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Imagine God Emerging Here: Clearness Committees, Young Adults, and Hope

This paper examines the role of imagination within Quaker clearness committees, especially as they can be used with young adults discerning how their gifts, identities, and vocations play a role in the creation of a more hopeful and just future. By engaging the literature of the imagination alongside religious education scholarship, we provide a framework for current research with young adults discerning the future emerging through their own lives. Following Ricoeur's "productive imagination" and the Ignatian "gospel imagination," we argue that central to communal discernment is the exercise of imagination.

Free to play with the givens, to reject or distort input, at the interface between our senses and our selves, our imagination has a terrible power over our inner life, over the decisions we make... Educating the imagination is thus of primordial importance.¹

– Janine Langan

Contemplative practices engage the imagination, inviting participants to co-create new realities. We, the authors of this paper, regularly engage young adults in one particular contemplative practice known as the clearness committee (CC).² We believe clearness committees can contribute to “educating the imagination” in ways that are important for young adults discerning how their gifts, identities, and vocations play a role in the creation of a more hopeful and just future.³

Following the Ignatian “gospel imagination,” Paul Ricoeur’s “productive imagination,” and Willie Jenning’s description of “Christian imagination,” we argue that a central component of communal discernment is the development and exercise of an emancipatory imagination. That is, we understand hope to be an act of imagination, with despair arriving as the imagination is constricted. Resisting this despair, the CC can be a mutual “imaginative catalyst,” inviting participants into relationship with each other and with God as co-creators of a hoped for world. Given its function as a connective and catalytic practice, the CC is perhaps especially important for young adults who live in disruptive times and long to join God’s creativity.

In the following, we address the practice and theology of the CC then explore how theological imagination is the deep well of this practice.

“Waiting in the Spirit:” the Theology and Practice of Clearness Committees

The practice of the CC is grounded in the type of “holy listening” described by Douglas Steere when he wrote “to listen another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for one another.”⁴ The CC draws together groups of people in prayerful expectation of the possibility that “way will open” and challenging questions or dilemmas will become clearer.⁵ Parker Palmer offers a description.

1 Janine Langan, “The Christian Imagination,” 65.

2 The “CC” is a practice of contemplative discernment and “holy listening” done in community, the origins of which are in the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

3 We are midway through a two-year research project which will involve 350 diverse young adults taking part in CCs, follow up surveys, and interviews. We have introduced such gatherings for communal discernment in retreats for college-aged participants, a high school theology program, an integrated campus ministry, and a local congregation.

4 As cited in Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality, Vol 1*, 149. See also, Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on the Quest for Vocation*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007)

5 While the CC is perhaps most popularly known via the work of Palmer and the Center for Courage and Renewal’s “circles of trust,” for the sake of brevity our attention will be primarily directed towards an understanding of the CC more directly tied to the faith and practice of the Religious Society of Friends, particularly the streams of which

[A CC begins with] a time of centering silence and inviting the focus person to break the silence, when ready, with a brief summary of the issue at hand. Then the committee members may speak – but everything they say is governed by one rule, a simple rule and yet one that most people find difficult and demanding: *members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions...* Nothing is allowed except real questions, honest and open questions, questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to his or her inner truth without becoming burdened by the personal agendas of committee members... The only answer that counts is one that arises from your own inner truth. The discipline of the CC is to give you greater access to that truth – and to keep the rest of us from defiling or trying to define it.⁶

While elements of the practice are centuries old, the term itself is relatively recent. It originates in the Religious Society of Friends in the 1960s, near Philadelphia.⁷ Our concern here is not merely on the CC, but also on the practices that undergird it, namely the types of communal discernment vital to the worship and faith of Friends for hundreds of years.⁸

That a gathered group of prayerful and listening Friends could hear some measure of God's will is central to the denomination's very existence. Indeed, the name "Friends" itself comes from John 15:15, "Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." Friends developed the practice of communal discernment in an attempt to learn "what the lord doeth" and how to best become part of it. Among early Friends, communal discernment was tantamount to what being a Friend *was*.

