads and where to park. We knew where the doorbell was. We knew the greetings, high-fives, and jokes that we would make with each student. We knew names without thinking.

Frequent practice, employment of concepts, or narration organizes some knowledge in our semantic memory. Here, we are able to recall concepts but the “knowledge itself becomes separate from particular episodes in which it is acquired.”\(^\text{22}\) This develops a familiarity with certain concepts, ideas, actions, or feelings which may be triggered in specific situations. We don’t remember the exact experience that taught us

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 68.

\(^{21}\) Hogue calls this habituating “tuning,” saying, “when learning has occurred, changes have also taken place in the synapses and in the structures on either side of that synapse. The receiving cell this change so that it is ready and tuned to the preceding cell. So learning a new piano piece requires intense effort, because more energy is required to fire across the synapses to unprepared receptors. With practice, however, those receptors are “tuned” and ready to fire more easily.” Hogue, Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past, 64.

\(^{22}\) Whitehouse, Modes of Religiosity, 69.
the data we employ. However, some perceptive data has triggered our need for a specific concept or action that we employ with a modicum of regularity. When entering the garage-gym at KidzExpress, I recalled the semantic memories of playing basketball: dribbling, passing, the hand-in-the-cookie-jar shooting. These actions require more cognitive thought, but I am able to naturally recall how to do it.

Finally, there are those infrequent moments of highly stimulating experiences that create episodic memories. Whitehouse recognizes that “a combination of episodic distinctiveness, emotionality, and consequentiality that together result in lasting autobiographical memories. These memories can be so vivid and detailed that they can take the form of flashbulb memories.” Episodic memories are explicit stories that are imprinted on our minds like a photograph or movie. They are detailed oriented, causing a person to recall specific words, smells, sights, sounds, textures, and emotions. The most extreme form of episodic memory triggers post-traumatic stress. These are the memories that we share when we are with friends. We tell scar stories because of the extreme situations and feelings that caused the scar. We tell marriage stories because of the meaning and uniqueness of the day and all the emotions associated with it. We also tell stories of once-in-a-lifetime experiences from travels or from odd and disorienting encounters with other people. These memories trigger “spontaneous exegetical reflection,” causing us to think about meaning, other associations, or explanations.

When we process new and disorienting experiences, we will attempt to tell explicit

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23 Ibid., 70-71.
24 Ibid., 72.
stories to try to find a context of meaning in order to categorize, explain, and integrate the experience into our normal categories.

All of these memories act as reservoirs of experiential data. In every experience, we perceive data that then triggers appropriate memories in order to help us make sense of the experience and figure out how we function correctly in the present experience. Each time we trigger a memory, our brains reconstruct it in the present.\(^{25}\) The data from our perceptions trigger all the different areas of our brain, causing us to recall similar sights, sounds, emotions, etc., from the past and re-experience them in the present alongside the immediate experience. Our immediate experience instructs the brain to remember certain things, coloring our memories with the needs of the present.\(^ {26}\) In this way, our brains fold time, causing certain memories of the past to be pressed into the present in order to give some context and understanding of how to act based on the actions of the past. It is in this folding of time that our imaginations take center stage, attempting to develop possibilities of the present context and of the moments to come.

Memory also gives us the foundation for our empathetic imagination. Hogue finds that empathy is, “‘trying on’ the experience of another and utilizing our own experiences to understand those of another.”\(^ {27}\) Empathy is an imaginative function that requires the full capacity of the brain: perceiving another’s situation, memory selection that gives a comparative self-context, and introspection of emotions and reactions, all the

\(^{25}\) Hogue explains what it is called re-membering, saying, “the brain actually reconstructs our memories each time we recall them.” Hogue, Remebering the Future, Imagining the Past, 65.

\(^{26}\) This is one of the risks of mis-remembering. Hogue notes, “Our brains are selective by necessity. There is no way, and usually no need, to remember all details of all events...The brain decides what is important to recall based on its needs at the time.” Ibid., 69.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 42.
while maintaining a separate sense of self. Memory sits at the center of empathetic imagination, providing us with the data we have experienced so that we can draw parallels between their story and our story. When we hear another’s situation, we remember all the possible previous memories to embody their situation within ourselves. The other person also hears their own memory and story, relating their experience to us for us to experience together. Both of our minds remember similar emotions, sights, sounds, smells, words, etc. Here, we form a shared story, ‘trying on’ each other’s experiences as our own.

When we hear another’s story, our imaginations call forth similar memories so we can incarnate their story within ourselves. This reflects the divine imagination. When God heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves, God remembered all the cries of injustice that God had heard. When Jesus, the incarnate God, heard the cries of the sick and outcast, Jesus remembered all of his experiences surrounding similar cries. By hearing these cries, God folds time, remembering them all together, calling for God’s activity. So, too, when we hear and remember, we begin to imagine all the possible activities and forms of life that we can enact with each other. It may be laughter, crying, or a move to action on behalf on the other person.

28 Hogue details these neurological functions. Ibid., 40-41.
29 Hogue explains an empathetic experiment performed by the University of Iowa in 2001. “Subjects were asked to remember and imagine an emotional experience from their own past (fear or anger) and then to recall and imagine an experience of the same emotion from someone else’s past. Identical brain structures were found to participate in those experiences whether the subjects were imagining the events happening to them or to someone else.” Ibid., 41-42. Though this was an active, conscious imagining, it is the same process by which we naturally empathize with another—we imagine their situation within ourselves, recalling similar experiences and activating identical brain structures. This is a function of imagination and memory.
Imagination: We Know

After playing in the garage-gym of KidzExpress a number of times, John saw some of the flaws in the structure of the garage that made basketball difficult for the kids. He perceived and remembered many times when kids almost hit metal electrical boxes that were on the wall. He noticed that the basketball hoop wobbled. He had the ball go flying off to the left when it was dribbled onto a crack in the floor. He tripped over a loose drain cover in the middle of the floor. John played with the kids. He delighted in watching them enjoy every moment of basketball. He remembered that delight disappearing when the ball took a bad bounce because of cracks. And John started to imagine something different. He imagined that garage re-designed to accommodate a gym. He saw a smooth floor, a secure drain cap, padded walls to protect the children, and a secure basketball rim. His imagination created a possibility out of his experiential data from his perception and memory. As John began making real plans, his imagination called for memories of previous construction projects that he had worked on, or stories of designing things that his architect father told. John’s imagination created the possibility of a new gym in that old garage.

The imagination is not the third part of a series of processes. The imagination is always active alongside our perceptions and our memories. As we perceive a situation, “our experience is ‘constituted’ against a ‘background’ that primes us to construe the world in certain ways.” Each piece of an experience we perceive calls our imaginations to develop an interpretive background to enable understanding. In order to call forth these interpretive backgrounds, the imagination must interact continually with our

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30 Smith, Imagining the Kingdom, 50.
memories, calling forth memories, comparing them, categorizing them, and making sense of how our layers of memory interact with each other. The imagination uses memories to “create maps of the world around us that give us direction, and...those maps bear a striking resemblance to the territories they describe.”31 These imaginative maps help us recognize color, shape, texture, size, movement, facial expression, breathing patterns, tones, etc. Our imagination uses the maps to recognize the basic structure of an experience as well as the unique nuances.

Experiences that we engage in frequently allow the imagination to quickly employ our primary neural maps. This primary map is the “primary repertoire by which we constitute and interact with our environment.”32 This means that in our normal activities, our imaginations habitually use the same basic information, creating rules and boundaries for constructing our realities. When we experience something that is out of the ordinary, our imaginations work harder at engaging secondary and tertiary maps to form understanding. The imagination uses these more latent maps as possibilities for understanding.33 These possibilities are less certain but are still able to aid in understanding. The more the imagination activates these secondary maps, the more normative they become, amalgamating the primary map.34 Because we are constantly experiencing the world around us, our imaginations “constantly sketch and revise [our

31 Hogue, Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past, 6.
32 Smith, Imagining the Kingdom, 115.
33 Smith recognizes these secondary maps as “latent maps remain possibilities for the adult organism. They have been lightly inscribed on the brain, but they lack the density of primary repertoires simply from lack of use and stimulation.” Ibid., 115.
34 Smith describes this process of primary and secondary maps: “‘Secondary repertoires that become dormant can also be reactivated, and if the environment and constancy of stimuli change—if the balance of competing rituals shifts—there also seems to be the possibility that the ordering of primary and secondary repertoires could be reversed, though this will have to fight against the overwhelming inertia and density of those primary configurations.’” Ibid., 115.
maps], tracing old routes and charting new paths.”35 We can see that the imagination works in continuous tandem with perception and memory to recall our interpretive maps from memory in order to construct our present reality from the immediate perceptive experience.

Our imaginations recall these maps without much conscious thought. The imagination is marrying our perception and our implicit memories in high frequency and normal experiences, our semantic memory and perceptions in moderately frequent or more skill demanding experiences, and our episodic memory and perceptions in unique and highly stimulating experiences. These levels of experience also demand differing levels of synthesis after the experience. During synthesis, “The imagination...can break down, dissolve, and reassemble, whilst all the time retaining hold onto that idea which lies at the core.”36 We are able to hold the full construction of our experience and compare it with whole memory templates and narratives. while simultaneously breaking it down into parts comparing them to rules and categories from our memories. High frequency and normal experiences require little-to-no cognitive imaginative synthesis because the information is so similar that it is already part of the map. Moderate frequency and skill demanding experience requires more cognitive-imaginative synthesis in order to understand and integrate the new experience into the map. Unique and highly stimulating experiences demand significant cognitive-imaginative synthesis in order to compare the experience to past memories and develop some concept of understanding, attempting to exegete meaning from any possibly relevant memory.

35 Hogue, Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past, 6.
36 Stockitt, Imagination and the Playfulness of God, 82.
It is in synthesizing that the imagination moves from constructing immediate reality to constructing abstract concepts or future possibilities. During an experience, the imagination breaks down the data into categories and then reconstructs those categories with the aid of our memory to create and understand the immediate reality.37 The more cognitively dissonant the experience, the more conscious thought the imagination will employ to deconstruct the experience and attempt to match it or contextualize it within the rules and structures of our cognitive-imaginative maps. Because our imaginations can hold the full experience, we are able to understand it as objective reality.

