

Images Above All: Richard Kroner and the Religious Imagination

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■ Abstract

This essay returns to a largely forgotten achievement of mid-twentieth-century philosophical theology, Richard Kroner's *Culture and Faith* (1951) and the "philosophy of faith" presented therein. It focuses on Kroner's idea of religious imagination as the inspired medium of revelation. It considers implications of this idea with regard to religious epistemology and theological language. In doing so, it puts Kroner in conversation with John Caputo, Iain McGilchrist, and Kroner's friend and colleague Paul Tillich.

■ Keywords

religious imagination, art, image, culture, Paul Tillich, John Caputo, theopoetics

Das Wesen im Bilde ist das Wesen der Religion.
The essence in the image is the essence of religion.
–Ludwig Feuerbach¹

¹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke* (ed. Werner Schuffenhauer; 21 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988–2022) 5:311 (my translation).

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■ Introduction

W. J. T. Mitchell has coined the term “pictorial turn” to name a moment in which the mind turns to the image as a figure for its own activity. Mitchell locates the “philosophical enactment of the pictorial turn in the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly in the apparent paradox of a philosophical career that began with a ‘picture theory’ of meaning and ended with the appearance of a kind of iconoclasm.”² One might also look to Hegel’s philosophy of religion. For Hegel, too, “a picture held us captive,”³ namely, the *Vorstellung* (pictorial representation) of religious consciousness. As a stage in Spirit’s journey, the picture-thinking of religion is not to be lamented, but it is to be overcome. The speculative drive of Hegel’s system does not tarry long with the pictures of religion before plunging toward the Concept.⁴

In the religious philosophy of Richard Kroner (1884–1974) we can recognize yet another pictorial turn, away from Hegel’s de-pictorialized Concept and back to the pictures of religious imagination. Kroner has fallen into obscurity in recent decades, especially in the English-speaking world. In his own time he was a thinker of some repute. Trained under Heinrich Rickert, Kroner’s head was turned by the Hegelian revival of his student years (much to the consternation of his neo-Kantian teachers). Kroner’s early publications reflect this Hegelian swerve. By the beginning of the Second World War, Kroner was professor of philosophy at the University of Kiel, founding editor of the influential journal *Logos*, and author of a celebrated two-volume history of classical German Idealism (*Von Kant bis Hegel*, 1921–1924) as well as a (less celebrated) systematic philosophy of culture (*Selbstverwirklichung des Geistes. Prolegomena zur Kulturphilosophie*, 1928). Although Kroner was never to achieve renown as a philosopher in his own right (a fact symbolized by his loss of a coveted chair at Marburg to Martin Heidegger in 1923), he remained prominent as a figurehead of the neo-Hegelian movement in early twentieth-century German thought. Jewish by origin, Kroner was born into an assimilated home. He wrote and taught as a Christian philosopher and never, to my knowledge, wrote or spoke publicly about his Jewishness. He fled Germany at the late date of 1938. After a brief stay in Oxford, Kroner landed at Union Theological Seminary by arrangement of Paul Tillich. Tillich had already been Kroner’s colleague at Dresden Technical University (from 1925–1928) and remained his close friend.⁵ The old friends now

² W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 12.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 48

⁴ For Hegel’s discussion of *Vorstellung* and religious consciousness see G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures On The Philosophy of Religion, One Volume Edition: The Lectures of 1827* (ed. Peter C. Hodgson; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 432–70.

⁵ For a fuller account of Kroner’s relationship with Tillich, see Alf Christophersen and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, “Selbstbehauptung des Geistes. Richard Kroner und Paul Tillich—die Korrespondenz,” *Journal for the History of Modern Theology / Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 18 (2011) 281–339.

found themselves down the hall from one another once again. Tillich began work on his *Systematic Theology*, the first volume to be published in 1951. Kroner began his own magnum opus, *Culture and Faith*, which was published in the same year.⁶

Theologians and philosophers of religion may still find a great deal of value in Kroner's thought. In this essay, I focus on Kroner's zeal for the imagination as the privileged medium of religious knowledge. Imagination, Kroner professes, is "the medium in which the human and divine mind meet," such that "it should be regarded as a truism that not reason, but imagination, presents to faith its object."⁷ This way of promoting imagination over reason is characteristic of Kroner's religious epistemology. In *Culture and Faith*, he integrates this view into a system of thought encompassing theories of science, art, state, morality, and religion. In that work, Kroner also projects an agenda for theology to match this doctrine of religious imagination. Theology is not a rational science, Kroner asserts, but an imaginative discourse of the heart. Its language must strive to be as imaginative as Scripture itself.

Below, I provide a short introduction to Kroner's life and thought, focusing on the system of *Culture and Faith*. I then concentrate on two notable elements of Kroner's theory of religious imagination. The first of these is Kroner's insistence that the imagination forms the cognitive basis of faith. Reason, logic, and conceptual understanding all take a back seat to what faith apprehends intuitively and imaginatively. I examine this element of Kroner's religious philosophy alongside the neurocognitive theory of the British psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, highlighting moments where McGilchrist's understanding of cognition—specifically, the kind of cognition involved in religious belief—overlaps Kroner's idea of faith. The resonances between McGilchrist and Kroner point toward an understanding of faith as a cognitive act mediated by imagination, intuition, and response. Second is Kroner's claim that theology must learn to speak the language of imagination. In exploring the implications of this claim, I put Kroner in conversation with Tillich and a more recent philosophical theologian much influenced by Tillich, John Caputo. With a number of critical provisos, Kroner's "philosophy of faith" may continue to serve the theologian: as a reminder not to allow faith, which lives on images, to get lost in thought, and as an invitation to a more imaginative mode of theology.

■ A Book of Conversions

We may begin with Kroner's beginnings. In Dresden in the 1920s, Kroner and Tillich kept company with the Russian émigré and writer Fyodor Stepun. They often gathered at Kroner's villa for small soirees involving a good deal of dancing on the terrace. The journalist Leonie Dotzing-Möllering describes each of the

⁶ Richard Kroner, *Culture and Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

⁷ Richard Kroner, "On the Religious Imagination," in *Perspectives on a Troubled Decade: Science, Philosophy, and Religion, 1939–1949* (ed. Lyman Bryson, Louis Finkelstein, and R. M. MacIver; New York: Harper, 1950) 595–622, at 612, 596.

three friends congregated in Kroner's "magical garden."⁸ Stepun appears lion-like, "with a broad, full face, narrow cunning eyes and a hairstyle like Rasputin's, half-length and graying."⁹ Tillich belies Dotzing-Möllering's image of the theologian as "elderly, dignified, and sedate"; he is a "handsome, slim man with dark blonde hair and glasses in front of happy eyes"; by turns "shy" and "electrified," Tillich goes waltzing through "the moonlit summer night" exuding "boyish charm."¹⁰ Kroner, the party's benefactor, cuts a different figure. Showing none of Stepun's bravado or Tillich's charisma, he stands to the side, "a tall, slim figure with a Caesar's head."¹¹ The portrait captures something of Kroner's intellectual temperament: measured and equanimous, yet given to magisterial proclamations.

These traits are evident in *Selbstverwirklichung des Geistes*, Kroner's first attempt at a systematic philosophy of culture. Kroner pitched this early effort between Kant's critical idealism and Hegel's dialectical method. Looking back, he confesses that *Selbstverwirklichung* conceives religion in dogmatically Hegelian terms, as "a state in the self-realization of mind" and "a link in the creative process of culture."¹² This self-criticism was preceded by a pair of critical reviews published by Kroner's dance partners, Tillich and Stepun. Tillich reacted to the hubris of a book in which "a philosopher dares to derive methodically the entire range of cultural consciousness in a closed system from a principle."¹³ Moreover, Kroner's method lacked the dialectical brio that Tillich had begun to cultivate in his own early thinking. Kroner passed too hastily from the fractured forms of culture to a point of ultimate unity, tarrying too little with the negative along the way. Stepun took greater pains to ferret out the book's implicit Hegelianism. Ostensibly, Stepun tells us, *Selbstverwirklichung des Geistes* honors the sovereignty of faith by placing the God worshiped in religion in a region above culture. However, in doing so, it severs God from the creative life of the world. Outside the circle of religious faith, where the Lord appears as "countenance," the divine activity in the world is best comprehended in Hegelian terms, as "the product of the spirit realizing itself through self-objectivization."¹⁴ Stepun concludes that the God of *Selbstverwirklichung des Geistes* is "a garment that Absolute Spirit puts on when it goes to church."¹⁵ More simply, Tillich and Stepun agreed that the book misread the times. On Stepun's view, the book amounts "to an extremely artful, but probably belated attempt at

⁸ Dotzing-Möllering's account is reproduced in the only existing biography of Kroner, Walter Asmus's *Richard Kroner (1884–1974). Ein Philosoph und Pädagoge unter dem Schatten Hitlers* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1990). Dotzing-Möllering's report appears on pp. 41, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, ix.