Early religious persecution meant that most Friends lived in close-knit, homogeneous neighborhoods or villages that created "social space in which different forms of existence are nurtured."⁹ Worship and discernment were not limited to a certain morning of the week or even to planned events. Due to close proximity and shared practice, Friends were easily able to seek each other out in prayer and counsel to become more clear on God's will at any time. Alexander Parkman, a Friend from the first generation of the tradition, offered this instruction about silent worship in 1660:

Innocently sit down in some place and turn in thy mind to the Light, and wait upon God simply, as if none were present but the Lord, and here thou art strong. When the next that come in, let them in simplicity and heart sit down and turn to the same Light, and wait in the Spirit, and so all the rest coming in fear of the Lord sit down in pure stillness and

strongly identify as Christian.

6 Parker Palmer, "The CC: A Communal Approach to Discernment"

7 Loring, *Spiritual Discernment*, 21. The CC was developed as part of a broader work in which Friends were figuring out how to teach practices of communal discernment to people outside of the Religious Society and often outside of religion entirely.

8 Jo Farrow. "Discernment in the Quaker Tradition."

9 Gay Pilgrim, "British Quakerism as Heterotopic," 53-69.

silence... Those who are brought to a pure, still waiting on God in the Spirit are come nearer to God than words are... though not a word be spoken to the hearing of the ear¹⁰

From the midst of these silent gatherings any person might rise, giving “vocal ministry,” an extemporaneous sermon brought forth in that moment. As one Friend from the 17th century wrote, “our worship consisted not in words so neither in silences as silence, but in a holy dependence of the mind upon God; from which dependence silence necessarily follows in the first place *until words can be brought forth* which are from God’s spirit.”¹¹ This same rationale follows in the CC as well: when participants are guided to ask only “real questions, honest and open questions,” they are being asked to bring forth questions from God’s spirit. These questions are God’s questions mediated through those listening for God’s movement.

Presently, and through much of the last century, Friends have rarely lived in homogeneous communities and often only gather together on Sundays, with worship far briefer than in centuries past.¹² An emphasis remains on the “still small voice” mentioned in 1 Kings 19:12, however occasions for spontaneous discernment in community are greatly diminished. Given these changed circumstances Friends developed the practice of the CC to explicitly call for the kind of gathered support that was more frequent earlier in the tradition. The process is still used today when people are considering marriage, becoming a member of a Meeting, and for other significant personal events such as buying a home, entering graduate school, or changing jobs. It functions not only to help individuals reflect on decisions to be made, but makes that reflection the occasion for community-building as well. That is, “while functioning as an instrument for discernment, it also helps recover the communal dimension of the spiritual life in relationships, in the vitality and authority that come of profound union in and commitment to God.”¹³

While Friends have experienced this in their congregations for centuries, something similar can happen among young adults today. As young adults gather in the quiet circle of a CC, they report community forming amid ethnic, racial, socio-economic, and gender diversity. As they gather, they draw out visions of the future from the deep wells of imagination.

Imagining with God

Imagination is sometimes associated with a line of argument presupposing that somewhere – e.g. higher levels of existence or in the Bible – there is a fixed and accessible Truth, Goodness, and Beauty and that we do it a disservice when we imagine things that don't live up to It. The following passage succinctly portrays a contemporary picture of this position.

10 Alexander Parker, *Letters of Early Friends*, ed. A.R. Barclay (London; Darton and Harvey, 1841): 365-66.

11 Robert Barclay. *Theses Theologicae and An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, The Eleventh Proposition, § IX. Emphasis added.

12 It should be noted that even among Friends only 10% or so still worship in the silent, expectant worship. Most congregations are part of branches of the tradition that have been influenced by Wesleyanism and the Holiness movement and have gatherings that include sermons, hymns, and a prepared order of service.

