

# OASIS OF IMAGINATION

Engaging our world through a better creativity

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For my father, Roger William Turnau (1938–96),  
whose faith and passion for truth profoundly shaped my own

For Bill Edgar,  
a friend and mentor who has been like a second father to me,  
and one of the most insightful and eirenic people I have ever met.  
Thank you for opening my mind to the wonders of culture  
and imagination

For my daughter, Claire Elise Turnau Ward – a beautiful, artistic soul.  
I didn't know until the very end that I was writing this for you



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# Introduction

## The parable of the oasis that was really a portal to another universe

Once upon a time, there was a traveller who habitually trekked through-out a dry and hostile land. It didn't bother him much, for it was all he knew. One day he saw in the distance a patch of greenery. That much colour in a land of unbroken dust-brown enticed him, and he set out for it. As he drew closer, the patch of green revealed more detail to him. This was a place of tall trees, lush undergrowth, and wild flowers.

He entered into the shade. In the centre of the oasis, he found a still pool of crystal clear water.

But he found he was not alone, for there was a man across the pool from him, staring intently down into the water.

The traveller enquired why the man was staring so. Perhaps he had seen a fish? 'No,' the man replied. 'No fish. Something more remarkable. See for yourself.'

The traveller stared intently, too, and saw something glimmering at the bottom of the pool.<sup>1</sup> It might have been simply the shimmering sunlight refracted on to the rocks below. But no, it was something more. He couldn't see it clearly, but he found the light mesmerizing. It fascinated him in a way that he could not put into words.

He cautiously asked the man across the pool about the glimmering light, what he thought it was. They talked about it until the sky grew dark and it was time for the traveller to move on.

But he was so intrigued that he came back the next day, both to gaze into the pool and to continue his conversation with the stranger.

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<sup>1</sup> See page 1 in plate section.

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The stranger had brought food, so they shared a meal together as they continued talking, sharing ideas and theories about the mysterious light at the bottom of the pool. The traveller resolved to return again the next day. And so he did. This became his habit for some time.

Gradually, he found that he had become more and more dissatisfied with the dry and hostile land. He much preferred the cool shade of the oasis and the company offered there. Eventually, the stranger lost his strangeness and became a trusted friend and discussion partner.

And all the while, the light at the bottom of the pool came more and more into focus, as if someone were adjusting a hidden lens. Whole cities full of light and life began to take shape before his unbelieving eyes. The traveller knew it was impossible, for cities do not reside at the bottom of ordinary pools. Nevertheless, he continued to study the image. He sensed in it a piercing beauty that entranced and drew him magnetically, almost more than he could bear. He loved his time gazing into the pool. And yet he felt a profound sadness, for the light stirred in him deep grief as well as deep gladness.

It became increasingly obvious that this was no ordinary pool. It was, rather, a doorway to another world, another way of being. It also became clear that the man who had been a stranger and was now his friend had, in effect, become his guide. It was only a matter of time before the traveller would take the plunge to the bottom of the pool to begin the most improbable, miraculous journey he could have ever imagined.

### **Why we need oases**

How are we to relate and contribute to a culture largely estranged from Christ? How do we invite in those who have grown accustomed to the desert?

Culture is a conversation. This book is about how creative culture-making can help the Christian church enter into and contribute to this conversation in ways that build bridges, ways that heal rifts, even in a world that might no longer welcome Christian commitments.

Christian cultural creativity done well creates oases for the imagination. Oases are open, porous spaces that invite the stranger in; spaces



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that refresh the soul, provoke conversation, challenge assumptions and lead the imagination to a new place. The landscape today is littered with false oases – spiritual paths that lead to shallow, toxic pools to nowhere.<sup>2</sup> Most in the West are no longer enchanted by the gospel. They are enchanted by something – anything – else.

Our world needs Christian creatives who can plant true oases.

Our world needs church communities to understand and draw alongside their creatives to support and encourage those planting oases.

Theologically conservative Christians have spent too much time and energy fighting non-Christian culture (culture warring), withdrawing into safe spaces (the ‘Christian bubble’) or just trying to keep their heads above water spiritually. There is more going on, a deeper, wider drama, and every Christian – artistically gifted or not – has a part to play.

Have we played our part? If culture is a shared conversation that runs between and through us, many Christians simply try to opt out or else force the conversation one way or another. If culture is a piece of music, some Christians seem tone-deaf. Our musical ear for culture-making shapes how the surrounding culture sees the Christian faith – as beautiful or ugly. The Christian church in the post-Christian West is in danger of defaulting on its aesthetic calling. You might never have thought of the church as having an ‘aesthetic calling’, a responsibility not only to proclaim truth but also to show its beauty. That’s part of the problem. But don’t worry, we’ll explore what that means and why it matters.

