

RESPONSE TO LINDA HOGAN’S “THE ETHICAL IMAGINATION AND THE ANATOMY OF CHANGE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM SOCIAL ETHICS”

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I am grateful to past-President John Thiel for introducing this plenary session and President-elect Richard Gaillardetz for the opportunity to respond to this thoughtful and suggestive—even imaginative—paper presented by my esteemed fellow Catholic theological ethicist and Irish friend, Linda Hogan. As a former Floridian, I am particularly pleased to have been invited to speak at this convention in Miami, a place that brings back memories of a television show called *Miami Vice*, which was popular during the mid-1980s when I worked for the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Department further up the Gulf coast near Tampa. And, if your imaginations are wondering, yes, I did actually wear a white jacket like “Sonny” Crockett, played by actor Don Johnson, now and then. I will refer again to my experience in law enforcement later in this response.

Hogan explores *conversion* in connection with “moments of significant” moral, cultural, social, and political change—especially where there has been a broadening of the recognition of equal human dignity. She inquires how such conversion happens, “how individuals and communities come to be persuaded about the need for a fundamental transformation in their expressed moral values.” The answer, she argues, is that “the arts can make unique contribution to the task of creating an imaginative space in which the established parameters of moral concern can be challenged and expanded.” In the final part of her paper, Hogan furthermore proposes that expanding our imaginative horizons through the arts can “get students to consider why violence presents itself to us as essential, why we have accepted it so definitively as a means of effecting justice, why it has captured our ethical and political imagination.” Doing so, she suggests, makes possible “the promise of pacifism.” My response aims, first, to supplement and qualify Hogan’s first part about the arts and imagination, and second, to challenge somewhat her claim about these in connection with violence and pacifism.

Hogan states, “[A]lthough moral reasoning and argumentation play an important role in making and establishing the case for change, I intend to focus on the role that the moral imagination plays in the context of such change.” Elsewhere, she more forcefully contends “that the arts can create a level of understanding that is qualitatively different from other more theoretical forms of discourse, and can thereby become a catalyst for change in ways that can never be accomplished by rational argument.” For Hogan, the arts and imagination are, as I would put it, a social catalytic converter, and I welcome these links between the arts, imagination, and social transformation that she has emphasized for us here today.

Yet, since this is the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, I want to highlight how imagination, the arts, and ethics have not been totally neglected by Catholic theologians and ethicists. Indeed, Philip S. Keane, S.S., in his 1984 book, *Christian Ethics and Imagination*, noted that scholars for centuries (e.g., Aquinas on phantasm) have acknowledged the role of the imagination in ethics,

even though admittedly the significance of that role has been underestimated.¹ Keane, himself, identified and emphasized the link between imagination, ethics, and the arts or aesthetics.

Although Keane's book helped revive some attention to imagination and the arts in Catholic moral theology, two recent books exemplify their connection with social ethics. Patrick McCormick's book *God's Beauty: A Call to Justice* articulates how beauty summons us to work for social justice. Like Hogan, McCormick writes that "ethics is more than a matter of fulfilling duties or following principles," and he believes that attention to beauty—in film, poetry, architecture, dance, music, photography, paintings, novels, children's tales, and Scripture—attracts us, inspires us, and calls us "to reach beyond ourselves and our present arrangements," thereby offering "a fresh, positive approach to moral arguments calling us to work for" social justice, peacemaking, and ecology.² Although McCormick does not mention imagination, it no doubt is what he has in mind here. Similarly, Maureen O'Connell's book *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* explores the theological and social significance of Philadelphia's community muralism movement, illustrating how the arts can help address the problem of urban poverty in creative and effective ways.³ Thus, Hogan is in good company when she calls for more attention to imagination and the arts as catalysts for social transformation, or conversion.