¹³ Paul Tillich, "Die Selbstverwirklichung des Geistes. Das neue Buch von Richard Kroner," *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten* 171 (1928) 2.

¹⁴ Kroner qtd. in Fedor Stepun, "Zu Kroners 'Selbstverwirklichung des Geistes,'" *ZTK* 12 (1931) 443–54, at 449.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 450.

philosophical mediation between nineteenth-century humanistic belief in culture and the new yearning of Christianity to intervene in the formation of life. . . . Our time is much more radical in religious matters than Kroner's system."¹⁶ Tillich agreed, finding the book "conservative" in its attitude.¹⁷

Kroner was not completely unmoved by the period's preoccupation with the radical and the new. This is manifest in his early fascination with the figure of the messianic. Among his earliest publications is a contribution to a 1909 volume Kroner compiled with Stepun and other students of Rickert, titled *Vom Messias. Kulturphilosophische Essays*. In the essay, Kroner bewails the despiritualizing fragmentation of culture, laying the blame at the feet of Nietzsche's materialism. Kroner's rhetoric is baroque and openly religious. Turning Nietzsche's rhetoric of vampirism against him, Kroner diagnoses the illness of the age: it is "as if the icy hand of death passed over all the miraculous figures of the soul, and they suddenly stand there: dead, senseless, shadowy like wax dolls, mere machines. As if by vampires, all the blood from our lives has been sucked, and nothing lies before us but a great rubble heap of soul-atoms."¹⁸ Redemption, Kroner tells us, rests with the arrival of the volume's eponymous messiah, "a messenger from that invisible realm that lies beyond all knowable things," with whom will return "the spirit of religion," "strong belief in values and ideas," and "a guarantee of the divinity of the world."¹⁹ In short, the "New Man" of the coming age will be the old figure of the messiah, cast in a biblical mold. The neo-Kantian professoriate was startled by the book. Wilhelm Windelband, for one, worried that the Rickert group "might become unfaithful to Kantian criticism and, unconsciously, verge on Catholicizing metaphysics."²⁰

Something of the radicalism and religious zeal of *Vom Messias* was to return in Kroner's postwar thinking. Kroner's transformation from staid neo-idealist to prophetic "philosopher of faith" bears all the marks of an Augustinian conversion. There is a moment of crisis, the benefaction of a bishop, and a decisive encounter with a book, all resulting in a wholehearted transformation of the self. The crisis was the war and its fallout, which broke Kroner's faith in idealism and the culture of humanism. The bishop was the Anglican Cecil Boutflower, with whom Kroner resided in Oxford. It was Boutflower who gave Kroner Reinhold Niebuhr's *Beyond Tragedy* (1936). With its twin emphases on the power of sin in history and the higher sovereignty of God's judgment, Niebuhr's book, Kroner recalls, was "exactly the sort of inspiration and consolation which I needed and which mysteriously agreed

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 454.

¹⁷ As Kroner himself reports in *Culture and Faith*, viii.

¹⁸ Richard Kroner et al., *Vom Messias. Kulturphilosophische Essays* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1909) 6; qtd. in Christophersen and Graf, "Selbstbehauptung des Geistes," 282.

¹⁹ Kroner et al., *Vom Messias*, 9; qtd. in Christophersen and Graf, "Selbstbehauptung des Geistes," 282.

²⁰ Stepun's recollection, qtd. in Asmus, *Richard Kroner*, 26.

with my own faith.”²¹ The book changed more than Kroner’s mind. It “elevated my heart as well as my intellect,” he writes. “A new man thus developed. He had to write a new book.”²² The new book is *Culture and Faith*, the conversion of one book (Kroner’s own earlier system) and the offspring of another (Niebuhr’s *Beyond Tragedy*).

■ The System of *Culture and Faith*

It is beyond the scope of this essay to give a full account of the revised system of *Culture and Faith*.²³ However, a somewhat extensive synopsis is necessary in order to better grasp Kroner’s doctrine of religious imagination. This section provides an overview of *Culture and Faith*, underscoring the centrality of religious imagination to its argument.

Culture and Faith pivots on the faculty of imagination, but it begins with experience. Kroner insists that his method in *Culture and Faith* is philosophical, terming it “philosophy of faith,” “pistology,” and (in what must have been a self-conscious inversion of Tillich’s nomenclature) “theological philosophy.” As a philosophical system, Kroner explains, *Culture and Faith* must begin with experience, which is “the sphere where philosophic thought has its legitimate rights.”²⁴ Kroner must also “begin in wonder,” because experience “is itself a wonder.”²⁵ The wonder is that “reality reveals itself” in experience. The nature of what is revealed in experience, however, remains ambiguous. The fullness of the revelation is obstructed, as it were, by a series of “antimonies” that pervade experience. Kroner enumerates these as antimonies between oneness and manifoldness, freedom and necessity, time and eternity. These derive from a fundamental antimony that colors experience as a whole, the antinomy of world and self.²⁶ “The most radical opposition we can think of” is that “the world is the whole of our experience. . . . And yet the experiencing self does not belong to the world.”²⁷ This most basic of the antimonies is felt in the “inner tensions and anxieties” that perpetually unsettle the self.²⁸ At the outset of the system Kroner signals that faith, in some sense, will “solve” the antinomies. “Faith is latent in [secular] experience, but [secular] experience does not produce faith.”²⁹

Secular experience is nonetheless productive; it produces culture. Culture, in each of its expressions—science, art, politics, and morality—arises as an attempted

²¹ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, ix.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ A more exhaustive summary of Kroner’s system can be found in John E. Skinner, *Self and World: The Religious Philosophy of Richard Kroner* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962).

²⁴ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

“solution” to the antinomies of experience. The second section of *Culture and Faith* describes how each area of culture tries and fails at a solution. Each lacks the capacity to grasp self and world together in a whole, in such a way that one does not swallow up the other.

Kroner first treats the “contemplative” cultural solutions of science and art. Science attempts to transform the world into a theory to be comprehended by the ego. Art transforms the world into an image for contemplation. Both fail, because self and world are living realities of experience; their transformation into objects of contemplation falsifies their actuality.³⁰ Notably, Kroner specifies that art fails better than science, because it fails imaginatively. Kroner emphasizes the unique ability of the artistic imagination to “adumbrate the world,” that is, to picture the world as a whole (and to picture the self within that world-picture). Science, by contrast, grasps the details, but “the world as a whole does not exist in the way in which all the details of the world do. It belongs to another kind of reality, and it is this reality which can be grasped only by imagination.”³¹ Art accesses this other reality by imaginatively generating an “image-world,” one “more comprehensive and more radical than the one presented by science.”³² This comprehensive capacity of imagination—its ability to “reach the uttermost polarities of experience and reconcile them”—will be central to Kroner’s view of religious imagination.³³

Kroner then turns to the “active” solutions of state and morality. These do better because both involve the reality of the active subject. However, both again fail to “solve” the antinomies. The state founds a unifying community of citizens, but that community can only bind individuals together outwardly. It cannot reach the individual inwardly. Morality surpasses the state by reaching inward, where it discovers its own foundation in the moral law. In principle, this foundation in the moral law makes morality capable of establishing a universal community of the good, something like Kant’s kingdom of ends. However, by turning inward, morality also meets its limit: the guilty conscience of an evil will. Kroner’s philosophy of culture reveals itself to be a moral philosophy in the Kantian tradition. “Culture is only the totality of all possibilities which the moral self encounters in realizing itself.”³⁴ The guiltiness of the moral will, then, is the limit of cultural progress as a whole. The guilty conscience is “the most obvious illustration” that “Man is always on the way; he never reaches the goal by his own exertion and action.”³⁵ Kroner concludes in Niebuhrian tone, “Culture is a tragic undertaking.”³⁶ Of course, Niebuhr’s gospel points beyond tragedy, and even Kant admits the possibility of

³⁰ Ibid., 128.