Thomas à Kempis, the medieval writer of *The Imitation of Christ*, wrote, ‘All men desire peace, but very few desire those things that make for peace.’<sup>3</sup> Similarly, we all long for the Christian faith to be seen as beautiful. We all desire oases for the imagination. Too few in the church are willing

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<sup>2</sup> I recommend two fascinating studies of America’s current spiritual landscape. Tara Isabella Burton presents a landscape dominated by intuition-driven made-to-order spiritualities (what she calls the ‘Religious Remixed’) in *Strange Rites: New religions for a godless world* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020). She argues persuasively that the decline in American institutional religions does not mean that religion per se is disappearing. Rather, that faith commitment is being displaced into other outlets. Religion isn’t something that evaporates from human life; it shape-shifts into more culturally acceptable forms. Pastor David Zahl in *Seculosity: How career, parenting, politics, and romance became our new religion and what to do about it* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019) argues that even secular pursuits can be invested with a religious weight – that, by them, we hope to achieve ‘enoughness’, a sense that our existence means something. But these secular religions simply place us on hamster wheels of achievement anxiety without end.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, book 3, chapter 25.

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to do the things that would help it to happen. This book seeks to encourage those things that make for oases, that make for a powerful and beautiful aesthetic witness.

Oases engage cultural hopes and fears, building bridges into the inner lives of those far from Christ, as well as those struggling with their faith in Christ. I teach university classes on culture, media, world view and religion. I hear the questions and struggles of my students. University is an odd time of life, a dress rehearsal for adulthood. Many students wrestle with questions like, ‘How much may I hope? What childhood dreams must I release? What, realistically, can I expect out of life? What will my desires – for myself, my loved ones, my world – come to?’ The answers the world has to offer often prove empty.

These questions linger far beyond graduation. I am old enough to understand the midlife crisis. I didn’t really want the expensive sports car or extramarital affair that stereotypically accompany a midlife crisis, but I do understand the restlessness that comes with catching sight of one’s own death. Life is so brief. What is left for me, now that I’m closer to the grave than to the cradle? What have my life and aspirations amounted to? Has it all been worth it? In what may I still hope? Where does my true home lie?

This is the human condition – chained to desires we cannot fulfil in the present, unsure if we may realistically hope they ever will be. The Germans call this ‘Sehnsucht’, a yearning for an unknown far-off country that is our truest home.<sup>4</sup> Well-made, well-planted oases raise questions, summon hopes and reveal possible paths to take us home. They stir desire for something else, something better.

And desire is the engine that shapes what I call the ‘imaginary landscape’ – the aspirations and anxieties that underlie cultural works.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On Sehnsucht and the longing for home that drove the younger brother in Jesus’ parable and drives us, see Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the heart of the Christian faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), pp. 92–95.

<sup>5</sup> Readers may notice a similarity to Charles Taylor’s concept of ‘social imaginary’ – that is, broadly shared background assumptions about reality that make beliefs plausible or implausible. ‘Imaginary landscape’ is more focused on how individual creative cultural works penetrate our shared (and fragmented) cultural consciousness. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 23–25. For a good summary of the concept of social imaginary, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, worldview, and cultural formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), pp. 65–68.

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Oases can set up resonances within the musical conversation of culture, giving people ears for something richer than the tired old tunes they are used to.

### **The things that make for oases: imagination**

So what are the ‘things that make for oases’, that lead to positive contributions to the cultural conversation? The key ingredient is imagination. We will explore imagination more in part 2 but, for now, here is a brief working definition:

The imagination is a human power that orientates us – mind and body – in the world, through which we perceive and create. It orientates us both individually and collectively, so we can speak of a ‘collective imagination’ or ‘imaginary landscape’. The imagination inspires us to create, *and* it colours our experience of the world and our assumptions about reality. The imagination mediates: we shape our world through it, and through it our world shapes us.

Think of the imagination as a permeable filter between us and the world. But unlike, say, a coffee filter, this filter is active, dynamic, flowing. It shapes our sense of place in the world, our identities, who we are or think we are. It can shape oases, true and false. And it is shaped by oases, true and false.

Imagination is always in conversation with faith (or unfaith).<sup>6</sup> Each informs the other. The playground of the imagination is the place where issues of belief and unbelief are decided. Faith struggles are often less intellectual, more aesthetic and imaginative; less about arguments and evidence, more about imaginary horizons inherited from culture. We dwell within those horizons, and what lies beyond feels, literally, beyond belief. For this reason alone, the imaginative and aesthetic witness of Christians matters greatly.

