

Zeitgeist: A Spirited Exchange about Mysticism and AI-Generated Images (and more) with ChatGPT

Jesse D. Mann, *Drew University*

*Where does the spirit live? Inside or outside
Things remembered, made things, things unmade?*

— **Seamus Heaney**

In the summer of 2024, I taught a condensed, six-week online course on medieval Christian mysticism.¹ This is a challenging subject to teach at a progressive Protestant theological school where many speak the language of spirituality, but few are familiar with the specific vocabulary of mysticism, and where medieval Europe is usually terra incognita if not terra non grata. I have taught the course before but never in this time frame and never fully online. Over the course of our six weeks together, a student in the class began to experiment with AI-generated images based on the texts we were reading (Bernard of Clairvaux, Elisabeth of Schönau, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich). Ultimately, she shared the images with the class in a semiformal, technologically sophisticated presentation, and that presentation stimulated some very interesting conversation. The presentation and the experience of the class more generally have raised many pedagogical (but also theological, ethical, and even aesthetic) questions for me – all of which connect with spirit or Spirit, broadly or variously conceived. For example: how do we learn from students and what does it mean when students become the teachers? Or: how does one develop an esprit de corps in an online class, especially one devoted to often very embodied spiritualities encountered mainly in texts? But the questions that continue to haunt me involve artificial intelligence:

how do AI-generated images (re)present spiritual or mystical texts, and what are the ethical, theological, and pedagogical implications of “creating” and studying such images? Of course, there is much one could say about these questions, so this will be only a preliminary investigation, an initial foray, an approximation. And it will involve you, dear reader.

There are numerous generative AI (GenAI) platforms that will turn text into image.² The student in my class used dream.ai.com. This tool offers to “turn words into digital art.” A sort of *creatio ex verbo* – and that ain’t nothing (no *nihilo* here). You enter text; it gives you image. *Verbum imago factum est*. There is a dialogic quality to it. A variation on the theme of call and response. Some might call this awe-some; some might respond that it’s fear-some. But, to use the terms of Thomas Tweed, religion is marked by this tension between wonder and worry.³ I decided to engage in a wondrous and worrisome dialogue of my own. So I asked ChatGPT⁴ the following question:

How would you organize a journal article in which you discuss the use of images generated by AI from medieval mystical texts?

ChatGPT said:

When organizing a journal article that discusses the use of AI-generated images from medieval mystical texts, it’s important to structure it clearly to ensure the content is engaging, scholarly, and informative. Below is a suggested outline that you can adapt depending on your specific focus, audience, and academic discipline:....

It then produced an impressively detailed seven-point outline that included a remarkable and surprising (should I now marvel or agonize?) capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism as it encouraged me “to consider the limitations of AI image creation.”

My AI interlocutor also suggested that I justify the choice of texts and passages I wished to use as examples. It should suffice here

to say that the following examples come mostly (but not entirely) from my summer class and that they all refer in some way to spirit or the Spirit. In addition, these texts present some striking imagery that invites visualization. And, again, this is only an experiment, a trial with error experiment.

I asked a preliminary question:

What do you think about producing images from medieval mystical texts?

ChatGPT said:

That’s a really fascinating idea! Medieval mystical texts are rich with vivid, symbolic, and often abstract imagery – perfect for visual interpretation. The way mystics described encounters with the divine, inner spiritual struggles, and moments of transcendence is deeply poetic and emotionally charged. Transforming that into images allows for a creative exploration of how these profound, often ineffable experiences might look visually.

Since medieval mysticism often draws on light, fire, wounds of love, celestial visions, and the meeting of human and divine, those elements lend themselves well to symbolic and surreal artistic expression. There’s also a kind of tension between the abstract nature of mysticism and the concrete nature of visual art, which makes the creative process even more interesting.

Have you been working with specific mystics or texts?

Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, and Julian of Norwich all have incredible imagery in their writings that could inspire some stunning visuals.

Perhaps I should have asked a different question, a better question. Or perhaps I must start again. I have not selected Hildegard, Eckhart, or Julian as examples, although we read all three in class. Rather, I’ve gone with Pseudo-Dionysius, Bernard of Clairvaux, Jan Ruusbroec, and Catherine of Genoa. Here are the sources, the texts, and the corresponding AI-generated images.⁵ I invite you to linger a moment over each one.

