

It is significant how often the theme of love and its transfiguring effect crops up in fiction about artificial creatures. Love not only “moves the sun and the other stars,” in Dante’s words in *Paradiso*, but also “moves”—determines, shapes—the act of godlike creation and the humans mirrored in fictional creations.

Artificial creatures in fiction prove to be a mine of images, parables, and philosophical ideas about the cre-

ation, being, limitations, defects, virtues, high aspirations, ultimate goals, and even the possible deification of human beings. These stories take up old myths and, to a great extent, Christian teachings and other philosophical ideas about human nature. They move the imagination of modern readers and moviegoers, who can thus continue to reflect in this mirror about themselves, their past, and their future, and explore their own mystery. ✱

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IN WORDS AND IMAGES

Image, Mind, and the Pursuit of “Pure Prayer”

Joel Houston

Blessed is the mind which prays without distraction and acquires an ever greater longing for God. —Evagrius of Pontus¹

What place, if any, does the imagination have in the practice of prayer? The fourth-century theologian Evagrius of Pontus’s *Chapters on Prayer* addresses the importance of “imageless prayer” in two places. “When you pray” cautions Evagrius, “do not form images of

the divine within yourself, nor allow your mind to be impressed with any form, but approach the Immaterial immaterially and you will come to understanding” (ch. 66). His concern over “rashly localizing the Divinity” follows a discourse on the nature of pure prayer (chs. 51–65). Evagrius does not condemn the imagination, but he is concerned about its potential for deception: “[the purpose of the

¹ Evagrius of Pontus, chapter 118, in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 206. Subsequent references given in text.

adversaries] is to persuade you that the quantitative object suddenly revealed to you is the Divinity" (ch. 67). Hence, he argues, "pure prayer . . . is the laying aside of mental representations" (ch. 70). Later, Evagrius warns: "Hold no desire to see angels or powers or Christ with the senses, lest you go completely insane, taking a wolf to be the shepherd and worshipping your enemies, the demons" (ch. 115). In the twentieth century, Dumitru Staniloae pursued a related but slightly different tack, arguing that the Fathers cautioned against "imaginings" that could be the product "of sin, or an attraction towards sin."²

Such prohibitions on using the imagination in prayer are not intended to denigrate the embodied experience of the supplicant. The imagination as such is not sinful or deceptive. To argue for such a proposition would, in effect, vitiate an essential aspect of the incarnation—that Christ assumed all aspects of humanity so that he might redeem them. Christopher Beeley, commenting on Gregory of Nazianzus's defense of the full humanity of Christ, stresses the redemption of all aspects of the human person, most notably the mind. Gregory argued against the followers of Apollinaris, who believed that the divine Logos replaced the natural mind of the Lord Jesus Christ. Commenting on Gregory's writings, Beeley states:

Gregory's response is simply to point out [the aspect of the redemption of the human mind] of the incarnation. Since we need healing in body, soul, and mind—and especially in our mind, which was the first to sin and is really the source of all our troubles—Christ must have assumed all of these elements in order to save us. . . . Hence he utters his famous soteriological dictum, "That which has not been

assumed has not been healed; but that which is united to God is also being saved."³

We may accordingly dismiss the Manichean notion that the mind is somehow imprisoned in a fallen flesh. Evagrius's worries are more subtle. He is concerned about the propensity for the imagination to detract from the experience of pure prayer, while at the same time acknowledging that not all images would necessarily be deceptive. Such a notion would be self-refuting. As Ilaria Ramelli points out, Evagrius's descriptions of the experience of pure prayer in his *Kephalia Gnostika* necessitate the use of the imagination in the reader's mind.⁴ A distinction must therefore be made between the tendency of the imagination to furnish the *nous* with an image (a fabrication of the self, as it were) and a legitimate vision or non-discursive act of divine communication as given by God. Evagrius's apprehensions almost certainly apply more directly to the former. The undisciplined imagination is far more likely to mislead the individual engaged in prayer than to be a reliable guide, so caution, or even outright avoidance, should be exercised. However, this is not to say there is no place for images in the life of prayer. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of blessed memory points out, there are other modes of prayer besides *pure* prayer: psalmody, iconography in prayer, and the Divine Liturgy. These modes, it seems, are more amendable to the disciplined use of the imagination.⁵ The role of the icon in the practice of prayer provides precisely the sort of boundary marker that might aid in the healthy use of the imagination in prayer. The icon maintains an appropriate desideratum for the imagination and curtails its more harmful tendencies, including the desire for a pictorial representation of the