Simultaneously, our imaginations can deconstruct and abstract that experience outside the rules of time, extrapolating implications and ideas, comparing them with our core beliefs and narratives. In this way, our imaginations create symbols out of our experiences, which “possess the capacity to unify matter and spirit in that they simultaneously refer to what is seen and also to what is not visible. They, therefore, produce a cluster of related meaning with a beautiful, fertile imprecision.”38 When Stockitt refers to unifying matter and spirit, this is the constructive capacity of the imagination to unify real experience and abstract meaning. Thus, each experience has the potential to be a symbol, anchored in its immediate context and also interpretive of past rules and future possibilities.

In episodic experiences, the severe stimulus and dissonance created in our minds demand prolonged imaginative synthesis, attempting to understand the experience itself and integrate it into our meaning framework. Whitehouse explains that, “especially vivid

37 Stockitt discusses Coleridge’s concept of the imagination in stages: the primary deconstructing and constructing of data into abstract concepts and ideas, and the secondary deconstructing and reconstruction of data to represent reality as it is experienced. Ibid., 65-66.
38 Ibid., 83.
episodic memories trigger a search for meaning...The search is protracted, in fact potentially unending, because the memories that drive it endure throughout the lifecycle.”39 These experiences become such vivid and significant memories that we continually return to it and wonder about it imaginatively. We construct such deep meaning out of these episodic memories that our imaginations habitually return to these memories, rehearse them, dissect them, reconstruct them, and use them as a model template to compare other experiences. This episodic, “exegetical reflection is essentially a process of analogical reasoning…The range of possible symbolic motivation will always be vast.”40 Here, what Whitehouse calls analogical reasoning, Stockitt calls symbolic construction. Thus, our imaginations continually recall these episodic memories, interpret their meaning in the present context, and develop future possibilities that shape our actions and understanding.

These episodic memories act like anchors for the imagination. They are so significant that they become the narratives and rules of our cognitive-imaginative maps. When our imagination returns to these anchor memories, it calls them out of the past and causes us to know them in the present alongside our present experience. We see this when a song comes on the radio and a friend of our begins to reminisce about a past memory. We also see this when we are challenged by an idea and we begin narrating past experiences in order to give an explanation for what we have experienced. We tend to explain our actions, feelings, or even the trajectory of our lives from these anchor memories. Our imaginations connect the meaning from one anchor memory to another,

40 Ibid., 113.
creating a trajectory of self-understanding, interpretation, and meaning.41 This trajectory also is used to conceptualize future activities, actions, or decisions that are in line with the anchor-narrative that our imagination has developed.

Our imaginations integrate our experiences within ourselves, causing us to experience them alongside all similar memories, so that we can know them. Knowing, here, is both conscious and preconscious knowing — we can explain how our new experience fits within our narrative memories, but we also experience the sights, sounds, feelings, etc., within our brain and neurons. We know it in our bodies and our minds. This is also how God knows the situation of the Hebrew slaves. Exodus 3:7 uses the verb יִדְעָ (ydh), meaning ‘to know.’ This word is used in all forms of knowing: skill and craft, acquaintance, experience, learned knowledge, and even sexual knowledge.42 Terence Fretheim elaborates, “For God to ‘know’ the people’s sufferings testifies to God’s experience of this suffering, indeed to God’s intimate experience...God is internally related to the suffering, entering fully into the oppressive situation and making it God’s own.”43 God knows their suffering within God’s whole self. Jesus, the incarnate God, knows the experiences of others consciously, by sharing their stories, and pre-consciously, reenacting their stories within his brain and body. It is by the Incarnation that we can claim that God knows the fullness of humanity. Our imaginations follow this same path, incarnating our and others’ experiences within our body’s neural network.

We know similar experiences within ourselves, and we share the same experience with

42 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 393-395.
43 Fretheim, Interpretation: Exodus, 60.
others. In this way, we imagine alongside God, incarnating other’s realities and realizing future possibilities for God, us, and them.

In coming to KidzExpress, John was developing both semantic and episodic memories from each experience. Because the South Austin neighborhood was so dissonant to his normal environment, each time he experienced it, it demanded that his imagination search for meaning in comparison with his normative life. Frequently, these experiences were dissonant enough to create an episodic memory in which he could narrate the feelings, words, faces, and voices of those he was with. His imagination continually returned to these experiences in order to develop a narrative and integrate it into his normative cognitive-imaginative map. Thus, when he went home, his imagination continually returned to Kidz Express and that garage-gym. His imagination held that gym as a symbol. He dissected the various issues within the gym and used each issue to inspire semantic memory in order to develop possible solutions. Then his imagination was able to reconstruct the gym with all of these new possibilities in order to see it as a possible whole. His imagination was creating the future possibility of the gym as if it was actually present. He knew this new gym within his mind as if it was real.

**Enacting: We Come**

After imagining the new gym, John was able to draw out the plans. His imagination drove him to action. Suddenly a whole new experience became available to John. He organized times to go and measure the gym. He talked to carpenters and contractors about his project to get their expert opinions on how to make this possible.
He began to talk about this possible gym, helping other people imagine it, and inspiring others to donate to his project. He then spent four weeks during a summer to pour a new floor, construct pads around the walls, reset the floor drain, and hang a new basketball goal. The garage-gym transformed from bricks and electrical tubing to a brightly colored gym with logos of “KidzExpress” on the walls and a floor with a basketball free-throw key in the floor. The garage looked like a miniature gym. In building this gym, John created a whole new world of specific, unique, and stimulating experiences that this story became an anchor memory for him. Constructing the gym gave an anchor for his regular memories of weekly work at Kidz Express. It also worked as an anchor for future experiences, tying them to the meaning he developed from building the gym. He points to this memory as one of the points that inspired him to study engineering in college. When he tells the story, he narrates it with an air of meaning that you can feel its significance, even if you can’t point out the particular meaning.

However, in creating this new space, John did not imagine or act alone. John’s imagination was inspired by the lives and activities of the kids at Kidz Express. He shared his imagined possibility with Doug, the director of Kidz Express, to gain approval. Now Doug shared in this newly imagined possibility. John shared his imagination with me, with contractors, with donors, and with other youth, inviting them all to participate with him in making it a reality. Once the gym was finished, John shared in a new reality with all of us who acted to make it a reality and with all the kids who now play in the new reality. What we can call “John’s imagined project” was really a shared, social
imagination that called many people to contemplate, engage, form, and make a new reality.

By participating in Christian practices that challenge and transform our imaginations, we participate socially with others. We have explored what happens in those who enter into an uncommon environment. However, we have only hinted at what happens to those for whom this environment is normal, allowing their imaginations to function passively in their primary neural map. When a stranger enters into their environment, it creates a unique experience by disrupting the normal framework and function of their reality. Thus, their perception is peaked, paying attention to the actions, words, and demeanor of this stranger and attempting to imagine them as friend or foe. Their imaginations search for memories to compare and create a template for understanding this new stranger. As they interact with the stranger, their imaginations continue to gather perception data, search their memories, and adjust their feelings and actions. If this interaction is repeated, that stranger eventually becomes part of their normal environment, and they help imagine and construct a role for the stranger to fit: friend, acquaintance, or just a normal presence. John, having gone to Kidz Express regularly, learned the students by their names and stories. The students learned John as well. By his continued, intentional interactions with the kids, they learned to mutually accept each other as friends and members of the same community. John may have helped reconstruct Kidz Express' gym, but the kids gave the gift of accepting him as part of their community. All imaginations involved were transformed from us and them to all of us, seeing each other as friends.
The social aspect of the imagination is key in education. Again, we return to Maria Harris’ educational model of contemplation, engagement, form, experiment, and release. A teacher’s imagination is sparked by an experience within their community, giving rise to a concept that they want to teach. So they contemplate the experience within themselves. This contemplation is social in that the teacher must take into account their students, allowing each person’s personality and disposition to adjust the possible teaching environments and activities.

Then, the teacher engages students in learning, inviting them to explore alongside the teacher. The teacher shares their imagination with the students while they are working together. Hogue explains the social nature of the preconscious imagination, “The human brain is constructed in such a way that it automatically ‘catches’ the emotional state of others...Certain ‘mirror’ neurons have been detected that spontaneously recreate the emotional experience of another even before conscious awareness of that event is available to the empathizer.”44 While engaging, students and teacher mirror each others’ emotional responses. This is why it is important for the teacher to be familiar, peaceful, calm, and confident in their engagement, setting the emotional base for students’ imaginations to arise from.

Then, the teacher and students step back from their engagement and begin to synthesize their experiences, feelings, stories, and possibilities into forms. Social imagination is consciously practiced during this phase. Students and teacher share their experiences with each other, and the teacher helps weave their stories together, allowing students to co-imagine. Then the teacher engages students in stories and exercises to help

44 Hogue, Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past, 42.
them expand their imaginations together. Finally, the teacher and students move to consciously imagining future possibilities together, wondering what future possibilities they should engage.

Students continue to engage, experiment, and synthesize together. Even when they experiment individually, they have been inspired by their social imagination and will bring their individual experience back to the class, giving unique possibilities for others to imagine. Through their experimenting, each student will find their own unique synthesis of the shared imagination. They will share the same foundation, but each will find ways that their experiences and possibilities uniquely fit their own neural map.

We should also see that when we engage in social activities, like Kidz Express, the teacher and students are not the only people involved. Instead, by entering into an uncommon experience for the students, the teacher is engaging the normal experience of another people-group. The experience may be foreign for the students, but the students are foreign to those they are engaging. A teacher must be intentional in forming imaginations this way. They must contemplate the possibilities of both their students and those they are engaging. The teacher must see all people as co-learners and co-imaginers. Thus, a teacher not only invites their students, but they also ask permission and invite those they are engaging to participate with them, as friends seeking to imagine community together. Because imagination-forming is social, the teacher will not only form their own imagination or their students’ imaginations. They will also engage and provide experiences for those they engage to contemplate and imagine. Through co-
imagining, the teacher, students, and the engaged all work together to co-create new possibilities and forms of life together, as one community.