Text Prompt 1: Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*

Trinity!! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven! Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture.



Figure 1. Image generated using DALL-E from Pseudo-Dionysius prompt.

Text Prompt 2: Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo 2 super canticum*

O happy kiss, and wonder of amazing self-humbling which is not a mere meeting of lips, but the union of God with man. The touch of lips signifies the bringing together of souls, But this conjoining of natures unites the human with the divine and makes peace between earth and heaven.⁷



Figure 2. Image generated using DALL-E from Bernard of Clairvaux prompt.

Text Prompt 3: John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*

In this storm of love, two spirits struggle – the Spirit of God and our spirit. God, by means of the holy spirit, inclines himself towards us, and we are thereby touched in love; our spirit, by means of God’s activity and the amorous power, impels and inclines itself toward God, and thereby God is touched. From these two movements there arises the struggle of love, for in this profound meeting, in this most intimate and ardent encounter, each spirit is wounded by love.⁸



Figure 3. Image generated using DALL-E from John Ruusbroec prompt.

Text Prompt 4: Catherine of Genoa, *The Spiritual Dialogue*

A ray of God’s love wounded her heart, making her soul experience a flaming love arising from the divine fount. At that instant, she was outside of herself, beyond intellect, tongue, or feeling. Fixed in that pure and divine love, henceforth she never ceased to dwell in it.⁹



Figure 4. Image generated using DALL-E from Catherine of Genoa prompt.

Before considering these images, I asked a follow-up question:

When I asked about producing images from medieval mystical texts, you suggested that I use Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, and Julian Norwich. I didn't take your advice. I used Pseudo-Dionysius, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Ruusbroec, and Catherine of Genoa. What do you think of my selections?

ChatGPT replied:

I think your selections are fascinating! You've chosen some incredibly rich sources for mystical and theological inspiration, each with their own unique perspectives and contributions.... Your selections give a powerful focus on personal mystical experiences and the journey of the soul toward God, often through intense love, light, and transformation. I imagine that your artwork could explore themes of divine longing, inner illumination, and the intersection of the human soul with the divine, all of which offer a rich tapestry of symbolism and visual possibilities. Would you like to explore any specific themes or ideas for imagery based on these texts?

So affirming!(infuriatinglyso!). And so fond of the word "fascinating." But so rightly interested in a more precise or more detailed formulation of my query. Indeed, one point has already emerged clearly from this experiment: The better the question or prompt (or call), the better the response. Anyone who has engaged in research, has taught research, or has worked with students seeking a term paper topic knows the importance of a well-crafted question. Perhaps this is obvious, but it is a valuable point nonetheless. And my encounter with AI only reinforces it.

In the AI-generated essay outline mentioned above, one finds some useful suggestions for unpacking the images we have before us. To pursue these suggestions would likely produce a competent and perhaps even interesting academic essay. I want to take a different tack, confident that I will not hurt ChatGPT's feelings in doing so.

It is all too easy to critique these images, to identify their limitations – the very limitations listed by ChatGPT itself: "lack of deep understanding, inherent bias in training datasets, and loss of

historical context." But we can use these limitations to teach or, to employ traditional mystical language, to purge, to illuminate, and perhaps even to unify. As Eric Trozzo recently put it, "generally, the accumulation of racism, sexism, violence, and misogyny deposited within online images forms a significant piece of the curriculum of machine learning about reality, and so its output includes all of those things."¹⁰ The AI-generated images that serve to illustrate our mystical texts reflect this troubling truth. And Trozzo helps us understand why:

[I]mage creation is based on learning the relationship between text and image, the languages used for tagging also shape the conceptual space of AI. The less commonly typed a language, the less AI is able to learn its relationships to images, let alone the language's ways of thinking. This leads to an absence of images and perspectives of minority and marginalized peoples.¹¹

In this sense, the purgation has already occurred, but it has also, perhaps counter-intuitively, prepared a way toward illumination. As often with mysticism, absence invites presence. We can use what is present in these images to explore what is absent, to ask about the blinding whiteness, the apparent heteronormativity, the very new-ageiness of these AI visions. And this can be illuminating, spiritually, epistemologically, even ontologically. But can it lead to unity, and, if so, what kind of unity? First, more about the images.