Still, I wish to raise some questions for clarification on how Hogan understands imagination. Keane, similar to Hogan, observed that moral theology has relied "too heavily on forms of moral argument which are logical [and] discursive."⁴ However, while he recommended that more attention be given to imagination, Keane did not deny the important role of logical, discursive moral thinking. In contrast, Hogan more strongly contends "that the arts can create a level of understanding that is qualitatively different from other more theoretical forms of discourse, and can thereby become a catalyst for change in ways that can never be accomplished by rational argument." For Keane, though, imagination is not set in opposition to reason or rational argument; indeed, rationality encompasses all human thought processes, thereby including both moral imagination and logical, discursive moral thinking. In his view, imagination, which "is indeed a rational process," involves a different kind of rationality from what we find in logical thought," which offers something "more than discursive logic to successfully address the kinds of problems," both personal and social, that we face.⁵ That "more" of imagination might have to do with how for Keane it is a sense activity, an intellectual activity, and an activity involving the will.⁶ Here I think Keane offers some fruitful theological considerations to supplement and bolster Hogan's soundings on imagination.

¹ Philip S. Keane, S.S., *Christian Ethics and Imagination: A Theological Inquiry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

² Patrick T. McCormick, *God's Beauty: A Call to Justice* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2013), 2.

³ Maureen O'Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2012).

⁴ Keane, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

Also, Russell B. Connors, Jr. and Patrick T. McCormick have coupled Keane's description of imagination with informing conscience and conscientious judgments. "The imagination," they add, "helps us to be creative, because when these two dimensions of moral experience are brought into dialogue, new and possibly liberating—but also potentially challenging—moral possibilities may emerge, possibilities that might not have been seen with the simple logical deduction of moral conclusions from general principles."⁷ In order to promote social transformation for justice and equality, Martin Luther King, Jr. attempted to prick the conscience of America through the nonviolent civil rights movement. I wonder if, given her previous work on conscience, Hogan might find it helpful to explore how conscience might interface with what she is claiming her about the arts, imagination, and social conversion.⁸

Moreover, drawing again on Keane, Connors and McCormick observe the role of imagination in the human ability to reason by analogy.⁹ This brings to mind Andrew Greeley's *The Catholic Myth*, which asked whether Catholics imagine differently.¹⁰ Greeley thought so, referring to Catholic imagination as "sacramental imagination," which he associated with being more analogical (and the Protestant imagination as more dialectical). Similarly, another *Catholic theological* connection with imagination comes from liturgical scholar Mark Searle, who claimed "that worship is, above all, an act of the imagination."¹¹ Liturgy is saturated with verbal, musical, visual, tactile, and other images, each of which points "beyond itself to that which it serves to present." According to Searle, the words, signs, and gestures of worship contribute to "a conversion of the imagination," thereby enabling "people to situate themselves differently in the world, to challenge their values, to bring them to question their accepted patterns of behavior."¹² Although liturgy itself sometimes is rightly the object of external ethical critique, I am struck by the absence of attention to the possibilities for internal imaginative social critique in Hogan's presentation.¹³

Catholic theologian James Alison has written about worship, imagination, and violence, the latter of which also comes up at the end of Hogan's essay. Worship, when truly experienced, sets our imaginations free from myths of inevitability, submission, sacrifice, and violence.¹⁴ Alison's claim here, I think, provides a robust,

⁷ Russell B. Connors, Jr. and Patrick T. McCormick, *Character, Choices and Community: The Three Faces of Christian Ethics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 187; see Keane, 81.

⁸ Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000).

⁹ Connors and McCormick, 187.

¹⁰ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics* (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 34–64.

¹¹ Mark Searle, "Images and Worship," in *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal*, ed. Anne Y. Koester and Barbara Searle (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004), 126; originally published in *The Way* 24.2 (1984): 103–14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 130, 135.

¹³ On liturgy as object of ethical critique, see Tobias Winright, "The Liturgy as a Basis for Catholic Identity, Just War Theory, and the Presumption against War," in *Catholic Identity and the Laity*, College Theology Society Annual Volume 54, ed. Tim Muldoon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 140–41.

