



# The Role of Imagination in the History of Spiritual Experiences

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The history of ideas offers many testimonies to how spiritual experience is born out of the rich imagination of sages, prophets, philosophers, theologians, religious reformers, or mystics. The rich imagination created a broad ground for the development of different kinds of religious or spiritual life. But at the same time, certain religious phenomena that at first sight appear identical show themselves in their differences when they are embedded in their own contexts. The paper traces such cases (especially through the topic of motherhood as an attribute of God or the original nature of human being) against the background of early Christian thought, the spirituality of man in the Carolingian period, and the theological-mystical attitudes in Middle Ages. At the same time, however, it also reflects on how these phenomena are projected into the experiences of contemporary man, which are often secular and non-theological, yet seek to retain an aspect of spirituality that is partially derived from past religious-anthropological experiences, but also supplemented with new elements.



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## 1 Introduction

When in 1670 Baruch Spinoza (anonymously) expressed in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* the idea that the speeches of prophets are characterized more by their highly sensitive and vivid imagination than by their own power of reason, it brought him hostility from the Jewish community in Amsterdam and later also an official publishing ban. Spinoza literally wrote that an act of prophecy is not the work of a perfect mind but rather of vivid imagination (*“prophetizandum non esse opus perfectiore mente, sed vividiore imagination”*; Spinoza 2005, I, 20, 3–4).

Despite his excommunication back in 1656, Spinoza was undoubtedly a deeply spiritual man, this notwithstanding the fact that the God of his *Ethics* (as *causa sui*) was later described not as a personal God, but as the God of philosophers. Spinoza’s spirituality remained silent or rather violently silenced. Of course, his spirituality inevitably bears Cartesian traces, but Spinoza can hardly be described as lacking an inner sensitivity to the Transcendent.

Spinoza longed for a spirituality released from images and elevated to the level of purified rationality. The prophets, according to him, used parables and mirroring analogies

(*“omnia fere parabolice et aenigmatische”*), because they were accustomed to expressing the spiritual through the corporeal (*“omnia spiritualia corporaliter expresserint”*). To them this was more in accord with the nature of the imagination (Spinoza 2005, I, 29, 8–11).

From Spinoza’s point of view, imagination is a matter of uncertainty and ambiguity and influenced by the prophet’s personality traits and abilities (the elegance or confusion of his style is then reflected in the elegance and confusion of God’s words) as well as by the natural circumstances of his life. Hence, he argues that if the prophet was a peasant, he described his visions through farm animals; if he was a soldier, he described his visions through warlords and armies; and if he was of courtly origin, he saw kingdoms everywhere (Spinoza 2005, II, 18, 5–10). Thus, as God himself has no distinctive style of speech, it is entirely a matter of the prophet’s abilities whether he shows God’s language as elegant, terse, stern, coarse, rambling, or obscure (Spinoza 2005, II, 20, 25–28).

However, it is not my purpose to analyze Spinoza’s work in detail here. In fact, I do not intend to deal with it at all in the

## 2 Imagination in Spirituality

following text but am quoting his words only to use them as a basis for asking whether spirituality is a child of the imagination or whether it is independent of it. Despite Spinoza's rationalistic claim, I believe that spirituality always has something to do with the imagination. Moreover, a cultivated spirituality will be related to a cultivated imagination. After all, even Spinoza's silent God without his own style of speech is a certain image, and his pantheistic faith has deep roots right in that image.

In this study, I will first point out how and why imagination participates in the creation of a referential frame or soil of spiritual experiences which are somehow defined and redefined by these frames. Next, I will discuss selected examples from the history of ideas that will illustrate this interplay between imagery and the individual's spiritual experience. Finally, I will touch upon the controversial topic of whether a spirituality without imagination is possible, or in the words of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whether a non-theological mysticism is possible at all.

