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Religious Imagination in the Late Medieval Low Countries: Theories and Practices¹

A cursory view at the titles of studies on the medieval imagination shows that ‘imagination’ is often paired with one or more other concepts. Next to imagination we find, for example, ‘fantasy’,² ‘invention’,³ ‘inspiration’,⁴ ‘meditation and cognition’,⁵ ‘image’,⁶ ‘memory’,⁷ or ‘emotion’.⁸ These pairings testify to the various ways in which the imagination was understood in the medieval period. As Michelle Karnes has noted, in medieval thought it was a ‘composite, fundamentally heterogeneous construction’.⁹ The imaginative faculty of the mind interacted with other faculties and played a role in both the composition and reception of images, texts, and other cultural productions. Although medieval ideas about the faculty differ from conceptualizations of the imagination in modern science and philosophy, some of these contemporary ideas have their roots in classical and medieval thought.

The modern concept of the imagination is studied in a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, and aesthetics. Even within one discipline, definitions of what constitutes the imagination vary. Broadly, it is seen as the ability to evoke in the mind images or ideas that are not present. Scholars have developed different typologies of the imagination – in one case defining as many as twelve different imaginative abilities of the human mind.¹⁰ A common basic distinction is made between reproductive or recreative imagination, in which the memory plays a role in recalling and sometimes recombining past experiences, and productive or creative imagination, which generates new ideas and shapes our experience. We can also distinguish between conceptual or propositional and experiential or sensory imagination; while the latter involves inner visualization, the former is a state of pretence without mental images.¹¹ The imaginative faculty is not only examined as an individual ability or experience. Cultural psychology sees the imagination as part of a sociocultural process: ‘it is situated within human relations and in dialogue with others and the world; it takes place in specific settings; it is materially and semiotically mediated while highly individual in the way it is experienced; and it is situated in time, having both antecedents and consequences.’¹² Thus, the imagination can be at the root of social change. An influential proponent of the socio-cultural importance of the human faculty of the imagination is the medievalist and cultural historian Yuval Harari. He states that the capacity of human beings to create shared stories or ‘imagined realities’, such as, e.g., religion, has been a crucial vector of historical change.¹³

¹ This thematic issue has taken shape in a collaborative process; draft articles were discussed during a workshop at the Lorentz Center in Leiden. We thank the Lorentz Center and all workshop participants for their efforts and expertise, and Lydia Shahan in particular for her help in the copy-editing phase. Lieke Smits has worked on this issue as part of her postdoctoral research project ‘Spiritual Role-Play as a Tool for Inner Transformation: An interdisciplinary Pioneer Study of a Devotional Practice from the Late Medieval Low Countries’ funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO), file number 12R5922N.

² Classen, *Imagination and Fantasy*.

³ Reid, ‘Through a Looking-Glass’.

⁴ Luongo, ‘Inspiration and Imagination’.

⁵ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition*.

⁶ Ringbom, ‘Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions’; Falkenburg and Richardson ed., *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self*.

⁷ Minnis, ‘Medieval Imagination and Memory’.

⁸ Blick and Gelfand ed., *Push Me, Pull You*.

⁹ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Stevenson, ‘Twelve Conceptions of the Imagination’; see also Abraham, ‘The Imaginative Mind’; Abraham, ‘Surveying the Imagination Landscape’, pp. 6-7.

¹¹ Kind ed., *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Imagination*, pp. 5-6; Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 3-23; Currie and Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds*.

¹² Zittoun and Glăveanu, ‘Imagination at the Frontiers of Psychology’, p. 11.

¹³ Harari, *Homo Sapiens*, ad passim.

