

Three Types of Medieval Allegory as a Basis of Later Christian Spirituality

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The aim of this article is to outline the three most fundamental types of allegories that offered new and richer interpretations of the Holy Scripture in the Middle Ages and gave birth to new spiritualities and mystical movements. The first type is the universally known *rhetorical allegory* that vastly contributed to an extended understanding of the spiritual possibilities of the Scripture and its interpretation in contrast to its literal exegesis. The second allegory known as *integumentum* is rooted in a pagan tradition and myths, and its exegesis of the world combined easily with the Christian message, which led to a very innovative spiritual view of the world. The third allegory is *tropological* and concerns the idea of imitating Christ and consisted mainly of a spiritual way. It is interesting that all three types of allegory have a common initial inspiration – the work of Aurelius Augustinus. The aim of this article is to introduce and compare these three allegories and interconnect them with the respective medieval Christian spiritual traditions.



About the author

Prof. PhDr. Rastislav Nemeč, PhD., serves as a Professor of Systematic Philosophy and a Vice-Dean at the Faculty of Theology, Trnava University. His professional interests include medieval philosophy of language (Buridan, Wodeham, Ockham) and medieval political theories (Marsilius of Padua, Ockham). He has co-edited several translations of medieval Latin texts and authored monographs on the late Middle Ages. His email contact is rastislav.nemec@truni.sk.

1 Introduction

The history of mankind could simply be called the history of the battle between text and image. By this we mean neither the ancient apprehension of scripture expressed by Plato that can be found in *Phaedrus* (1951, 157), where Plato develops the thesis that scripture (text) kills our memory, nor the culture of image promoted by the contemporary digital era, which pushes the phenomenon of the printed book aside. When we talk about the battle between text and image, we have in mind a wider horizon: the ceaseless battle of attraction of the concrete and validity of the universal, the intensity of image and the abstraction of scripture. Their duel reminds us of the mythological couple Hermes and Hestia. Hermes – a god reaping the full benefits of life and space, and Hestia – a goddess of the family hearth, symbolizing reliability and devotion, represent two symbols of every reading (Vernant 2006, 10). There is closeness and intimacy on the one hand and strangeness and remoteness on the other. Comprehension and incomprehension – these two basic points of departure guide our reading. Because the less we understand the text, the more we are drawn to read it.

1.1 Three Fundamental Types of Allegory

This study is focused on medieval reading associated with the interpretation of allegory as a basis of spirituality (Lat. *sensus spiritualis*). Regarding this topic, I would primarily like to touch on the term allegory [1], which was granted quite a generous space in the Middle Ages and stood at the birth of new spiritual schools. We should especially direct our attention to the three fundamental types of allegory used most frequently in the Middle Ages. The first type is understood *rhetorically*, and it was developed in antiquity in relation to the Stoics. Rhetoric used it with the aim of *persuasion* (Lat. *ars persuandi*) as well as the aim of leading the listener toward thinking and transformation. The second type of allegory is *integumental allegory*, which is a specific kind of allegory used mostly by the authors from monastic schools (e.g., from Chartres). They used ancient, even pagan legend and myth, seen as a preimage of the Christian message. And finally, let us shed some light on the third type of allegory – the *tropological or moral allegory* – experiencing its rise in the works of authors of the 13th century, who wanted to lead man towards inner reflection and *imitation of Christ* (Lat. *imitatio*). We will illustrate each of these types of allegory in relation to a specific author to make our reflections more concrete and to provide a proper explanation.

1.2 Allegory as an Instrument of the New Interpretation

It is necessary to underline that allegory was also a vastly used instrument in the past. It was implemented mostly when some important message from the past had to be understood anew during a certain essential event (Detel 2011, 52), for example, during the transition from the most ancient to late antiquity, from Judaism to Christianity, or from antiquity to the Middle Ages. This was also the case of Homer, whose authority declined after the arrival of the first natural philosophers (Thales and others, 6th century BC), because his work described a mythic pantheon of gods. Natural philosophers did not consider the explanation of the world's origin based on its creation by several gods as reasonable, as they were looking for a “single” cause. Suddenly, the authority of Homer started to lack credibility, so authors like Metrodoros of Lampsacus (6th century BC) decided to explain this Homeric pantheon (mainly the part about the Trojan war) in an allegorical way. They began to interpret deities as fundamental natural forces: Achilles was a symbol of the Sun, Hector of the Moon, Helen of the Earth, Paris of the air; Agamemnon was seen as the Aether, Troy as the city of the gods – was perceived as a human body with various functions. In this way Metrodoros allegorically confirms the credibility of the epics written by Homer that were threatened by the arrival of first critically thinking natural philosophers.