At the outset I should explain that by spirituality I mean a cultural and anthropological phenomenon which, although historically closely intertwined with religious experience, has also had a secular form since ancient times. When the pagan philosopher Plotinus said that prayer is the dialogue of the alone with the Alone, "μόνους πρὸς μόνον" (Plotinus 1984, V, 1, 6, 12) [1], he was not thinking here as a religious thinker nor using the religious concepts of prayer and God, but was instead expressing a distinctive spirituality, typical of his philosophical experience. The old distinction, often reflected in the early Christian period, between *body* (Gr. σάρξ), *soul* (Gr. ψυχή), and *spirit* (Gr. πνεῦμα) has indeed had its new secular reinterpretation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Max Scheler [2], but several other attempts to define this concept outside the framework of purely religious thought have also emerged since.

Pierre Hadot gives a good answer as to why the term "spiritual" may nowadays be used in a broader sense that encompasses both the religious and the non-religious. He says that notions such as "thought," "intellectualism" and "ethics" do cover the phenomenon of the spiritual only in a partial way, but these words often forget that imagination and sensibility also play an important role here. Thanks to the spiritual dimension of his personality, the individual, Hadot says, "replaces himself within the perspective of the Whole" (Hadot 1999, 82).

Ignatius of Loyola, in the first meditation of his *Spiritual Exercises* from 1522–1524, advises his exercitant to begin his contemplation with imagination. If the topic concerns a physical place, he should imagine Christ in a temple or on a mountain. If the subject is an abstract one, such as sin, he should imagine the soul imprisoned in the body or even himself placed in some valley amidst wild beasts. The key phrase for him is "seeing in imagination" (Ignatius 1991, 47).

However, is it irrelevant what form the temple seen in my imagination will take, or what mountain Christ will stand on? Is it irrelevant how I imagine the prison that should be my body, or the wilderness in which I find myself threatened by wild animals? And which species of animals? The images I use will modify the referential frame or background of how the figure of Christ, myself or my soul appears on it. And how do I imagine the soul?

We could point here to the theory of the figure and the background as elaborated by Gestalt psychology, but we do not have to go that far. It is enough if we realize that our imagination significantly shifts or modifies our attitude towards the imagined. According to Spinoza's words quoted above, if I am a peasant who has never been to a big city in my life, my temple will look like a wooden church with simple rustic decorations, while if I am a courtier, I will see in my imagination a temple adorned with gold and works of art by the most skilled craftsmen and artists. But Christ amid poor peasants and amongst the well-dressed and rich acquires different characteristics. In either case, a powerful spiritual emotion or experience can arise in the meditator regardless of whether he is poor or rich, ignorant, or educated, lay or cleric. That can profoundly affect his or her personal life, morals, social attitudes, or other beliefs. Moreover, the more temples I have seen in my life (and not only Christian ones), the more my imagined temple will change in my mind and so will the ways or horizons of my spiritual experiences.

When French philosopher Gaston Bachelard explored in his *Water and Dreams* (from 1942) the nature of what he called "the material imagination," he used the concept of *the graft* in his description. A graft expresses the insertion of one thing into another. An image stems from one of the four elements. For him, a graft is a human affair, a human trace in a natural environment in which it would not otherwise occur. A graft is in this sense a cultivation of the natural. But Bachelard goes even further, saying that all poetic metaphors we use in our

language “*must be a union of dream-producing and idea-forming activities*” (Bachelard 1999, 10).

One could object that there is an essential difference between dreams and images and between ideas of conceptual thinking and spiritual reflections. But in Bachelard’s work, dreams are related to lucid daydreams rather than to the dreams in our nightly unconscious. Thus, some form of latent imagination, not rationalized but rather embodied in the dreamer in the manner of the passive syntheses of which phenomenologists speak, plays a role in Bachelardian daydreams. It is similar with ideas. Although Bachelard understands them in this context as poetic ideas, they are very close to the meditations that aim to deepen human existence. They form a non-theological spirituality *sui generis*, which will be discussed here later.

