

# A Conceptual Analysis of Imagination in the Context of Faith

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## **Main concepts/issues:**

'Imagination' is defined by Webster's Dictionary as the creative ability to "form a mental image of something not present to the senses." Faith is "firm belief in something for which there is no proof." Organized religion provides a set of rules, rituals, textual knowledge and methods of textual exegesis which give the order, structure, depth and boundaries within which faith continues, grows and thrives. But does this religious structure require the circumspection of imagination; does tradition necessarily lead to a "restrictive and petrified imagination" (Scott, 2015, p. 263)? Or does imagination give wings to faith? Interestingly, Hartman (1985) says that, "When we study how a religion seeks to regulate imagination we perceive the imaginative character of that religion itself" (p. 201).

When we begin to look more deeply into these conceptual relationships we see the need for linguistic clarity. What exactly is imagination? Is it just another word for thought, or fantasy? Or vision, creativity, ideation? Are these terms interchangeable? What, if anything, differentiates imagination from these terms and others? And what of religious knowledge? Spirituality may exist as a kind of free spirit, but religion without a knowledge base is a contradiction in terms. Even the soaring freedom of imagination builds on knowledge. What is textual exegesis but critical and imaginative interpretation of text? In the words of the poet William Wordsworth, "Imagination... is reason in its most exalted mood." And surely the burning embers of religious faith find their fuel in the depths of religious knowledge. How do these three ideas, imagination, faith and religious knowledge co-exist? What are the conceptual relationships between and among them? Why and how is this understanding important for religious education?

**Description of methodology:** This colloquium presentation offers an initial conceptual analysis of the concept of imagination, especially within the context of religious faith. Conceptual analysis is one of the main traditional methods of philosophy, arguably dating back to Plato's early dialogues. The basic idea is that questions like 'What is knowledge?', 'What is justice?', or 'What is truth?' should be addressed based on understanding of the relevant concepts. Conceptual analysis consists primarily in breaking down or analyzing concepts into their constituent parts in order to gain better understanding of a particular philosophical issue in which the concept is involved (Beaney, 2003). There are different schools of conceptual analysis as advocated by various philosophers. This analysis will follow the practical approach of Hirst and Peters (1970), according to whom analysis of a concept goes far beyond definitions to examination of the ways a concept is used in order to see what principles govern its use, and the ways in which it is related to other concepts. In Hirst and Peter's (1970) famous educational example, they show how the concept of 'teaching' is logically inseparable from the concept of 'learning', though the reverse is not true. The bottom line, according to Hirst and Peter's analysis, is that the intention of teaching is to bring about learning (p. 78). From this, they raise the question, if someone

claims to have been teaching all day long, but not one student learned the intended material, was that person really teaching? This analysis has influenced me since I studied it during my doctoral program, and through almost 30 years of work in education since that time. Examining concepts in this way is not simply a grammatical or linguistic exercise; conceptual analysis “requires reflection on the different purposes, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that human beings share in their social life” (Hirst and Peters, p. 8). Conceptual clarity is essential for meaningful educational discussion.

**Sources grounding the presentation:** Hirst and Peters (1970) contributed greatly to conceptual analysis of educational concepts. Their work is based in a long philosophical history, some of which will be cited in a bibliography that will be prepared for and distributed at the colloquium. Among the reference works will be those of John Dewey who, among other contributions, offers an interesting analysis of faith, imagination and the strictures of religions (1947). Underlying Thomas Groome’s (2011) work on the cultivation and nurturing of religious faith is a conception of what religious faith entails and means. Kieran Egan (see, for instance, for instance, Egan, Stout and Takaya, 2007) has written extensively on imagination and its central role in education. These works and others will be drawn upon.

**Status of the research at the time of the proposal:** Inspired by the conference theme, this work is in the early stages of thinking, reading and writing. By conference time the work should be in its intermediate stages. The presenter looks forward to colloquium participants’ insights, critique, revelations of sources and ideas for application in religious education.

## References

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