

Phenomenology of Religious Experience

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Javier E. Carreño*

Religious Experience and Photography: The Phenomenology of Photography as Revelatory of the Religious Play of Imagination

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Abstract: That there are genuinely religious representations, and that the practice of praying with images involves no confusion of the divine with its representation, are matters firmly established by a phenomenology of imagination such as Edmund Husserl's. Moreover, such a phenomenological regard can become attentive to the concrete roles played by a viewer's imagination in his dealings with various sorts of images. I propose to bring these phenomenological insights to show that there is a distinctively religious play of imagination in dealing with religious images. Moreover, I address this question by turning to one kind of representation which Barthes and others have found unsuitable for representing a religious subject, namely, photographic images. While agreeing with some of these reservations, this paper explores some of the ways in which photography may still be found to represent a religious subject, shifting the problem of religious photography from its inherent impossibility to its inadequacy. In doing so, I show that the distinctively religious play of imagination vis-à-vis religious representations cuts a wedge between the depictive and the symbolic, and is rather akin to a metaphorical use of representations.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Religion, Imagination, Image, Photography

"I may well worship an Image, a Painting, a Statue, but a photograph?"¹ With this question, Roland Barthes wants to settle an issue that is not quite as clear for the religious believer who prays with depictive images. Within Christianity, God is transcendent to the world, and belongs to an altogether different order from perception. Photography, by remaining faithful to what was once perceivable, and by representing it without symbolization, seems furthest removed from representing the religious. Yet, at least for the Christian, God is not prevented by His transcendence from acting tangibly in the visible world – for "the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us" (John 1:14). The good news of the incarnation returns yet again in the Church and in the sacraments – visible signs for invisible realities, which, especially in the Eucharist, are *what* they signify. Why, then, would photographs be prevented from giving testimony of the divine agency in the *here and now*?

One answer to this question is that, at least in Christianity, photography runs counter to the grain of accepted iconographic practices and their theological or metaphysical commitments. One could also say that a divine subject is nowhere constrained to appear in a photograph the way perceived things do. Divine manifestation, whether in word or in image, is itself a divinely given gift and not a man-made imposition.²

1 Barthes, *Camera*, 90.

2 We can see this, for instance, in the Jewish tradition of the 72 translators – and their exact translations – of the Torah, signaling God's own willingness to have His Word rendered into Greek.

*Corresponding author: Javier E. Carreño, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Austria; E-mail: jcarreno@franciscan.edu

As a phenomenologist, however, I want to address the possibility of religious photography, focusing on the kind of appearing photographs bear on their subject. Moreover, I believe this question is valuable as it brings to the fore some of the necessary determinations of the *play of imagination* in one who prays with images.

Furthermore, finding the contours of the religious play of imagination is important because there is a history of not properly acknowledging it in the practice of praying with images. Rationalists, early and recent, have suspected that iconophilic believers are deluded. However, Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his critique of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, pointed out that no one paying an act of piety to an image crudely confuses the image with what it represents.³ At the heart of praying with images there is at least the conscious distinction between an image and its subject. However, I will argue through the case of a *minimal* photography of the religious that there has to be more than just a depictive play to the believer's imagination. In fact, her imagination must also play a *metaphoric* role in connecting the image and its subject.

1 The depictive play of imagination

In the order of things, I propose to first follow Edmund Husserl's description of both depictive images and the "play of imagination" that generally corresponds to them.

Already in the "phenomenological breakthrough" of the *Logical Investigations*, Edmund Husserl breaks free from the Empiricist tendency to account for our perceptual awareness of things by appealing to "mental images."⁴ For Husserl, "mental images" do not account for conscious *intentionality* – the predominant feature of consciousness as consciousness *of* something – but the other way around: intentional consciousness accounts for how we can become aware of objectivities, including *depicted* objectivities. Hence, for Husserl, there are no "mental images" in consciousness.⁵ Neither are there "real images" in the world or in things, as if images existed as parts of things or as if things had the spontaneous property of representing something else. The term "image" turns out to name not a thing but rather a mental, ideal objectivity – an objectivity that only exists *for consciousness* and yet appears embedded within the perceptual field of regard.