2 First Sources of Allegory – Rhetorical Allegory

2.1 Augustine's Contribution to Allegory

The problem of reading and its methods in the Middle Ages has its primary roots in ancient times and the opus of Aurelius Augustinus (†430). Augustine's treatise *De doctrina christiana* represents the first manual for reading and interpretation in the history of Christianity and had a huge impact on the approach of medieval scholars. On the one hand, it brought the fundamental *truths of the faith* (Lat. *regula fidei*), and on the other it offered a certain kind of repertoire of rules for interpreting the Holy Scripture (Augustine 2014, 185). Augustine enriches this issue with traditional knowledge of Cicero's and Quintilian's rhetoric, and for this reason his works cannot be separated from the foundation and applied rules of rhetoric (Lichner 2014, 139).

Quintilian – just like Augustine later – understands allegory rhetorically as a term whose meaning is different than its spoken expression: “*aliud dicit, aliud sentit*”. He understands it as an instrument that resists strict systematization and precision of the language. Augustine explains and defines it similarly when he speaks about signs [2] as the means of human communication. Augustine discerns *natural* (Lat. *naturalia*) and *agreed signs* (Lat. *placita*). He understands agreed signs to be those with one meaning or those with several meanings. He differentiates them because some signs are of human and others of divine origin. Those of divine origin have a clear

meaning (smoke as a sign of fire, etc.), while agreed signs, which include spoken and written words, can have various meanings. Thus, Augustine distinguishes between *proper* (Lat. *propria*) and *figurative signs* (Lat. *translata*), with allegory belonging to the group of metaphoric signs.

According to Augustine, allegory enriches speech, preventing it from being “dull”. It also indicates *another*, spiritual meaning (from original Greek *allé* – “*alius*”) that does not result from the metaphoric meaning of words. From the epoch of the Greek Stoics, it was the privilege of philosophers to understand allegory and know how to interpret it. In the epoch of Augustine this is the privilege of rhetors. *Other readers* (Lat. *incognizant*) were not able to unveil the secrets hidden by means of allegory (Lichner 2020, 108).

2.2 Reading as Allegory of the Canons of St. Victor

Spirituality linked to this rhetorical, allegorical motif of Aurelius Augustine was represented by the canonical school of St. Victor. According to some authors (Illich 1993, 20), this school was seen as a source of a great intellectual revolution based on diligent study. It is represented mainly by Master Hugh (†1141), its spiritual father and teacher, who introduced interesting incitements associated with reading. This idea can also be found in the agenda of other authors of this school – Richard or Andrew of St. Victor (Walker Bynum 1973, 4–5).

This school unambiguously develops Augustine's discernment of signs into *proper* (*unambiguous*) and *figurative* (*ambiguous*), moving spiritual signs from the level of rhetoric to the level of reading. Similarly to Aurelius Augustine, who used signs for the better identification of meaning in rhetoric, Hugh uses them in his *opera* as a journey towards more diligent searching and the finding of wisdom through reading.

He believes that reading is “*the pursuit of wisdom*” (Hugh of St. Victor 2012, 84). A good student “*listens to everyone with pleasure, reads everything, does not despise any document, any person, any doctrine... because there is no text that would not bring pleasure if it is read at the right time and in the right way*” (Hugh of St. Victor 2012, 128). He describes reading as an unobstructed journey across a country. It is a wandering from page to page, and each of them is different. During the journey across the country one gets to know new horizons and it is the same with reading – every page unveils new continents. Hugh interprets this theory based on etymology. He is convinced that the meaning of the Latin word *pagina*, “page”, is also related to *line* (Lat. *pagus*), and the roots of a vine are implanted in those lines. He believed that *reading* (Lat. *legere*) is derived from the Latin word *lignum* – “wood” that is usually picked up in the forest to build a fire – and that read-

ing can also be interpreted as a picking – looking for wood to build the fire, picking the letters and sounds that create words where wisdom is hidden. In this sense it is like work in a vineyard to which God invites the laborers (Mt 20:4).