²Dumitru Staniloae, *Prayer and Holiness: The Icon of Man Renewed in God* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1996), 9.

³Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus: On the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 127.

⁴Evagrius of Pontus, *Kephalia Gnostika: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*, trans. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 259–60.

⁵Kallistos Ware, "Prayer in Evagrius of Pontus and the Macarian Homilies," in Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward, eds., *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 2001), 18.



The Vision of Saint Peter, 17th c. print. Victoria and Albert Museum.

divine. The use of icons in prayer may provide a safe passage for the soul that longs to commune with God in prayer yet finds itself between the Scylla of self-deception and the Charybdis of disappointment when an appropriate image fails to materialize.

A cursory response to the question about the use of the imagination in prayer, therefore, is a simple “yes.” Excepting the self-generating illusion, the imagination has a role in what might be termed “lower” prayer. But what of the pursuit of higher, pure prayer? An absolute prohibition on using imagination in pure prayer is likely untenable. Several instances in Holy Scripture—the New Testament particularly—bear witness to the role of imago-spiritual noumena. Yet, in

each instance, the Scripture clarifies that the noumenal event is manifestly not self-generating. Visions and images of the divine are to be understood as a divine gift and disclose truths that are, in a sense, ecstatic—at once outside of, but also *to*, the body. Saint Paul was the recipient of numerous visions (Acts 9:3–12, 16:9–10, 18:9–10, 22:17–21, 23:11, 27:23–24) and writes of just such an ecstatic experience of “a man in Christ” (likely a circumlocution for Paul himself) who was “caught up to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2). Paul’s cautious ambiguity creates the possibility that such an experience could describe the *nous* as it engages in prayer and not be interpreted as a bare spatial-temporal event. However, as many of Paul’s experiences do not occur during prayer properly speaking, they create a kind of third category that does not obviate the use of images but certainly qualifies the conditions of their appearance. An instance of image use in the prayer language of Paul occurs in his opening benediction to the Ephesians (1:18), where he prays that God would “give light to the eyes of the hearts [ὀφθαλμοὺς τῆς καρδίας]” of the Ephesians. Apropos of prayer as a practice, Saint Peter’s vision of “the great sheet” that descended from heaven occurred as he was praying at the sixth hour (Acts 10:9–10). Saint Luke is clear that Peter’s experience in prayer is a legitimate vision from God—again, it is not self-generating. Peter’s experience, while hardly normative, at least suggests that the presence of images in prayer does not necessarily indicate deception or demonic influence. Instead, the images created a precedent for non-discursive phenomena that further reinforced syntactic revelation. Saint Peter’s trance-induced vision in Acts 10 is accompanied by verbal, interpretive revelation—“What

God has cleansed, you must not call common”—and occurs not once but thrice (Acts 10:15–16). While it would be inappropriate to construct a theology of imaginative prayer from this account alone, there appear to be some essential boundaries that identify Saint Peter’s account as distinct from a mere apparition that might occur while engaged in prayer.