In both earlier and later texts Husserl consistently understands both imagination (*Phantasie*) and image-consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*) as modifications of perception since their objectivity, however intuitively intended, is not posited as actually existing before our perceptual regard. Perception, in contrast, is indeed "originary consciousness" and ranks as an act of presentation (*Gegenwärtigung*) because perception directly and intuitively presents a thing in space as corporeally (*leibhaftig*) before our perceptual regard.⁶ Hence, our conscious relation to external images, as well as our acts of memory and pure imagination (*Phantasie*), rank as representifications (*Vergegenwärtigungen*). The latter name is fitting since these latter acts do entail a double presence.⁷ Consider, for example, depictions such as a family photograph, a devotional portrait, and a byzantine icon. While these images are found within my perceptual field of regard, *what* appears in them does not appear as presently before me. The depicted objectivities appear not directly but through something else that is present – in a way analogous to signs and symbols, but with the difference that the

³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical*, 125.

⁴ Husserl, *Logical*. A significant landmark of the *Logische Untersuchungen* is the account of perception as an intentional consciousness that is not mediated by mental immanent representations understood as mental *images*. For Husserl, it is not in virtue of any immanent objectivity or mental image that perceptual consciousness has an intentional object. Moreover, it is also not in virtue of any such mental representation that perception enjoys the direct appearance of a thing under a certain aspect or perspective called "adumbration" or *Abschattung*. Thus Husserl contradicts this basic assumption in various theories of perception sponsored by many Modern thinkers, and which Husserl calls the *Bildertheorie*. For further reference see Zahavi, "Intentionality." It is also worth noting that in the lecture course entitled "Main Problems of Phenomenology and the Theory of Knowledge" from the Winter Semester of 1904/05 Husserl still treated pure imagination or *Phantasie* as informed by a kind of pictorialization (see Husserl, *Phantasy*, 18). However, by 1909 Husserl has overcome even this claim to an immanent pictorialization for pure phantasy (see Husserl, *Phantasy*, 323).

⁵ Husserl, *Phantasy*, 23.

⁶ Husserl, *Analyses*, 40.

⁷ Marbach, "Edmund", 236; Bernet, "Framing", 3.

image *already* offers an intuition of what is intended. More concretely, in our encounters with depictions, one distinguishes between (1) the presentation of an *image-object* and (2) the *subject* of the depiction, that is, the photographed family of four, St. Philomena, or the Resurrection. Husserl further distinguishes both the object and the subject of an image from (3) the underlying *image-thing*, that is, the photographic paper with inkblots, or the gilded, wooden tablet that triggers my consciousness of an image.⁸

Now, while this image-thing appears as perceptually present, it appears in an inhibited way. I do not see the cardboard paper and inkblots as such, *unless* I look contrary to the intentions of the artist, for example, as when I place the image upside down, or else come too close to the picture, visually attaining the equivalent of excessively zooming in and seeing a picture pixelate.⁹ This inhibited appearance of the underlying image-thing matters to us because it signals the basic play of imagination in depiction. As I perceive the image-thing, my imagination takes up the sensuous contents of that perceptual appearance and “phantasizes-in” (*hineinphantasieren*) the image-object. Thus, the image-object appears within the perceptual field of regard by taking up actual sensuous contents. Yet, since the image-object is phantasized, I never take it as something merely perceived. Rather, I take the image as wholly exhibiting something else.¹⁰

It is worth noting that the image-object can only exhibit a subject to the degree to which the appearing image resembles the originary perceiving of an object. By way of resemblance the “consciousness of the intended object lives in the kindred traits” of the image.¹¹ The image-subject does not appear all by itself and apart from the image – unless one no longer looks at the image but simply daydreams about it – but rather, one “sees” the subject “in” (*hineinsehen*) the image-object. Since the subject appears in a borrowed, proximate appearance, rather than in its own *originary* appearance, the subject appears *unmistakably* as absent.