This thematic issue focuses on the uses of the human imagination within the context of the shared story of late medieval Western Christianity. It brings together historians of art, culture, the book, and literature, to explore how in late medieval culture the imagination was attuned to and harnessed for cultivating the relationship with the divine. The articles consider the medieval imagination as a faculty crucial to devotional practice, that was exercised and developed through the use of devotional instruments such as images, objects, and texts. Religious images, both material, textual, and mental, functioned as ‘instruments of soul formation’, as Walter Melion has called them.¹⁴ The geographical focus is on the Low Countries, a dynamic and highly urbanized region with a rich visual culture and flourishing textual production in the context of a vibrant religious life in both towns and countryside, lay contexts and religious institutions. In this introduction, we start with a discussion of the views on the imagination in medieval thought, after which we discuss the connections of the religious imagination to popular affective devotion and to the identity-formation in religious communities, both in a mystical and everyday devotional context.

Medieval views on the faculty of the imagination

Medieval thought on the imagination was embedded within philosophical ideas on the composition of the soul.¹⁵ Medieval scholars combined views on the psyche of Plato and Aristotle, mediated by Arabic psychology, and Augustine. They adopted the notion of a tripartite division of the soul, which only humans fully possess.¹⁶ Plants have a vegetative soul, aimed at nourishment, growth, and reproduction. On top of that, animals have a sensitive soul or *anima animalis* that allows them to perceive the world around them, react to it instinctively, and remember things that are vital to their survival. The sensitive soul controls not only the outer senses but also the inner senses, which include the faculty of the imagination. Humans, finally, are driven, not only by the vegetative and sensitive soul, but also by the rational soul, consisting of intellect, memory, and will. Thus, while animals also have imagination, the faculty of internal vision that feeds the memory, it differs from the human imagination, as, in human beings, the latter informs and interacts with the rational soul.¹⁷

Given the fact that the imagination – or *phantasia* as it was called in Greek –, was a faculty of the *anima animalis* it was, in line with the (neo-)Platonic thought which influenced medieval monastic and clerical thinkers, regarded as an inferior faculty that needed to be heeded. It was mainly connected to inspiration and creative powers, with the negative connotation of irrationality.¹⁸ In the eyes of the Church, this meant that it could lead people to dangerous ideas and heresies.¹⁹ The rhetorical tradition favoured the memory over the imagination as the primary creative faculty.²⁰ Mary Carruthers, writing on the influences of the classical rhetorical tradition on medieval thought, claims that medieval culture was ‘fundamentally memorial’,²¹ contrasting the high status of the imagination as the origin of creativity and originality in modernity with ‘the apparently lowly, working-day status accorded to imagination in medieval psychology – a sort of draught-horse of the sensitive soul, not even given intellectual status.’²²

The influential views of church father Augustine stand in this tradition. In his philosophy the imagination can both reproduce sense-perceptions and, with the help of the memorial faculty and the mind’s eye, produce new mental images. It can make absent things vividly present, but here also lies its danger; poets and heretics can mislead the mind with powerful fantasies.²³ Scholars of medieval imaginative devotion have in particular emphasized the influence of the three kinds of vision defined by Augustine.²⁴ His tripartite division can be seen as a Neoplatonic model for the ascent from the body

¹⁴ Melion, ‘Introduction’, p. 30.

¹⁵ See Reypens, ‘Ame’; Harvey, *The Inward Wits*.

¹⁶ Perler, ‘Faculties in Medieval Philosophy’.

¹⁷ De Boer, ‘Imagination, Images, and (Im)mortality’, pp. 15-17.

¹⁸ Jørgensen, ‘The Philosophy of Imagination’, pp. 19-22.

¹⁹ Minnis, ‘Medieval Imagination and Memory’, pp. 240-249; Lobsien, ‘Faculties and Imagination’, p. 140.

²⁰ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*; Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*.

²¹ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 8.

²² Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 2.

²³ Minnis, ‘Medieval Imagination and Memory’, pp. 242-243.

²⁴ Ringbom, ‘Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions’, p. 162.

onto God, starting with bodily vision (*visio corporalis*) through the eyes, via the inner sight (*visio spiritualis*) of the memory and imagination, to intellectual vision (*visio intellectualis*). The three were highly interconnected, with spiritual vision as a mediator between the body and the intellect. Only the latter enabled the mind's eye to perceive imageless divine truth, because the intellect, the highest faculty of the rational soul, was considered to be the image of God.