³¹ Ibid., 117.

³² Ibid., 116.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 178.

³⁵ Ibid., 168.

³⁶ Ibid., 179.

a divine “supplement” that may bridge the self’s moral shortfall.³⁷ Kroner echoes Kant’s language: culture is only tragic “if it is not supplemented by a faith which assures us that it is not destitute of meaning.”³⁸ Unless all is truly lost, this longing must be fulfilled. The second section of the book concludes on this melancholy but forward-looking note.

In the third section, the system effectively begins again. To do so, it must return to experience. This time Kroner discovers another category of experience, one which would make Kant cringe, what Kroner calls “mystical experience.” By this he means the “inner relation to the totality of experience, i.e., to that totality in which the differentiation between world and self has not yet taken place or has not yet assumed the character of a distinct consciousness.”³⁹ Culture and philosophy, Kroner explains, presume a dirempted form of conscious experience, always already divided between self and world. Faith presumes another kind of experience, an experience of primordial non-differentiation underlying the surface of common experience. Just this kind of experience is what Kroner understands by “religion,” at least in the “vaguest and widest sense” of the term.⁴⁰ “Mystical experience” serves as the opening through which faith, always “latent” in ordinary experience, makes its entry. It re-grounds the system, which we now discover had “deliberately and methodically [abstracted] from any experience that might be called religious.”⁴¹

At this point, Kroner’s theory of religious imagination becomes decisive. Religious imagination, Kroner explains, has the special ability to “articulate” mystical experience, that is, the power to grasp and unify (*articulare*, “join together”) “the uttermost polarities of experience” in a holistic form of awareness.⁴² In doing so, the power of imagination is nothing less than revelatory. Kroner defines revelation as the event in which “the ultimate ground of reality articulates itself in our human imagination and . . . our minds and wills are responsive to this self-articulation.”⁴³ As he elsewhere formulates this idea: “Religious imagination thus turns into Divine Revelation from the side of God and into Inspiration from the side of man.”⁴⁴ In principle, all historical forms of religious imagination bear revelatory potential so far as they are “inspired.” However, for Kroner, “biblical religion” stands in a category of its own. It alone has tamed the “luxuriant imagination” of

³⁷ See Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (trans. Alan Wood; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 196.

³⁸ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 179.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* This view of religion as an experienceable undercurrent of cultural activity resembles Tillich’s notion of religion as “the experience of [or directedness to] the unconditioned” (Paul Tillich, *Visionary Science: A Translation of Tillich’s On The Idea of a Theology of Culture with an Interpretive Essay* [trans. Victor Nuovo; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987] 24.) and ultimately derives from the Schleiermachiian tradition that shaped both Tillich and Kroner.

⁴¹ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 179.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴⁴ Kroner, *Religious Function*, 37.

pre-biblical religions by reducing “to the indispensable minimum the human part in the articulation of mystical experience.”⁴⁵ Biblical imagination thus succeeds in making the medium of imagination a vehicle for the pure self-articulation of the “ground of all that is,” and it alone can claim “the living God himself [as] its founder and its interpreter.”⁴⁶ As evidence for this claim Kroner points to the poetic “afflatus” of the prophets and to the “dramatic” and “epic” scenes of the gospel narratives.⁴⁷

The final section of *Culture and Faith* adopts a proto-theological tone. By the end, Kroner has qualified that the philosophic terms theretofore employed to name the object of faith (e.g., “ultimate reality,” “ground of all that is,” etc.) are, strictly speaking, “highly objectionable, if not entirely devoid of meaning” when taken on their own.⁴⁸ Within the realm of faith, such formulations may be properly understood as inadequate means of indicating conceptually what faith only apprehends through imagination. So far as these terms are understood conceptually, they misrepresent and so misapprehend the object of faith. Kroner turns to Origen, his favorite of the church fathers, for a theological authority: “There is no ‘concept’ of God in the Bible but rather a ‘holy image,’ as Origen calls it.”⁴⁹ Thus, as Kroner elsewhere states, “the *idea* of God must be replaced by the *image* of God.”⁵⁰

What, then, is the “holy image” of the Bible, and how does it “solve” the antinomies from which the system sets out? The image that radiates throughout the final section of *Culture and Faith* is that of God’s forgiving love as manifest in cross and resurrection. Kroner sings hymns to love as the principle of reconciliation. “Love is mysterious because it unites what is separated; it unites the opposites so completely that they become one and the same life, one and the same self.”⁵¹ In the biblical image of a forgiving God, faith overcomes what culture never could: the resistance of the evil will. The will “is broken by God’s overwhelming grace and love . . . not by means of force or the stronger physical energy but by means of love, which conquers from within the very soul of man.”⁵² In forgiveness, God “[stoops] down to the repentant sinner and by accepting him again into his fellowship, God has shattered the ultimate barrier to the ‘solution’ of the antinomies. . . . Forgiving love finally closes the gap between man and God, and thereby all the gaps which divide the human self.”⁵³ In this sense, “faith carries through what is begun in moral life.”⁵⁴ In doing so, it also brings culture toward its end.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Notably, in the earlier *The Religious Function of the Imagination*, Kroner’s emphasis falls on the inspired poetry of the prophets. In *Culture and Faith*, Kroner’s emphasis shifts to the epic and dramatic aspects of the gospels.

⁴⁸ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 268.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁵⁰ Kroner, *Religious Function*, 33.

⁵¹ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 224.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

The system begins to arch toward closure as the unfinished business of culture is completed by faith. For this, imagination is not enough. Imagination, Kroner specifies, is “but the instrument through which God’s word is received; the real recipient is not imagination but will and heart.”⁵⁵ The miracle of revelation, then, consists in the inward movements made possible by the image of a forgiving God. The image brings about the final sundering of the self, in which the sinner sees himself turned away from God, and the reunifying act of God’s forgiveness, by which the split is closed. From the individual heart, the reunifying power of forgiving love spills over into the communal order, giving rise to the image of the Kingdom, that is, “the absolute community . . . of repentant sinners transformed into a community of lovers by the grace of God.”⁵⁶ Outwardly, Kroner acknowledges, humankind will never be free from “the wrecks of time” or “the vicissitudes and chances of the ever changing scene of life and history.”⁵⁷ Inwardly, however, “faith is always at the end, for which it is destined.”⁵⁸ The task of faith is to witness to an eternal truth beyond the wreckage of the temporal scene, to stand in judgment of history and culture and thereby to press the species further on its unending way toward the Kingdom come.

From these heights, faith is given ultimate insight. “The eyes of faith see ultimate reality” and receive “a kind of imaginative knowledge derived from the active attitude, which needs this knowledge for its moral function.”⁵⁹ The crowning image of the biblical imagination—the diptych of the crucifixion and resurrection—amounts to an assurance that the ultimate reality glimpsed by faith is really real, that the biblical image of God’s forgiving love is true. For Kroner, this assurance entails a triumph of spirit over culture. The resurrection confirms that “God himself is spirit,” and simultaneously fulfills the promise first given in mystical experience, namely, “that there is something behind or beyond . . . the antinomies of all experience and the impossibility of getting rid of them by cultural productivity.”⁶⁰ Through this imaginative perception, all of reality is made to radiate with the mystery within. As Kroner elsewhere writes: “Everything receives an imaginative character by being seen with the eyes of inspired religious imagination. Everything appears as related to the divine mystery. . . . The phenomenal world thus becomes . . . imaginative, and that means *miraculous*.”⁶¹

Culture and Faith is a curious and uneven work. It is curious in the sense of being hard to place. With Tillich and Niebuhr, Kroner desires a new synthesis between culture and religion, philosophy and faith. However, he predicates that synthesis on a principle of contradiction between faith and reason, such that his proclamations

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 203–4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁶¹ Kroner, *Religious Function*, 39, 41 (italics in original).

of faith's sovereignty resonate more with Karl Barth's new dogmatics than Tillich and Niebuhr's new liberalism. The book is uneven in its argument and execution. A philosopher may raise an eyebrow at Kroner's procrustean divisions between reason and imagination, and both eyebrows at the free reign he gives the alogical religious imagination. A theologian may suspect Kroner has only reissued Hegel's dialectic in a post-speculative guise or reasserted the Kantian denial of knowledge that "makes room for faith," admittedly in a way that permits faith roomier quarters, but only by relocating faith to the realm of the conceptually incomprehensible.