The intertwining of dreams and ideas, of images and spirituality, is thus a crucial moment in Bachelard’s understanding of material imagination through the notion of *the graft* as a characteristic anthropological trace in nature. Of course, a lot depends on whether the dream-image develops within the element of water or earth, because deep water (for example, passive sinking) and depths of earth (for example, active digging) offer different imagery and motives. I am convinced that the same could be said of spiritualities, which are sometimes unconsciously based on one of the four elements and thus lead the human being along different horizons and verticals of his being.

To put it figuratively: it makes a difference if I plunge into the deep mysteries of existence, or if I must dig hard to get to them. It makes a difference whether I am adrift on the lower waters of transcendence, or if I struggle (dirty with clay) through the transcendent darkness of the Unknown and the Unspeakable. Just think of Mephistopheles’ words to Faustus that he must “*dig down deep, so deep*” to reach the realm of the Mothers (Goethe 2014, 6411–6418). Hans Pollnow used this Faustian image as a description of Jean Wahl’s notion of “*trans-descendence*” (Wahl 2016). And there are also different silences *grafted onto* waters, cosmic space, earth or even onto the bowels of a cave.

Let me now show it with some examples from history which could help us better understand this topic.

### 3 Images of the Transcendent

I would like to turn now to very specific spiritual imaginings related to motherhood and femininity. Much work in this area has already been done (for example by Bynum 1982, 1988; Penniman 2017; Davy 1960, 1977; Atkinson 1991). Motherhood and femininity will here play the role of one of the many backdrops to the imaginations on which various medieval spiritualities were based.

Most visions of motherhood attributed to God or to males were accompanied by a very detailed study of feminine experiences, both in the milieu of the Church Fathers and later of theologians and mystics in the Middle Ages. The basis of their imaginings, however, was always somewhat different and with either more moderate or more fundamental shifts of meaning. Referring to God or a man (bishop, priest, saint) as a mother was not as much of a problem for early Christians as it might seem to contemporary people. The roles of fatherhood and motherhood were not strictly separated from one another, and it was normal to conceive of man as a being in whom masculine and feminine elements are equally represented: such as *animus* and *anima* in Carl Gustav Jung.

But while today’s discourse looks for femininity in men and masculinity in women rather through certain forms of behavior, emotions or character traits, older epochs based this duality primarily on the corporeality (or psychosomatic union) of men and women. Among the typical signs of femininity that came into play here were breasts, mother’s milk, and breastfeeding. Since the asexual notion of a transcendent God led to an empty, non-figurative image (analogous to *horror vacui*), a certain solution was God’s imagined sexuality, mostly masculine, sometimes very strictly feminine (e.g., in 15<sup>th</sup> century mystic Julian of Norwich), at other times swinging to one side or the other according to the needs of the interpretation or the topic at hand.

Drinking milk (of course, spiritual milk) from the breast of God or from the breast of a wise man was a typical image that appears from early Christianity until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This imagery is not stable but emerges in the texts of medieval authors according to contemporary trends of thought and based on different contexts.

It may surprise people today to read the words of one of *The Odes of Solomon*, an anonymous apocryphal piece of writing of Aramaic-Syriac origin, which may have been written in the second century and had an impact on the ante-Nicene Church and its main leaders (Irenaeus of Lyons, Justin the



Martyr, Clement of Alexandria). In this ode we read that the Father (because both his breasts were full of milk) was milked by the Holy Spirit, and that the Son is a cup of this divine milk (Ode 19). This image, despite its bizarreness today, did not cause any major controversy in early Christian times. Squeezing milk from the breasts of the God-Mother and giving it to mankind in the cup that is the Son was a typical image of receiving God's eternal Wisdom through the feeding mankind.