This follows God’s coming into the world. Stockitt reminds us that:

God’s projection of himself into the state of the other who is a sinner is a profoundly imaginative activity, based on his deep understanding and empathy for the person standing before him. In this imaginative penetration, God does not lose any of himself nor does he become the other. He remains distinct and transcendent yet displays all of his attributes within an imaginative engagement.45

God has seen, heard, and known our situation, taking it into God’s self and imagining new possibilities for creating grace and life. God comes and engages us socially. God engages Moses, sharing God’s imagination with him, inviting him to engage in new possibilities, and goes with him before the Hebrew slaves and Pharaoh. God invites the Hebrew slaves to imagine new life on the other side of the Reed Sea and at Sinai. The wilderness is God engaging the Hebrews in socially forming their imaginations, sharing the experience of fire, cloud, manna, and quail, and having them synthesize and imagine God’s promise of life in the Promised Land. When God came in Jesus, the incarnate Christ, God engaged the disciples and full communities of people in forming a social imagination together. In every miracle, teaching, and even in the death and resurrection, Jesus engaged the disciples, religious teachers, sick, poor, and outcast to imagine God’s reality together. In this way, all are invited to become part of the body of Christ. We profess this social incarnate-imagination that we are “one body and one Spirit...called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4-6 NRSV). Just as the the Father,

Son, and Spirit are one, we are to imagine God, self, and others as one body, unified in the Incarnation.

The work of forming the imagination is a social work. Smith recognizes our goal: “We gather to be sent, and we are sent to do — to undertake Christian action that participates in the *missio dei*. ‘Mission’ then is just shorthand to describe what it is for Christians to pursue their vocations to the glory of God and in ways that are oriented to the shalom of the kingdom.”46 We are called to engage each other, inviting each other to imagine create new graceful possibilities together. This is the call of God in the Incarnation, that God is with all of us, so we are to be with God and each other. We are to imagine and incarnate a reality in which God has invited us to play in grace, so we extend that graceful invitation for all others to come and play.

46 Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 157.
Chapter 4: Make Believe and the Play of Mercy

We have looked at how faith education is a transformation of a person’s imagination into the incarnate imagination. Then we looked deeply into God’s imagination as the foundation and goal of our incarnate imaginations, and how God’s imagination transforms us into icons of the Incarnation. Next, we dove deep into the physical and neurological makeup of the imagination, seeing how it is shaped by and shapes our memories, perceptions, and possibilities. So now we come to the point of exploring how we actually engage, encourage, and transform our own imaginations and those of our students (for we cannot transform our students’ imaginations if we are not also being transformed together with them).

Imagination and play are partners. John’s experiences with the children of Kidz Express inspired his imagination to play with them. He played with them in tutoring, helping them figure out the puzzles presented in homework. He played with them in telling stories and sharing experiences together. Finally, he played with them in the serious work of designing a safe play-space for the children, so that their imaginations would be free to play without the fear of injury or outside threats. Further, it has inspired John’s imagination to keep playing, seeking out young students in his college town and playing with them through tutoring and mentoring.

Playing is the realm of teaching, engaging students’ imaginations in specific environments and lessons, allowing them to work through puzzles, tell stories, play out scenarios, test out roles, and, ultimately, imagine new possibilities. It is also how we teach and mentor in the spontaneity of the present. When we are presented with a personal or technical issue from one of my students, we must play with them on their
terms. We have to imagine their situation, find ourselves in their role, and attempt to play within the scenario to help develop possibilities. Each possibility becomes a role-playing world in which our student partners together with us to test outcomes and ramifications. After playing through all of these possibilities, we then re-engage in reality with a chosen possibility and seek to enact it. We, as teachers, are game-masters, designing and playing in possibilities with those around us, asking our students and colleagues to play with us. Our goal is to shape each others’ imaginations through our shared experience of new possibilities. To transform our imaginations into icons of the incarnate imagination, we engage in make-believe, playing in the world by the rules and relationships of God’s grace.

In this chapter, we lay out the final pedagogical model of incarnate imaginations. First, we will explore how play and imagination inspire and form each other. By investigating various frameworks of play, including Johan Huizinga’s foundational framework in Homo Ludens and Courtney Goto’s reframing of play as ‘make-believe’ in The Grace of Playing, two forms of play emerge: formal and make-believe. We will see how play allows us to form environments that inspire active, conscious imagining of the self, others, and reality.

Second, we will look specifically at formal play and make-believe within Christian faith formation. Here, we will use the frameworks of play that we have developed to help us understand what kind of play-realities we are creating in faith formation. This distinction is important, because the kind of game we play engages the
imagination in unique and specific routines, providing different kinds of mental formation.

Third, we will complete our pedagogical model of the *incarnate imagination* by drawing together Maria Harris’ model (contemplation, engagement, formation, experimentation, release) with the framework of play. In short, if our goal is to form imaginations, then our teaching method and environment will be playful, allowing students to experiment with possibilities by playing them in real situations.

Fourth, we will conclude by imagining how God’s playfulness in creation and redemption invite our imaginations to play. In our play with God, we make-believe reality in faith, and our imaginations become sacramental icons of the divine imagination — *incarnate imaginations*.

If we want to imagine and act in all reality as-if God’s grace is real, then we must go into the world and play as-if grace is real. This makes the works of mercy central to play, turning them from *works of mercy* into the *play of mercy*. Playing mercy will give foundational imaginative experiences that the formally Christian games of corporate worship, fellowship, and personal practices will help synthesize and form in the narrative of Christian imagination. If we do not engage the world in the *play of mercy*, then we lose the vital connection to reality beyond the church/home, allowing other social games to form their imagination toward neighborhoods, economics, work, school, and other social realities.
Imagination and Play

Just like imagination, we often dismiss play as something that is childish and non-serious. However, Johan Huizinga, in his foundational anthropological work on play, *Homo Ludens*, warns, “As soon as we proceed from ‘play is non-seriousness’ to ‘play is not serious’, the contrast leaves us in the lurch — for some play can be very serious indeed.”¹ The seriousness of play is seen in professional sports, where a player’s career depends on how well they play and their record of winning and losing. We drive our children to become experts in play — sports, music, acting, designing, art, etc. — so that they can receive scholarships and internships to secure their future careers. We attempt to tell ourselves and our kids that “playing in these sports and arts are for fun,” but our scheduling, coaching, and expectations communicate, “playing these sports and arts are serious business, essential for your future.” Play, itself, possesses a quality of non-seriousness, but the habits developed, lessons learned, failures endured, and outcomes achieved are all very serious indeed.

Imagination and play are typically associated together. This begins when we are children and we play make-believe with our friends, imagining situations and roles and playing them out. As we get older, we ‘play make-believe’ when we sit with our friends and play games like *would you rather* or when we ask hypothetical questions about our own futures and desires. As adults, ‘playing make-believe’ seems less fantastical, as we figure out career options, housing choices, marriage, and even scheduling our kids’ activities. We imagine, practically, what each option may be like, testing out our stress, pleasure, hope, fear, and how others will react to our options. When we imagine, we

create possibilities for ourselves to play and experiment with. We will then choose one of these possibilities and bring it into reality.

This language is associated with any of our adult experiments. We typically create from an imagined possibility and then let it play-out to see what will happen. When programmers create new lines of code for computer programs, they run the program, letting the code play-out to see if it will achieve the desired outcome or not. We often tell our youth that, once they’ve made a decision, they will have to see how it plays-out. Thus, we can see that there is functional equation: imagine possibilities, choose a possibility, play-test that possibility in reality, implement/abandon/revise the possibility.

*Play Frames Imagination: Formal Framework*

The imagination plays with possibilities. Therefore, the language and framework of play gives us a model for how the imagination functions in forming our views of and activities in reality. The popularity of play as an anthropological model is rooted in Johan Huizinga’s 1938 study, *Homo Ludens*. As a framing concept for education and development, it arose out of the montessori influence on Jerome Berryman, among others, as he describes it in his 1991 work, *Godly Play*. As teachers, we notice that play is essential to the development of young children, building tactile identification, relations of cause and effect, agency, and social role development. We also notice play when children imagine and work out possibilities of understanding. However, we tend to de-emphasize play as we get older, co-opting it with work and necessity. What we do not
realize is that work, experimentation, and problem solving are all realms of playing in which we flex our imaginations to overcome an issue, create something new, or network people together for a common goal. So, let’s look at how play and imagination function together.

First, let us explore the frame and boundaries of play.

Play is:

- **Voluntary**: a person cannot be forced to play but, you can invite them into play and they voluntarily engage with a spirit of enjoyment.

- **Suspension of reality**: play suspends “real life,” inviting people to pretend or adopt special roles within the sphere of play. We step out of our normal environment into a special environment, allowing us to experience possibilities without consequences of our normal environments. We can attend to real life themes and practices but suspend reality’s normal rules to play with the possibilities of those concepts and actions.

- **Limited**: play happens within certain environments and times. We play on fields of play, or playgrounds, and we play through a set duration, whether it is determined by clock, achieving a goal, or some arbitrary marker of time. We explore new environments and experiences but will return to our normal once play has ended.

- **Rules and regulation**: play has its own order, according to the kind of play. Special rules govern games, defining moves, limitations, and roles. Pretending
calls us to negotiate and adopt mutually agreed upon structures, roles, and processes to play. Here we can test new rules, possibilities, and roles safely.

- **Inspiring:** feedback within the world of play pleases or stimulates us to continue playing and exploring within the play environment.

- **Social Experience:** when we play together, the shared experience creates new possibilities within each person and bonds them together through the unique experience of play. Even when we return to our realities, we invoke the memories of play with our fellow players, creating a bond beyond our normal reality.²

When we typically think of play, we think of a formal game, whether it be a sport, board game, video game, or even a word game. We typically begin with some form of invitation, asking, “Do you want to play with me?” Once we enter into the world of play, we negotiate the general rules and structures, discovering what role we will play and how we interact with each other. We recognize the limitations of play. When one of the rules is violated, the reality of play breaks down, allowing our other realities to break in.

² I follow Johan Huizinga’s markers of play. Ibid., 7-12. Jane McGonigal gives a similar structure to play in her work, *Reality is Broken*. She moves from the general attitude of play to the more specific structure of games. Her markers are:

- the goal: “the specific outcome that players will work to achieve...the goal provides players with a sense of purpose,“
- The rules: “limitations on how players can achieve the goal...They unleash creativity and foster strategic thinking.”
- The feedback system: “tells players how close they are to achieving the goal...Real-time feedback serves as a promise to the players that the goal is definitely achievable, and it provides motivation to keep playing.”

I find that Huizinga’s list gives a clearer picture of general play, whereas McGonigal focuses more specifically on games. However, McGonigal gives us the addition of feedback within play that encourages continued play and exploration, which will be important as we develop play in forming our imaginations.
However, as we play, we are inspired to continue by overcoming obstacles, working toward a goal, or even through the feedback of joy, friendship, cleverness, etc. Finally, once play has ended and we have stepped back into our individual realities, we are reminded of our play when we see our playmates, share inside jokes, or tell stories of what we discovered and accomplished.