From the foregoing it is clear that no perception could interconnect these three image-objectivities – thing, object, and subject – without a dual play of imagination. For on the one hand, *perceptual phantasy* constitutes the appearing of the image-object as an appearing unmistakably different from the surrounding perceptual appearances. And on the other hand, *analogizing phantasy* articulates the appearing of an absent subject in the appearance of the image-object – appearing unmistakably different from a corresponding, originary perceptual appearance.¹²

Depictive images, of course, can exhibit real as much as fictive objects. When I turn to the family photograph, I recognize my wife and children. When I look at a Van Gogh painting, I see Irises. Or when I see a hand-drawn unicorn, I see a fabled creature. Each depiction has a subject, but in each case the way of “having a subject” deserves to be differently qualified in accordance with authorial intentions and the reach of the given image-making technique.¹³

2 The photographic play of imagination

The triadic structure of image-consciousness can now help us understand the exceptionality of photography from a phenomenological standpoint. In photographs, one distinguishes between image-object and image-subject, but unlike in painting, it is more difficult in a photograph to attend to the image-object apart from the image-subject.¹⁴ “It is” says Barthes, “as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself”. And

⁸ Husserl, *Phantasy*, 584.

⁹ Ibid. 583, 587.

¹⁰ See Husserl, *Phantasy*, 570 as well as Biceaga, “Picturing” and Marbach, “Edmund”. As Marbach notes, Husserl rethinks on a few occasions the manner of givenness of the image-object. When he claims this givenness to be *perceptual*, he stresses the fact that an image is given *within* the perceptual regard and *with* the force of something perceived. But then, Husserl is forced to belabor the difference between the perceptual givenness of images and that of perceptual illusions – something he does not need to do the moment he admits that the givenness of the image-object is *already* pervaded by imaginative intentions.

¹¹ Husserl, *Phantasy*, 30.

¹² Ibid., 564 and 616.

¹³ Thus, for Husserl, the status of image subject is better thought of as neither something real nor something fictive itself but rather as something *ideal* whose appearance in image must conform to the idea, for example, of a human family, an iris, and a unicorn. See Husserl, *Phantasy*, 646.

¹⁴ Bernet, “Framing”, 3.

again: “A photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.”¹⁵ In turn, Barthes calls the image-subject a ‘spectrum’ since the photographed person appears to ‘pose,’ that is, imitate herself. In doing so, for Barthes, the portrait sitter unwittingly undergoes “a rehearsal of death” as a subjectivity playing the part of an objectivity.

A photograph does not just represent a subject – it also indexes or certifies that something real existed before the camera for the reflected light to impress the chemically coated film or digital sensor. And while it usually takes a person to set off the camera before an object and then select the photograph, the process itself occurs under predetermined parameters without the interference of the consciousness of the artist. Hence: photography only captures what is present or *in* the present simultaneous with its operation. One cannot photograph the past or the future – only a concurrent “present.” But as the photograph is taken, the photographed presence becomes an index for a past presence.¹⁶ Furthermore, the photographed past appears so certain that it cannot be improved upon, tinkered, or relived with the plasticity of memory. As Barthes puts it, the photograph is “neither image nor reality [but] a new being, really: a reality one can no longer touch.”¹⁷ This isolation and unrepeatability of the photograph is further emphasized by the fact that unlike a remembered past, photography conveys just a past moment. Without my awareness of having perceived what appears photographically, an undated photograph certifies that the past thing existed, but it does not tell me just how long ago.¹⁸

According to Brough, the play of imagination – particularly on the level of phantasizing the image-subject – becomes so constrained to the “real world” and so “specific” to the mundanely visible that photographs inevitably foil both our awareness of something fictive and our awareness of the religious.¹⁹ One could read, for example, a children’s book with photographs of people dressed up in costume instead of having drawn characters, but the overall fictive experience would be spoiled by inevitable intentions about the real persons themselves. Similarly, when looking at photographic stills for a play or movie, our recognition of the characters is ‘toned down’ by the awareness of the real actors: they do not yet appear “concealed” by the enveloping narrative of the play or the movie.²⁰ With regards to a religious subject, photography struggles with the temporal or ontological inaccessibility of religious figures – even if nothing prevents, as an ideal possibility, that Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary could have been photographed. More decisively for Brough, photography, with its adherence to a past reality, also closes “the space between the image and its religious subject for the play of imagination, which is an essential ingredient in religious experience.”²¹

As I will show in a moment, I will partly agree with Brough that photography is not as ideally suited to represent the religious as the other sacred arts. However, photography’s capacity to convey the worldly and all “that-has-been” is not absolute or total, but has limits. Indeed, the photograph’s ‘reality effect’ is at all possible because of the necessary distinction between image-object and image-subject.²² The question that we must now consider, then, is whether the distinction or distance between image-object and -subject in photography is on the whole constant, or whether there are some cases where it takes more than just resemblance to see in the photograph the subject it purports to give.