Clement of Alexandria devotes extensive passages to this subject in his *Paidagogos* (Gr. *The Instructor*). He tells us of mother's milk, which is an allegorical name for the Word, the sacred doctrine. He speaks of the breasts of mothers and the forming of their milk from blood (a medical idea that persisted deep into the Middle Ages); this blood foamed and turned into milk so that the child would not be afraid of it. Next, Clement refers the Fathers maternal features: "*breasts of paternal kindness that give milk to the little ones to drink*" (PG VIII, 1, 46, 1). And he adds also that the word "seeking" (seeking of wisdom) has in Greek the meaning of "sucking". And as Andrew C. Itter (2009, 169–170) [3] suggests:

*The word 'κόλπος' has interesting connotations not readily translated directly into English. It is often translated as 'bosom,' but can also carry the connotation of a bay, or a gulf or hollow. It can also refer to the womb, the vagina, or the lap, or even the folds of a woman's garment. Ultimately, however, it appears to signify the sympathetic quality of a woman's embrace, such as when a child is held within the folds of its mother's arms and kept close to its place of origin and to what sustains its life. In this passage the Father becomes feminine in order to become known to us as motherly and sympathetic.*

The maternal image of breasts filled with milk, which is an image of overflowing Wisdom, appears again with St. Augustine when his friend Severus, bishop of Mileve, in a letter to Augustine, writes that he values their friendship and says that he desires to suck all the wisdom from his friend's breast: "*I draw strength by clinging to you and sucking the abundance of your milk*" (Augustine 2008, *Letter 109*). But it is not just Severus who expresses himself this way; Augustine himself often uses this image.

Moving forward a few centuries, we find the theme of motherhood masculinized in the milieu of the Carolingian Renaissance. Here, too, the characteristics of women are attributed to men [4]. Alcuin of York speaks in one of his poems about Bishop Bassinus as a nurturing father, *pater alme* (Alcuin 1881, 57–58). And in a letter to a certain Dodo, his student,

Alcuin says: "*My dearest child, born too late and abandoned too soon, you were not well weaned from my breast, and the cruel nurse, by the caprice of lust, snatched that tender little body from its father's bosom*" (Alcuin 1975, 3–6).

Later, John Scotus Eriugena, in his *Periphyseon*, calls the teacher *nutritor* (provider of nourishment) and the pupil *alumnus* (recipient of nourishment), though this is not Eriugena's neologism, but something established in Celtic culture at this time (Parkes 2006, 370f). Eriugena, however, is a particularly interesting author here, not only because in his *Periphyseon* he uses the notion of "*the secret folds of Nature,*" which may remind us of Itter's interpretation of the Greek term *κόλπος*, but also because he develops the theme of the original human being, undivided into two different sexes, male and female.

Eriugena understands man as the younger brother of the asexual angels (Eriugena 1987, V, 896C), and they were created like their prototypes, angels, even "*at least equal to if not greater than angels*" (Moran 2012, 156). Due to the Fall, however, man was divided into two sexes (as he often stresses: this differentiation and ways of procreation of humans in their actual state are shameful and thus, man is *a risible animal* – Eriugena 1987, I, 444B). Nevertheless, the Carolingian Neoplatonist Eriugena believes that in the end, when all things return and will be reunited with God, men on this return journey will also return to their original humanity, stripped of sexual differences.

Eriugena is rather ambiguous in his attitude towards women: On the one hand, he defends them from saying that the Fall in Paradise was the fault of women, and he argues that every person (whether male or female) is responsible for their own sins. On the other hand, he repeats several times that man was created in the image of God as undivided, spiritual, and not subject to sensuality, while woman was seduced by the Devil precisely through her corporeal senses (Eriugena 1987, IV, 847C).

Eriugena's original man may be devoid of sexual distinctions, but in the final analysis original human being seems to be rather masculine in his imagination, even if he tried to reserve judgment on this subject in the sense of his "*negative anthropology*" (Nieuwenhove 2012, 68). And this is precisely the point to which I want to refer: I am convinced that the deep spiritual life that Eriugena most certainly lived is described by the contours of his imaginative world in which Plotinus and his followers, Augustine, Diogenes the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory the Great, Bede the Venerable, and certainly Alcuin of York all played their part.

These all formed the backdrop of his imaginative world. On this soil he then built his spirituality, in which there is no hell, but everything ends in triumphant union with God.