Despite the witness (and possible exceptions to the rule) of the New Testament, more serious theological difficulties still need to be addressed that militate against using the imagination in prayer. Augustine Casiday, in his treatise on the theology of Evagrius, underlines the ontological considerations that are active when discussing the role of the imagination in prayer. Casiday argues that for Evagrius, because God is transcendentally distinct from all created matter and beings, it is, therefore, “strictly impossible to form images corresponding accurately to God because the human mind forms images based upon its experience within the created order.” As a created faculty, the imagination has certain ontological and epistemological limits, which do not apply to the uncreated One. Therefore, according to Casiday, there is a kind of impossibility of conceptual and ontological apprehension. The mind (much less the imagination) cannot penetrate the divine or interact with it in any kind of communicative equity: “It is strictly impossible to form images corresponding accurately to God because the human mind forms images based upon its experience within the created order.” Not only are images insufficient to bridge the ontological gap between the supplicant and the divine in Casiday’s reading of Evagrius, but there also runs an additional risk of idolatry. When the imagination interposes an image

in the experience of prayer, no matter how pious, it must “be acknowledged as that to which the prayer is being directed.” Ultimately, what seems to be an expedient means of entering into an experience of pure prayer (the use of images to provide an immediate encounter with God) becomes a truncated, potentially deceptive, and maybe even idolatrous(!) experience, in which the mind contents itself with the image and fails to enter the reality. Casiday puts it well: “It is as though the mind fails to go beyond itself and, in place of God, rests content with the concepts that it has produced itself.”⁶

To conclude, we may now bring Evagrius’s teaching into bold relief for those considering the use of the imagination in the experience of prayer. It is safe to say that the imagination is not a sinful faculty; it is a created part of the human person and is therefore good (Gen. 1:26–27). Indeed, the New Testament bears witness to divine visions (themselves constituted by images) experienced by the holy apostles and others while praying. While undoubtedly genuine, these cases are the exceptions that prove the rule. More regularly, particularly in the case of those who might be considered novices in the school of prayer, the imagination tends to mislead and possibly even deceive. With this tendency in view, the Church, in her wisdom, has made judicious use of psalmody and iconography as appropriate modes of prayer that use images. These visual aids for prayer function at their best when they encourage the supplicant to pray from the *kardia* and not simply utter words as a by-product of cognition—as though prayer were simply a matter of verbalizing the ratiocination of the brain. More substantively, however, there remains a significant obstacle that cannot be overcome (on the part of those engaged in prayer,

⁶ Augustine Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 150.

at least). The ontological gap between the supplicant and God implies that no image could ever rightly contain or even symbolize the divine. The calling of pure prayer is to lay aside mental representations (note well: not to negate or to do away with

entirely); to recognize that while they play a role in the created goodness of life, communion with God involves transcending the realm of earthly images, to an experience of the uncreated light where words and even images themselves are but shadows. ✱



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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

A Note on Terminology: “Godmanhood” and “Divine-Humanity”

Jeremy Ingpen

Translators of Vladimir Solovyev and Sergii Bulgakov face a series of choices in glossing the Russian word *богочеловечество* (*bogochelovechestvo*) or the French *divino-humanité*. The early translators of these writers chose “Godmanhood,” and Professor Andrew Louth has argued in favor of this choice.¹ One can find justification for “Godmanhood” in the Athanasian Creed, as rendered in the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer* of 1662: “Who [Christ] although he be God and Man: yet he is not two, but one Christ; one, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the Manhood into God.”² More frequently, we find the translation “divine-humanity,” as in Boris Jakim’s

many outstanding translations from the Russian.

As a translator from French who frequently handles quotations of texts originally in Russian, I find myself stumbling on both “Godmanhood” and “divine-humanity.” Let me explain. “Godmanhood” seems to me to objectify a spiritual mystery—the Chalcedonian synthesis that, Olivier Clément says, crucifies the human mind. In addition, in popular parlance manhood has become synonymous with maleness, and, euphemistically, with the male sex organ. That aside, “Godmanhood” does not allow for the formation of an adjective: Godmanly? I don’t think so! So

¹ Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (London: SPCK, 2015), 22.

² *Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: John Baskerville, 1762), n.p.