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The Possible's slow fuse is lit by the Imagination. —Emily Dickinson

As I sat down for lunch with a longtime colleague in Oak Brook/Chicago during the 2014 Religious Education Association (REA): Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education (APRE) Meeting, he turned to me mischievously and said: "I see you have become very traditional." He was referring to a recent article I had published in *Religious Education*. I smiled and nodded in the affirmative. I have become very comfortable being identified with the word tradition or traditional. To some of my colleagues this may seem a complete ideological turn-about. To me, it seems like coming home again, as if for the first time (T.S. Eliot). The lunch conversation with my colleague later sparked some self-reflection and questions on my part: Are tradition and progress/development mutually exclusive? Are conservative and liberal forever in opposition? Are these irreconcilable dualisms (splits) or duals (pairs) that need to be held in creative tension within each one of us and within our religious bodies? The answer to these questions may lie in the role we allow for the creative imagination within our churches, synagogues, and mosques. What is at stake here is our capacity to give living expression to our respective religious traditions in our time and place.

I was born in a pre-modern world in a small rural town, 70 miles north of Dublin, Ireland. For the most part, it was a world of fixity, stability, and permanence. Tradition ruled—in every aspect of our lives. The authority of tradition was embodied (externally) in representative figures: parents, clergy, schoolteachers. It was also overwhelmingly a Roman Catholic culture (97%) and a cocoon of Pre-Vatican II Catholicism. The parameters and boundaries of our tribal communal identity were clearly established. It was a safe and secure life-world—a world of moral absolutes and religious meta-narratives. It offered order and an anchor in life. It saved us from rootlessness, drift, and narcissistic subjectivity.

Nothing came close to the influence of parents and family in passing on the Catholic tradition and its way of life. They cultivated a center, a core, a chain of memory and a set of practices. Catechism classes at school were an exercise in didacticism. They remind me of Alfred North Whitehead's statement: "The vitality of religion is shown by the way the religious spirit has survived the ordeal of religious education" (1967 [1929], 39)! Religious instruction involved memorizing crisp doctrinal formulas and numerous definitions. The method was deductive and non-dialectical—starting with universal, timeless, "revealed" truths. What was important was certainty of faith, namely, answers to a daunting list of questions—answers to questions, more often than not, people could never imagine themselves asking. The quest for understanding was secondary. The appeal was to the authority of tradition. God was the rule maker and religion was legalistically fulfilling obligations.

Years later I look back at this deep immersion into my religious tradition with a high level of ambiguity. While it provided a foundation for religious homecoming, I found much of it dysfunctional and irrelevant—at a later period in my life. It was the practice of the first naiveté (Ricoeur 1965). It was essentially uncritical or pre-critical. Later, however, I would find another language to capture it: a fettered religious imagination. John Shea speaks about the fettered imagination, linking it with the adolescent self, the characteristics of institutional religion, and the Super-ego God (2005). J. B. Phillips' aptly titled little book, *Your God is Too Small* (1955), captures well this restrictive and petrified religious imagination.

The fettered imagination is a wounded imagination. It holds us captive, locked in and stagnant. It "loses its vigor as it slips into disinterest and ennui" (Whitehead and Whitehead 1984, 97). In the life of a religious community, a stagnant and fettered imagination leads to rote repetition, impotence, and loss of meaning. It degenerates into "traditionalism—the dead faith of the living" (Pelikan 1984, 65). With this in mind, Amos Wilder writes, "When imagination fails, doctrine becomes ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolation hollow and ethics legalistic" (Wilder 1976, 6). What is conservative degenerates into conservatism. That is why I had to distance myself from this impoverished imagination shackling my religious tradition and enter a stage of "dis-belief."

Graduate schooling in the United States was the real dawning of the age of modernity for me. Modernity represented a paradigm shift, a transformation of consciousness and perception of the world.

The world is dynamic, evolutionary, developmental. Progress is interchangeable with modernity. There is the birth of historical consciousness, the relativity of cultures, diversity of religions, the rise of the empirical sciences—with their inductive methods—and proliferation of movements of liberation. This paradigm shift is represented most of all in the ascendancy of universal reason. Reason, and especially critical rationality, is placed on the throne. As a way of knowing and an avenue to truth, it claimed to offer objective, lucid, and certain control and mastery of the world. Authority is now directed inside the human subject. Modernity, in effect, is a revolt against tradition.