Augustine's theory of vision has been used to explain the function of material and mental images in medieval devotion as preparative steps for imageless contemplation and the legitimization of visions of holy women, while scholars have also used it to point out the limitations of image and imagination in the highest regions of the medieval spiritual path.²⁵ However, Michelle Karnes has challenged the 'dominant narrative of imagination'²⁶ that claims that, in the premodern period, the imagination was regarded as an inferior faculty. Karnes has shown that with the revival of Aristotelian ideas in the scholastic milieu from the thirteenth century onwards, the potential of the human mind to understand physical reality is revalued and the imaginative faculty gains more prominence.²⁷ The imagination or *phantasia* is now seen as a faculty that serves the functioning of rational thought. It processes sense-perception into mental images with the aim of making judgments. It can produce images *as if* they were present, thus aiding in the process of rational thinking. This Aristotelian notion, in which the imagination is a cognitive ability with an epistemological function, was adopted by Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians.²⁸ The imagination was thus viewed less sceptically and more sympathetically and this filtered through beyond the scholastic realm, into theories on spirituality and mysticism. Likewise arguing for a higher status of the imagination, Barbara Newman has defined a category of often vernacular medieval texts including what is considered mystical literature as 'imaginative theology', as 'the pursuit of serious religious and theological thought through the techniques of imaginative literature, especially vision, dialogue, and personification'.²⁹ Newman however uses the term imagination not necessarily in its medieval meaning but as 'thinking with images' with the help of vivid, image-rich language.³⁰

The circulation and reception of views on the faculty of the imagination in the late medieval Low Countries has up till now received little attention. Developments in this region did of course not take place in isolation – authors writing on the imagination, mainly male mystics and theologians such as Ruusbroec and Geert Grote, participated in international networks.³¹ Yet we can assume that direct knowledge of Aristotle's work was limited, as few manuscripts of his works from the Low Countries survive.³² His psychology did circulate more widely in digest form in encyclopaedias such as Bartholomew the Englishman's thirteenth-century *De proprietatibus rerum*, who saw the brain as composed of three cells: imagination, reason, and memory.³³ These ideas can also be found in the fifteenth-century Middle Dutch catechetical summa *Tafel vanden Kersten ghelove* ['Table of the Christian faith'] written by the Dominican cleric Dirc van Delf.³⁴ Recently, the edited volume *Mystical Anthropology: Authors from the Low Countries* presented the views on the composition of the soul expressed in vernacular mystical authors such as Ruusbroec and Hendrik Herp, but not much attention is given to the faculty of the imagination. The edited volume *Geen povere schoonheid: Laat-middeleeuwse kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie* ['No poor beauty: Late medieval art related

²⁵ Ringbom, 'Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions', p. 163; Minnis, 'Medieval Imagination and Memory', pp. 245-246; Newman, 'What Did It Mean to Say "I Saw"?'; Fraeters, 'Visio/Vision'.

²⁶ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition*, p. 2.

²⁷ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition*, 3. See also Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought*, pp. 14-37 for Aristotle's philosophy of the imagination.

²⁸ Kärkkäinen, 'The Senses in Philosophy and Science'; Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*; Minnis, 'Medieval Imagination and Memory', p. 240. See also Palmén, *Richard of St. Victor's Theory of Imagination*, on the influence of classical theories of imagination on the philosophy and theology of Richard of St. Victor.

²⁹ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, p. 292.

³⁰ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, p. 298.

³¹ Waaijman, 'Beeld en beeldloosheid'; Faesen and Arblaster ed., *Mystical Anthropology*.

³² Schepers, 'Multilayeredness of the Highest Faculties in the Arnhem Mystical Sermons', p. 155.

³³ Minnis, 'Medieval Imagination and Memory', pp. 239-240.

