

Imagination in an Age of Crisis

Jason Goroncy and Rod Pattenden (Eds.), *Imagination in an Age of Crisis: Soundings from the Arts and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), ISBN 978-1-6667-0688-8, Paperback, 372 pages.

Since the start of COVID-19 in 2020, we have become accustomed to the familiar “cancelled conference”. These announcements have often been met with disappointment and sorrow. Jason Goroncy and Rod Pattenden took the vision and energy from an arts and theology event to be held in Naarm/Melbourne in July 2020 and transformed it into this exquisite collection of essays, poetry, artworks and reflections. Goroncy, Associate Professor of Theology at the University of Divinity, and Pattenden, Adjunct Fellow with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, gathered an array of voices and artistic genres to create a smorgasbord for the reader. Whether you are seeking scholarly justification for the place of imagination in times of crisis or the solace of a poem which speaks the words you have not yet found, this compilation contains a myriad of offerings.

Although the book has a distinctive Australian flavour, the 35 contributors offer a window into the universal nature of times of crisis. The reader is introduced to a New Zealand artist’s portrayal of two non-violent Maori figures by Scott Kirkland and a few pages later hears Trish Watts reflect on the power of song for children in Cambodia. Jennifer Wakeling presents the power of textless music by French composer Olivier Messiaen before we find ourselves in locked-down Paris in the poetry of Kevin Hart. Turn the page again and the prophetic works of Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, provoke a passionate response in solidarity with those across the world. The global nature of this diverse anthology does not simply represent isolated artistic expressions in distinct locations, but brings them into conversation. Jason Goroncy’s own article examines the scripts of Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett, and how they have inspired Japanese playwrights to address trauma in their own context. Rod Pattenden unearths another dialogue between Australian artist, George Gittoes, and the war-torn countries of the Philippines, the Middle East, Sudan, Cambodia and Ukraine over the last five decades.

The collection has been gathered in such a way that the reader may dip their toe in at any point and find challenge and inspiration. In saying this, I read the book as it is presented and found its careful crafting guides the reader on a significant journey of

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discovery. The introductory essay by Jason Goroncy sets the scene by presenting a convincing argument for the place of imagination and the arts in times of crisis. What follows is a montage of evocative poetry, poignant artworks, insightful essays and personal reflections. Each piece is an invitation to look more deeply, linger a little longer and savour each offering. This is not a book to devour, but invites a more reflective, contemplative reading.

The intended audience of this collection seems as broad as the contributions. While there is plenty for the scholar of public or practical theology to digest, ministry practitioners will also find a wealth of inspiration within this work. The book is not only an exemplar of how the artist is both witness and prophet in times of crisis, it paves the way for new expressions to emerge in the reader. On more than one occasion, while engaging with *Imagination in an Age of Crisis*, I was inspired to take up pen or paint brush to respond to my own experience of the world around me. At the conclusion of other sections I found myself searching the internet for a piece of music or art, each opening a new door into a different world. Through the generous sharing of the contributors, the reader is invited to engage both their head and their heart in responding to this age of crisis.

I was particularly impressed by the significant contribution of Indigenous Australian artists, writers and actors throughout the collection adding a profound depth and sacredness to the experience. The breadth of contributors and genres represented widened my own thinking and challenged me further to explore the use of the arts in my own ministry. My only disappointment with Goroncy and Pattenden's book was the noticeable absence of dance as a significant art form. As I read, I was reminded of memorable dance performances in the wake of Australian bushfires and tragic loss. Perhaps this could be included in the next volume.

Imagination in an Age of Crisis is an invaluable gift to the conversation between arts and theology. I would highly recommend it to anyone involved in the thinking or feeling of what it means to live as people of God in a time of much pain and despair in the world. I know I will be revisiting many of the contributions again to take more time to linger and learn.

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