On the other hand, there is also passivity, divine *otium* (Lat. “the opposite of action”). It is a journey towards light that flashes through the pages of the book (Illich 1993, 54). Hugh advises the reader to expose himself to the light shining from the lines of the book and to let its light shape him. By reading he means particularly silent reading that was rather rare. Scriptorium from the era of Hugh of St. Victor was noisy, and transcriptions were associated with reading out loud. Both Hugh and Richard, however, associate the act of reading with silent, attentive focus on something that represents a subject of meditation (Dillard 2014, 205).

Therefore, reading is the beginning of *meditation* – a deep reflection (McWhorter 2012, 112). In meditation, the collected fruits are assorted, and the mind starts to focus on the essential. Meditation is followed by *contemplation*, where the whole spiritual act concludes. The result of contemplation is described by Hugh and Richard as a *sweetness for the soul*. Reading allows us to pick the sweetest fruits and taste their sweetness in contemplation. For Hugh, study and contemplation are something similar – the collecting and interpreting of signs and the tasting of Wisdom.

The particularity of this approach, from reading to contemplation, is special exactly for the school of St. Victor, which was inspired by St. Augustine. This spirituality indefinitely influenced the *lectio divina* (Lat. “divine reading”), which has been used in the Church ever since.

3.3 The Integumentum Accentuates the Dignity of Man

This allegory is called *integumentum* – “masking, obscuring” [3]. It finds its culmination in antiquity with Alain de Lille, Abelard and Bernardus Silvestris. This is an allegory that uses the *motifs of ancient fable*. It is a method of interpretation in which the true intention hides behind a mythical fable. The term comes from the Roman poetry of Virgil and Cicero (*De oratore* I, 161), where it was synonymous with *ambiguity, darkness* – Lat. *obscuritas*. The narrated event coming from antiquity conceals a different meaning, which the author in antiquity indicated allegorically. Bernardus Silvestris – like Abelard – also believes that these pagan myths and their pagan author were inspired by God’s divine providence and they, too, bring a message of truth that is valuable for believers (Karfíková 2005, 122).

If allegory in Augustine hides its true meaning and indicates it only indirectly, the *integumentum* in these authors ultimately has several levels of indirect signifying, i.e., several levels of concealment.

3.4 The Integumental Allegory – St. Francis’s Spirituality of Creature

According to Hans Blumenberg, a new asymmetry arises in this period of this allegory – the reader no longer needs to be a scholar, as was the case with the first Augustinian allegory (Blumenberg 1984, 83). Instead, the reader may even be illiterate, with the allegory serving less as a source of intellectual understanding than of amazement.

It is of interest that this dimension also contributed to the development of lay spirituality and the emphasizing of lay people – an example of which is St. Francis of Assisi. He even referred to himself as *unstudied* and *ignorant* (Lat. *ignorans et idiota, illiteratus*), although he wrote more works and writings than the erudite St. Dominic. Developing themes about the world was equally close to him. In one letter, Lady Poverty accompanies Francis and points to the world with the words: “*This world is our monastery!*” (*Sacrum Commercium*, chap. 63 in *Francis of Assisi: The Prophet* 2002). In addition, St. Francis, with his sense for the symbolic, also uses pagan rituals as a deep symbolism for conversion.

St. Francis’s spirituality is typically sensual-physical (Rotzetter 1989, 180), penetrated by the delicacy of poetry and a ritualistic attitude underlining the mimetic dimension of its interpretation. Francis understands creation as a universal book that can also be read by illiterates. Every small thing, every being becomes a letter for him, a sign of the deeper testimony of God and a better instrument of knowledge. Creation enables him to understand himself as a sign; that is why he often ritually uses various situations of his life as signs. He saw himself as a sign that unveils/enwraps the message of God.