Kroner's old companions, Tillich and Stepun, likely would have found in the new system (of which they wrote no reviews) the same flaws that marred the first. They may have suspected that, despite his best efforts, Kroner had once again written a philosophy of Christianity from the sources of German Idealism. Further, despite embracing a more aggressive dialectics of faith, Kroner again produces a closed system that comes to rest in a unifying moment of harmony. At the end of Kroner's system, a self-assured tranquility reigns over the inner life of faith, lending it an ahistorical and otherworldly bent. As Kroner's system reclines into faith's inward, imaginative fullness, it verges on what Tillich once called (with presumable reference to Heidegger) "an aesthetic sense of being in the world which prides itself on being above the sphere of moral struggle."⁶² The near quietism of *Culture and Faith* was ill-suited to its postwar moment in Christian thought, which was marked by an acute concern for Christianity's obligations to the social order. All of these factors may have contributed to *Culture and Faith*'s fall into obscurity.

■ Reason, Imagination, and the Cognitive Operations of Faith

Despite this obscurity, Kroner's thinking contains a fundamental insight regarding the cognitive operations of faith. Kroner's claim is that the understanding of faith is not primarily logical or intellectual. Rather, faith sees through affect and imagination, heart and image. Kroner speaks of the heart when he writes: "The whole of reality engenders our fear and hope, our love and our hate, our rapture or our dismay, our gratitude or our horror, and a thousand other feelings and affections. These sentiments stir our imagination, modify, enlarge, enrich it, and the images in turn provoke new emotional reactions."⁶³ The heart stirs the imagination and the imagination provokes the heart. This virtuous circle of affect and imagination becomes faith's viewfinder, its way of grasping the "imaginative knowledge" transmitted through Scripture and evident in the world when re-illuminated by divine mystery. This mode of perception must not be traded for the less perceptive lens of logic. This principle lies behind Kroner's assertions that "imagination is superior to thought," that "imagination, not thought, is permitted to enter the divine

⁶² Paul Tillich, "Protestantism as a Critical and Creative Principle," in idem, *Political Expectation* (ed. James Luther Adams; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1971) 33.

⁶³ Kroner, *Religious Function*, 14.

mystery.”⁶⁴ Or, stated more philosophically, that only “spiritual, as compared with intellectual imagination, can truly be called ‘realistic,’ since it is the adequate medium through which the eyes of faith see ultimate reality.”⁶⁵ With such statements, Kroner asserts the primacy of imagination in the cognitive workings of faith with a zeal unparalleled among his contemporaries.

One might conclude that “mind,” for Kroner, is less like Hegel’s *Geist*, with its end and origin in the Concept, and more like what the Greek fathers meant by *nous*, which, within the context of Eastern Orthodox theology, is often translated as “the eye of the heart.”⁶⁶ Indeed, there is a distinctively Orthodox flavor to some of Kroner’s thinking—a sense that the intellect is one with the heart and that the heart is created to gaze contemplatively on the image of God.

While these resonances with Orthodoxy are intriguing, it may be more revealing to consider another set of resonances, namely, those between Kroner’s view of religious imagination and some recent work in neuropsychology. Exploring these resonances will further illuminate Kroner’s understanding of faith as an affective, intuitive, and relational way of knowing. In this vein, the work of Iain McGilchrist is especially germane. McGilchrist is a British psychiatrist and neuroscience researcher with extensive knowledge of modern philosophy. In his 2008 *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, he argues that the brain’s left and right hemispheres support fundamentally different modes of understanding. The left hemisphere, which is responsible for the brain’s hypercognitive functions, including the sequential processes of language production and abstractive reasoning, supports a dispassionate and analytic mode of understanding the world. The right hemisphere, which is the seat of the brain’s more relational and affective capacities, supports a more intuitive mode of understanding, one oriented to context and to the whole over the part. McGilchrist argues that the left hemisphere is fundamentally dependent on the right hemisphere for generating understanding overall. He indicts Western culture for tending to get this order of dependence backwards, promoting left-hemisphere thinking over right-hemisphere thinking. The better (i.e., more neurologically advantageous) arrangement would be the reverse: the right hemisphere should serve as “master” of the left, and the left should serve as “emissary” to the right, interpreting the information it sends over.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 14.

⁶⁵ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 237.

⁶⁶ For instance, in the glossary to the standard English translation of the *Philokalia*, *nous* is said to be: “the intellect [that] dwells in the ‘depths of the soul’” and “constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart . . . the organ of contemplation, the ‘eye of the heart.’” Sts. Nikodimos and Makarios, *The Philokalia* (trans. and ed., G. E. H. Palmer, Phillip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware; 2 vols.; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988) 1:362.

⁶⁷ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009; expanded ed., 2019). Page numbers taken from the expanded edition.

On the basis of this model, McGilchrist ventures a view of belief, broadly conceived. Here, McGilchrist's theory of cognition begins to harmonize with Kroner's idea of faith. For McGilchrist: "Belief is not to be reduced to thinking that such-and-such might be the case. It is not a weaker form of thinking laced with doubt. This view of belief comes from the left hemisphere's disposition towards the world."⁶⁸ By "belief," McGilchrist means the espousal of views concerning the fundamental nature of reality—for example, "materialism," "atheism," "theism." His focus falls on religious belief as "belief in God."⁶⁹ From a left-hemisphere perspective, religious belief is reduced to a mental state of affirmation or propositional assent, one lacking firm evidence or conceptual coherence. Religious belief appears differently when the model is adjusted, granting cognitive priority to the intuitive and affective right-hemisphere. Seen from the right hemisphere, "belief is a matter of care: it describes a *relationship*, where there is a calling and an answering, the root concept of 'responsibility.' . . . It has the characteristic right-hemisphere qualities of being a betweenness: a reverberative, re-sonant, response-ible relationship."⁷⁰ Care and relationship are characteristic "dispositions" of the right hemisphere, for McGilchrist, because it is the right hemisphere that permits us to cognize the world holistically, in terms of relational interdependence, rather than atomistically, as a sequence of self-sufficient parts. Thus, it is the right hemisphere that enables the self to relate "to whatever lies outside the self."⁷¹ It is not that belief has nothing to do with left-hemisphere cognition. McGilchrist wants to avoid a simple binarism of brain functioning: "the right hemisphere, though it is not dependent on the left hemisphere in the same way that the left is on the right, nonetheless *needs* it in order to achieve its full potential, in some sense to become fully itself."⁷² The left hemisphere may be necessary to bring belief to speech, and to reflect critically on the content of belief-statements. Belief itself, however, is grounded in the pre-reflective, affective, and relational world of the right hemisphere. The theologian Graham Ward, who has put McGilchrist's theory in profitable conversation with philosophy and theology, sums up McGilchrist's view: "Working together, the left and right hemispheres of the brain make believing a mode of cognition associated with imagination, motivation, desire, intuition and feeling."⁷³

It is possible to restate Kroner's overarching, counter-Hegelian thesis in McGilchrist's terms: one cannot uproot the knowledge of faith from its "right-hemisphere" home and reconstruct it in a "left-hemisphere" way without losing the content of faith.⁷⁴ Faith or religious belief, for both Kroner and McGilchrist, is

⁶⁸ Ibid, 170.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 128.

⁷² Ibid., 437 (*italics in original*).

⁷³ Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014) 77.

⁷⁴ The "counter-Hegelian" element of this formulation might be disputed, given that McGilchrist

closely aligned with the fundamental work of the right hemisphere, as it enables affect, perception of the whole, and relationships of response. To misunderstand the nature of faith, as primarily a “left-hemisphere” affair, a matter of analysis and intellectual certainty, is to miss the point of faith altogether. In short, Kroner understood that faith happens in this “right-hemisphere” way. To this understanding he brings the mind of a systematic philosopher steeped in the Christian intellectual tradition.