¹⁵ Barthes, *Camera*, 5.

¹⁶ Brough “Curious”, 35. Even photographs of distant stars, or long-exposure photographs that depict in an instant what appears in a temporal spread, suggest an appearance time to which the photograph was, in either case, concurrent.

¹⁷ Barthes, *Camera*, 87.

¹⁸ Clearly the play of imagination in contemplating photographs is not naïve. Thanks to empirical clues, we know upon looking at a photograph that we are looking at an appearing captured with a camera at a given moment of time, and representing just the things that actually stood before it.

¹⁹ Brough “Curious”, 40.

²⁰ Husserl, *Phantasy*, 615. One may here contrast, for example, a still from Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *La passion de Jeanne d’Arc* showing Maria Falconetti dressed as St. Joan of Arc with the moving picture: in the former, the actress as a real person pronouncedly comes to the fore, whereas in the latter it is St. Joan who comes to the fore. Another example is a photograph of St. Thérèse of Lisieux dressed in costume to look like St. Joan of Arc. Though one does not miss the allusion to St. Joan, St. Thérèse comes to the fore in the photograph.

²¹ Brough, “Curious”, 41.

²² Biceaga, “Picturing”, 89.

3 Can the religious be photographed?

I will now address three ways in which something religious may be said to come into contact with photographic representation: as the *numinous*, as the *miraculous*, and as the *sacramental*. We will see that the connection between the photographic image and its subject in each case shows varying degrees of closeness, and that the difficulty with religious photography lies with whether we can confidently take the image for the subject it gives.

The first contender for a photography of the religious considers the latter under the rubric of the numinous. For Rudolf Otto, the *numinous* occurs whenever we are in the presence of “an overpowering, absolute might of some kind.”²³ Both objective, wholly other, and yet wholly mysterious, the *numinous* strikes in us a distinctive dread or terrifying awe which also coincides with a certain fascination for what positively exceeds us. C.S. Lewis has described the particularity of this dread by contrasting it with a fear for what some power might do to you. The numinous, he argues, is rather awakened by *what* the object of fear is.²⁴

Inspired by Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw has highlighted some of the ways in which the plastic arts communicate the *numinous*:²⁵

- By evoking dazzling sunlight;
- By means of darkness and semi-darkness, as in the interior of Gothic churches which signal that the divine dwells in impenetrable light;
- By representing the divine in “threatening majesty”;
- By means of the ghastly or the ghostly;
- And also by the communication of the human and the divine, together with the overlap between the beautiful and the sacred, such as in the representation of the person of Christ.

I do not take this list to be exhaustive, but already it illustrates that the artistic representation of the *numinous* tends to depart from the mere realistic representation of things and moves towards a contrast or else a coincidence of opposites. By comparison, the *numinous* in photography tends to reduce to the *uncanny*, as in Atget’s desolate shots or as in old daguerreotypes whose stiffness is somewhat eerie: these do not readily communicate the religious as *numinous*. Still, one may think of photographs of great religious artworks which already convey the numinous, such as Robert Hupka’s remarkable takes on the *Pietà*.²⁶ Also, one may here invoke photographs, such as that by Lajos Keresztes (Fig. 1) which depicts another representation but in a way that almost “animates” the sculpture as if the shot corresponded to one of the feet of Christ.²⁷ Lastly, in the photographic representation of modern day saints, one could read some of that remarkable tension, for example, between light and darkness, or between innocence and severity.