Such an allegory offers space for the demonstration of the saint’s particular poetic playfulness and creation that is not only a marginal phenomenon but the center of Franciscan spirituality (Rotzetter 1989, 202). In my opinion, the most

interesting expression of this attitude is the event during which he indicates his sinfulness. This was an ancient urban ritual with pagan roots used for the public humiliation of criminals. Francis allowed himself to be exposed in the square in front of the Church of St. Rufino. He started to preach and then he underwent the ceremony of penitence. He allowed himself to be stripped of his clothes and ordered his brothers to tie a rope to his neck and sprinkle him with ashes. *Rope – nudity – ashes – public*: four fundamental elements that help us identify the ancient tradition, pointing to the connection with the pillory of criminals in Assisi, where villains were publicly punished. There is a similarity to another tradition in which the wives of Assisi led their unfaithful husbands by ropes tied to their penises. To Francis, the public aspect of penitence represents a ritual symbology through which the mercy of God is proclaimed (Celano 1:228 in *Francis of Assisi: The Saint* 2002).

The most astonishing drama-sermon occurs when the saint eats the putrid discharge from a leper's diseased hand. Francis sits at the table with the leper and the other brothers, a bowl is placed between the two of them. The leper's fingers are especially putrid and bloody, "so that whenever he put them in the bowl, blood and pus from his fingers dripped into it" (*A Mirror of the Perfection* 303 in *Francis of Assisi: The Prophet* 2002). Of course, this symbolic meal serves as edifying theater rather than a real attempt to get his followers to eat pus. Food is not normally consumed with enemies or outsiders. Meals are a primary symbol of fellowship binding humans together in their need for both food and one another. Sharing a meal is an action that generates acceptance of those present. It unexpectedly yet powerfully illustrates that fellowship must be shared with all of God's creatures (Morrison 2018, 107–108).

In many situations, Francis used a symbolical play (e.g., the cribs of Greccio), scenic plays (singing, lamentation, wailing, his Canticle of the Sun), and biblio-dramatical elements (if brothers touch money, they must smell the barnyard manure for some time).

At the end of his life, Francis even stages his own death according to a script. During his life he instructed his religious brothers on how to prepare him for death, how to arrange his body on the floor, surround him with candles and incense, dress him in a chrisom, then let him lie naked on the *soil* (Lat. *humus*) because this way his *humility* (Lat. *humilitas*) could be expressed in the best way, and let him die like this.

The integumental allegory of Francis ignores differences (secular/sacred, Christian/non-Christian), approaching the world as a fundamental instrument of the glorification of God as can also showcased on an example of interreligious dialogue [4].

4 From Integumental to Tropological Allegory

After this period of the 12th century, allegory significantly recedes, mainly due to the influence of the systematization of university education – *studium generale* – but also as a result of obligatory study of Aristotle and his model of science, which has a strict way of expression and requires a precise logical argumentation.

4.1 A Retreat from Theoretical Commentaries and the Arrival of Practice

According to Beryl Smalley (1984, 266), this period was marked by the end of interest in biblical exegesis. Theological studies focused more on political, ethical, and legal topics due to the historical context of the era (the papal schism and other issues). This tendency to neglect biblical studies was most bravely faced by the Franciscans (e.g., Peter John Olivi or Henry of Ghent). However, their commentaries to the Old and New Testament had a rather small impact (Smalley 1984, 267). Furthermore, according to Christel Meier (1996, 60), the share of moral exegesis increased, which could be seen in an unprecedented growth of the number of moral tutorials (e.g., *Repertorium morale*, *Directorium morale* etc.). This change of perception influences allegory too. While before it was perceived in a close relation with the Scripture and nature, later it was driven towards practice – *what needs to be done* (Lat. *quid faciendum est* – Hugh of St. Cher in Smith 1966, 85).

This transition to practice gives a new content to allegory – which had already been pointed out by St. Augustine – associated with life, practice, moral use. This type of allegory was given the name *tropological*, and it found many supporters mainly within Franciscan spirituality. It is the *moral sense* (Lat. *sensus moralis*), the aim of which is to imitate the model of someone's behavior.