We can recognize this in formal sports. Players are invited onto a field of play, receive a position and objective, work alongside teammates within certain rules and parameters, score points or markers of progress, and attempt to achieve the ultimate goal of winning the game. Afterwards, stories of the amazing events, unexpected moves, prowess, and even of failure and overcoming are told. Highly structured games, like sports, allow persons to engage a very specific game in a very specific environment. One learns social lessons of teamwork, strategy, and responding to situations in the midst of constant movement. However, the specific imagination and possibilities developed in a highly structured game tend to be limited to the environment of the game.

Formal play engages our imaginations within highly structured and formal worlds, usually based around some form of contest. Our imaginations recall our semantic memory, specific actions and knowledge necessary for the highly specific environment. It helps us attune our habits and actions through developing new possibilities for specifics thoughts, actions, dispositions, etc. But, these specific

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3 Huizinga finds that many games have a formal contest, including the judiciary and war. First, he asserts, “...like all other forms of play, the contest...begins and ends in itself.” Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 49. He continues, “‘There is something at stake’—the essence of play is contained in that phrase. But this ‘something’ is not the material results of the play...but the ideal fact that the game is a success.” Ibid., 49. Here, Huizinga shows that contest sets up formal boundaries for a game, focusing on specific results determined by the game’s own reality.
environments serve as highly specialized places to fine tune what we already practice. It does very little to challenge us to engage our episodic memories, calling us to reflect upon, dissect, and reform our anchor memories and adjust our overall neural map. Formal play helps fine tune our already existing neural maps, but it does not challenge us to engage our secondary, tertiary, etc., neural maps as options to check or replace our primary map.

*Play Frames Imagination: Make-Believe Framework*

Huizinga’s framework gives us a structure for formal games, developing and reinforcing roles and rules within highly unique and structured environments. However, there are other games that we play as children which shape our overall reality deeper than structured games of sports or formal games — the play of pretending and make-believe. Courtney Goto, in her work *The Grace of Playing*, focuses on the childish playing of pretend, finding that it transforms us through the practices of:

- Creativity: When a person re-imagines reality to see it differently, rearranging the familiar in peculiar ways for new possibilities.
- Structure: This goes beyond the field of play to fully world building. In playing pretend the players construct possible words to abide in, contemplate, and experiment. This structure includes what is true and false within the possible world
- Response: the persons involved in playing-pretend sense, respond, and negotiate possible relationships with each other as they explore together.
Wonder: in pretending, we must be open to impromptu possibilities, allowing ourselves to be surprised, wonder at the peculiar possibilities, and attempt to respond.

These practices “trigger not an analytic parsing of parts but contemplation of how parts relate to an unseen whole. They inspire a person to consider creative possibilities, to construct plausible explanations for being taken by surprise perceptions.”

It is this sense of wonder and surprise that calls our imaginations to retrieve unexpected and deep core memories, attempting to relate ourselves to the unseen whole that has been made possible. In pretending, we enter new realities, become surprised by the possibilities, and our imaginations are transformed by new understandings of what we can become.

Playing pretend follows the structure of any game: invitation, environment, rules and roles, and inspiration. However, in pretending we enter into a more fluid and flexible form of play. Instead of entering into pre-made roles and rules, we have to discover our roles together and discover the rules as we play. There is an intuition that helps us recognize when our role has overstepped its bounds or broken down. It is in wonder that inspiration makes its larger contribution. As we play and negotiate, we are surprised by our playmates’ impromptu activities and wonder at our own possibilities. Wonder is the feedback that inspires us to continue playing. During this kind of play, there is little signal to the end of play. We must end either when play is no longer inspirational or when the demands of our normal reality call us out of play. The shared experience is rooted in the wonder we have discovered together. We may continue to explore the

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possibilities discovered, tell stories about it, make inside jokes, daydream, or even attempt to activate small gestures of play with each other within our normal realities.

More transformative play happens within the less structured play of “pretend.” Pretending, for Goto, is a place of where very real “possibilities abound.” She reminds us that pretending is not escapism or falsification of the world, but, “sometimes the make-believe involved in playing has more to do with authentication or approaching that which is more real.” When we pretend, we enter a foreign experience, learning how to navigate the new environment without a referee keeping us in boundaries. Players voluntarily enter into environments of unknown consequences and nebulous social rules that they have to work out in the midst of play. It is akin to entering a new environment within normal realities — a new school, a new job, a new city, etc.

In pretending, we are transformed by the realities and possibilities that our imaginations are testing. By entering these new environments, we engage our imaginations (as we explored in chapter 3). When we first enter the new environment, our perceptions are heightened by the unknown, and our imagination attempts to find familiar cues within the new environment so that we know our role and others’ roles within the environment. It activates our previous memories, dissects both past and present experience, and reorders it to make sense of our environment and who we are within it. As we engage with other people in this new environment, our imaginations call us to “pretend” certain roles or act “as-if” we are certain types of people.

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5 Ibid., 16.
6 Ibid., 16-17.
7 Goto uses this phrase, ‘as-if,’ saying, “Playing involves a poietic world characterized not only by make-believe, but of acting or believing ‘as if’ certain everyday ways of being in the world were suspended.”
we leave the uncommon “play” environment, our imaginations reflect upon our experience. Because the play-environment was uncommon, it has more opportunity to engage our episodic memories, calling us to reflect upon our anchor memories at the core of who we are and compare this experience with those moments. In short, it calls into question our habited assumptions. If we do this reflection in a group, then we will be inspired to tell stories, compare, and assimilate the memory together, giving deeper opportunity for our imaginations to integrate the experience with our core self. Our imagination helps us structure possible explanations in which our experience fits with our primary, secondary, tertiary, and further neural maps. In this way, we adjust our primary neural map with significant possibilities from our non-primary maps, creating new worldviews and possibilities for us to engage in. Who we pretend to be while we are playing transforms who we are in our normal life. This is where core transformation of our imagination begins.

A better way to refer to playing-pretend is “make believe,” for that is exactly what we are doing. We are testing new realities and possibilities as if they are true so that we can make new beliefs within ourselves about reality. Make believe is the act of transforming our imaginations by adjusting our neural maps with new possibilities and experiences. We continue our transformation by continually oscillating between our normal environment and re-engaging in the foreign “make-believe” environment. In doing so, we are testing and retesting our roles within our normal life and our life within the other context. We will engage in formal play within our normal lives and the make-

Ibid., 16. I find that there is the other side to this coin, acting “as-if” another world or reality is possible, and acting “as-if” it is true.
believe play in the foreign environment. Through engaging this “pretend, reflection, normative” cycle, we will slowly adjust both our anchor memories about who we believe we are and our semantic skill memories of habit and action so that they will match. Slowly, our primary neural map will adjust into a new imagined self. When we do this in community, it will influence the communal imagination as well, seeing a new imagined social self.

When John and I got out of my car in the South Austin neighborhood, we were engaging in a world of play. We were invited by Kidz Express to come into their environment and play. As we entered the neighborhood and the building, we were uncertain of our roles or the social rules of the environment. We had some idea that the structure revolved around “tutor/student” roles. However, we also had to make-believe our roles within ourselves, navigating the environment of possible learning disabilities, unique student interests, race, age, gender, and each unique individual experience. So, we pretended, stepping into what we conceived as our role, and we began to navigate all the possibilities of play in Kidz Express. We violated rules, had to ask the director and teachers about the proper order of things, played through homework, reading strategies, puzzles, board games, and even basketball. We also navigated through some tough conversation about life, race, history, economics, and families.

We had to trust our fellow playmates to help us navigate in their environment. I had a fourth grade girl become my conscience while I was at Kidz Express. She would tell me when I said or did something that either violated their rules or violated social rules of race and economics. We negotiated this relationship through the play of poetry, where
we learned that we cared for each other and that we respected each other’s voices and opinions. She helped me play rightly in their environment.

Once we became normal playmates at Kidz Express, we could begin to negotiate the environment together, developing new structures and rules for how we play together. In our play, we listened to the kids so that we could bring activities and lessons to Kidz Express that we knew would inspire the students to play with us. We knew that there were certain words and phrases that would inspire different responses, and we developed new words, jokes, and phrases that became our play-language. Eventually, our play at Kidz Express inspired John’s imagination to negotiate the possibility of remodeling a garage into a gym. It also inspired our greater communities to work together to create new spaces of play. Our church invited students from South Austin to join our K-8 school. Kidz Express inspired our church to help raise funds to purchase a new, larger building for their program, co-creating a new play place for us to interact and the possibility of inviting more students to come and play with us.

It is this make-believe/real play that transforms our imaginations into incarnate imaginations. Just as God’s imagination drew God to become incarnate and live with us as one of us, when we play with others in their worlds, we begin to imagine incarnately and slowly transform into the incarnate imagination. Now, we must recognize that merely playing in someone else’s world is not enough. Our transformation into incarnate imaginations requires directed reflection on our experience through the shared stories of the gospel, giving us languages, metaphors, and icons for our experience rooted in the
incarnate Christ. Then, when we imagine our possibilities and roles, we will imagine them as icons of Christ.

**Formal Games and Make-Believe: The Christian Practices**

Now that we have laid out and explored the models of *formal play* and *make-believe play*, and how each forms our imaginations, these models can help us investigate our Christian practices, seeing them as games inviting our imaginations to experiment, test, and play in Christian realities.

As we saw in chapter 1, Christian faith formation’s goal is to transform a person’s mind into an icon of Christ, forming an incarnate imagination. The Christian life is one of play: we are invited into a new world; suspend the realities of this world; find it limited and framed by its own rules, roles, and goals; receive the feedback of grace, community, encouragement, and humble rebuke; all within a community of fellow players. Dykstra has directed our attention to the Christian practices of communal worship, piety, and works of mercy as all necessary to form us in the incarnate imagination.\(^8\) Each one of these practices is a kind of game or play that forms us in the reality of God’s grace.

Most experts in faith formation find that worship is the beginning and foundation of our religious imaginations, seeking to form our daily realities within its framework. Though many of them define worship holistically, involving life within and beyond corporate worship, they tend to focus on corporate worship and liturgy as the primary

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formative experience. James Smith emphasises that, “Worshipers leave worship with a blessing and charge, sent into the world for the world...We are sent from formation for mission.”9 With this understanding, we are primarily formed and transformed in worship and then sent into the world. This form expects that we will be able to pre-consciously imagine the real world in the forms of the worship environment and act accordingly.