³⁴ Roodenburg, 'Imagination over Matter?', p. 182.

to the *Devotio moderna*'] pays attention to ideas on the role of images in devotion in the context of the *Devotio moderna* reform movement.³⁵ However, much remains to be done in this area.

In this issue, two contributions explore the views of male monastic authors of the *Devotio moderna* movement on the role of the imagination in the practice of meditation. **Ingrid Falque** draws attention to Geert Grote's *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* as a hitherto little explored source on meditational practice. With her thorough analysis of this fourteenth-century text as an instruction manual for the proper use of imagery and the imagination in meditation, she provides a crucial contribution to our understanding of the faculty of the imagination and image-based meditation in the Low Countries. She argues that in Grote's view on the cognitive process universals are extracted from images, making the imagination and the formation of mental images (*phantasmata*) crucial to meditation, not only in the beginner's stage but also in the later stages of spiritual perfection. **Thor-Oona Pignarre-Altermatt** examines the ideas on the use of the imagination in a later text of the Modern Devotion, the *Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium et sacrarum meditationum* written by the fifteenth-century Augustinian friar Jan Mombaer. These spiritual exercises were partly inspired by Grote and are often overlooked in the history of spirituality. Through a lexical analysis, Pignarre-Altermatt uncovers Mombaer's complex and nuanced view of the function of imagination in meditation, which complements the memory and evokes emotions. She argues that for Mombaer the imagination had an ethical component; mental pictures help in moving the will to initiate action and thus imaginative meditation could cultivate virtuousness.

Affective devotion and imaginative practices for new audiences

In the late medieval period, imaginative devotional practices were tailored to the demands of a larger audience. A particularly widespread spiritual exercise in late medieval Europe was the meditation on the passion of Christ. In this practice, the devotee focuses on inner sensations: emotional responses to and compassion for the life and Passion of Christ, and the joys and sorrows of the Virgin Mary. Richard Southern first described this new type of devotion emerging in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033-1109), who with his Passion meditations created an imaginative way to explore the self in relation to God, heralding the 'new subjectivity' of the long twelfth century.³⁶ Southern showed how this type of meditation was further developed by the Cistercian monk and so-called father of Western mysticism, Bernard of Clairvaux; and subsequent scholars paid attention to the Franciscan tradition as an important instigator of such affective meditations on the *vita Christi*.³⁷ A key text that promulgated this monastic practice to a wider public is the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi* (ca. 1300), which circulated widely in the Middle Ages, in a long and short version and both in Latin and vernacular languages. Visualisation and emotional empathy take centre stage in this manual for how to meditate on the life of Jesus. The author of the *Meditationes* tells the reader to 'place yourself in the presence of whatever is related as having been said or done by the Lord Jesus, as if you were hearing it with your own ears and seeing it with your own eyes, giving it your total mental response', and to imagine these events 'as they occurred or as they might have occurred according to the devout belief of the imagination and the varying interpretation of the mind'.³⁸ The emphasis on visualization gives the imagination a central role in this highly emotive form of late-medieval piety.³⁹

Scholars such as Barbara Newman have argued that the laity was not only a recipient but also an important instigator for the production of texts stimulating the imagination. The tradition of visions as the result of spiritual training – as opposed to spontaneous, unpredictable visions – began in twelfth-century cloisters where visionaries had access to a vast amount of literature which stimulated the imagination.⁴⁰ Laypeople with a desire to participate in this practice did not enjoy the same education

³⁵ Waaijman, 'Beeld en beeldloosheid' discusses Geert Grote's *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* with attention for the *imaginatio* and *phantasia*; Van Dijk, 'Thematische meditatie' discusses Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen's emphasis on inner visualization and *phantasmata* in his treatise *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*. See also Caron, "'Aensien doet gedencken'".

³⁶ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*; Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*.

³⁷ Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*; Despres, *Ghostly Sights*; Beckwith, *Christ's Body*.

³⁸ *Meditationes vitae Christi*, trans. by Ragusa, p. 5.