I found all these currents of modernity head-spinning, emancipatory, and novel. Progressive education—with its deductive methods—became the new way to truth and life. My guides in this new way were the three Masters of Suspicion—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. They would uncover the blind spots and blinders obfuscating our view of reality. Religious education turned to the human subject as its starting point. The educational task was to critically correlate our common human experience with our religious tradition. The process was dialectical and conversational. The model had a prophetic dimension to it. It sought to foster critique of the dominant culture and the religious tradition. It practiced criticism on that which until now had been beyond criticism. When the old truths had become inert and irrelevant, placing reflective consciousness at the heart of education was, it seemed, what was required. It was the liberal answer to conservatism. It lifted some of the dead weight of tradition.

But religious traditions were beginning to seem no longer monolithic. A new cultural paradigm shift was underway—a sense of interruption, indeterminacy, hybridity, malleability. The context was now ecumenical and pluralistic. Could critical rationality rise to this challenge? Are their limits to reason? Alfred North Whitehead wrote, “But men (sic) cannot live on bread alone, still less can they do so on disinfectants” (1925, 59). Reason had removed some restraints and barriers. But it was not clear what would set new limits. Pascal, however, pointed the way: the last step of reason is to recognize that there are many things beyond reason (1670/1966, 4:277). The unfettered imagination was what was required to address our new emerging (“postmodern”) cultural context: a world of rich religious plurality, profound ambiguity, the situatedness and partiality of all knowledge and truth, multiple sources of authority, and an acute sense and urgency to turn our face toward the other.

In this period of late modernity, Luke Timothy Johnson (2014, 17) writes, it is difficult to occupy and maintain a position “in a world that insists we either mindlessly adhere to received teachings or recklessly reject the wisdom of the past in the name of enlightenment. In such a world the notion that one can be ‘liberal’ in some ways while ‘conservative’ in others seems too difficult for many to grasp.” “The forces of bifurcation,” he notes, “are not unique to Catholicism. All Christian denominations find themselves split between—for lack of better terms—fundamentalists and modernists (and Judaism and Islam in their own ways are similarly divided)” (Johnson 2014, 17). Johnson continues, this “distance between liberals and conservatives . . . inexorably grows, deepened by chronic misunderstanding and mistrust. If the religiously liberal regard traditionalists as dumb sheep, the latter regard the former as wolves out to ravage the flock. Mutual acceptance remains difficult to find and almost impossible to sustain, and so the two groups drift even further into a kind of ghettoized separation” (17). This seems an accurate picture of much of our religious world today.

The premise of this brief article is: *to be lured into choosing between conservative and liberal, tradition and progress/development is a false choice. Traditionalism and progressivism are in opposition. But there is no reason why tradition and progress has to be.*

Tradition, literally, is the process of handing on. It is what the living think is worth preserving from the work of the dead. It is learning from history and giving our ancestors a voice in the present. All good education starts with tradition. However, the process (traditio) and its product (tradita) can become deadening, frozen, and a straightjacket. Tradition ceases to be authentic when it becomes fossilized. The only way to conserve all that is best in tradition is to be liberated from elements that threaten its continuity with the past. For this, tradition needs an imaginative education context for its liberating work. In this vein, Mary C. Boys writes, “Religious education is the making accessible of the traditions of the religious community and the making manifest of the intrinsic connection between tradition and transformation” (1989, 193). Thomas Groome (1980; 1991), Mary Elizabeth Moore (1983), Jack Seymour and colleagues (1982; 2014), Charles Foster (2012), and Gabriel Moran (1989), with their own distinctive language forms and methods, affirm similar sentiments: religious education is a passing on—it is tradition-ing. Tradition, however, to be alive, has to be in constant change. It is a never ending process of development. It is constantly becoming other than itself (Gadamer

1982). It is a fundamental resistance to stasis. The guarantor of this is the role of the creative virtuous imagination (Whitehead and Whitehead 1984, 93–94). It is the fire that enlivens our religious tradition and makes all things new.