Worship should be the foundation of our primary neural map. However, how can worship be our primary neural map when the bulk of our lives is lived outside of corporate worship — outside of formal worship practices like bible study, prayer, and intentional Christian community? The primary experience, and thus the primary neural map accessed by our imaginations, is the world we predominantly live in: work, school, family, sports, commerce, etc. All of these things provide us practices that we employ daily to achieve certain tasks.

Instead, I find that we often imagine worship within the contexts of our dominant, worldly lives. Murphy states this clearly, saying, “What we bring with us to worship has everything to do with how we worship and how we are shaped by the worship we offer.”10 We bring our work, school, family, and play habits and neural maps into worship. Our imaginations compare the form of worship to our dominant practice-forms and seek to define the foreignness of worship by our daily standard. In order to transform our primary imaginations into the forms of the gospel, we must go into the world and practice the gospel within our normal realms. We must take the secondary neural map of our forms-of-faith and ask our people to play by these rules intentionally in the world.

9 Smith, Imagining the Kingdom, 4.
10 Murphy, Teaching that Transforms, 119.
Then, our imaginations will seek to compare and challenge our worldly experiences with Christian forms, decenter our primary neural maps, and re-center them within the incarnate imagination. We will explore the Christian practices in the language of games to see how, exactly, they form us.

*The Works of Mercy Make Belief through Make-believe.*

When we create environments for faith formation in the real world, we are training our parishioners’ imaginations to see real people, places, conditions, and relationships in the forms of grace. We must enter the world “as-if” God’s grace is real. “‘As-if’ is vital for nurturing faith,” says Goto, “Christian tradition often asks the faithful to act ‘as if’ or consider something ‘as if’ in order to perceive what is spiritually real.”

Acting “as-if” is literally “make-belief” in which we consciously prepare ourselves to perceive reality a certain way. There is a cognitive dissonance that arises when we employ our imaginations in make-believe: when we enter a foreign environment our primary, pre-conscious imagination will provide our natural reactions and roles, while our conscious imagination will attempt to employ the forms and roles of our “as-if” belief. If we prepare our parishioners to enter a situation, making themselves believe that God’s grace is real, then we will feel the competing emotions of fear and hope. We will see those foreign to us as possible enemies and neighbors. We will see the poor as both valueless and of absolute value. We will see the sick as contagious and as needing the medicine of grace. It is this mix of reality and make-believe that decenters our primary

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neural map and calls for our imaginations to attempt to make sense of the make-believe possibilities.

What is unique about make-believe is that it is informal. Goto explains what playing make-believe means. First, play is unchallenged by the rules of reality. Here, reality is not the real environment that you are entering. Our play must be unchallenged by the rule of our primary, individual realities—the normal roles and rules of gender, race, class, religion, etc. that we usually employ in our lives. We must suspend these rules because they serve more to protect ourselves from threat than to engage ourselves in grace and love. Second, play is not skill or rule mastery but developing the disposition of wonder, making one open to what relationships and possibilities emerge. These possibilities occur when those we encounter move from “them” to brother, sister, and friend; from threat to play-mate! Though it is not about mastery, we will eventually master the disposition within our imagination to relate authentically with others. Finally, we learn to negotiate reality with our play-mates. Instead of allowing our primary reality dictate our imagined possibilities, we now negotiate new possibilities with our new friends and create a new reality together by God’s grace.

The works of mercy are the primary place to practice “make-believe” play. We will act as-if Matthew 25 is true and that the poor, hungry, naked, imprisoned, and sick — the least of these — are fellow play-mates. We will find ourselves in the place of the woman who washes Jesus’ feet with her hair and tears or of Simon who carries Jesus’ cross. We are forming our imaginations to view all people as Christ and to serve them.

12 Ibid., 28.
13 Ibid., 29.
14 Ibid., 29.
The more we enter the real world, playing “as-if” those we interact with are Christ, the more we will believe it. Playing make-believe actually makes us believe! As we practice it, it will become normal and, hopefully, our primary way of imagining reality. That way, when we ask Jesus, “When did we see or serve you?” Jesus will answer, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40b NRSV). We will imagine and live in the world shaped by God’s grace.

Worship and Piety: Form-giving Formal Games.

When we enter the Christian world — the church, corporate worship, bible studies, prayer, and Sunday school — we enter a part of our primary reality that is formed by rules and roles. Though church should challenge our primary, worldly imagination, for most Christians it has been assumed as part of the normal roles of life. Most understand it as a formal game, like a sport or a board game, in which we enter the play-field of the church; governed by the play-rules of proper worship, interpretation, posture, speech forms, and politeness. We interact with each other as “brothers and sisters in Christ” within this play world. But, because it is part of our normal reality, we imagine the church as the place where “those rules apply,” limiting them to that game sphere. Just like we cannot employ basketball rules at work, or Monopoly rules at school, so too we do not employ “church rules” beyond the church. This is the nature of formal games. As we saw above, a game has a set environment, time, rules, and roles that all begin when the game starts and ends when the game ends. Sadly, this means that “church rules” begin with “The Lord be with you,” and end with “Go in peace and serve the Lord.”
Formal games do have their place in forming new imaginings of reality. They are the places where we practice the proper forms and rules of the reality we are trying to “make-believe” in the real world. Where Goto said that playing make-believe is not mastery of skills, playing formal games is the mastery of skills. When we play formal games, we employ semantic and implicit memory, reinforcing neural pathways to particular skills, words, movements, and postures. We learn the forms of grace, humility, joy, lament, thanksgiving, and praise. But, so long as these skills are only learned in the formal game of worship, they will only be triggered and employed in worship-type experiences. However, when we begin with playing make-believe in the works of mercy, then we will marry those experiences with the experience and practice of worship, bridging our skills and forms with our real-world experiences. This bridge allows these forms to be imagined and enacted in the new possibilities that we imagine in the world.

The works of piety are also formal games that we employ to teach us mastery of skills and concepts. We are taught to read the Bible, pray, and learn together in formal ways. Even the extemporaneous prayer of many evangelical churches has a form. We hear the formal repetition of “O, God, I just..,” or “Heavenly Father…” When we read the Bible, we set aside a time for reading, and we ask routine questions to probe our thoughts. We are taught a form for interacting with the tools and practices of our faith, and we master those skills well. Like any formal game, there is a beginning and an ending to employing those thoughts and skills. However, when we employ these practices in contemplation and integration of our de-centering make-believe experience, we will bring new thoughts and possibilities to the forms and allow the forms to help give
categories and explanations to our experience. In this way, these forms help shape our imagination.

In order for corporate worship or the works of piety to truly form our imaginations, we must enter into them with de-centered experiences and untested possibilities from the works of mercy. These formal practices give proper categories, forms, and roles to help us integrate our new experience into our scriptural, communal, and personal narratives. In this way, worship and piety is incarnate, because it is giving Christ-form to a real and living experience. They then help form the incarnate imagination by helping us imagine forms of life that reflect Jesus in the real world.

**Becoming Icons**

The framework of *make-believe* and *formal play* has given us models to form imaginations. *Make-believe* invites the imagination into improvisational negotiation with reality, attempting to discern and discover the roles and rules of play. It is decentering, calling into question our primary imaginative roles and rules for reality. *Formal play* invites our decentered imaginations into a familiar space, allowing us to test and practice these new *make-believe* roles and rules within a normative environment. Here, our imaginations synthesize these possible realities within a formative environment. Now we will work out these frameworks alongside Maria Harris’ imaginative pedagogy.

As teachers, we are professionals in playing make-believe. Our imaginations have been inspired by the possibilities of God’s graceful incarnation, both in story and in grace-full experiences. Our imaginations should be *made to believe* the Incarnation, and
thus we act as if the Incarnation is true within us. We play the formal games of worship and Bible studies. We also play the impromptu make-believe games of prayer, exhortation, and the works of mercy within the world. As we have been transformed by playing make-believe in God’s grace, so we, too, create playful environments for others to play and experience grace. Let us return to Maria Harris’ educational model: contemplation, engagement, forms giving, emergence, and release.  

We will look at each part on behalf of the teacher and the student.

**Contemplation: Making the World for Imaginations to Make-Believe**

As teachers, we are world-builders. To begin this work, we must experience the world as a student, learning the contours, needs, desires, fears and hopes of each particular environment. We must also enter the world of our students, learning their own unique interests, desires, needs, fears and hopes. By contemplating these two worlds side-by-side, we see our “teaching as a work where a community of people come together as a community of hope; a coming together of people, each of whom brings her or his radical particularity as this unique person.” Harris’ ideal teaching environment is a community of hope, where the students’ and the world’s hopes and fears mutually form each other.

Hope functions on two levels during our world-building contemplation. First, it must be the foundational disposition of our imagination and contemplation. We must

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16 Ibid., 28.
enter the world in hope that we will discover the thread of God’s grace through reality. We must also entertain our students’ perspective in the hope that we will find that same thread in their lives. When we find these threads, we can draw them together into a full learning environment, engaging our students in the real world and revealing the thread of God’s grace to them. Second, hope is the imaginative possibility of what may be learned and how both our students and those they interact with may be formed by grace. We imagine the possibility that our students will encounter others in the world and participate in Christ-like and graceful ways. At the same time, we imagine that the those we encounter in the world will be shaped by grace and slowly join us in discovering God’s thread. In short, our incarnate imaginations are shaped by hope to see and actualize possibilities of hope. We imagine a teaching environment where our students can make-believe the grace of Christ in the world.

Practically, contemplation must be deep and constant. While working in Chicago, I spent two years slowly forming the teaching environment. Much of this was the work of contemplation. I hoped that I would discover the thread of God’s grace in my community. In order to imagine what could be taught, I had to listen and experience the worlds of my parishioners, students, and neighborhoods. The parishioners’ perspective was one of anxious success, in which they hoped for the success of their children and feared failure. Thus, they chased every extracurricular and academic opportunity to find the one that would make their child a prodigy. Their hope was for the best life of their child. Their fear was that their child would not be able to survive our economy.
I also worked with a number of non-profit agencies to learn the shape of Chicago’s community. I found that there were very many deep and unique needs throughout the city, from inner-city student issues, violence, refugee integration, foster care administration, and rape-victim advocacy. Over the first two years, I organized weekend service trips to partner with the agencies and invited their professionals to speak to our students, introducing these two worlds together. I did not know how these would coalesce, but I was immersing myself in the stories and inviting these stories to interact with each other.