³⁹ On the 'imaginary scenarios' in the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, see Flora, 'Empathy and Performative Vision'.

⁴⁰ Newman, 'What Did It Mean to Say "I Saw"?' pp. 5, 25.

and instead used visionary scripts, produced from the mid-twelfth century on, ‘to help readers visualize the life of Christ so vividly that pious imagination would shade into visionary experience’.⁴¹

Two articles in this issue focus on textual productions of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries Low Countries eliciting affective and immersive experiences that were designed to cultivate the religious imagination of a broad audiences through different media: vernacular sermons and books of hours. **Pieter Boonstra** analyses the sermons of Jan Brugman as multisensorial narratives. Through his sensory language, but also through the theatrics of his preaching and his engagement with the environment, the audience was immersed and encouraged to place themselves present at important religious scenes. As such, Brugman’s sermons blurred the lines between the perceptible and the spiritual world and elicited emotional responses. In her contribution on the books of hours as translated in Middle Dutch by Geert Grote, **Anna Dlabáčová** argues that a certain imaginative skill was needed to read and interpret the text. This ‘sequential reading’ or ‘contextual reading’ involves a sensitivity to the various voices and perspectives presented in the text and the attribution of meaning according to the context in which a certain text passage is presented. Basing her analysis on a printed copy of the hours dating from 1498, Dlabáčová argues that by promoting and cultivating interpretative skill, Geert Grote’s translation had a significant cultural influence.

Not only meditative and immersive texts, but also material culture played a crucial role in late medieval imaginative practices. Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen argues that in the Middle Ages the sacred needed sensory mediation in order to become an authentic experience.⁴² This required training of the *hagiosensorium*, denoting the ‘sacred senses’ as well as the ‘sensing of the sacred’, to be able to perceive the divine.⁴³ Devotional images functioned as ‘props of perception’, directing the gaze at the sacred and both sanctifying the object of the senses and the senses themselves.⁴⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum has done important work on the paradoxical nature of Christian materiality and holy objects, emphasizing the transformative potential of matter in both intellectual thought and everyday life.⁴⁵ The relic culture of the medieval period testifies to the importance of materiality in imaginative devotional practices. **Caroline Van Sumere**’s contribution to this issue focuses on the Tongeren septennial relic display and the relic sheet that reproduces it in relation to collective and individual imaginative practices of devotion. The sheet offered the public possibilities for imagining salvation, reimagining the relic display, and meditating on the saints’ narratives as a devotional act. As such, the sanctifying power of the relics can be reproduced in the homes of pilgrims. Through its ‘proximate grace’ the sheet makes the divine present.

Imaginative scripts for spiritual communities

Communal imaginative practices could function in the identity-formation of religious communities, on scale from mystical-intellectual to everyday devotion. Richard Kieckhefer argues that exceptional and ordinary religious experiences were highly interwoven. The presence of Christ was ‘ordinary as a matter of implicit faith but exceptional as a matter of explicit experience’.⁴⁶ Focusing on the more mystical encounters, found in, e.g., the texts of the Helfta nuns or the German sister-books, Kieckhefer shows how these imaginative visions played a role in the formation of their communities. Research on immersive spiritual practice has been connected to the identity-formation in elite religious communities by Line Cecilie Engh, who has analysed the ‘imaginative immersion’ in the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux for his monks, showing how the mystic uses cognitive techniques such as ‘deictic displacement’ and ‘blended viewpoint’ to create a spiritual reality in the Cistercian cloister and enact a transformation of the self, making comparisons with the experience of virtual reality games.⁴⁷ Similar forms of imaginative immersion could also take place in communities of religious women.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Newman, ‘What Did It Mean to Say “I Saw”?’’, p. 25.

⁴² Jørgensen, ‘Sensorium’.

⁴³ Jørgensen, ‘Sensorium’, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Jørgensen, ‘Sensorium’, pp. 45-47.

⁴⁵ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*; Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*.