¹⁴ James Alison, "Worship in a Violent World," *Studia Liturgica* 34.2 (2004): 133–146.

theological basis for Catholic imagination, including the Catholic belief that war and violence, though likely, are not inevitable or always necessary. As a student of pacifists Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder, I know that one of their criticisms of Christian justification of violence (i.e., just war) is that, as Hauerwas puts it, “it stills the imaginative search for nonviolent ways of resistance to injustice” so that violence, rather deterministically, “becomes the only alternative.”¹⁵ Hogan appears to share this concern. In connection with teaching a course on religion, politics, and conflict, instead of referring to the liturgy or worship as a springboard, Hogan describes her experiences attending a trial at the Hague and visiting some art exhibits in order “to demonstrate how the arts” and imagination can “challenge the dominance of the just war paradigm in Christian theology, to push back against its weight, and make the case for Christianity as a tradition of non-violence and pacifism.” I am, however, not yet convinced that all this necessarily translates into pacifism.

I know that my own experience in law enforcement has impacted my vision and how I teach and write in theological ethics. I have seen what violence can do to others; I have endured violence; and I have used force. In my courses, I have students read the standard canon of theologians’ writings arguing either for pacifism or for just war. Because of my own experiences with violence, I agree with Hogan that these discursive arguments are insufficient, although I maintain they remain a necessary component. I supplement that material by having students watch movies like *The Mission*, *Romero*, and *Dead Man Walking*, as well as more documentary films like *Faces of the Enemy*. I have them read books like former war correspondent Chris Hedges’ *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*.¹⁶ We also watch and listen to music videos, such as the Irish band The Cranberries’ “Zombie,” U2’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” and Guns N’ Roses’ “Civil War.” Hence, I agree with Hogan that the arts have an important role to play, raising ethical dimensions in ways that straightforward logical or discursive argument cannot do. Reason alone “will not deliver an understanding of the nature of violence and its impact upon victim and victimizer alike.” But, again, I am not sure this necessarily makes “the case for Christianity as a tradition of non-violence and pacifism.”

Does all just war thinking necessarily assume this myth of violence? Much probably does, but at its best the Christian just war tradition does not. There are just war Christians who, as the U.S. Catholic bishops put it thirty years ago, share with pacifists a strong presumption against violence and war.¹⁷ Plus, significant

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 114, 123.

¹⁶ Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

¹⁷ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1983), nos. 70, 80, 83, and 120. I have suggested how this mutual presumption against violence and for a just peace is congruent with Christian liturgy in Winright *op. cit.* and Tobias Winright, “Gather Us In and Make Us Channels of Your Peace: Evaluating War with an Entirely New Attitude,” in *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective*, ed. David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 281–306.

imaginative efforts have been underway during the past two decades, not only by pacifists but also by those who believe that force is sadly, sometimes justified to defend the innocent. Indeed, pacifist and just war theologians, activists, and practitioners have even worked together on the so-called just peacemaking paradigm¹⁸ and on Catholic peacebuilding.¹⁹ Pacifist and just war Christians also have explored and contributed to calls for just policing²⁰ and the new international norm known as the responsibility to protect (R2P).²¹ I do not know the extent to which the arts—or the liturgy or experience—have contributed to these imaginative efforts, but it appears to me that both pacifist and just war Catholics are using their imaginations lately, and the result is not exactly, at least not yet, “Christianity as a tradition of non-violence and pacifism.” Nevertheless, I truly appreciate Hogan’s provocative paper, which I am confident will serve as a catalyst for our imaginations as we seek to address the injustices and conflicts facing us at this time.

¹⁸ Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, rev. ed. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Scott Appleby, Robert J. Schreiter, and Gerard Powers, *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, Praxis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

²⁰ Gerald W. Schlabach, ed., *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Approach to World Violence* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2007).

²¹ Semegnish Asfaw, Guillermo Kerber, and Peter Weiderud, eds., *The Responsibility to Protect: Ethical and Theological Reflections* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005); Tobias Winright, “Just Policing and the Responsibility to Protect,” *Ecumenical Review* 63.1 (March 2011): 84–95.