This confluence has everything to do with the imagination, so far as imagination is taken as the mind’s faculty for creating and perceiving figures of the whole. As we have seen, for Kroner, religious imagination, like artistic imagination, creates images that “adumbrate” the whole of reality; however, in faith, unlike in art, these images encompass the active and lived dimensions of life. The consciousness of faith is thus mediated by an “imaginative whole. . . . Every thing and every being belongs to this imaginative whole, it has its own full reality only insofar as it participates in the reality of this whole.”⁷⁵ This capacity to encircle the whole of reality in an actual, living way makes faith the “ultimate and all-embracing power in the human soul.”⁷⁶ This holistic form of perception can be recognized as a “right-hemisphere” quality of faith. As McGilchrist explains, “cognition in the right hemisphere is not a process of something coming into being through adding piece to piece in a sequence, but of something that is out of focus coming into focus, as a whole.”⁷⁷ He continues: “In reality we see things first whole: serial attentional processing is not needed. . . . we do not have to orientate our attention to each feature of an object in turn to understand the overall object.”⁷⁸ Faith, for Kroner, works this way. It is not a process of piecing the details together into a set of facts that more or less line up with reality—that is what science does—but a way of (re)perceiving reality as a whole, in light of the truth made visible in Scripture.

The confluence runs deeper. For Kroner, this imaginative form of perception works in tandem with the deep stirrings of the heart, those thousands of “feelings and affections” that enlarge and enrich imagination. For McGilchrist, this domain of feeling, motivation, and desire also belongs to the right hemisphere. Indeed, the word “heart,” in Kroner’s sense, may be taken as shorthand for these affective dimensions of cognition. McGilchrist observes that philosophers in the West have

credits Hegel with having a “strong sense of the right hemisphere world” and thus partially exempts Hegel from the narrowly “atomistic, rationalistic approach” that, according to McGilchrist, dominates in Western philosophy. Suffice it to say that McGilchrist and Kroner have different takes on Hegel. McGilchrist focuses on Hegel’s formulation of the dialectic as the union of union and division; for McGilchrist this indicates a strong attunement to the whole over the part in Hegel’s philosophy of Spirit, and thus exemplifies “right-hemisphere” thinking. Kroner focuses on the fact that, for Hegel, the unity of Spirit consummates in logic (and decidedly not image and affect)—in other words, Hegel’s rationalism wins the day. McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 140, 201.

⁷⁵ Kroner, *Religious Function*, 17.

⁷⁶ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 210.

⁷⁷ McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 447.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

been suspicious of affect or emotion as a source of knowledge. This is because “philosophy in the West is essentially a left-hemisphere process. It is verbal, analytic, requiring abstracted, decontextualized, disembodied thinking.”⁷⁹ McGilchrist makes a few exceptions to this rule. Some philosophers, he believes, have had a “strong sense of the right-hemisphere world.”⁸⁰ Among these he numbers Kroner’s own philosophical hero, Blaise Pascal. Kroner hails Pascal as “the founder of a philosophy of religion unsurpassed up to the present day.”⁸¹ More than once, Kroner invokes Pascal’s famous dictum, which Kroner phrases, “the heart has its own reasons, of which reason is unaware.”⁸² For McGilchrist, Pascal exemplifies the right hemisphere’s disposition to the world in treating reason as a self-limiting faculty of mind. McGilchrist quotes Pascal approvingly: “the ultimate achievement of reason is to recognize that there are an infinity of things which surpass it.”⁸³ This is precisely how Kroner treats reason in *Culture and Faith*: as a power that cancels itself out, and, in so doing, opens onto an infinite region beyond its grasp, the region of faith. Faith sees with a form of heartfelt intuition, which, when illuminated by religious imagination, is sharper even than reason.

In its finer details, Kroner’s theory of religious imagination comes to center on the act of response. Kroner divides imagination into three modes: the reproductive imagination (the instrument of memory), the productive imagination (the instrument of artistic creation), and the “responsive imagination.” The last of these, he explains, arises in response to “the call” of a task.⁸⁴ Religious imagination is a form of “responsive imagination.” It responds to the call of an “ultimate task”—the solution to the antinomies at the core of experience.⁸⁵ Specified further to the biblical imagination, the heart receives this “call” as the Word of God, which is spoken through the image of cross and resurrection. Faith, then, pivots upon this openness to the call of another. Here again we can recognize a “right-hemisphere” quality of faith. McGilchrist describes the affective and intuitive right hemisphere as the seat of our “longing towards something, something that lies beyond itself, towards the Other.”⁸⁶ The right hemisphere grounds our capacity for relationships of “betweenness” or “togetherness.” By contrast, the left hemisphere inclines toward a posture of solipsistic self-enclosure. McGilchrist appeals to Heidegger’s notion of *Ent-sprechen* to characterize this open disposition. *Ent-sprechen*, for Heidegger, as George Steiner explains, is “‘a response to,’ a ‘correspondence

⁷⁹ Ibid., 137.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 140. See n. 75 above.

⁸¹ Richard Kroner, *Speculation and Revelation in Modern Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961) 105.

⁸² Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 217.

⁸³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (edition Brunschvicg; Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1976); qtd. and trans. in McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 354.

⁸⁴ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 201.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 171.

with, ' a dynamic reciprocity and matching such as occur when gears, both in quick motion, mesh."⁸⁷ Kroner finds such a responsive correspondence—or, as he prefers, “coordination”—at the heart of faith. God’s law of love “coordinates” the self to God. It thus “opens up an entirely new level of life on which the moral categories are replaced by a transmoral, because transrational, co-ordination of the polarities within the ego and between self and self.”⁸⁸ Faith, then, is the human self’s way of responding to God, oneself, and other selves in a reconciling way, establishing a new kind of “betweenness” amid the human and divine. In other words, another mode of fellowship or comm-union.

Last, while this response involves the active use of the human imagination, there is, for Kroner, an even deeper passivity within the imaginative activity of faith. In being overwhelmed by God’s love, the deepest movement of the heart in faith is one of surrender. “Is not such surrender the very substance of faith? It is.” The possibility of surrender, Kroner continues, “presupposes that man is free to surrender.”⁸⁹ The self cannot take for granted this freedom for surrender; the self’s desire to preserve its sovereignty holds the will back. The bondage of the will—which, for Kroner, is ultimately the self’s inability to surrender in love—brings us back to the problem of reason and logic, so far as logic, for Kroner, is “the mode in which the self tries to defend itself against the danger of being lacerated and given over to the manifold.” Through logic, “the ego asserts itself; it expresses its sovereignty in thought.”⁹⁰ Logic, when misapplied to faith, is among the self’s means of guarding against its deeper freedom, the freedom of surrender. McGilchrist describes the linear and logical left hemisphere in similar terms, associating cognition in the left hemisphere with control, epistemic certitude, and nonpassivity.⁹¹ By contrast, the right hemisphere disposes the mind to an “open receptiveness” and “a wise passivity that enables things to come about less by what is done than by what is not done, that opens up possibility.”⁹² For Kroner, this disposition of receptiveness and passivity is basic to faith.

In sum, these confluences point to an understanding of faith as an act deeply rooted in imagination, and, in turn, an understanding of the imagination as a complex faculty of mind grounded in those “right-hemisphere” capacities of feeling, response, and receptiveness. They suggest that Kroner is right to be wary of philosophical attempts to recompute the truth of faith according to the laws of logic. In short, what faith knows in its “right-hemisphere” way—affectively, intuitively, on the order of the whole—cannot be comprehended in a primarily

⁸⁷ George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (New York: Viking, 1978) 29; qtd. in McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 152.

⁸⁸ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 223.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹¹ McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 174.

⁹² *Ibid.*

“left-hemisphere” way. Kroner took this as a principle of his religious philosophy, upon which he staked the knowledge and assurance of faith.

McGilchrist’s model of cognition also provides a critical perspective on Kroner’s view of faith and reason. As mentioned, while McGilchrist recognizes real differences between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, he does not endorse a simple binarism. In actual brain functioning, both hemispheres light up together. The right hemisphere needs the left, McGilchrist explains, for “distance and structure” and “to unpack experience.”⁹³ In other words, the holistic perception of the right hemisphere needs the piece-by-piece sequential analysis of the left. McGilchrist recognizes imagination as one of the strongest examples of this kind of “interhemispheric cooperation”: “It is the faculty of imagination . . . which comes into being between the two hemispheres, which enables us to take things back from the world of the left hemisphere and make them live again in the right.”⁹⁴ The recovery of imagination, then, is a path toward restoring the right hemisphere to its place of primacy, to its role as “master.” Yet, imagination itself is not an exclusively right-hemisphere operation. Imagination involves the left hemisphere in conjunction with the right. Imagination describes a process in which what the right hemisphere apprehends is creatively “unfolded” by the left—through the kind of distanced cognition that is supported by language—then “returned” and “reintegrated” to the right hemisphere world.⁹⁵ At the very least, the left hemisphere is needed to bring to speech what the imagination apprehends in a “right-hemisphere” way, to render its knowledge communicable.