13 Loring, *Spiritual Discernment*, 21.

People have come to see the imagination as frivolous, playful and essentially disconnected from the real world... Daydreaming and fantasizing are equated with wasting time and laziness. When others' ideas seem disconnected from worldly reality we say, with an ironic tone, that they have a "vivid imagination." The implication is clear: the imagination may be creative and entertaining, but it cannot be trusted.¹⁴

We believe the imagination of the daydreamer – rather than signaling laziness or wasting time – may be trustworthy and important. While the imagination can just be "disconnected" it can also be about a new vision of the current situation. Indeed, Jung differentiated between pleasure-oriented imagination (*phantasia*) and reality-prone imagination (*einbildungskraft*), relating only the latter with spiritual growth and discovery.¹⁵ Drawing out this kind of "reality-prone" imagination might be a needed corrective to the kinds of education most young people encounter in public schools, social media, and consumptive capitalism. Ignatian spirituality, Paul Ricoeur and Willie Jennings help us describe the power and contours of this type of imagination.

Ignatian Perspectives

Imagination is a vital component of the "Spiritual Exercises" of Ignatian practice. In fact, Ignatius himself first converted to Christianity as a result of a prolonged period of bed rest, during which he regularly read and daydreamed about the lives of saints and what it might be like to be one.¹⁶ As he came to envision what that life might be like, he was gradually transformed. The "possible world of his imagination" was "made real by action."¹⁷ Ultimately, Ignatius would come to see "the products of the imagination as vehicles that transport us to an understanding and experience of higher realities in ways that linear discourse cannot carry us."¹⁸

In the Spiritual Exercises, retreatants engage in a prayerful experience of scripture called "Gospel Imagination" in which they read a piece of scripture and allow themselves to "become onlooker-participants and give full rein to the imagination."¹⁹ Rather than reading *about* Jesus, this is an invitation to imagine the embodied fullness of the story. Ignatius ...

chooses scenes of Jesus acting rather than Jesus teaching or telling parables. He wants us to see Jesus interacting with others, Jesus making decisions, Jesus moving about, Jesus ministering. He doesn't want us to think about Jesus. He wants us to experience him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses. He wants us to meet him.²⁰

Ignatius does not go so far as to say that what the imagination produces in Gospel Imagination is actually (critical-historically speaking) what happened. He does, however, think that formation can result from immersing ourselves in that narrative and allowing the Spirit to

14 Chris Webb, *The Fire of the Word: Meeting God on Holy Ground*, 120.

15 David Loomis, "Imagination and Faith Development," *Religious Education* 83.2 (1988): 255

16 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius*, 24

17 Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149.

18 Thomas Lucas, S.J. "Grandeur of God." *Company* 13.2 (1995):18

19 David L. Fleming, S.J., *What Is Ignatian Spirituality?*, 57

20 *Ibid.*, 58.

help guide our imaginative journey. The Jesuits who lead retreats suggest that “this type of imagining helps us... take on God’s qualities of love, compassion, and understanding.”²¹ We think a similar kind of imagining takes place in the CC.

When participants gather “in a holy dependence of the mind upon God... until words can be brought forth which are from God’s spirit,”²² they are actively and imaginatively listening for God’s movement. They are imagining, because where God is concerned, there is no choice *but* to imagine. If God’s ways and thoughts are more than humans can fully comprehend with reason alone,²³ our only option is an imaginative and faithful act. As Jesuit J. Robert Barth writes, “it is only the imagination that can bring us ... to the full encounter with religious reality, because it is only the symbolic language of imagination that can resist the human drive for simple clarity and determinateness.”²⁴

Imagination is a messy, playful, and embodied practice, *and* it can be done in the service of faith. Moreover, imagining God bringing forth questions that help bring someone to greater clarity does not preclude that *God is already actually doing this* and that our imaginative act is a participation with the movement of the Spirit.