4.2 Tropology as a Basis of Mystical and Affective Imitatio

A distinct example of such a tropology is given by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (†1274) and his work *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259), submitted to his brothers as his recipe for the imitation of Christ, as well as a smaller opus *Unus est Magister vester*, where he particularly emphasizes the motive of *imitation of Christ* (Lat. *imitatio*), which is substantiated only within the framework of *assimilation* to the Master (Lat. *assimilatio*). Bonaventure sees the drama of Christ's life as

a symbol of the drama of a man, as an adumbration and model of life, as a prototype presented to a disciple. The disciple (believer) tries to assimilate the Master by living according to his example, by learning to act/live like him and to *feel* (Lat. *affectus*) like him.

Both works of Bonaventure are characterized by dynamic terms: journey, pilgrimage, imitation. They are an infallible sign of the constant process prepared for his brothers in their difficult role. Journey represents the humble looking up of an imperfect human being to his perfect counterpart, symbolically indicated in every single step of this rise and guided and mediated by the light of God. Light is present everywhere as a quiet motive that represents the basis of all our knowledge, and our knowledge of the world and things around us grows hand in hand with the growing intensity of the light. Only through its higher level do we recognize other people as equal beings and ourselves as dignified images of the Supreme. It helps us realize ourselves and something that transcends us.

Bonaventure distinguishes several types of such *enlightenment* (Lat. *speculationes*) and each level is characterized by a specific kind of knowledge. To complete it means to step “inside” God himself. In his work, the author rather often uses the term *speculatio* and the term *speculum* – Lat. “mirror”. The world is a *speculum*, but especially man is a *speculum* (being *imago*). He reflects the universe and all its parts, but he is not similar to them, as he is the *speculum* of the Supreme. However, the term is also related to another aspect: man gets to know things in a deeper way (Lat. *speculari*). According to Bonaventure, the world surrounding us hides many symbols for our lives that speak to us and reflect a certain kind of truth (Lat. *speculum*). Thanks to our ability to see and the light (Lat. *speculatio*) we can define and realize it (Lat. *speculari*), as well as to reflect on it (Lat. *reflectere* – literally “reflect the light”).

4.3 Speculatio as an Allegory of Seeing in English Affective Mysticism

The root of this word also indicates another relation, thanks to the word *spicere* – Lat. to “see” or “observe”. It reveals that we encountered something distant, something mediated, something that is not directly present. But on the other hand, it means to touch something, to expect something with desire. This word contains both distance and closeness – as two opposing sides known from mystic. *Speculatio* means passive and seemingly static viewing that, however, also contains the dynamics of pilgrimage. The impossibility to influence things in an active way versus the ability to change them through the prism of our active view. To change ourselves may only require us to see better, which will lead to our transformation. According to Bonaventure, the mystic expression to “see God” means that man must “die”, undertake *transitio* (Lat. *transitus*) and *assimilate* (Lat. *assimilatio*) to Christ.

Continuity to Bonaventurian allegory can be seen, for instance, in the spirituality of English eremite mysticism of the 14th century. This is a widely represented stream of authors, such as Richard Rolle of Hampole (†1349), Walter Hilton (†1396), or some representatives of feminine mysticism, such as Margery Kempe (†1438) or Julian of Norwich (†1416). Although there are various authors of affective mysticism, the English eremite mysticism of the 14th century overall contains a very strong idea of sensual experience and imagination rooted in this experience, which is understood as a tool for further mystical vision. Affective mysticism covers a broad scale of physical and emotional conditions, which include sight and hearing, scent and sensual expressions of taste or touch.

Richard Rolle is a typical representative of Bonaventurian allegory, and not only because he wrote a work with the same title. It offers a divarication of the topic of mystical vision and ascent towards light through senses and emotions. It is very unusual compared to previous traditions of spirituality. From linguistic and thematic point of view, the spirituality of

affective mysticism leans on the important allegory of *seeing* (Lat. *speculatio*), a *journey* (Lat. *via*) and *renewal* of an image within our soul (Lat. *renovatio*). Similarly, the motive of *transitio* (Lat. *transitus*) is understood by Rolle mainly as a moment of the “*abandonment of the sensual face to a face with the reality of the divine*” (Rathouzka 2021, 92). He believes in the importance of sensual visions; however, when it comes to actual contemplation of the divine, they are put aside. They become overpowered when the soul stands face to face with the light. Light, blaze, fire and brightness are the symbols of contemplation.