Indeed, it may be that language processing is necessary for understanding as such. Kroner claims that the “imaginative knowledge” of faith is “ineffable and inexpressible,” suggesting that it takes shape in a nonlinguistic manner. This is a difficult thesis to defend. It is challenged by much late-modern philosophy that has stressed the primacy of language in all thought and cognition. McGilchrist, for his part, believes that many mental processes that constitute “thought” are carried out pre-linguistically.⁹⁶ However, he suggests that higher-level cognitive faculties, such as imagination, require language. In short, Kroner’s view of reason and imagination could do with more of the “right-left” mutuality present in McGilchrist’s theory of cognition. Insight without analysis is indistinct. Pictures without language are mute.

Kroner’s way of opposing imagination to logic, feeling to reason, leads him to reckless excoriations of a number of theologians more favorably disposed toward reason. For instance, of Thomas Aquinas, Kroner howls: “How could he have so profoundly deceived himself? . . . It is appalling to see how deeply he was taken in by his master Aristotle, who completely distrained his intellect.”⁹⁷ Even the most

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 199.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 216.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 107–13.

⁹⁷ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 266.

anti-philosophical of theologians are taken to task. For instance, Barth is said to operate in “a strange twilight between the consciousness of mystery and the ardor for lighting it up by means of systematization. . . . [He] is trapped by his own logic, which is the logic of thought and not of faith.”⁹⁸ These rebukes of overly “rational” theologies ring rather hollow in light of the fact that Kroner himself cannot help but *think* through the content of faith. There is clearly a “logic” at work in his system, a logic which presumes that the antinomies of experience must be resolved into a state of unity or noncontradiction. Kroner stresses that this resolution is imaginative and not conceptual in nature, such that the logic of faith can never be “the logic of thought.” This is Kroner’s anti-Hegelian credo. However, even Hegel acknowledges that reason can work *through* imagination. For Hegel, reason is the act of Spirit comprehending opposites. Imagination shows great aptitude in this regard; hence, the privileged, if penultimate, position of religious imagination in Hegel’s system. In the final analysis, religious imagination performs something of this “rational” function of comprehending opposites in Kroner’s system, too. In this light, Kroner would have done well to give more consideration to the Yale philosopher John E. Smith, who, in reply to a talk given by Kroner around the time of *Culture and Faith*, stated that he would prefer “to see [Kroner’s] theory of imagination developed with imagination taken as a form of reason.”⁹⁹

To put it plainly: recognizing the primacy of imagination in the ways and workings of faith need not rule out the involvement of reason. Kroner’s philosophical passions blinded him to this possibility. His philosophy of faith, however, stands on firmer ground so far as it simply underscores the imagination’s primacy in the cognitive workings of faith. Any attempt to comprehend the content of faith in a hypercognitive, primarily “left-hemisphere” way is bound to falsify what faith knows through feeling and imaginative perception. Smith’s objection, then, might be better phrased the other way around, as a preference to take reason as a form of imagination.

■ The Image, the Whole Image, and the Language of Theology

What would espousing Kroner’s imaginative doctrine of faith mean for the work of theology? Kroner gives only vague indications. In *Culture and Faith*, he rules out the methods of “dogmatics” and “philosophical theology,” linking Barth with

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 264–65. One might think that if Barth does not escape censure, then Tillich—the self-declared “philosophical” theologian—would surely raise Kroner’s hackles. Yet, Kroner never voiced any criticism of his friend, publicly or privately. Perhaps even fair-minded critique seemed out of place when directed toward the man to whom Kroner once wrote: “I consider it a great happiness and a gift given to me by providence to have met you. What grew out of this meeting is immeasurable; it not only decisively determined the direction of my thinking, but also had consequences for my soul’s bliss; it ‘saved’ me not only in a worldly but also in a spiritual sense.” With such a friend, there may be no room for faultfinding. Richard Kroner to Paul Tillich, 4 July 1961; reproduced in Christophersen and Graf, “Selbstbehauptung des Geistes,” 323–24.

⁹⁹ Kroner, “On the Religious Imagination,” 597.

the former and implying Tillich by the latter.¹⁰⁰ Both approaches rely too heavily on “logical thinking.” Kroner gestures toward two avenues that remain open to the theologian. There is the method of “theological philosophy,” which Kroner himself begins to enact in the final pages of the book. Such an approach has the task of interpreting experience in light of biblical images. Kroner gives one example: “the duality of world and ego might be interpreted in the light of faith as the outcome of man’s . . . banishment from paradise.”¹⁰¹ It follows that any experience of self and world’s reconciliation could be interpreted as an outcome of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. “Theological philosophy” done in this mode, Kroner specifies, would have to be “as imaginative as is the content of faith.”¹⁰² Second, Kroner points to “sacred theology,” which he tasks with the “mysterious interpretation” of the imaginative content of faith.¹⁰³ Seemingly, this approach is not concerned with the interpretation of experience, but with the “inner” mystery of biblical images themselves. This approach must foreswear “intellectual understanding” even more assiduously, because “in Scripture the content of faith has a definitely nonintellectualistic form. . . . Spiritual imagination alone does justice to the mystical roots and meaning of every word used in Scripture . . . whereas intellectual statements are inadequate for this purpose.”¹⁰⁴ Neither of these gestures amount to a comprehensive, or even coherent, vision for theology. However, both require that theology take a more imaginative form in order to match the imaginative form of faith and revelation. In what remains, I consider two possible responses to these provocative, if rather underdeveloped, gestures toward a more imaginative form of theology. More specifically, I focus on implications for theological language.

One might respond that Kroner has misrepresented the opposition. Are Barth and Tillich really so unimaginative, so hamstrung by logic? It would seem that the second edition of Barth’s *Römerbrief* is a paramount example of an imaginative work of theology; and the *Church Dogmatics* are perhaps not so unimaginative as Kroner supposes (famously, Hans urs von Balthasar found reading Barth’s great work akin to hearing Mozart played).¹⁰⁵ Tillich, for his part, does not hesitate to avail himself of philosophical concepts. However, his philosophical theology nonetheless aims to express the truth of faith imaginatively. Tillich himself states that the unconditioned can only be brought to speech through symbols. The theologian does not aim at Hegel’s Concept but at “the ultimate, highest *symbol* of the unconditioned.”¹⁰⁶ Tillich’s theologian, then, never takes leave of the imaginative-symbolic realm for the purely conceptual.

¹⁰⁰ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 264–65, 271.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁰⁵ Hans urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1971) 24.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Tillich, *The System of the Sciences according to Objects and Methods* (trans. Paul Wiebe;

Yet, it is precisely the symbolic imagination that Kroner objects to. In *Culture and Faith* Kroner states a strong preference for the terminology of the “image” over the “symbol” when speaking of religious imagination. Examining this distinction in detail will provide a clearer sense of Kroner’s vision for theology. Kroner holds that “a symbol represents something that is known directly in an unsymbolical way, e.g., t in physical equations symbolizes the time of natural processes,” while “the religious image . . . is the only form in which we know and can know what is imaged,” such that any “merely intellectual or speculative definition, e.g., of ‘creation’ or ‘resurrection,’ can only circumscribe certain aspects and fragmentary connotations of the imaginative word but can never exhaust its content and may often falsify it.”¹⁰⁷

Kroner’s concern is that framing religious imagination symbolically will invite the kind of speculative translation he wishes to forestall. If “symbol” is taken to mean a mere stand-in for a concept, then this concern is warranted. It is difficult not to read Kroner’s rejection of symbol-talk as a tacit rebuke of Tillich’s celebrated theory of the “religious symbol.” Tillich, however, does not conceive the religious symbol as a mere stand-in for a concept. That would be what Tillich calls a “sign.” In contrast to a sign, Tillich states, a symbol is necessary to the cognition of what is symbolized. Thus, “in no other way can faith express itself adequately. The language of faith is the language of symbols.”¹⁰⁸

However, even if distinguished from a sign, Kroner would find the language of “religious symbol” inadequate. He explains further: “A symbol does not resemble the thing symbolized, e.g., . . . the American flag [does not] resemble the United States, whereas images like ‘creation’ and ‘resurrection’ do resemble what is imaged in them, as do metaphors or figures of speech in poetry.”¹⁰⁹ This distinction may recall C. S. Peirce’s distinction between symbol and “icon.” Both Kroner and Peirce use “symbol” to indicate an arbitrary relationship between sign and referent and “image” or “icon” to indicate a relationship of resemblance. However, what Kroner means by “image” is something different than what Peirce means by icon. For Peirce, “icon” indicates a relationship in which both sides are antecedently identifiable. What an airplane is can be known apart from the icon of an airplane. Indeed, the icon presumes that the viewer can readily identify what it depicts, otherwise it would fail to signify. For Kroner, however, the “resemblance” function of the image does more than signify; it discloses its referent. This is evident in Kroner’s identification of the parable as the quintessential example of imagistic “resemblance” in action: “the parables of Christ are the classical illustration of how spiritual imagination operates.”¹¹⁰ The parables of Jesus do not simply re-present

Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981) 186 (italics added).