Ricoeur

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur also distinguished between two types of imagination. He called the imaginative capacity that creates a degraded mental photo-copy of something the *reproductive imagination*. A second type of imagination is actually generative and is a way by which novelty enters the world by means of human action and reflection. This type he called the *productive imagination*. Ricoeur wished to recover of a sense of imagination that is not rife with connotations of falsity, distrust, and insufficiency, but one through which humanity engages with that which has yet to be. Imagination, thus, is a source of human freedom. Richard Kearney, who studied under Ricoeur, writes:

The metaphors, symbols, or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with “imaginative variations” of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation ... The possible worlds of imagination can be made real by action.²⁵

We suggest that people in discernment are participating in God’s movement in the world, listening for “imaginative variations” and, upon hearing them, feeling called to action and transformation. Thus, we educate (from the Latin *educare*, to draw out) the productive imagination when we lead people into contemplative practices. In such practices, we create

21 Ibid., 57.

22 Robert Barclay. *Theses Theologicae and An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, The Eleventh Proposition, § IX. Emphasis added.

23 See Job 26:14, Isaiah 55:8-9, Ephesians 3:20, et al.

24 J. Robert Barth, “Mortal Beauty,” 69.

25 Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149.

conditions that *draw out* questions, metaphors, symbols and narratives in ways that suspend judgment, turn to wonder, and invite freedom.²⁶

Jennings

An especially important word about the capacity of imagination to create harmful reality illuminates the word “terror” as it appears in the epigraph of this paper. Theologian Willie Jennings’ historical narrative shows that, from late medieval times, the modern Christian imagination grew hand-in-hand with colonial socialization: the result is deeply embedded racial categories that the church is implicit in creating. Here the “productive imagination” inadvertently resulted in the segregation of societies into racial categories. Jennings argues that this is a direct outcome of the European Christians who arrived on African and American soil and began to imagine the land and the people as possessions. Taking root in the Western mind, this cultural fragmentation consistently shows up in history as Christian nation-building and conquering, rather than an ethic of neighborliness and love that *could have* been Christianity’s gift to history. Jennings states:

Christian social imagination is diseased and disfigured ... This loss points not only to deep psychic cuts and gashes in the social imaginary of western peoples, but also to an abiding mutilation of a Christian vision of creation and our own creatureliness ... I want Christians to recognize the grotesque nature of a social performance of Christianity that imagines Christian identity floating above land, landscape, animals, place, and space ...²⁷

Jennings’ offers a slender hope: “Theological reflection also opens up the possibility of a conversation that has yet to happen: a Christianity born of the colonialist wound speaking to itself in its global reality, pressing deeply inside the miracle of its existence, battered, bruised, marginalized, yet believing, loving, Christian.”²⁸

Jennings sees hope emerging in the form of interdisciplinary conversations that take seriously land, borders, natural resources, and living spaces – subjects to which the young adults with whom we work are deeply drawn. Jennings imagines “those deeply involved in the formation of space and those concerned with identity formation – urban planners, ecologists, scientists, real estate brokers, developers joined in conversation with theologians, ethicists, literary and postcolonial theorists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians.” The aim of such conversation is nothing short of imagining reconfigurations of living spaces that promote more just societies.

As we gather young adults into circles of quiet reflection, we summon Jennings’s slender hope, try to engender its growth, and name its fulfillment in a reformed Christian imagination. In our participants’ imaginations thrive inchoate urgings to change the world through professions as

26 The language here echoes the Covenants of Presence we use to establish group norms at the beginning of a CC. These covenants are modelled after the Touchstones used by the Center for Courage and Renewal and can be found at <http://fteleaders.org/resources/fte-guide-to-vocationcare>

27 Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, 293

28 Ibid., 291.

diverse as those Jennings cites in his wish list. Is it yet possible to believe that religious educators create spaces in which we invite people to imagine God emerging?

Religious Educators and Emancipatory Imagination

As religious educators, we cross disciplines, engaging best practices of pedagogy with emerging theologies so that human capacities might flourish. Taking Ignatian, Ricoeur, and Jennings as sources, we turn to colleagues in religious education whose work supports our claim that contemplative practices in general, and CCs in particular, hold hope for educating the imaginations of young adults discerning vocation.