During my romance with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, my disenchantment, and near disaffiliation, with the Roman Catholic tradition was acute. Before the acronym Nones was invented, I would have found myself numbered among the unaffiliated—at least for a time. Paul Ricoeur, however, writes, “Every *real* conversion is first a revolution at the level of our directive images. By changing our imagination, man (sic) alters his existence” (1965, 127). For Ricoeur, the imagination is “the seat of profound workings which govern the decisive changes in our visions of the world.” It is the advanced outpost of our journey toward lucidity and maturity. “It is, *par excellence*, the instituting and the constituting of what is humanly possible.” In imagining our possibilities, Ricoeur claims, humans act as prophets of our own existence. Then, “we can begin to understand,” he notes, “in what sense we may speak of a *redemption through imagination*” (127). This redemption emerged by imaginatively reclaiming the integrity of my religious tradition by re-appropriating lost, hidden, suppressed, and marginalized strands in the tradition. This led to a reshaping of its vision and its set of practices. Through the power of the imagination, the tradition was re-created. In effect, it was re-invented anew . . . without end (Tilley 2000). I could now identify with Goethe (2007), who urged us to interact creatively with tradition:

What you have as heritage,
Take now as task;
For thus you will make it your own.

I was home again . . . but never the same again!

In spite of the crucial role of the imagination in shaping our life choices, we have given little attention to it in our educational programs, especially in our work in religious education and church ministry. It is not always highly regarded in church circles. Richard Cote writes, “The church . . . has long harbored a mistrust of the imagination by not giving sufficient heed to the imaginal experience of many of its members in the area of originality, passion, non-rational thought, theopoiesis, creativity and playfulness” (2003, 7). This long-neglected “entombed” religious imagination is seen as a frill, an add-on, as the opposite of the real/truth. However, “The play of the imagination,”

Cote writes, “is not merely an incidental or fortuitous occurrence in the life of faith but, rather, an abiding constitutive element of faith itself—indeed something without which faith in the living God can become dysfunctional” (22).

Writing some 60 years ago, Rabbi Abraham Heschel asserted: it might be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was defeated, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid (1955, 3). Wolfhart Pannenberg (1971) also astutely observes: Religions die when their lights fail. That is, when their teachings no longer illuminate the human experience of its adherents. “It is not so much that Christian faith is collapsing in today’s world,” Richard Cote declares, “but that much of the Church’s religious vocabulary, in which the faith has been cast and transmitted in ages past, has now become ‘out of reach’ for and ‘out of touch’ with the average lay person today. Nor is the challenge merely one of re-educating the faithful in the Church’s traditional speech modes, although this, too, is important. What is at stake is a clash between two very different ‘linguistic paradigms’” (2003, 45). The figure of Lazarus, for Cote, symbolizes boundary crossing at its best and helps “awaken” in us a re-vitalized religious imagination. The imagination’s creative role is to offer images, metaphors, and narratives to enable our religious symbols to sing again and resonate with people in their lives. When it creatively plays this role, the lights come on again. Tradition, then, becomes ever ancient . . . ever new, and we are at home again, as if for the first time. Now, however, I can know myself only in relation to who I am not. My religious identity is created by turning to face the other. Religious education now is inter-religious, and religious education is a pre-requisite for sustaining religious pluralism. This role, of the transcendent power of the imagination, is essential and at the core of all our religious educational endeavors and responsibilities today.

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PRACTICING THE THEOLOGY OF THE POSSIBLE
IN DIGITAL CONTEXTS

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As semesters begin, and first introductions make their way around the class, I have in recent times heard myself say to the students “. . . and my theology generally follows a constructive approach, meaning I like to explore what is possible, and how we might move toward that as a people of God.” As students shuffle the pages of the syllabus and strive to gain a clear sense of practical details, I realize I am voicing this statement more for myself than for them at this point. Yet, for me, naming this pursuit of the possible is a statement of hospitality: hospitality to the tradition, hospitality to the movement of the Spirit toward new horizons, and hospitality to the students who venture into this creative space with me.

For constructivist theologians, committed to testing the boundaries of systematic theology, my identification may skirt their overall question. They would make a fair critique. For me, the theology of the possible that guides my work is rooted in a particular place—a paschal place, a place that is both at the foot of cross but dares to hope beyond it, a place that awaits the Spirit in the upper room, a place that gives in to the religious imagination to take flight with that same Spirit to see how it renews the face of the earth. Seeking, exploring, hoping, insisting on the possible over the impossible is the disposition this brings to my work—not so far, after all, from the task of constructive theology.

My work in religious education takes place at the intersection of new media and old tradition: I explore how tradition stays both rooted and dynamic in our digital culture today. This is one place in which I search for the possible, for doing theology that is both rooted and dynamic, both authentic and relevant, both already and not yet. This place of both/and is liminal, transitional, dynamic, and can make one feel as though the ground is shifting beneath one's feet. It is not a steady place, not a place of idling, complacency, or “the way we have always done it.” Yet, neither is this an untethered place, a flow that