It is fairly clear that the many facets of the numinous are not as intensely found in photography as in the plastic arts. Still, cases such as photographs of holy people elicit not only a photographic play of imagination but also require a regard that seeks to *already* see *by faith* something that the mere depiction does not unequivocally reveal, namely, grace at work with nature.²⁸ Naturally, the ‘holiness’ that a photograph conveys is no evidence, and in order to manifest the presence of that grace some symbolization is still needed, as when the devotional card of a newly canonized saint based on a photograph still receives a halo – though on condition that this representation approximates iconicity, for example, presenting the saint facing the audience and not in profile.

²³ Otto, *Idea*, 10; Steinbock, *Phenomenology*, 21.

²⁴ Lewis, *Problem*, 6.

²⁵ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred*, 190.

²⁶ Hupka, *Pietà*, 1975.

²⁷ *La Photographie*, 328.

²⁸ Husserl, *Phantasy*, 172. Brough, in an article defending the possibility to represent “the spiritual” in plastic arts in general, describes this “logically mediated image-consciousness” as follows: “Pictures can contain more than the sensuous, but one can become aware of this surplus only if one brings understanding and experience – knowledge – to the picture” (Brough, “Picturing,” 55).



Fig. 1. Lajos Keresztes, “Titicaca, Bolivia 1988” – © Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln (1995/1996). By permission of Kulturelles Erbe Köln

In these cases, the photograph may depict a religious subject, but on condition that the viewer completes the identification between the image-object and the image-subject by faith. In other words, and without symbolization, the depiction of the photograph can only evoke a religious subject *metaphorically* and admittedly *minimally*. For it does present the religious – but only as what is *barely visible*, or else not plainly visible without faith.

A second contender for the photography of the religious considers the latter under the rubric of the *miraculous*. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines miracles as signs of wonder, “such as healing or the control of nature, which can only be attributed to divine power.”²⁹ Within the scope of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, we have (a) miraculously made images, the *acheiropoieta*; (b) miraculous images – that is, images through which God grants special favors; and (c) images depicting a miraculous event.

Regarding the first (=a), as Daniel Grojnowski points out, there is a surprising affinity between photographs and the Christian tradition of miraculous images called *acheiropoieta*, or “not made by the hand,” such as the Mandylion and the Turin Shroud.³⁰ These images are not just imprints made by contact, but *images* made by contact. When Secondo Pia first photographed the Shroud in 1898, he discovered that the Shroud’s image was itself a perfect negative of a man with closed eyes showing the peculiar signs of martyrdom that faith believes to be of Christ. He went on to claim that for this reason photography had actually yielded the portrait of Jesus.³¹

²⁹ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 547, 548 and glossary. This definition of miracles is in tension with the Humean definition of a miracle as a violation of a law of nature by a supernatural being.

³⁰ Grojnowski, *Photographie*, 20.

³¹ Falcinelli, “Unpublished.”

With respect to the second kind (=b), it is worth noting that miraculous images do not hold their place of pride either by their degree of resemblance or by their artistry. Their being miraculous is rather experienced religiously both as a mystery and as a gratuitous gift. As van der Leeuw notes, “The Roman Catholic knows that the most holy images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, or other saints, blackened with age, are only rarely the most important works of art. In Italy, it is the ‘black madonnas’ which work miracles.”³²

With the advent of photography, there have also been rare pictures depicting a miraculous event witnessed by others (=c), such as from the Marian apparition in Zeitoun (Egypt) in 1968. One may also find scant records of miraculously made photographs (=a), in the sense of pictures depicting a religious subject that was not visible in the first place, such as Fr. George Webby’s 1950 picture outside the walls of the monastery of St. Charbel. The photograph, once developed, unexplainably included the image of a man who was not present at the scene but which monks who knew St. Charbel personally identified as the saint himself.

However, not only skeptics but also laity and clergy tend to respond to these photographs with remarkable apprehension.³³ It is as if the photograph with its ‘reality effect’ precisely invites questions about the veracity of what it depicts – whether the photograph in question has been doctored, or stems from a double-exposure, or simply grasps an illusory form. None of these issues emerge when praying with a painted or carved image, not even with one purportedly miraculous in origin. In other words, such photographs which purport to give either what is rarely visible or what was otherwise invisible polarize viewers who see completely different subjects given by the image. For one spectator, this will be a photograph of St. Charbel, whereas for another the photograph will give a perceptual illusion. Without the requisite act of faith, even a photograph purporting to reveal the invisible (or the exceptionally visible) will not give that “real subject.”