In contemplating these worlds in God’s hope and grace, my imagination discovered a thread to tie them together. Families sought unique opportunities for their child’s success, and each of these agencies provided something unique and graceful in the community. If these two worlds could be drawn together, there would be a unique teaching environment in which students would participate in unique, practical, hopeful work that served the same kind of marginal communities that Jesus served. At the same time, my students would make-believe and play in these worlds of need as Christ-like icons of grace, inviting others to play with them. So, I called the agencies and asked, “What would it look like for you to hire one of our students as a summer intern to learn the daily, practical experience of your service?” I also asked our church, “What would it look like for us to fund internships for our students to go into Chicago and learn how to serve our neighbors in grace?” Together, we developed the learning environment of service-internships for our students to make-believe their lives in Jesus’ grace.
When we contemplate in hope, we must first know the needs, hopes, and fears of our students and our surrounding community. We must also be immersed in the imagination of the gospel, its stories, and its rhythms. From these, we can imagine how certain situations echo Jesus’ service to the poor, sick, marginal, and oppressed. Environments will be shaped as reflections of the gospel, and we can imagine what roles our students will inhabit, pretending and make-believing God’s grace in their real-world lives. We may imagine them as Jesus-the-teacher tutoring students, or Jesus-the-dignifier helping the humiliated find work, or even Jesus-the-liberator helping people find work, homes, and love. When we contemplate in this way, we can imagine the possibility that the world is formed by God’s grace and that our students can be icons of Christ, affecting real grace in the world.

*Engagement: Inviting and Playing in the Make-Believe World.*

During our contemplation, we will discover moments of engagement. Though we may not have the full picture of the educational environment, we may imagine smaller lessons to engage our students in, inviting them on our journey of discovery. As we engage the world around us, we also engage our students in “diving in, wrestling with, and rolling around in subject matter. Engagement brings the contemplative imagination to bear on something tangible, and makes the creative (compositive) imagination active.”17

In contemplation, we teachers are learning and imagining. Engagement means that we involve our students in our learning, training them to learn and imagine alongside us.

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17 Ibid., 30.
Here is where we begin to play. The first act of play is inviting others to play with us, create with us, and make-believe alongside us.\textsuperscript{18} We have contemplated and imagined through our students’ hopes and fears. Now we invite them to jump in. As we saw in chapter 3, their participation will activate their passions. These passions are both their anxieties and hopes, the initial emotional responses to new environments and perceptions.\textsuperscript{19} By participating with us, our students will enter foreign environments that activate their base fears and turn on their imaginations to search for comfort and understanding. They will depend on us, their trusted teachers, and their fellow students for comfort and orientation as their imaginations “make-believe” their role in this new environment.

The world we invite them to make-believe in is a play world. It is an environment with social rules and regulations that determine how one acts and responds. However, it is less a formal game with formal rules and more of a game of make-believe with negotiated and intuited rules and roles for the students to embody and play out. As we discover these rules and boundaries together, our imaginations will attempt to make sense of them, finding a familiar framework to play in, or discovering new, peculiar, and

\textsuperscript{18} Harris bridges contemplation and engagement, saying, “When we understand that engagement with subject matter we can also see how the contemplative moment is incorporated into the moment of Engagement, where are ontological vocation to be subject only requires us to be engaged with the world but also to stand back and to look at how we look at the world.” Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{19} Moltmann investigates the idea of passion, saying, “The word passion has the double meaning of suffering and overwhelming feeling and ardour; and because of this double sense, it is extremely well suited to express the central truth of the Christian faith.” Jurgen Moltmann, “The Passion of Christ and the Pain of God,” \textit{Jesus Christ for Today’s World} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 44. This idea of passion—suffering and ardour—connects with Hogue’s idea of the activating emotions of fear and comfort. Hogue says, “Our brains are hardwired to respond automatically to certain types of events in the world and to overlook others...We are much more likely to attend to objects that could hurt us than we are to those that promise to give us pleasure...The pathway from the thalamus to the amygdala is the shorter circuit, preparing the organism to flee or fight.” Hogue, \textit{Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past}, 36-37. So, when we activate a student’s passions, we are activating the initial, foundational emotion of either fear or comfort, anxiety or hope.
paradoxical rules for how to live and act. In these environments, students’ and teachers’ imaginations are open to new possibilities of relationships, interactions, language, actions, roles, and archetypes. Their normal “hero” archetype of a Superman-esque paragon of goodness may encounter the new Robin Hood-esque virtuous rogue. Or, their idea of how a good, moral Christian should function may be challenged by the possibilities of the subversive, Sabbath-rule breaking, unclean-touching Christianity that Christ practiced. Through playing and participating in graceful make-believe in the real world, our students’ imaginations may be open to the possibilities of a real and living Christ.

While we play in the very real play-world, both our imagination and that of our students will be open to inspiration and wonder. When they encounter and negotiate the rules and roles of their learning environment, their imaginations are inspired to explore new possibilities and wonder at what may become of our playing. As our students play with those they are serving, they will receive the feedback from their playmates, encouraging them to either adjust their roles (when they violate an environmental rule) or to keep playing (when they interact rightly with others). This feedback will encourage their imaginations to continue wondering and creating possibilities even after the play has finished.

As I was contemplating and exploring the needs of my congregation and the world of Chicago, I invited students to join me. We went to tutor students in the South Austin neighborhood, encountering the world of African-American west-side Chicago. We attended the World Refugee Day festival, helping serve lunch alongside refugees,
paint children’s faces, play water balloons with the children, and cheer for various ethnic soccer teams. We had victim-advocate counselors and teachers speak with our students about sexuality, consent, and abuse. All of these environments came with their own rules and roles that we had to negotiate and intuit. Our pre-imagined forms of the world were challenged by the laughter and stories of refugee children, the hope of foster-care youth, the challenges and creativity of West-side students, and even the realities of abused and victimized persons. Each one of these experiences invited us to continually make-believe who we were and who our partners in service were. Our pre-imagined roles—races, genders, family norms, students, workers, etc.—were all challenged. We were inspired to wonder about the possibilities of all these various rules and roles. Further, we are called imagine how grace is uniquely playing in each environment: both how we may play the role of grace, and how those we serve are playing as grace for us.

Here, we must recognize the risk of voyeurism, in which the privileged go into areas of poverty, abuse, and struggle in order to experience life on the other side. Once their experience is finished, they can return to their normal realities, safe from the struggles they experienced. Thus, teachers must be intentional about helping form the make-believe framework for the students. The environments that they enter are not temporary but continue existing before and after the play has ended. The students’ roles are not to be saviors or solvers but neighbors, friends, and play-mates.

Further, we must imagine how Christian make-believe functions in the other direction. How do churches from minority or under-resourced communities engage with other communities? Play is the answer. They invite other communities to play with
them, entering a play environment together in order to negotiate, learn, and transform
together. If our analysis thus far is correct, then the framework of play ought to work just
as well for minority communities learning to play with dominant communities as for the
privileged learning to play with those who are not. In our mutual play with other
communities, we learned each other by name and participated together as friends. This is
the goal of teaching through engagement.

It is these experiences alongside my students and families that began to coalesce
into the new learning environments of non-profit internships.

*Form-Giving: Expressing Wonder and Inspiring our Imagination to re-make our realities*

After we have engaged new environments in the world, opening our imaginations
to new possibilities and roles, the initial playing ceases. Our students will continue to
remember, wonder, and imagine different possibilities from their experience, attempting
to make coherent their normal frameworks with the possibilities that arose from the new
framework. This moment requires the most traditional and hands-on teaching, leading
students in integrating their new experiences. This is *Form-Giving*, as Harris explains,
“the moment when preparation, prior knowledge, and the understanding of subject matter
as a system of clues is essential. At the same time, it is the moment when all the learning
may produce something quite unexpected, the paradox being that the preknown, the
finished, is needed.”20 As teachers, we lead students to remember the vital prior
knowledge and memories they need to make sense of their new experience. We also lead
them in remembering their new experience. These are the prior and current

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20 Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 34.
understandings that we will integrate together, imagining new possibilities, roles, and forms of life for our students and ourselves.

In form-giving, we ask our students to remember and reconstruct their experience. Because it is a new experience, each student will attempt to explain it, struggling to understand all of the data, relationships, and their own roles. They will experience the *je ne sais quoi*, lacking language or comparable memories to form understanding. As teachers, we need to supply the prior information to help explain and integrate the new experience.

To help form an incarnate imagination, the primary prior information must be the gospel and scriptural stories that reflect the experience. These will provide us with foundational language, pictures, and forms to begin explaining and integrating their experience. The stories will be retold alongside their new experience, giving them icons and archetypes for the people they encountered, relational exchanges, and their own sense of selves. We lead them in seeing themselves and the world around them in the roles and forms of God’s story.

However, merely telling the scriptural story is not enough. We must lead them in recalling similar memories from their own past experiences, allowing the new experience to match and line up. Now there are three levels of narrative: their new experience, the scriptural form, and their past stories. With these three layers, we invite the students to wonder and explore them together, letting their imaginations compare, dissect, and reform all of these stories into new possibilities. Though this may not be active play, it is
still imaginative play. The students make-believe together, telling and re-telling stories, and fashioning new possibilities to test with each other.

Teachers help their students navigate all these narratives, but they do not dictate the forms or possibilities that result. Instead, the teacher is a partner. Our job is to help inspire their memories and narrate the scriptural foundation. We tell stories, and we ask poignant questions to help the students explore deeper connections. We also seek to affirm their thoughts, helping them clarify and synthesize their ideas. Finally, we engage their productive imaginations by asking them to think of possible new forms of life, or future possibilities to re-play their experience and test their new forms.

*The practices of Christian worship, Bible study, Sunday school, and any other formal Christian practice is primarily form-giving.* These practices within the formal Christian world are times for our parishioners and people to juxtapose their daily and worldly experiences with the narratives, forms, and experiences in a structured Christian environment. Christian worship is essential in form-giving. It is the “formal game” with a set structure, world, roles, and systems of play. Worship provides us with clear metaphors, icons, and roles, each pointing us to God and God’s possibilities for us.