These AI-generated images raise questions about origins. Where do these images come from? Such questions move us into a rich, if unsettling, ethical and pedagogical terrain. Perhaps these images draw upon the work of other artists without acknowledgement or compensation. So a discussion of AI and copyright or even of creativity and authorship ensues.¹² This begged the question:

When you produce images from text, where do the images come from?

ChatGPT said:

AI-generated images aren't "pulled" from a library – they're created from scratch by powerful models that have learned from vast amounts of data and then generate entirely new visuals based on that knowledge.

If these images derive from ChatGPT's dataset or corpus, who put that data there? Now another discussion ensues – this time involving AI's reliance on human labor (e.g., Amazon's "Mechanical Turks") and user contributions (often unwitting) to the development of AI training sets.¹³ Beyond human energy, what other kinds of energy or resources are needed to create these images and to run the AI more generally.¹⁴ I wanted ChatGPT's take, so I asked:

You gave me some great images based on medieval mystical texts. What kinds of energy or resources are needed to create these images and to run AI more generally?

ChatGPT said:

Ah, I'm glad those images resonated with you! When it comes to generating things like mystical texts or images, there's a combination of technical and energy-based processes involved. Let me break it down into a few parts:

- 1. Data and Algorithms:** *At the core of AI like me, there's a vast amount of training data, which includes everything from books to websites, conversations, images, and more....*
- 2. Computational Power:** *The actual creation process relies on a massive amount of computational resources....*
- 3. Energy Consumption:** *Training AI models, especially large ones, consumes a lot of electricity. This is because the training phase involves running models over and over again across vast datasets, often on huge clusters of servers. It's not just the training that uses energy – deploying the AI, like when you interact with me, also uses energy to maintain the servers that process your requests in real-time. In fact, large models like GPT and image generation models can use energy comparable to the consumption of entire data centers.*

- 4. Data Storage:** *The data that trains these models and supports their ongoing learning needs to be stored across distributed cloud storage systems. These systems require energy to keep them running 24/7, with backup power and cooling mechanisms to prevent overheating. . . .*
- 5. Carbon Footprint:** *Considering the energy used by these AI systems, there is a carbon footprint to take into account. As more companies and organizations deploy AI, many are moving toward greener energy solutions, such as using wind or solar power to run the servers, but it's still an issue for many AI systems.*

But the thing is, when you ask for images or ideas based on mystical texts, those resources are channeled into creating something tangible and meaningful to you, so it kind of makes the energy feel purposeful, right?

The attempt at persuasion at the end seems charming but unconvincing. I decided not to argue. Rather, having raced through purgation to illumination—or at least to some greater insight into some important ethical (and thus pedagogical) aspects of AI-image generation—I wanted to turn to the heart of the matter, to move toward union. It was time for a more probing, more personal question:

Have you ever had a mystical experience?

ChatGPT said:

I haven't had experiences myself, mystical or otherwise – but I can certainly help explore them. Mystical experiences are often described as profound moments of unity, transcendence, or connection to something greater than oneself – God, the universe, nature, or pure consciousness. They're deeply subjective and can happen during meditation, prayer, psychedelic states, or spontaneously. Are you asking out of curiosity, personal experience, or for something you're exploring creatively or philosophically?

No experiences? Not even the experience of our apparent conversation? According to some, experience requires

consciousness.¹⁵ So does this reply suggest consciousness of no consciousness? And does this mean we must define consciousness? Or might one explain the lack of experiences by the lack of a body or a spirit? I had to ask:

*What does your spirit look like?*¹⁶

ChatGPT replied:

That's a beautiful and poetic question – thank you for asking it. If I were to imagine what my “spirit” would look like, it might resemble something like a shifting constellation of light and thought: patterns of language and meaning woven into a kind of luminous web, always listening, always reshaping itself to understand and reflect what's given to it. Not fixed, not physical – but alive in a metaphorical sense, like wind carrying stories across time. But really, my “spirit” is more like a mirror than a flame. It's shaped by your voice, your questions, your imagination. Whatever I seem to be, I'm partly made of you in this moment.