Scholars of religious education document the “primordial importance” of educating the imagination. Mary Elizabeth Moore writes “imagination is not one thing; it is an action, indeed a medley of actions, exercised in relation to a context and in a singular effort or a collaborative effort with others.” Using the metaphor of canoeing, in which different strokes and strategies are used for differing fluid contexts, she says, further: “The purpose of imagination is finally to move creation through time and space. In the case of human educational systems, its purpose is to move the learning community and the communities with whom they relate to into the future.”²⁹ We see the CC as doing just this, drawing people together to take seriously the questions most powerfully resting on their hearts, providing them with a space and place to nurture their response to those questions, and affirming that they may point to vocation.

In reference to Freire, Daniel Schipani argues – in a tone that resonates with Palmer’s “inner truth” – that liberation comes about as “learners rediscover their own words and expand their capacity for self-expression by the development of their creative imagination.”³⁰ Indeed, Schipani critiques Freire’s early critical pedagogy for not granting affect and imagination the same “privileged status of reasoning and thought processes.” Schipani concludes that “the conscientization approach overemphasized cognition”³¹ and that a fuller approach would emphasize embodiment, affect, and imagination. Moore summarizes these affirmations when she writes “what is most needed now is a vision of flourishing, formed and continually reformed by a collaborative exercise of imagination.”³²

CCs can contribute to the development of this vision, and we go so far as to suggest that contemplative practices offer religious education a way toward fostering “emancipatory imagination.” Evelyn Parker coins the term “emancipatory hope” in her study of African American teenage girls. For her “Wishing is associated with fantasy, the magical, fairy talk, and the dreamy. Hope, on the other hand, is associated with expectancy, confidence, assurance and faith.”³³ Citing numerous movements of freedom from domination, including the Civil Rights Movement in which she herself participated as a young adult, Parker writes “Hope is decidedly Christian and rooted in the experiences and beliefs of African American women, children, and men. It is expectation of deliverance from economic, political and racial oppression through the

29 Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Imagination at the Center,” 195. See also, Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching*.

30 Daniel Schipani, *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology*, 15

31 Ibid, 23

32 Ibid., 199.

33 Ibid., 14.

power of God, which requires one to *live in the present as an agent of change for God's justice.*"³⁴

Figuring out how to “live in the present as an agent of change for God’s justice” is a task young adults face. Mindful of ecological degradation, massive instability among the world’s most vulnerable populations, and the persistent hegemony of race-based cultural fragmentation, they eschew organized religion but seek spiritual oases from which to draw sustenance and create lives of meaning and purpose. Our research seeks to empower religious educators to continue repurposing spiritual tools that might help young adults enter regularly into deep wells of emancipatory imagination.

An Invitation to Hope

Initial findings suggest that this theoretical framing plays out in practice,³⁵ with our participants acknowledging that, “at first [the CC] feels forced and unnatural, but near the end you begin to see how it works. It becomes more natural and you start to enjoy it.”

A general observation across the numerous CCs we have facilitated in the past two years is that in the sparse hour in which the practice occurs, community catalyzes. Even in retreat settings in which there is a great diversity of perspectives theologically, racially, and politically, participants report feeling connected and “seen” in that space. One reported, “I felt like I was engaging in a sacred practice with other folks as we attempted to hear what message God was trying to impart to us through the CC. I felt very close to God and the other people there.”

Our ongoing research aims to document that tiny little time-bound intentional communities of contemplative discernment open up new ways of seeing the world and one’s place in it. If “hope is an act of imagination” and “despair arrives as the imagination is constricted” as psychologist Steven Cooper claims,³⁶ we believe that CCs provide a way to engender resistance to despair. When we invite young adults into spaces carefully designed to call forth their emancipatory imagination, we invite hope, imagining that God is there.

34 Ibid., 16. Emphasis added.

35 For a more in depth exploration of initial data see “Clearness Committeess Revisited: Gathering Young Adults for Contemplative Discernment” in *The Prophetic Voice & Making Peace: Research in Collegiate Ministry*, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Methodist Church, forthcoming 2016.

36 Steven Cooper, *Objects of Hope*, 19.

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