A third and last contender in our analysis of a photography of the religious considers the holy under the rubric of the sacramental. According to the traditional formula, sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ, and entrusted to the Church.”³⁴ They are neither natural phenomena nor human accomplishments such as mundane representations, depictions, and symbolizations. They are “mysteries,” preserving what is “mysterious” in them, namely, the agency of God who remains truly distinct from the world. However, all sacraments involve verbal (or formal) as well as material elements, so as to be received corporeally by the believer as channels of God’s grace – which these formal and material components themselves do not reveal. In relation to them, it would seem that photography only reveals the material components (oil in flasks, the hand that anoints, unleavened bread and wine, the hand that blesses in gesture).³⁵

Of the seven sacraments (or “mysteries”) of the Church, the Eucharist is “the Sacrament of sacraments” in which Christ Himself becomes substantially present. We cannot enter here into the manifold levels of manifestation, presence, and absence in the Eucharist, though Robert Sokolowski has proposed one in the context of his phenomenological theology.³⁶ Amongst others, Sokolowski differentiates the Eucharist from either a mere representation of the Last Supper or of the Crucifixion, even if the Eucharist does have an element of representation. Sokolowski also distinguishes the Eucharist from either a mere repetition

³² van der Leeuw, *Sacred*, 163-164.

³³ It is well worth pointing out here that, for example, the alleged Marian apparitions at Garabandal, Spain, have not received approval from the Bishop of Santander, not even while involving photographic and cinematic “evidence” of a Eucharistic bread appearing on the mouth of a seer (which she claimed was holy communion given by an angel). It is also worth noting that in relation to the approved apparitions of Fatima – which included a miraculous solar event witnessed by tens of thousands of people – Ecclesiastical authorities have been cautious to publicize these photos. Even in their references to phenomena such as the visions of Sr. Lucia they have repeatedly claimed that they are not “photographic” in nature. See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “The Message of Fatima.”

³⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1994, sec. 1131.

³⁵ Cf. Sokolowski, *The God of Faith*, 38 and 144 *passim*. As he puts it in this text, “Sacraments are continuous lessons in the transcendence of God” (147).

³⁶ Sokolowski, *Eucharistic*. For an excellent introduction to this text see Brough, “Theology.”

or even a natural re-enactment of these events, marveling at how the Eucharist is still “the one sacrifice of Christ,” and how every Eucharistic celebration both is and is not new “in the way – analogously – that a picture both is and is not other to what it depicts, and a quotation both is and is not a new statement.”³⁷

All sacraments in general involve layers of public disclosure and concealment, though at different levels. A baptism and a wedding celebration may have a public layer for which photographs are desirable. Yet, in each sacrament there is a non-public layer and a degree of intimacy for which photographic or plainly written records are not desired. This is also true of the Eucharist. Brough, commenting on Sokolowski, proffers that “In the mass, the spiritual action of God through his Son becomes public, intersubjective, in a sacramental way.”³⁸ But the photography of the Eucharist does reveal the limitations of that publicity. For example, one’s reception of the Blessed Sacrament may be public and seen, but a religious believer might be displeased at seeing a photograph of the moment in which she receives the Precious Body and Blood. She might describe such a photograph as intrusive, even if she would not thus describe a photograph of her consuming anything else in that way.

Now, if the photograph indeed only captured the mundane and the materially perceived, such a photograph would not be potentially distressing for a believer, any more than a photograph of one’s own infant baptism. Also, and unlike the photography of the miraculous, the cause of anxiety is not that something other than the visible and supernatural is unexplainably displayed. The photograph displays what was once actually and publicly visible. However, for the believer, this photograph still displays something religious and intimate – her reception of the Body and Blood of Christ. It is not just that the photograph fails to do justice to this reception; it is almost as if the photograph became the vehicle for a unique kind of injustice. We do not mean that a photograph would reveal the Body and Blood of Christ as such: but for the spectator, a photograph, firstly, *turns the communicant’s earnest reception* into a pose, and secondly, it portrays as *past* an encounter that for the believer cannot be ‘just past’ but bursts through the dikes of time and streams into eternity. In short: we still have here a minimal photograph of the religious event *as* religious, but this photograph may strike one as inappropriate. For the photograph turns the represented reception of the Sacrament of Life and of Christ’s triumph over death into an unwitting, vain rehearsal of death.