But three centuries later, the theme of the motherhood of God is developed again in a new framework. Around 1170, Anselm of Canterbury (1973, lines 421–426) [5] writes a prayer to St. Paul (for Princess Adelaide) in which he calls both the apostle and his Lord not only fathers but also mothers:

*Therefore, you are fathers by your effect  
and mothers by your affection.  
Fathers by your authority, mothers by your kindness.  
Fathers by your teaching, mothers by your mercy.  
Then you, Lord, are a mother  
and you, Paul, are a mother too.*

For the sake of accuracy, it should be said that in Anselm's case this is a rare description of Christ as Mother, something not present in this way in his other texts. But the truth is that after him, the theme becomes very popular, especially in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as Carolina Bynum (1982, 110–113) noticed, and continues as such until the onset of the Renaissance. However, 12<sup>th</sup> century authors did not speak of the motherhood of Christ with reference to the early Christian authors. Their language about motherhood is different. It can be said that the early Christian authors dealt with Gnostic objections (Gnostics believed that they were filled by full Wisdom as solid food, while Christians sucked the mother's milk like small children in the spirit of St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:2). For the 12<sup>th</sup> century authors the emphasis is rather on the affectivity, sensitivity and tenderness of prelates who should not be purely paternalistic in their managing of church communities.

There is also an emergence of several new commentaries on the *Song of Songs* in this period. This biblical text was one of the most difficult writings to interpret in medieval hermeneutics, for it included the topic of the feminine (Bride) and the masculine (Bridegroom) dangerously colliding in allegories that allowed the play of the imagination to be rekindled. The speech about the breasts of the Bridegroom reopened the theme of the motherhood of God, and medieval authors had to find their own interpretations that stimulated the imagination of the believers and nourished their spirituality. For example, according to Bernard of Clairvaux, the Bridegroom's breasts symbolize patience and kindness, and his milk nourishes fervent souls, whereas the Bride's breasts nourish "new souls," those who are already beginning to seek and love God (Davy 1977, 81). Bernard certainly had immense

devotion to the Virgin Mary, but his image of her as a mother was different from the motherhood of the ordinary women of the time, whom he never really trusted. In his eyes, the Virgin Mary's motherhood was modified according to the model of Christ (Atkinson 1991, 119–120). It should be added, however, that the authors of the 12<sup>th</sup> century distinguish between the activity of the *Mother* (as temporal aspect) and the passivity of the *Virgin* (as eternal aspect): the *Mother*, as a symbol, constantly gives birth, while the *Virgin* humbly waits to be impregnated (Davy 1960, 376).

We could go on to elicit further evidence of how (through the themes of motherhood and the femininity of God, and through related imaginaries) the distinct spiritual experiences of the authors of early Christianity and the Middle Ages were shaped. My intention here has only been to point out that in the history of spirituality, imagery bore a crucial role in shaping the conceptual frameworks upon which stood not only medieval mysticism or piety, but also the sophisticated reflections of theologians and philosophers. And although after the Middle Ages the theme of the motherhood of God gradually faded away, motherhood and femininity remained a subject of philosophical reflection. They entered philosophical discourse, a discourse that called for a new desacralized type of spirituality, a spirituality that might not bear that name at all, but nevertheless, that would describe some deeper anthropological experience, as we have seen above in Pierre Hadot.

## 4 Conclusions: Silence Without the Image

Jan Patočka in his 1975 lecture *The Spiritual Person and the Intellectual* did not understand spiritual man as a religious believer, but as a deep and disquieted man thinking and re-thinking various themes of life (Patočka 2007, 51–69). It seems that Patočka opens the topic of secular spirituality without image, but he also writes about philosophical insight as a flash of lightning that for a fleeting moment will break the darkness. Imagination of light and darkness plays its role again here as in Dionysius the Areopagite or in medieval metaphysics of light. However, Patočka tries to keep a spiritual level of humanity, even re-defined by his own attitudes and in a non-religious context.

However, the desire to remove spirituality from the religious sphere and to rid it of images was revived several times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But what happens when we separate spirituality from imagination? When we try to keep it in play, but without participating in representations influenced by

our life experiences, cultural milieu, or historical grounding? Is it even possible to abandon all the religious images that are so strongly embodied in our lives? Many such images are already a latent part of our speech. In the words of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, they have *sedimented*.