When we end our play engagement with the world, we are left with the chaotic wonder and sense-making of our experience. Worship provides the foundational forms, icons, and roles to help us interpret our new experience and see it as part of our whole narrative. The people we encountered become our neighbors, brothers, and sisters in Christ. The needs of the community that we experienced become the needs that Jesus met on the road to Jerusalem and are the same needs we lift up in prayer. The gifts of serving and
relationships that we experienced are reflected in the gift of the Eucharist. Further, the Eucharist reflects the “breaking” of our normal patterns and the “pouring out” of our preconceived roles in the world, only to be “made whole” in the body of Christ that forms our incarnate imagination. Without worship, our worldly experiences lack the common, incarnate form. Without our worldly experiences and play, worship merely teaches us static forms to play in church. At worst, worship remains a foreign world that our imaginations cannot understand nor even conceive the tangible possibilities in our own lives. Continually playing real world make-believe centered in the gospel is essential for worship to help form us. Regularly playing in the world beyond the church anchors worship’s forms in our daily, functional imaginations.

After my middle school confirmands and I finished working and playing with refugee families, we spent the evening debriefing on the day. I asked them to reflect on the day and tell me what they experienced. I also asked them to explain to me what a refugee was. They could provide the explanation of someone seeking refuge in another country to preserve their lives. But, now they could add that refugees were men, women, and children who laughed, played, and loved life just like them. We then looked at the Exodus, God coming to the slaves, and God’s promise of a land. We read about how God saw, heard, and knew their experience. God, in knowing, becomes incarnate in the suffering and fears of the slaves and refugees. Then God comes and acts on their behalf. We talked about the laughter of the children and the joy of the families playing water balloons and soccer. We could witness the role of God’s grace and how it was possible that they could participate in it with the refugee families.
The next day, I accompanied the confirmands into worship. We entered the same liturgy that we participate in every week. Afterward, we had lunch, and I asked them how the gospel, the songs, the prayers, and the Eucharist helped them understand their experience with Chicago’s refugee population. They could slowly identify the role of God as the provider, they could see God’s grace in the world, and they could identify the gift of the Eucharist with the gift of the people’s different foods that we shared. One student even identified the broken body of Christ with a bruise he received from a water balloon that did not pop! We then talked about future possibilities. Who, in our immediate community, stands in the same role as the refugee? Who needs grace? How can we see the needs, hear the fears, and know the experience of them? How do we partner with God and come? What should we do next? The immediate answer was to go back and work with the same families. Slowly, though, their imaginations grew to see that they could possibly join the high school students, tutoring in South Austin. These may seem like simple possibilities in their imaginations. However, these students were using their incarnate imaginations, shaping the possibilities of their daily lives in the forms of Christ.

After we engage and give form, we need to continue repeating this oscillation: engage the world, integrate experiences through conversation and worship, imagine incarnate forms of life, re-engage the world, integrate, imagine.
Emergence: Allowing Students’ Imaginations to Make-Believe in Various Worlds

Slowly, playing make-believe becomes our new reality. We continue this process of engaging, integrating, and imagining until students begin to take some self-initiative and enact these forms on their own. This is when their imagining and pretending to be the grace actually makes-belief that they are partners and bearers of grace in the world. We encourage our students to imagine new forms and to experiment with them. They will attempt these forms, struggle with them, and become frustrated because they can not quite get it right. We must walk behind them and encourage them to keep going. We explore their successes and failures with them, and we nudge them to re-imagine and try again. “Something new is beginning to be born,” Harris explains, “that something is connected to what has gone before; but for the present moment, in this learner, in this situation, subject matter is being and has been reformed, indeed reinvented for the future with a life of its own.”

True emergence is when a student steps into a new environment, perceives its needs, imagines their role, navigates the relationships in grace, finds their natural place within it, and creates something new alongside those they are playing with. It is when their imaginations become icons of the Incarnation, and they nurture the grace of Christ in the real world.

In emergence, students become journeymen and masters of grace within their real-world contexts. They have played grace so much that it has become the natural possibility. When their imaginations perceive new contexts, their perceptions are driven by the hope of grace instead of the anxiety of foreignness. The hopes and fears that they intuit in others and themselves are opportunities for the gospel to manifest in the present.

21 Ibid., 37.
They will contemplate their daily interactions in the language and stories of scripture. And, they will be bold in imagining the possibilities of grace. When we send them from worship with the call to “Go in peace and serve the Lord!” they will understand the call as it applies to their lives and be able to accomplish it.

With my students, emergence looked like the summer internships. These internships were paid jobs that students interviewed for. They would work 20 hours a week in non-profit services. These services included foster care and adoption fundraising, consent and sexual education for elementary school students, refugee summer camp and home placement, and programming an inner city summer program. Our students were self-directed, working in their respective offices and classrooms with people from various walks of life. These environments were foreign to their normal school/home/church lives. After working for a week, students came to understand their environments and could explain to me how their agency was enacting grace. They saw those they serve as both the broken who need grace and as those who provide grace to others. They could see how their colleagues were bold warriors facing the struggles of this world, or kind care-takers nurturing grace. Most of all, they could narrate their work, even the most mundane work of organizing accounting files, as small pieces building the possibilities of grace. They were actualizing an incarnate imagination, shaping their working lives in the story of Jesus.
Release: Discovering our Students’ transformed Incarnate Imaginations

Finally, we must release our students from the role of student and allow them the full freedom to imagine and actualize the possibilities of grace within themselves. This looks like one student who still tutors and teaches in South Austin. He has attended two funerals of youth who were shot on the streets. He called me and told me that, in his daily life at school, no one knows these boys’ names. For his school-friends, these boys are just a number, but for him they are people that he loves. Another student went to college, and though he struggles in finding a worship community, he volunteers to tutor in an elementary school, working and playing through various learning disabilities. He told me that tutoring helps alleviate his anxiety from the pressures of college and puts his engineering classes in perspective. Even though these students are still navigating their lives of faith and their relationships with worshiping communities, their forms of life look like the works of mercy that Christ enacted. Their primary neural maps function in the framework of the gospel. Their imaginations have been transformed into icons of the Incarnation. Grace has become normal.

The Play of Mercy, Playing Graceful Make-believe with Our Neighbors.

The pedagogy of *incarnate imagination* that we have laid out has shown how *make-believe* and *formal play* work together to transform our parishioners’ imaginations, making God’s grace normative for reality. Following Matthew 25, we see that playing the make-believe of mercy shapes our imaginations to see all reality through Christ. When we lead our parishioners in the foundational play of Mercy, we will form their
imaginations to see real, graceful possibilities. So, let us trace Matthew 25 through our pedagogical model of Incarnate imagination.

Contemplation

Matthew 25 identifies a number of realities that we unknowingly encounter and respond to in our everyday lives. These realities include the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. As teachers, we need to contemplate these realities in our congregation as well as our community. Each reality has a surface level — those without reliable resources of food, water, clothing, or medicine. But our imaginations must consider the deeper reality.

Hunger, thirst and nakedness are deeper realities defined by resources. Within our congregations there may be a lack of food, but it may also be issues of healthy eating, heart disease, or lack of time to provide reasonable-cost meals for their family. In our communities, hunger and thirst may be a sign of poverty or lack of neighborhood grocery options, but they may also be signs of busyness, fast-food dependence, or a sign of resource-strain due to other expenses. Both malnutrition and obesity are issues we must consider when we consider hunger and thirst. These are not realities that we can rush in and fix but that we can enter into, invite others to play with us, talk, listen, negotiate, and develop concepts together.

Strangers, illness, and imprisonment are deeper realities of being. They go beyond community borders, hospitals, and prisons. These three categories may be tied together for those affected by depression. Depressions has symptoms that may be make
one a stranger to their own community and imprison them in isolation, exhaustion, anxiety, etc. It is an illness that requires medication, community care, and understanding. Aging and other illness may follow the same path. Those who are home-bound due to age, illness, or disabilities may leave empty spaces in our congregations but are often overlooked or considered strangers to others. Further, we must face the realities of communities that are different from ours. This may be due to race, economics, language, education, gender, sexuality, age, or a number of other identity markers.

In contemplating these deeper realities, we may recognize that both the overachieving and underachieving students may both feel the same anxiety, demands, and pressure. They may feel imprisoned by the expectations and work, ill from their anxiety, or a stranger to their teachers and parents. The professional and the day laborer may also be two sides of one reality. They feel the demands of work, performance, and proving themselves worthy in order to continue work. The pressure of bills and expenses weigh on both of them. These demands may imprison them to hours of labor, make them strangers to their families or communities, or even develop real illnesses due to stress.

The play of mercy calls us to enter the world and experience all of the different realities of play that life demands. If we have incarnate imaginations, then we will attempt to embody these realities within ourselves. What is primary in contemplating incarnately is that we recognize each reality not as an issue but as a real, named person. Contemplating these realities as play-environments for mercy means that we do not attempt to fix or solve them but that we enter them humbly and playfully, inviting others to teach us the rules and roles within them. When we make friends with the hungry,
thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, or imprisoned, then we share our realities together, playing with each other, caring for each other, and inadvertently aiding each other.

*Engagement*

Once we have contemplated these realities, identifying ourselves, our friends, and strangers within realities that need mercy, then we can begin to find ways to engage them. We have recognized that our students need to play with mercy for their own realities. Further, we have recognized where our community and our neighbors’ communities need mercy in their realities. We invite these communities to play together. Our students and other community members slowly come together to play *make-believe*. They tell each other their names and slowly hear each other’s stories and experiences. Similarities bind them together as friends and differences create a sense of wonder and exploration to deepen the friendship.

Engaging in the play of mercy crosses the boundaries created by our identity markers (race, economics, gender, age, etc.). By calling each other friend, those who are *other* become open to recognizing themselves in each other. The elderly may catch glimpses of their younger selves in the teenager, and the teenager may see their struggles worked out in the life of the elderly. The struggling student may see the same struggles in a more successful student and learn how to manage failure toward success. The successful student may see their anxiety in the struggling student and learn how to accept some of their own failure with grace. The under-resourced parent may see the same struggle to make time and financial ends meet in the well-resourced parent and vice-
versa. The play of mercy allows us to imagine each other as real people, make-believe each other’s lives within our own, wonder about possibilities together, and play in care and grace for each other.

By engaging in this form of play, we will become disoriented, and our imaginations will be decentered. Because we have playfully imagined someone else’s life within our own, we will begin to question our own reality. It is this questioning that opens us to wonder and possibility within our own lives and the lives of those around us.

*Form-Giving*

Becoming decentered means that we need to come to the church and practice the formal games of worship, study, prayer, and fellowship. These forms are the means of grace that recenter our decentered imaginations in God’s reality. The stories of scripture become deeper than “literal” interpretation. The bible becomes a play-mate, inviting us into its stories to wonder about the historical realities and concerns of the characters and the analogies that transcend past and present. When Jesus feeds the five thousand, we see a historical crowd of people, but we also see our fellowship hall pot-luck, our community soup-kitchen, and our school cafeteria. Now, scripture echoes across reality because our imaginations have been inspired by another person’s living reality. We give form to our experienced realities by telling our stories alongside the stories of scripture.