Some of these perplexities return when we consider the photography of Eucharistic Adoration. If one looks online at photographs of the Blessed Sacrament exposed, the question might arise for a believer whether *this is or was indeed the Body and Blood of Jesus*. The photograph *per se* cannot distinguish between a consecrated and an unconsecrated host, while for the believer who actually attends mass or a public veneration of the Blessed Sacrament, or even for one who follows it mediated through a live broadcast, this is not an issue. For the photograph, in revealing a past, still does not offer of itself a filled temporal context. Even when we see a photograph of a priest performing the act of consecration itself, this does not yet reveal to the religious observer, in and of itself, that the host *has* been consecrated. Looking through a book of photographs of Eucharistic Adoration, I realize that the reason why these photographs are not as disquieting is because they also depict, for example, the monstrance, the altar, even the Church or the solemn procession, and the worshipping community – representations within a photograph which bear witness to the supernatural of the depicted subject without removing the need for further reassurance. In contrast, one finds no need for reassurance in paintings which visualize the supernatural element of consecration: in these the *image-subject* is clearly and beyond doubt represented, and therefore it does not interfere with the act of prayer. These pictorial representations, even if stylistically not sophisticated, are preferable to photographs because in them the religious subject is represented as the one whom the religious believer seeks to praise, without giving rise to hesitations.

³⁷ Sokolowski, *Eucharistic*, 32.

³⁸ Brough, “Theology”, 148.

4 The religious play of imagination

We began with Barthes' question: "I may well worship an Image, a Painting, a Statue, but a photograph?" Neither would we but perhaps the reasons are now more concrete to us. As Leonid Ouspensky reminds us, art in Early Christianity "intended not to reflect the problems of life but to answer them."³⁹ A photograph of the religious, as we saw, might introduce doubt at a level where one would or should have at least the reassurance that the one to whom one prays is indeed the one who appears depicted.⁴⁰ The uneasy identifications we made in certain photographs indicated that there can be some unclarity as to the spiritual meaning or purpose behind, for example, a miraculous photograph. Furthermore, there is a discomfiting *fixity* to the photographed "past" which has no vistas either to the future or beyond the pale of temporality. This 'fixity' is an essential feature of the photograph, even if we were to consider particularly that interaction with it to which Barthes gives the name of *punctum* or animating "prickling." In contrast with the culturally informed, educated regard of photographs called *studium*, our response to the *punctum* effectively de-frames and restores some life to the picture. Thus Barthes goes on to say that photography "does have something to do with the resurrection" since what such a photograph contains for a particular viewer is "more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer."⁴¹ However, the sheer accident and mutability of the *punctum* makes the anchoring of a religious awareness on it even more uncertain and private.

One could develop further the contrast between iconographic representation and photography, but our goal remains to give greater specificity to the play of imagination in religious representation. To wit: religious imagination does not just interrelate image-object and image-subject on the basis of resemblance, but also coheres with an act of faith by taking the visible *image-object* to represent something not just unseen but (at least in this state of life) altogether invisible, namely, the work of sanctifying grace. What is peculiar about this way of relating the image and the subject, hence, is that it is not properly speaking *symbolic*, since a symbol, even when employing depictions, is only accidentally and conventionally related to what it signifies, whereas in a religious representation the unseen *already* appears somehow *in* the image. It is as if the proper way for an image to represent the religious is neither purely by resemblance nor by symbolization, but by an in-between which is closer to metaphors.⁴² For in religious images the consciousness of the intended object lives in the image – but, as we have seen, not solely on the basis of the image-object's analogizing traits. The *metaphoric* play of imagination involved on the part of the believer thus consists in taking what appears not just as depicting a supernatural subject but also as presenting or approximating elements that we cannot see in this state but take by faith.