¹⁰⁷ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 252 n. 9.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, in *Main Works/Hauptwerke* (ed. Carl Heinz Ratschow; 6 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter 1987–1998) 5:252.

¹⁰⁹ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 252 n. 9.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

an already perceptible reality. They illuminate an otherwise imperceptible one. They make the Kingdom perceptible by showing what it is like, what it resembles. Thus, “all religious insight or ‘knowledge’ is parabolical.”¹¹¹ The Bible as a whole is an image in this “parabolical” sense, a disclosive representation of an otherwise imperceptible reality.

Notably, Kroner’s references to parables, metaphors, and figures of speech indicate that visuality is not essential to his notion of the “image.” Indeed, all of Kroner’s examples of “religious images” are verbal or literary figures. Rather, what makes an image an image, for Kroner, is its structural wholeness as a representational figure.¹¹² We recall that for Kroner, the cognition of faith happens as a whole. This cognitive holism corresponds to the idea that the figures of religious imagination must be treated as self-interpreting wholes. This is how Kroner treats the artistic image, as an imaginative whole in which “form orders its own content.”¹¹³ Kroner even implies that the inspired religious image is the perfection of the artistic image. God, for Kroner, may aptly be compared to an artist. God is “the model and the greatest of all artists” so far as God is able to “close the gap” that renders every human work of art insufficient to life, that is, “the gap between the image-world of [the artist’s] work and actual life.”¹¹⁴ In closing this gap, the religious image becomes perfectly whole, encircling the whole of lived reality.

In its holism, Kroner’s “religious image” is comparable to what Susanne Langer would call a “presentational symbol”—a symbol whose elements take their meaning “from their functions in the perceptual whole.”¹¹⁵ In describing how such a symbol works, Langer cites Wittgenstein: “The whole, like a living picture, presents the atomic fact.”¹¹⁶ A parable, for Kroner, is the best example of such a living picture or “presentational symbol.” It is an image that reframes and re-presents reality as whole. A symbol, even when distinguished from a sign, does not possess this holistic structure. Tillich acknowledges this. “Symbols have one characteristic in common with signs,” he writes. “They point beyond themselves to something

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² It is true that a visual image seems to possess this structural wholeness more intensely than, say, a poem or a narrative. The visual image seems to present itself to the eye as a whole, all at once and in a moment; a poem or a narrative, by contrast, constructs its whole sequentially, piece by piece and over time. Such, at least, is the much-contested thesis of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s “Laocoön.” McGilchrist supports this distinction: “One of the more durable generalisations about the hemispheres has been the finding that the left hemisphere tends to deal more with pieces of information in isolation, and the right hemisphere with the entity as a whole, the so-called *Gestalt*—possibly underlying and helping to explain the apparent verbal/visual dichotomy [between the hemispheres], since words are processed serially, while pictures are taken in all at once” (McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 4).

¹¹³ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 118

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 212.

¹¹⁵ Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967) 84.

¹¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, qtd. by Susanne K. Langer in *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942) 63.

else.”¹¹⁷ In pointing away from themselves, symbols attest their own incompleteness or nontotality. Thus, for Tillich, there is no symbol that can wholly express the ultimate or unconditioned. The only symbol that comes close is the cross, but this is only because the cross “implies an element of self-negation,” which epitomizes the principle that no symbol is wholly adequate to the unconditioned.¹¹⁸ For Kroner, by contrast, cross and resurrection image their object in a comprehensive, “all-embracing” way. In faith, the contents of reality are reordered to the imaginative whole of the image, in toto.

An early reviewer of *Culture and Faith* wished that the author “had grappled more explicitly, though he certainly does by implication, with his divergences from such a theologian as Paul Tillich. One gets the impression that his criticisms would be both philosophical and theological, and sharp in both cases.”¹¹⁹ One way to capture their divergence is to say that Tillich is a symbol-thinker, while Kroner is an image-thinker.¹²⁰ The difference embodies a paradox inherent to the romantic discourse of the symbol. As Nicholas Halmi astutely observes: “On the one hand the [romantic] symbol was supposed to be the point of contact between the contingent and the absolute, the finite and the infinite. . . . On the other hand it was supposed to refer to nothing but itself, so that image and idea were inherently and inseparably connected in it.”¹²¹ Kroner peers ever deeper into the self-showing image of faith. Tillich looks toward the symbol’s border with what lies beyond.

The consequences of this divergence for theological language are significant. In conceiving the religious imagination symbolically, Tillich allows theological language more leeway to “point away” from the religious symbol toward suggestive concepts. Thus, while Tillich never strives for purely conceptual understanding, there exists a deep synthesis of symbolic-theological language and conceptual-metaphysical language in his systematics; for example, “God would not be God if he were not the creative ground of everything that has being . . . the infinite and unconditional power of being or, in the most radical abstraction . . . being itself.”¹²² Kroner, the image-thinker, allows himself no such radical abstractions. For him, as we have seen, such philosophical abstractions are “highly objectionable, if not entirely devoid of meaning” within the realm of faith. In short, for Tillich, the theologian is free to straddle the symbol’s boundary with the abstract and conceptual. For Kroner, the theologian must stand entirely within the image of

¹¹⁷ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, in *Main Works/Hauptwerke* (ed. Ratschow), 5:250.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:276.

¹¹⁹ John E. Burkhart, review of *Culture and Faith* by Richard Kroner in *The Christian Scholar* 38 (1955) 72.

¹²⁰ Significantly, Tillich occasionally slips in pictorial idiom, especially when discussing the symbol of Christ as an all-pervading element of religious consciousness. See Anne Marie Reijnen’s discussion of Tillich’s “picture-talk” in “Tillich’s Christology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (ed. Russell Re Manning; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 66–68.

¹²¹ Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 2.

¹²² Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963) 2:7.

faith. Kroner allows that theology can never fully escape the “tension” between “rational and imaginative thought.”¹²³ The image of faith, he writes, “is a living entity like all images of our mind, ever changing, sometimes clearer, sometimes duller, now approaching the level of distinct thought, now returning to the darker but more vigorous actuality of imagination.”¹²⁴ The theologian risks speech within this zone, between conceptual clarity and imaginative darkness. Strictly speaking, however, the image only makes sense on its own terms; it shows its content only through its own form.

It would follow that Kroner’s model theologian has the task of re-illuminating or revivifying the form of the revelatory image first glimpsed in Scripture. The theologian is to use language imagistically in an attempt to re-depict or re-portray what the Bible first makes visible to the heart. How such a theology would be written is another question—perhaps as a poetic commentary on Scripture, or a biblically framed, poetic response to the “book of experience,” to recall Bernard of Clairvaux’s terminology.

This leads to a second possible response to Kroner’s vision for theology. One might take Kroner’s philosophy of faith as an invitation to liberate theological language from conceptual precision and plunge it into the imaginative darkness of poetic forms. Something of this attitude is present in the work of John Caputo, whose agenda for what he calls “weak theology” is served by a loose method dubbed “theopoetics.” Like Kroner, Caputo is something of a Hegelian convert to faith. His “weak theology” aims to bring low the “high and mighty” God of classical theology. Caputo names Hegel as a progenitor of “weak theology,” so far as Hegel brought the divine down to earth, involving God’s being with the processes of becoming. Caputo also extols Hegel’s way of reconceiving revelation as *Vorstellung*, which Caputo defines as “a richly imaginative and suggestive figuration of spirit.”¹²⁵ However, like Kroner, Caputo balks at Hegel’s subsumption of *Vorstellung* into the Concept. “Hegel is right to say that religion is a way we have been given to imagine the unconditional.” However, Caputo wants “no commerce with the next step he took, what he called the Concept, the Absolute Knowledge of the Absolute Spirit, thought thinking itself. That’s the DUI.”¹²⁶ For Caputo, “the *Vorstellung* goes all the way down.”¹²⁷ Kroner would wholeheartedly agree.

