

INTERACTIVE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

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Authors such as Ludwig Feuerbach (1841/1969) and Sigmund Freud (1907) have formulated critical views that stressed the connection between religion, imagination, illusion, and human wish fulfilment. However, on my account, the acknowledgment of imaginative elements in religion doesn't necessarily mean that religion is nothing but a product of our own consciousness. On the contrary, it is more or less a general understanding among contemporary scholars of religion that a significant degree of imagination is required when subjects form representations of a transcendent and sacred realm of reality (independently of whether or not they consider that realm to be metaphysically real).

Among philosophers of religion, a common way of talking about religious imagination is to compare the propositional attitudes of belief and imagination. However, if we are to give a fair treatment of the phenomenon of religion, it is necessary that we – besides propositional imaginings – also consider how sensory, experiential, and creative imagination contributes to a religious way of making the world intelligible (Malm Lindberg 2021). Nonetheless, in this post I will limit my discussion to include only the categories of mental imagery (sensory imagination) and propositional imaginings.

Visionary experiences and visualizations

One interesting question concerns in what way (if any) that mental imagery is involved in the phenomena that we typically refer to as religious visionary experiences and visualizations. Although both of them involve a “seeing” of an invisible realm of reality, they do so in distinct ways. Generally, a vision is said to be spontaneous and unintended. Visualization, on the other hand, is described as a voluntary and active creation in the mind's eye. I argue, nonetheless, that in many cases of visionary experiences, it is more accurate to talk about an interaction between visualization and vision.

As an example, we can think of the sophisticated spiritual disciplines for facilitating visionary experiences that were developed in medieval Christian monasteries. Even if monastic spirituality included examples of “spontaneous vision,” it was more common that such phenomena resulted from systematic cultivation. In many of the meditative techniques that were developed during this time, the meditator's gaze was directed toward some specific visual focus, whether this object was a part of an internal image constructed by the mind, the natural world, or a symbolic image. Monastic writers often refers to this kind of speculative “vision” as *speculum* – or “seeing in a mirror”. Thus, in the case of medieval monastics, it seems to be more accurate to talk about an interaction between visualization and visionary experiences (McGinn 2005; Newman 2005).

As noticed by Chris Hatchell (2013), a similar kind of interaction between visualizations and visions can be found in Mahayana Buddhism as well. In general, the terms “vision” and “visualization” apply to two distinct kinds of Buddhist meditation. However, while some visions occur with no intentional cultivation, others are evoked by the Buddhist practitioner through meditative practices that include visualization. As an example, Hatchell mentions meditations that involve the practitioner's recollection and visualization of the physical and mental qualities of Buddha. In combination with additional exercises (retreat meditations and long periods of

wakefulness) this is supposed to lead to a visionary encounter with the real Buddha. At the same time it should be noted that visionary experiences ultimately, according to the Buddhist approach, are empty and devoid of any solid nature.

In the contemporary study of religion, anthropologist Tanya M. Luhrmann (2020) has, in turn, explored how visualization and mental imagery influence what spiritual practitioners experience as “real.” In her studies she observed, for instance, that inner sense cultivation seems to soften people’s distinction between inner and outer, self and other. That is, when engaging in deliberate, repeated use of inner visual representation, the boundary between what was attributed to the mind (self-generated, private) and the external world was altered. Even so, Luhrmann emphasizes that none of this implies that the experience of God is no more than the experience of the trained imagination. A more accurate approach, according to her, is to see prayer as a spiritual technology that changes the way a person attends to his or her own mind.

Transformative vision and propositional imagination

Similarly to Luhrmann, philosopher John Cottingham (2017) argues that imagination influences the experiential world of a religious believer. According to him, religious truths require personal engagement and commitment. For this reason, he points out that religious belief includes much more radical psychological changes than in other belief formations. Such a procedure leads, in turn, to a comprehensive “vision” of the world that requires active engagement on the individual’s part. That is, instead of being a passive bystander, s/he creatively interprets and transforms what s/he encounters in the world. Given this, Cottingham proposes that we look upon believers’ relation to reality as a kind of poetry in which they cooperate with reality through “transformative vision.” While the poet deals with the real world (and not a fiction), his/her vision involves an “unconcealment” of what is (partly) hidden. Besides being guided by a particular religious belief, this procedure involves a delicate interaction between perception and imagination (as well as a variety of other mental states and propositional attitudes).

When we talk about propositional imagination – and how it is involved in religious engagement – Cottingham’s term “transformative vision” is a good starting point. By pointing to the complexity of religious belief formation, his approach contradicts the view that it is *one* particular attitude or mental state that guides religious engagement. An example of the latter approach is, for instance, J.L. Schellenberg’s ultimism and his use of the concept of “imaginative faith.” The dominating idea of ultimism is that there is a metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate reality. However, instead of taking the attitude of belief towards the content of ultimism, Schellenberg suggests that a weaker cognitive attitude – in this case, imagination – can play the cognitive role that is typically assigned to belief (so called non-doxasticism). However, in terms of imagination, it is important to notice Schellenberg’s own insistence that imaginative faith is not to be equated with pretense, which he associates with falseness. When a subject engages in imaginative faith, it is instead the case – according to Schellenberg – that she entertains the possibility of *p*, while holding the truth and falsehood of *p* before her and giving them equal weight (Schellenberg 2013). An even more radical suggestion comes from proponents of religious fictionalism. On their account, religious discourse is constituted by fictional claims that, in certain contexts, still can serve a useful function. Furthermore, since the discourse in question is considered to be false, religious engagement is, according to fictionalism, associated with the attitude of pretense or make-believe (Le Poidevin 2016).

When applied to religion, non-doxasticism and fictionalism are approaches that challenge the received view of religious doxasticism (according to which a subject can only have faith that *p* if

s/he also believes that *p*). Even so, I emphasize that existential wrestling generally requires something more than suppositions and hypothetical reasoning about a possible state of affairs. That is, even if entertaining possibilities is indeed an essential part of this procedure, it is not to be equated with the procedure as a whole. Furthermore, with regard to religious fictionalism, I consider it to be a position that is better suited to a scientific than to a religious context. That is, whereas “acceptance that *p*” rather than “belief that *p*” is a common strategy in science, the attitude of belief plays a more important role in religion. Hence, even if religious engagement may involve episodes of fictionalism and/or non-doxasticism, there are certain challenges in life (for example, suffering) that may require something more than just “imaginative faith” or acting “as if” something is the case.

I suggest that a more fruitful approach is to acknowledge a constant interaction between different positions. In the case of religion my proposal therefore is that it is plausible that subjects take a number of stances towards different parts of the same religion. Another possible scenario is that, during the course of their lives, individuals switch between different attitudes towards religious discourse. This observation, in turn, is consistent with the position that I refer to as *interactivism* (Malm Lindberg 2021). According to the interactive stance, propositional imaginings often cooperate with other forms of imagination (for example, sensory and experiential imaginings) and mental states (for example, belief and perception).

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