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<sup>6</sup> That is, imagination informs and inflects the various types of atheism, New Age paganism and varieties of ‘other enchantment’, as I called it above.

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The aim of this book is to help Christians to develop a better understanding of the imagination and what it does so that our communities can live robust, imaginative lives as they encourage and support those who plant oases. These creative cultural works form imaginary worlds that welcome in both Christians and non-Christians for refreshment, recalibration and conversation. Creative cultural involvement is all about using the imagination to construct worlds for both the church and the common good, reversing the spiritual confusion and ‘desertification’ of our post-Christian world.<sup>7</sup>

### The plan of the book

The imagination is a hard subject to pin down. It skitters all over the place like a chihuahua on espresso. We will approach it carefully, in stages.

- Part 1 asks if we should even engage culture and, if so, how? Spoiler alert: the answer is ‘Yes, and we ought to pay attention to the imagination.’
- Part 2 asks, what is the imagination and why does it matter? It presents a theory of the imagination by exploring the testimony of God’s ‘two books’, Scripture and nature, especially *human* nature, as revealed in selected works of cognitive science, philosophy and literary theory.
- Part 3 sharpens our focus to ask, what makes the *Christian* imagination distinctive and resonant in a post-Christian world? What makes for good or bad Christian art and entertainment?
- Part 4 explores examples of the Christian imagination done well in a variety of media and genres. What might an oasis of the imagination look like, whether in film, music, video games, literature or other media?
- Part 5 examines the resources that Christians need to reform, refresh and sustain the Christian imagination: worship and the artist-within-community. Why does the church need artists, and what do artists need from the church?

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<sup>7</sup> As mentioned in note 1, when a society becomes disenchanting with the gospel, it becomes enchanted with other things. For a detailed study of what this looks like in the West, see Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, modernity, and the birth of the human sciences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

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The book's overall arc explores questions such as, 'How can we, in this day and age, best enter the cultural conversation for the common good? What kinds of imagination are best suited to expressing creatively the multifaceted glory of Christian faith in a culture that is both suspicious and tired of it? How can we set creatives free by encouraging and supporting those who plant oases?'

Christian cultural creativity could become a game-changer and a productive step away from complacency, divisive culture wars and the self-protective bubble Christianity that have become so common. We can create communities of imaginative flourishing that radiate healing light out into the broader culture.

### How to use this book

I hope that this book attracts different types of readers with different interests, concerns and attention spans concerning the Christian imagination and creative cultural involvement (what I call the church's 'aesthetic witness'). I hate it when authors assert stuff without sharing the reasoning *behind* their assertions, so I have organized the book in the form of a logical argument – A leads to B leads to C and so on. But you don't have to use it that way. Think of it as a 'make your own adventure' book and dip in where you're most interested, meandering back to things you missed if you want to. For example, if you:

- are convinced that we ought to engage culture through creativity, but want to know what that looks like in practice, skip to the artists I showcase in part 4;
- want clarity about what makes a Christian imagination resonate in a post-Christian world (the stuff that ties the case studies in part 4 together), go to part 3;
- want practical guidance on how the church can feed its own imaginative life and treat its creatives better, skip straight to part 5;
- are a nerd like me and have questions about how to define the imagination in general, go to part 2, where we get into the technical, nitty-gritty details of a Christian theory of imagination;

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- are really unsure about whether or not Christians *should* involve themselves in this cultural conversation at all, or why culture warring or cultural withdrawal aren't the ways to go, then you probably need the whole enchilada, starting with part 1.

The choices are yours.

Becoming a part of the cultural conversation in a way that builds bridges rather than erects walls is necessary work.<sup>8</sup> This conversation shapes our shared imaginary landscape, our shared cultural narratives, hopes, fears and desires. If we do not enter in and contribute in a meaningful, healing way that resonates past our own communities, we have no right to complain when the imaginary landscape becomes a desert or choked with weeds that tangle people, will-o'-the-wisps and enchantments that lead away from God into quicksand. Like nature, the imaginary landscape abhors a vacuum. In the absence of a winsome, honest Christian creativity, it will inevitably become enchanted by other things, other visions of the world.<sup>9</sup> Like Jesus' parable about the formerly demon-possessed man whose house is 'swept clean' (Luke 11:24–26), the collective imagination never stays unoccupied for long.