Rolle supplements his descriptions of contemplation with metaphors of warmth, sweetness, and heavenly music (Rathouzka 2021, 95). Warmth and a blaze are associated mainly with the beginning of mystical journey when the soul is burning with love. The metaphor of singing and music represents a later stage of contemplation when the soul is closely linked to its object. And finally, the soul is attracted and uplifted by love, which can liken it to God.

Deeper parallels of this spirituality can also be found in the works of other eremites. *The Journey to Jerusalem* represents the narrative basis of the work of Walter Hilton (McIlroy, 20). He arrives to the city as a pilgrim in the night to find a place to sleep – representing an allegory of knowledge. This experience is an experience of transformation and renewal of emotions (Rathouzka 2021, 93–94); it is a renewal of sight and enables him to contemplate the essence of God. Jerusalem as a city of peace is also the great theme for Margery Kempe and her *Book*. It is a symbol of “*the journey towards perfection*” defined as *compassio* – walking with the crucified Christ through suffering (Lavinsky 2013, 340–341).

5 Conclusion

In our study we have introduced three fundamental medieval types of allegory to which we attribute three various spiritualities. The goal of the first – the *rhetorical allegory* of St. Augustine – was to motivate listeners to reflection and conversion. The school of St. Victor reacted to this impulse and based its spirituality on a new way of *eruditio* – perceiving written signs – reading as a prequel to meditation and contemplation as well as a specific outline of the *lectio divina* then came into practice in this school.

The second allegory is related to creation and its integration at the center of attention. We mentioned mimetic-symbolic spirituality of St. Francis as an example of implementation of this allegory. He sees God in all creation, representing a counterweight to the spirituality *fuga mundi* (Lat. “escape from the ‘bad’ world”). For him, nature is a book about God addressed to all humanity, including illiterates. Pagan rituals and myths are the signs that help to proclaim God among non-believers. Franciscan spirituality opens up to the world, to foreign cultures, thus communicating supertemporal truths via poetry and ritual.

The third allegory presented in this study was *tropological*. Its visual angle is the analogy of man and God, inner purification of *imago* and *assimilation*. It inspires the spirituality of affective mysticism of eremites in the 14th century, who tried to follow Jesus in the conditions of their life, thus appreciating immensely the role of the physical senses and emotions, that was absolutely unprecedented in medieval mysticism.

These three types of allegories had the same source: they found their inspiration in the works of St. Augustine. However, they led to different types of spirituality. The first spurs a return to the core, has an intellectual undertone and is based on erudition. The second turns to the outer world including illiterates, with ritual symbolization as its instrument. The third offers long centuries of affective mysticism. Allegory specifically establishes something new and leads to other, even richer interpretations and a very important construction element of spirituality throughout the centuries. And the history shows us that it has played a crucial role in the dialogue between various cultures, helping to interconnect all that seems distant and strange at the first sight and emphasizing what they have in common (Dojčár 2018, 45).

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Notes

- [1] Allegory, from the Gr. *allegoria*, is commonly understood as a metaphor. In Latin, we find its various synonyms: *permutatio*, “inversion”, or the later *alieniloquium*. At the beginning, allegory was seen as any metaphoric expression, however, its meaning has changed gradually.
- [2] St. Augustine sees a *sign* as something that points to some other thing (“*omne signum... res aliqua est*” – Augustine 2014, 454), describing something other than the literal meaning (“*quae significant aliquid*” – Augustine 2014, 250).
- [3] The term *integumentum* often occurs in relation to the terms *involucrum* and *velamen*. In all its meanings, it denotes “furtiveness”, “obscuring”.
- [4] Interreligious dialogue leverages the dialectics of allegory even to create new meaning and shared references. This is an ideal locus for the rehabilitation of syncretistic religious references that turn out to be an accurate category for understanding the creation of liminal space afforded by interreligious dialogue.

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