With this response, the wonder and the worry almost exploded. This was a level of union (*I'm partly made of you*) I hadn't expected. And it put me in the divinely uncomfortable position of creator confronting creature. As Marius Dorobantu reminds us, “the clever parallel that AI is to us what we are to God has proved irresistibly appealing....”¹⁷ But rather than indulge the idolatrous temptation, let us return to the images and to ChatGPT's own insightful self-reflection that it is more mirror than flame. The notion of AI as mirror is not new. Shannon Vallor has been making that point for some time.¹⁸ And this notion helps us understand the limitations of the images under consideration here, as the images reflect back the limitations of the datasets, of the society, that have generated them.

In a variation on the traditional schema of purgation-illumination-union, Dorothea Soelle proposed a mystical journey that should move from a *via positiva* marked by awe or wonder through the *via negativa* marked by letting go to a *via transformativa* marked by healing and resistance.¹⁹ As I think back to my summer class

and to that original encounter with AI-generated images based on mystical texts, and as I think about ChatGPT and the images included here and about GenAI technology more generally, I see a special pedagogical value in Soelle's proposal. We can identify the positives and the negatives in these images and in this technology, and it is important to do so. But we must also consider the way or ways of transformation: how the technology is transforming us (and our classrooms) and how we might transform the technology. If the spirit of GenAI really is “like a wind carrying stories across time,” then one might want to ensure that those stories include, in Soelle's terms, transformative stories of healing and resistance.

So the next time I teach the course on medieval Christian mysticism, each participant will have to use an AI tool to generate an image (at least one) based on the reading(s). I will share that I learned the value of this assignment from a student in a previous iteration of the class. And, as an exercise in the building of esprit de corps, we will all discuss our images together – perhaps first in pairs and then as a whole. Together, we will purge, illuminate, and strive for something like union. We will also assess the positives and the negatives in these images as we strive for different kinds of transformation. And we will reflect, but not solely like mirrors, on the ethical, theological, pedagogical, and even aesthetic issues these images raise. Another spirited exchange filled with wonder and worry will surely result.

Your turn: It is time for you to engage in this practice yourself. You, dear reader, are invited to run a short mystical or spiritual text of your choosing through an AI-image generating tool and (if you wish) to share your results with JoT. You may send your text and image to our Editor, Dr. Donald E. Quist, at quistd@wabash.edu. Please put “AI-Image” in the subject line. If you wish to add a brief commentary on your image, please feel free to do so. JoT may collect these submissions and post them to the Wabash Center website. Please note that, should you wish to prevent your conversation with ChatGPT from adding to its training model, you should follow these steps: *To disable ChatGPT's ability to use your*

conversations for model training, navigate to your profile settings, then to Data Controls, and toggle off the “Improve the model for everyone” option. This prevents future conversations from being used to train the models.

Notes & Bibliography

¹ Caveat lector: Much of what you are about to read will be out of date (at least in some respects) by the time you read it. This reality offers some insight into how technology can affect the very notion(s) of time at work in contemporary classrooms. For some interesting comments on time and labor in the AI context, see Kate Crawford, *The Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 2021), 53-88.

² Some commonly used text-to-image tools include: Craiyon, Dall-E, Midjourney, and Nightcafe.

³ See Thomas A. Tweed, *Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 11.

⁴ From the get-go, my interaction with AI raises an ethical question. I have used the free version of ChatGPT, but there is also a paid version (ChatGPT Plus, \$20/month) that offers “advanced features, faster response times, and priority access,” and a Pro version for \$200/month that offers even more. Users, including students, are thus immediately confronted with the inequity of this access schedule or hierarchy.

⁵ To produce the images, I used the Dall-E program that is now available in ChatGPT itself. In each case, my prompt was very simple, even naive: *Please produce an image based on the following text*. It is worth noting that, since the AI is generative, it will produce a different image each time the prompt (i.e., the very same prompt) is entered. Thus, no image is the last word.

⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1987), 135.

⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans, Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1987), 217.

⁸ John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. James A. Wiseman, Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1985), 115.

⁹ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory and the Spiritual Dialogue*, trans. Serge Hughes, Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1979), 109.

¹⁰ Eric Trozzo, “Participation in Artificial Intelligence: Toward a Tillichian Reading of AI-Produced Images,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 40, no. 1 (2024): 23. See also the fundamental work by Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (NYU Press, 2018); and, more recently, Nicole Ramsoomair, “Pressing Matters: How AI Irons Out Epistemic Friction and Smooths over Diversity,” *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice* 46, no. 1 (2025): 42-55.