⁴⁶ Kieckhefer, *The Mystical Presence of Christ*, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Engh, ‘Imaginative Immersion’; see also Buschbeck, ‘Sprechen mit dem Heiligen’.

⁴⁸ Smits, ‘Out of Sight’.

Other scholars have recently connected medieval intellectual theories of imagination to the practices and material culture of everyday life in religious communities. Herman Roodenburg calls attention to the more ‘humble objects’ of devotion, focusing on the sister-books of lay sisters and nuns of the *Devotio moderna*. Building on the work of An-Katrien Hanselaer and Jeroen Deploige on the regulation of emotions in female communities,⁴⁹ and of Anna Dlabáčová on spinning as meditative activity,⁵⁰ he argues that the most common objects, such as spinning wheels, embodied spiritual imaginations and formed incentives for the ‘constant stream of affective practices’ that characterized their lives.⁵¹ Their *oculus imaginationis* did not require a rich material culture.⁵²

Gender – be it the gender of a text’s author, its audience, or the presence of gendered metaphors in a text – is a recurring theme in most if not all of the above-mentioned scholarship on the imaginative practices of spiritual communities. In the study of affective piety, the practice has been explicitly interpreted as being developed for the needs of two specific groups: not only laypeople, but also religious women. Sarah McNamer argues that early texts of affective piety, like Anselm’s, were composed for women, and that the ‘emotion scripts’ of Passion meditations, casting the reader as participant in scenes of Christ’s suffering, were gendered: ‘to perform compassion is to feel like a woman’.⁵³ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Paul Vandenbroeck, and Barbara Baert have written fundamental studies on the imaginative practices and material culture of female religious communities in the Low Countries.⁵⁴

In this issue, the role of the imagination in mystical literature written by clerics for religious communities is discussed in **Lydia Shahan**’s article on the *Limburg Sermons*, a vernacular Middle Dutch mystical sermons collections compiled c. 1300, to explore the cultivation of the religious imagination. She argues that the sermons thematize the process of preaching with the use of the imagery of the Song of Songs, resulting in a gendered understanding of speech gendered feminine, the audience adopting the roles of bride and mother. Moreover, the audience is encouraged to imagine Mary’s speech, modeling themselves after her. **Godelinde Gertrude Perk** connects mysticism and everyday communal life in her examination of the violent nuptial imaginary of the liturgies of the virgin martyrs, especially that of Agnes, in the Diepenveen sister-book. This text, Perk argues, joins images in a mnemonic chain, connecting the virgin martyrs to the sisters’ lives and the convent’s hagiography. The use of virgin saints’ liturgies produced a collective mysticism for the Diepenveen sisters, which Perk discusses with attention for its complex relation to gendered perceptions of somatic spirituality. **Renske Hoff** discusses a Middle Dutch song book (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds Néerlandais 39), used within a female religious community, as sensational form. Analysing the texts as affective scripts, she argues that through their emotional and sensational language the songs stimulate the imagination and spiritual growth, shaping a community of singers and their experience of the divine. The physical book, being composed and interacted with by many makers and users, reflects a community of readers.

With this special issue on the imagination in the religious cultures of the late medieval Low Countries, we have aspired to provide the community of scholars with a set of exemplary case studies on how the imagination was used as a spiritual tool in devotional life, and which roles texts, images and objects could play in imaginative spiritual practices. We hope this interdisciplinary volume may foster further research on the topic, for scholars working on the devotional context of the Low Countries and beyond.

⁴⁹ Hanselaer and Deploige, “Van groeter bannicheit hoers herten”.

⁵⁰ Dlabáčová, ‘Spinning with Passion’.

⁵¹ Roodenburg, ‘Imagination over Matter?’, p. 179.

⁵² Roodenburg, ‘Imagination over Matter?’, p. 185.

⁵³ McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, p. 119.

⁵⁴ Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles*; Vandenbroeck, Irigaray, Bries, and Caeymaex, *Hooglied*; Baert, *Interruptions and Transitions*

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