And it is precisely Merleau-Ponty who in his notes from the lecture *La philosophie aujourd'hui* considered Heidegger's "metaphysics" and the hidden Being as analogous to the Christian mystic's idea of a *hidden God* (Lat. *Deus absconditus*). In this regard Merleau-Ponty notes: "*Non-theological 'mysticism' is further from theology than the philosophy of nothingness*" (Merleau-Ponty 1996, 119, author's own translation). Merleau-Ponty's intention was, that nihilism or the Nietzschean philosophy of the dead (or killed) God is still theology, but he tried to outline a new kind of desacralized mysticism. Unfortunately, he does not develop this idea further, however, but leaves it as an open question for our philosophical reflection.

Merleau-Ponty's words about non-theological mysticism may remind us of the notion of the *mystical* discussed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.522 (which, incidentally, takes us back to Spinoza, with whom we started our contribution): "*There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They 'make themselves manifest.' They are what is mystical*" (Wittgenstein 2001, 89). Things, which are Unspeakable: if there really are such things, then it is impossible to describe them, to express them through images (not only through words); if there really are such things, then we just have to remain silent in the face of them. The need of spirituality is here exposed to the Silence: of Being, of God, of Transcendence, of Nature.

If philosophical silence should be a kind of revised spiritual exercise, then such philosophers face a difficult task: to say a few words about it and keep quiet, to be silent. Hamlet's final words "*the rest is silence...*" are given new meaning here. To be silent means to stop creating an imaginative backdrop in which is possible to shape some deep imagined spirituality, but at the same time it means to open a new imageless form of spirituality.

This form of spiritual experience may seem stimulating and inspiring, but it also raises questions. Is not silence itself an image? Or if it is not, doesn't it at least open possibilities for the imagination to create representations of various spaces and acts of silence? If this silence of wonder before the Unknown or Being should be absolute and final, does it not impose on he or she who has decided for it an obligation not

to say a word about it? If this is so, then spirituality is uncommunicable, non-intersubjective and should remain pure subjectivism.

But how is it possible that we can talk about it and that others understand this speech? Maybe all images of silence are born from some anthropological Ur-silence, deeply rooted in the culture and thus in the latency of intersubjectivity. Those who have become sensitive to this silence are spiritual people of the kind Maurice Merleau-Ponty spoke of. Their thought did not stop at nothingness, but at the silence before Being and Nothingness. Of course, they also need images, but these are no longer figurative or even abstract; they are more like an empty painting in a silent gallery.

## Notes

- [1] Karl Jaspers interprets this passage as an attempt to reach the intimate presence of the One, to attain "*to that which is not an object*" (Jaspers 1974, 40). And Jean-Louis Chrétien, developing his phenomenological notion of "*unhoped for*" transcending all our expectations, adds that Plotinian spirituality is based on the jump or leap into the Void: "*To leap is to cross the void, to go where there is no path*" (Chrétien 2002, 107).
- [2] Although Scheler's *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* could be the main work referred to here, the topic is also addressed in his other texts. For him, the spiritual accent hovers on the edge of the religious and the non-religious. The notion of sanctity (in contrast to geniality) here goes beyond a purely orthodox use, and Scheler writes in the essay *Exemplars of Person and Leaders* that the spiritual personality of holy person is, in essence, supra-temporal, while acts of genius originate in a point of time "*without requiring a span of time*" (Scheler 1987, 175).
- [3] The Greek word *γυναίκεος κόλπος* has the Latin equivalent of *sinus mulierbis* with similar semantic ambiguity (Adams 2005, 583; see also Newbold 2000, 11).
- [4] The Carolingian Renaissance also knows the opposite example, when Dhuoda, author of the *Liber manualis ad filium* which she wrote for her son William, takes on the role of father and abbot (Claussen 1996, 804).
- [5] Cf. the slightly different, even if semantically identical translation of these lines in Bynum 1982, 114.

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