What is the theologian to do, then, if not refine concepts? The point of theology, for Caputo, is not “to figure out God” but to “figure forth the event harbored in the name of God.”¹²⁸ The theologian’s means of doing so are “metaphors, metonyms,

¹²³ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 270.

¹²⁴ Kroner, *Religious Function*, 13.

¹²⁵ John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2016) 102.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

narratives, allegories, songs, poems, and parables.”¹²⁹ These are the figures available to what Caputo calls “theopoetics,” that is, “a figurative means to express what is happening to us under the name of God.”¹³⁰ Caputo regards the creations of religious imagination, including Scripture, as “first order theopoetics,” responses to the event that happens “under the name of God.”¹³¹ Theology, in turn, is “the second order articulation of theopoetics, which faithfully observes its theopoetic form and avoids going higher, ever mindful of the warning of Daedalus.”¹³² Kroner’s rough vision for theology corresponds with this vision for theology as a second-order discourse that responds poetically to first-order expressions of religious imagination, principally the imaginative content of the Gospels, while self-consciously avoiding conceptual exactness.

Kroner and Caputo further converge in tethering this more poetic mode of theological speech to feeling and affect. For Caputo, the yearnings of the heart are embedded in the linguistic systems into which we are thrown. Our language, Caputo writes, carries “deposits” of goodness, truth, beauty, and wisdom (*sophia*); these deposits “are both promises and memories of things in which our desire, or what Augustine called the restlessness of our hearts, are concentrated.”¹³³ It follows that theology, for Caputo, must employ human language poetically in continuing to promise and remember those things after which the human heart yearns. For Kroner, too, it is because theology addresses the heart more than the head that its language must be imaginative: “For our real life is not intellectual only; it is the life of our heart and our will as well. And the language of our heart and our will is the language of imagination, as every preacher and every orator knows.”¹³⁴ If theology wishes to speak of real life, the life of the heart, it must speak the language of imagination.

And so, Kroner and Caputo can travel rather far together. If Kroner were transposed into the contemporary moment, he might well be a partner in theopoetics. Theopoetics, however, brings the theologian to an impasse. What is this more poetic mode of theology to do for heart? How does it serve the heart’s way of understanding? For Caputo, it seems, theology serves the heart by keeping it restless. “We are the restless ones,” Caputo writes, “the ones whose hearts are restless, *inquietum est cor nostrum*, as Augustine said.”¹³⁵ Faith is something that “spooks our lives, that makes our hearts restless, as a 24/7 alert, an un-Sabbath that gives us no rest and peace.”¹³⁶ This restlessness keeps the heart yearning and striving for those deposits of goodness, truth, and justice. Kroner, by contrast, allows the

¹²⁹ Ibid., 94.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 95.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 84.

¹³⁴ Kroner, *Religious Function*, 8.

¹³⁵ Caputo, *Folly of God*, 34.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 105.

heart to rest. He, too, invokes Augustine. Unlike Caputo, however, he does not omit the *donec requiescat in te*. “Faith . . . stretches out toward the infinite, and there it rests: ‘Restless is our heart, until it rests, O God, in Thee.’”¹³⁷ By using language imaginatively, Kroner suggests, theology may serve to communicate the wholeness of the Bible’s image to the human heart, helping to put to rest the anxious yearning that culture cannot relieve.

This contrast between rest and restlessness bears out hermeneutically. For Caputo, the second-order interpretation of first-order religious images (e.g., the interpretation of Scripture) must proceed in ceaseless unease, never claiming an assurance of understanding. “Theopoetics” thus embraces a “radical hermeneutics,” which favors “the unassimilable fragment, the remains, the leftover that cannot be *relevé* . . . something that cannot be consumed and incorporated into the Hegelian ‘dialectic.’”¹³⁸ For Kroner, while the truth of faith remains “mystical and mysterious, ineffable and inexpressible,”¹³⁹ the subject of faith nonetheless rests assured of its meaning, the heart having seen what the tongue cannot tell, at least not in plain or propositional language. Caputo’s is a theo-poetics of the fragmented and unsure, Kroner’s a theo-poetics of the whole and assured.

There is a dialectical rejoinder to this divergence. Must it be one or the other? Rest or restlessness? The whole or the fragment?¹⁴⁰ We have seen Kroner defer to the wisdom of the preacher, who knows that “the language of our heart and our will is the language of imagination.” Preachers also know, with the preacher of Ecclesiastes, that there is a time for tearing down and for building up, for killing and for healing. A sermon may unsettle or soothe the heart. So too may a theology. Barth’s *Römerbrief* kills and makes restless; Barth’s *Dogmatics* heals and gives rest. It may be that the theologian, like the preacher, must read the signs of the times (or the “antinomies” of the moment) and risk speech accordingly, toward the breaking or the healing of hearts. That said, it would seem that the biblical imagination accents images of wholeness: the “kiss” of peace and justice (Ps 85 NRSV); the holy mountain where the wolf shall live with the lamb (Isa 11); the resurrected body speaking, “Peace be with you” (Luke 24: 31, 36). These are images of peace, *eirene*, and wholeness, shalom. What they convey is difficult to conceive; it is a peace “which surpasses all understanding” (Phil 4:7). Caputo must read these images as fragments that haunt the soul. However, shalom and “peace be with you” are not hauntings (at least, not only). They are also blessings. On Kroner’s vision,

¹³⁷ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 274.

¹³⁸ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000) 269.

¹³⁹ Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, 276.

¹⁴⁰ On the contrasting figures of the whole and the fragment in modern and postmodern religious thought, see David Tracy, “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Time” in idem, *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time; Selected Essays, Vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

tending to these images of wholeness, keeping them vivid and alive, is among the principal tasks of theology.

■ Conclusion

“Much appreciated by those who elected his courses though he never became widely known, adjunct professor Richard Kroner retired in 1952.”¹⁴¹ So Kroner is remembered in Robert Handy’s *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*. Kroner’s voice may not have reached far, but it was not lacking in enthusiasm for its cause. That cause was to champion the religious imagination against all rationalist minimization. In an era when faith is still regularly mistaken for assent without evidence or knowledge without certainty, Kroner’s philosophy of faith is well worth revisiting.

For the theologian who wishes to take Kroner’s cue, however, much remains to be worked out. The theologian must confront a number of hermeneutic and communicative challenges to Kroner’s idea of faith. For Kroner, religious truth is intuited through an image, which he takes to be an “imaginative whole.” This epistemology presumes a strong form of intuitionism. Given this intuitionism, how can the truth of faith be publicly communicated through propositions, belief statements, or (relatively) clear concepts? If this kind of communication is not possible, theology may still proceed as the poetic presentation and exchange of intuitions. Theological dialogue might look something like a poetry reading or a group exhibition of pictures. As intuitions vary across religious communities and traditions, this kind of poetic exchange may enable what Wittgenstein calls an “aspect change” or another way of “seeing as.”¹⁴² However, for all its eye-opening potential, this mode of theological speech would seem to insulate the content of faith from open inquiry and argument. It would lack the discursive to-and-fro that allows claims to be challenged and norms to be interrogated. In this way, theology may become less accountable to its publics and less capable of prophetic and reconciling speech.

Kroner does not provide a reliable model for theological communication. He does, however, provide a striking portrait of faith—as an imaginative and perspicacious faculty of the heart. Martin Luther wrote that the wise “picture nothing else in heart” but “cling to the Word of God.”¹⁴³ Kroner stresses that the Word cannot be clung to except through the images that fill the heart. This was his standard, his flag to fly among the philosophers. It is a flag worth raising once more, and every now and then, whenever faith is tempted to trade the pictures that inspire it for mere concepts, doctrines, or propositions.

¹⁴¹ Robert Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 231.

¹⁴² On “seeing as if” and “seeing as,” see Ward, *Unbelievable*, 46–51.

¹⁴³ Martin Luther, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther* (7 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000) 5:257.