When we pray, we re-imagine and speak the different realities that we have encountered, offering them as stories to God. Then, we quiet ourselves in silence and listen as others do the same. We pray the words of scripture and the church alongside our
stories, attempting to place them in the forms of our traditions. Most of all, we pray the Lord’s prayer, asking for God’s will to be done within our own stories and those of our play-mates. Prayer imagines all reality as belonging to God and evokes God’s activity to come and play within our reality. We are recentering our stories within God’s creative imagination.

When we play the game of worship, we encounter forms that specifically put the play of mercy into context. When we pray “Give us this day our daily bread,” or see the bread broken, saying, “This is my body given for you,” our imaginations are inspired to our personal encounters with the hungry. We encounter the thirsty when we touch the waters of baptism, or when the cup is raised, saying, “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Our imaginations are called to the needs of the naked when we see the baptized clothed in white or we see the vestments, suits, or designer clothes of our ministers and fellow members. As our mouths speak words of confession and ask for forgiveness, we will recall the stories of imprisonment and isolation that separate us from the love of God and each other. Each name that is named in the intercessory prayers and each empty seat in the pews calls our imaginations to picture specific persons and wonder how we can care for them. Finally, throughout our worship we are called to imagine the stranger. When we greet our friends, we may imagine those new friends we have played with in life but are not part of this community. When we pass the peace, our imaginations recall those friends beyond our walls and desires to wish them peace as well. And, ultimately, when we are
dismissed to “Go in peace and serve the Lord,” our imaginations should recall all our other friends that we get to play with in the real world.

By engaging in these formal games, our imaginations are able to recenter themselves around God’s grace in Christ. This recentering is what transforms our imaginations into *incarnate imaginations*. But, this recentering can only happen if we have been decentered by playing mercy in the real world first.

*Re-engage and Emerge:*

When we leave worship with the words of sending, God calls us to re-engage in the play of mercy. As teachers, we invite our students to return to the communities, situations, and realities that we have already begun playing in. Now, we return as friends instead of strangers. Our invitations for others to come and play become more natural and expected. These different realities begin to blend together. It is no longer ‘my world’ encountering ‘your world.’ It is our shared world.

It is also in this re-engaging that we can begin to imagine new possibilities of reality together. We are open to the questions of our friends, and they are open to our questions. Trust and love for one another becomes the foundation in which we can engage one another, care for each other, and challenge each other’s pre-existing imagined realities. It is also here that we negotiate new rules, roles, and possibilities with each other. We may be able to help our friend assess and alleviate stress from their lives. Our friends may help us do better on an assignment. We may invite each other over for meals, meeting the need of hunger and thirst. We may exchange clothes for fun,
accidentally meeting the needs of nakedness. By becoming friends, we have already met the need of the stranger. They may help care for our sick child while we go to work, showing mercy to the sick. If one of us is in trouble, then we seek a solution together. Playing in mercy together helps meet each others’ needs through normal, graceful accidents.

However, we will also discover larger, systemic issues that challenge us. Because we are friends, their issue becomes our issue and vice versa. We learn to care about these larger issues because we intimately know a friend who is affected by it. People are no longer pieces of an issue. Because we have imaginatively incarnated their stories within us, issues are merely pieces of our friends’ lives. So, we reimagine these issues together, seeking solutions alongside one another. We serve together, advocate for one another, intercede on behalf of each other, and provide new opportunities for each other. It is from the play of mercy that programs, institutions, classes, and new community groups — each one an incarnate creation produced by our shared imaginations — are formed.

When we enact faith formation as forming incarnate imaginations, we will play in the most serious parts of the world, entering them like God entered our reality, as one of us. These places will become normal for us, parts of our realities, and grace will become more natural. Corporate worship and pietistic practices will be freed from our self-imposed rules and forms and will be given the life of God’s imagination. They will no longer serve as a formal game that affirms “my salvation,” but they will help us imagine in God’s grace the real possibilities of salvation for our neighbors, communities, and
world. In order to do this, we must have incarnate imaginations that play in the world, making-believe that God’s grace shapes reality.

Teachers need to embody the incarnate imagination in order to see our local realities through the possibility of grace. Then the teacher can shape the “play world” for our students to engage, experiencing the dissonance of their real-world and the reality of our neighbors being Christ. The teacher can then help the students integrate and develop forms from our incarnate imagination, scripture, worship, and personal stories. Finally, we can help each student’s incarnate imagination emerge by continually playing in the world and in the church. The incarnate imagination transforms ourselves, our students, and all of creation.

**God’s Play and Our Play**

To transform our imaginations into icons of the incarnate imagination, we first play make-believe in the world, imagining it as-if it is God’s good creation formed by grace. In this form of play, we are “moved from a merely reproductive imagination, which in its leisure recapitulates the rhythm of the working world, to an imagination productive of a more liberated world.”

22 This shift from reproductive to productive imagination moves us to create alongside God. As humans, we are first reproductive, playing with information and data that we have received, recalled, and reformed. God’s imagination is productive first, imagining possibilities and creating them from nothing.

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23 “When we say that the creative God is playing, we are talking about a playing that differs from that of man. The creative God plays with his own possibilities and creates out of nothing that would please him. Man can only play with something which, in turn, is playing with him.” Ibid., 17.
As we begin to play make-believe in the world, we imagine the real possibilities of God’s creative grace, and we learn how to produce new possibilities alongside God. We become playmates with God and with all humanity as our brothers and sisters.

God has invited us into this playful world of make-believe. The Incarnation is the fullness of God’s imagination and holds within it all of God’s creative possibilities.24 When God created, it was through the Word that became flesh. God walked within creation both with Adam and Eve in the garden and as Jesus with the disciples. God played with Abraham, leading him on an adventure into a new land and asking he and Sarah to make-believe that God’s promise of a child is true. God played with Moses, Pharaoh, and the slaves. God asked Moses to make-believe that God has actually come to set the slaves free. God let Pharaoh set the rules and played in a contest for the freedom of the slaves. Then, God covenants with Israel, writing rules for a newly imagined way of life in the Torah. God invites kings and prophets to make-believe that God’s created order and Torah shape reality, having Hosea marry Gomer or Jeremiah buy a plot of land soon to be exiled as a promise of restoration. In the incarnate Christ God walks with us; invites us to make-believe that he is the Messiah; plays with the sick, poor, hungry, enemies, and outcasts; plays with children; and feasts. Jesus plays with the rules of the Torah and Sabbath, challenging others to imagine as-if they were meant to liberate the oppressed and wounded.

24 We spoke about the Incarnation as the ultimate act of God’s productive imagination in Chapter 2, citing Stockitt: “Nowhere is the notion of the imaginative particularity of God more startlingly realized than in the Incarnation itself...The imaginative creativity of God that is so apparent within the created order is demonstrated supremely in the novel, surprising, unexpected, and unpredictable intervention of God in humanity with the Word made flesh in Bethlehem.” Stockitt, *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, 152.
Most significantly, Jesus engages in make-believe as he confronts the cross and resurrection. Here we see the divine and human imaginations working perpendicular to each other. After he inspires the disciples to imagine who he is, Jesus teaches that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31 NRSV). With these words, Jesus is already imagining the possibility of the cross and the resurrection, of danger and promise, anxiety and hope. He takes the disciples on the journey toward the cross. They witness Jesus’ hope as they eat the last supper together, promising never to reject Jesus. They witness Jesus’ anxiety as they pray in Gethsemane. And these imagined possibilities become reality — Jesus is crucified on the cross, affirming their imagined fears. But, even moreso, Jesus appears to them after the resurrection, affirming their imagined hopes of the Messiah and incarnate Christ. It is the resurrection that is the invitation for all creation to play make-believe. We are called to imagine as-if the resurrection is true, to see ourselves and our neighbors in the reality of the resurrection, and to transform ourselves into icons of Jesus, the incarnate and living Christ.

The game we are invited into is the game of grace. It is the game that founded all of creation. When we play it in the present world, it re-creates our world. Moltmann muses that:

We enjoy freedom when we anticipate by playing what can and shall be different and when in the process we break the bonds of the immutable status quo. We find pleasure in games and enjoy the suspended state of playing when the games afford us critical perspectives for change in our otherwise burdensome world. In that case the significance of games is identical with that of the arts, namely to construct ‘anti-environments’ and ‘counter-environments’ to ordinary and everyday human environments and through the conscious confrontation of these to open up a creative
freedom in future alternatives...we are increasingly playing with the future in order to get to know it.25

When God invites us to play, we are invited into the world of the incarnate Christ, which suspends the rules of empires, fearful faiths, oppressive economies, and neighbor/enemy divisions. As we play with the incarnate Christ, we play in a counter-environment within our present world, providing space to imagine and enact creative possibilities within the rules of grace. We are imagining new possibilities and creating new futures with God. In doing so, we are freed from our own fears and the rules of the world around us. We are transformed in wonder and imagination to see ourselves as Christians, little-Christs, icons of the Incarnation.26

Therefore, as faith-educators, we are called to be transformed by God’s imagination. God calls us to play with God in creation. First, our imaginations perceive the world ruled by grace and all people as playmates and children of God. Then our imaginations recall memories in the framework and language of grace, either finding examples of God’s grace redeeming the world, or of people and places in need of grace. Finally, our imaginations produce creative possibilities alongside God, bringing grace to life within the world. When we discover this imagination for ourselves, we will contemplate our students’ environments in grace and engage them in the counter-environments of God’s graceful play. These play-environments must begin in the real world, reimagining our daily environments as arenas of grace and people as playmates.

26 Moltmann finds that the game of grace, “may well require that we have to give up the last vestige of pride in our own achievements and free ourselves of selfishness and self-pity so that we may join in an affirmation of grace, full of wonder.” Ibid., 24. Moltmann’s movement from selfishness to wonder reflects Goto’s aspect of play and make-believe as inspiring wonder and exploration of new possibilities.
We then compare these real-world play-environments with the archetype environment of corporate worship and scriptural stories. As we invite our students to imagine and play in the world and in the church, their daily worlds and faith worlds will slowly integrate, allowing them to habitually imagine all things in grace. This is the transformation of faith, the *incarnate imagination*. 
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