Consider the call to contribute imaginatively to the cultural conversation as part of the privilege of serving as ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14–21). For Christ's love compels us to rethink how we use and enjoy the imagination so that we might connect with non-Christian friends and neighbours at a deeper level, enabling the gospel to shine all the brighter. We will also learn how to love and serve our Christian brothers and sisters more fully. Along the way, we become richly blessed, surrounded by imaginatively robust Christian communities. Contributing creative cultural works that resonate in our shared culture (oasis planting) isn't just about loving and serving others. It is about being

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, the gospel will remain a stumbling block and foolishness for many (see 1 Corinthians 1:23). But cultural insensitivity makes the stumbling block worse, and makes the gospel look *more* foolish and repugnant. That does not honour Christ.

<sup>9</sup> Because our current cultures are so fragmented, it would be more accurate to talk in terms of competing imaginary *landscapes*, plural. For the sake of convenience, however, I will continue to speak in terms of a mainstream imaginary landscape rather than mapping the multitudes of intersecting post-Christian landscapes. In both cases, the calling of the Christian imagination remains the same: engage in a way that refreshes, encourages, challenges and creates space for conversation.

fully and joyfully human, alive to all the wonder that God has woven into this world around us.

## Starting positions

Imagination is a huge topic. It encompasses our whole personalities and applies to all areas of life: leadership, science, parenting, engineering, business, architecture, education, urban planning and so on. We cannot possibly cover all of that. This book is concerned with the area that has the most direct impact on the aesthetic witness of the church: arts and entertainment. We will be particularly interested in imaginative works intended for life *outside* the sanctuary or fellowship hall<sup>10</sup> – the places where non-Christians live and where Christians spend most of their time.

I bring a number of starting assumptions to this task that my readers may or may not share.

- 1 The Christian Bible is trustworthy, our ultimate authority for belief and practice, including about the topic of the imagination.
- 2 God also speaks truth through his creation. The Bible is not a textbook on every subject. It doesn't address quantum mechanics, contemporary literary theory, nor how to write a sitcom. To understand the dynamics and patterns of God's creation, we must listen to God's voice by studying creation. Scientists, philosophers and thinkers of all stripes will prove helpful here.
- 3 Nevertheless, the Bible gives us our foundational framework for understanding the *meaning* of creation. We should be attentive to sympathetic resonances between what we read in the Bible and what we find in creation (via scientists, philosophers and others). That is where I shall try to position my own understanding of the imagination.
- 4 Finally, we are interested in a certain kind of Christian imagination: one that resonates and invites with the other-enchanted in a

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<sup>10</sup> Though we will explore worship in part 5, we will steer clear of the 'worship wars'. Others have written well on that topic. See, for example, Mike Cospers's *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's worship tells the story of the gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

post-Christian world. That is, we must contextualize our investigation for the world we live in.<sup>11</sup>

## Who is this book for?

This book is for Christian creatives who seek clarity about the imagination and how to avoid pitfalls that ensnare some artists. It's for Christian leaders who long for their churches to adopt a less defensive posture and, instead, explore more positive ways to engage the world around them, those who wish to understand the creatives in their midst better and how best to pastor them. It's for everyday Christians who are not artists by profession but want to learn about art and imagination to better support the creatives in their communities.

This is *not* a 'how to' book. I will not explain how to plant an oasis. Artists and other creatives know that territory better than I. For those who want a shorter, more direct dive into practical stuff, I have co-written a shorter book with the jazz vocalist, art photographer and social activist Ruth Naomi Floyd called *Imagination Manifesto*. In this book, however, we will delve into a bit more theory and theology, seeking to explore important questions. In a time when the gospel has lost credibility, how can the imagination help us move forwards? How can we restore the aesthetic witness of Christ's church in a post-Christian world? How can we re-enter the cultural conversation and start making music rather than being satisfied with tone-deafness?

This is a call to action, in your Christian community and beyond. But I do not wish to 'tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders' (Matthew 23:4). Instead, this is more than a call to action; it is a call to wonder, a call to open your imagination to the beauty of God's grace revealed in Christ to the dark world through the power of the Spirit. To hear the call of imagination, you will have to use *your* imagination. May God enlighten the eyes of your heart to open you to that wonder, so you may walk in it.

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<sup>11</sup> Contextualization does not mean compromising the gospel, selling out to the world. It means letting Christian truth shine in wavelenghts our post-Christian friends can actually see. For an excellent introduction to contextualization, see Tim Keller's talk on YouTube, 'Tim Keller - Center Church: What is contextualization?', Redeemer City to City, YouTube (28 February 2013), <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eUvwzmV0P8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eUvwzmV0P8)>, accessed January 2023. See also Keller's book, *Center Church: Doing balanced, gospel-centered ministry in your city* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), especially part 3, 'Gospel contextualization'.