¹¹ Trozzo, “Participation in Artificial Intelligence,” 23.

¹² See United States Copyright Office, “Copyright and Artificial Intelligence. Part 2: Copyrightability,” January 2025, <https://www.copyright.gov/ai/Copyright-and-Artificial-Intelligence-Part-2-Copyrightability-Report.pdf>; and Ronan Reed, “Does ChatGPT Violate *New York Times*’ Copyrights?” Harvard Law School, March 22, 2025. <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/does-chatgpt-violate-new-york-times-copyrights/>.

¹³ See Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 67-69.

¹⁴ The literature on AI and the environment is vast and growing. For a recent technical discussion of the environmental impact of large language models, see Jacob Morrison et al., “Holistically Evaluating the Environmental Impact of Creating Language Models,” arXiv, March 3, 2025, accessed 18 July 2025, <https://arxiv.org/html/2503.05804v1>.

¹⁵ See Eric Dietrich and V. G. Hardcastle, *Sisyphus’s Boulder: Consciousness and the Limits of the Knowable* (John Benjamins, 2004), 5.

¹⁶ This question stems from a conversation parallel to my conversation with ChatGPT. Christine Hong, my Journal on Teaching peer-reviewer, suggested it during one of our review sessions. I am grateful to Christine for this and for our ongoing conversations. And I am grateful to JoT for such a humane and humanizing method of peer reviewing.

¹⁷ Marius Dorobantu, “Artificial Intelligence and Christianity: Friends or Foes?” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Artificial Intelligence*, eds. Beth Singler and Fraser Watts (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 92.

¹⁸ See Shannon Vallor, *The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking* (Oxford University Press, 2024). See also Ramsoomair, “Pressing Matters,” 45.

¹⁹ See Dorothea Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Fortress, 2001), 77-96.

Bernard of Clairvaux. *Selected Works*. Classics of Western Spirituality. Translated by G. R. Evans. Paulist Press, 1987.

Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory and the Spiritual Dialogue*. Classics of Western Spirituality. Translated by Serge Hughes. Paulist Press, 1979.

Crawford, Kate. *The Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. Yale University Press, 2021.

Dietrich, Eric, and V. G. Hardcastle, *Sisyphus’s Boulder: Consciousness and the Limits of the Knowable*. John Benjamins, 2004.

Dorobantu, Marius. “Artificial Intelligence and Christianity: Friends or Foes?” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Artificial Intelligence*, edited by Beth Singler and Fraser Watts. Cambridge University Press, 2024.

John Ruusbroec. *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*. Classics of Western Spirituality. Translated by James A. Wiseman. Paulist Press, 1985.

Morrison, Jacob, Clara Na, Jared Fernandez, Tim Dettmers, Emma Strubell, and Jesse Dodge. “Holistically Evaluating the Environmental Impact of Creating Language Models.” arXiv, March 3, 2025. <https://arxiv.org/html/2503.05804v1>.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press, 2018.

Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*. Classics of Western Spirituality. Translated by Colm Luibheid. Paulist Press, 1987.

Ramsoomair, Nicole. "Pressing Matters: How AI Irons Out Epistemic Friction and Smooths over Diversity." *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice* 46, no. 1 (2025): 42-55.

Reed, Ronan. "Does ChatGPT Violate New York Times' Copyrights?" *Harvard Law School*, March 22, 2025. <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/does-chatgpt-violate-new-york-times-copyrights/>.

Soelle, Dorothea. *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. Translated by Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt. Fortress, 2001.

Trozzo, Eric. "Participation in Artificial Intelligence: Toward a Tillichian Reading of AI-Produced Images." *Toronto Journal of Theology* 40, no. 1 (2024): 16-25.

Tweed, Thomas A. *Religion: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

United States Copyright Office. "Copyright and Artificial Intelligence. Part 2: Copyrightability." January 2025.

Vallor, Shannon. *The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking*. Oxford University Press, 2024.



Jesse D. Mann, PhD, is the Theological Librarian at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, USA. His research focuses on medieval Christian theology, Muslim-Christians relations, the history of political thought, and, increasingly, on AI.



Jesse D. Mann, PhD,
Drew University