³⁹ Ouspensky, "Meaning", 27.

⁴⁰ In the Orthodox theology of icons the connection between the icon and the represented saint has an element of realistic resemblance – insofar as the icon reproduces faithfully the characteristics of the prototype initially minted by an iconographer who might have known the saint. Yet on the other hand, the icon might provide a defective resemblance altogether without losing its concrete subject, since icons refrain from expressing a saint's individuality and focus rather on expressing a saint's glorification. All in all, icons do not orchestrate the kind of hesitation between the image-subject and the image-object that we have seen in the aforementioned cases of a photography of the sacred. See Ouspensky, "Meaning", 37-38. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that in the Western Church devotional portraits of recent saints – such as Saint John Paul II – have been modeled on photographs, or else are reproductions of photographs with an added halo. While the Eastern Church would not count such images as iconographic, the Western Church would insist, on the one hand, that the identification of the saint in the photograph is unmistakable, and moreover, that the photographic appearance of the canonized saint can still serve as *point d'appui* for an act of prayer. (In the case of the Eastern Church, something analogous could still be said about the photography-based mechanical reproduction of an icon: while not having the same religious value as the genuine icon, the reproduction can still prompt the believer to pray).

⁴¹ Barthes, *Camera*, 82 and 70.

⁴² For this use of "metaphor" see Brough, "Picturing", 55. It should be noted that this understanding of "metaphor" is not the same as what Husserl understands by "symbols". Husserl, in turn, seems to have lightly touched upon the issue of metaphors. At the Husserl Archives there is one manuscript "Zur Metapher" (A I 17 I) in which it is not entirely evident what Husserl says versus what he has transcribed from other sources, but which at least records (without further development) a difference between artistic metaphors and rhetorical metaphors.

Ouspensky, when delving into the symbolic aspects of an icon, seems to me to arrive at a similar conclusion: “The symbol is not in the iconography, not in *what* is represented, but in the method of representing, in *how* it is represented.”⁴³ He goes on to say that “the methods used by iconography for pointing to the Kingdom of God can only be figurative, symbolical, like the language of the parables in the Holy Scriptures,”⁴⁴ However, in our understanding, icons and parables would be more metaphoric and figurative than symbolic, because they do not just include the symbol within the intended meaning but also because the religious subject already appears represented. Due to this visible presence of the consciousness of the divine subject, it becomes possible to take icons as liturgical – as a part of religion and not merely as a referring to the religious.

Photography comes up short in comparison to icons. But photography does help us to understand the metaphoric play of imagination. And it remains important for us to consider the relation between photography and the religious, given our unabated predilection for photographs. Moreover, there is a truth to photography which, no matter how limited or in pretense, is not exempt from the Church’s mission to ‘churchify’ all that is true and make up for what is lacking. Without denying that traditional iconic representations remain supremely faithful to revealing the work of grace in nature, we must admit that a photograph can nevertheless “bring to mind” a religious subject and, if only indirectly, ease the believer’s way into prayer.⁴⁵ If a photograph succeeds in bringing to mind a *religious person* in this way, then perhaps a photography of the religious is indeed possible.⁴⁶

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⁴³ Ouspensky, “Meaning”, 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 49.

⁴⁵ “A photograph, when it is particularly good, re-presents a person to us. We immerse ourselves visually in the photograph. A photograph, however, can also *bring to mind (erinnert)* a person in a manner *similar to* that in which a sign brings to mind something signified. If it does that, the image is characterized, phenomenologically, as that which brings something to mind” (Husserl, *Phantasy*, 56). Emphasis added, so as to highlight the fact that for Husserl this use of photography is similar and analogous but still not quite identical to symbolization.

⁴⁶ Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the 2014 Annual Conference on Christian Philosophy hosted by Franciscan University of Steubenville in Steubenville, Ohio, and at the 2016 Phenomenology of Religious Experience conference at the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute in Berkeley, California. I am thankful to the organizers and participants of each event for their very kind welcome and fruitful discussion of its contents, as well as the very helpful comments and thorough corrections of the two anonymous reviewers. I am also indebted to Marc Barnes and especially to Jess McGee for bringing to my attention the problems related to photographs of sacraments.

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