

Religion for the Senses. Part III: Religious Meanings of Taste, Smell and Touch in Ancient and Medieval Asia and Europe

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After investigating the religious significance of visual and aural senses in previous workshops, the focus now shifts to the senses of taste, smell and touch. These three sense perceptions are often prominent features of sacrifices; but do they make the rituals more attractive or do they individually express religious dimensions? If mundane senses of taste, smell and touch are used to describe divine attributes and behavior, do these sensory appeals indicate intra- and interreligious contacts? Alternatively, should sensory experiences be understood symbolically or allegorically? In this workshop, individual case studies will seek to find answers to these questions and to prompt methodological and theoretical reflections about the roles of these senses in processes and patterns of religious contact.

Two general questions served as lines of inquiry: Why are certain forms of religious expression considered to be attractive and how are variables associated with forms of religious expressions related to processes of contact and exchange? The main argument is that sensual experiences of religious expression are not only attractive in and of themselves, but the shared social dimension of living religions gives them relevance as factors of religious identity. The following case studies illustrate this thesis with regard to the senses of taste, smell and touch.

Taste is one of the most intimate senses because of its internalisation. Religious dimensions of meals and cultic meals are side-effects of the phenomena of taste.

SVEVO D'ONOFRIO (Bologna / Bochum) started with a systematical overview of the sense-phenomena and asked about relations between subjects and objects. To taste something for example means an immediate and

individual relation between the one who perceives and what will be perceived. How speech gives witness to sensual experiences is problematic since its ability to adequately express the reflected impression is limited. Since religious experiences are ineffable, employment of sensual metaphors such as „to taste god“ or the „sweetness of god“ is very complicated. Nevertheless, such semantic constructions are used in the Bible as well as in the Quran or in texts of old Indian religions. The Latin verb „sapere“ from a root related to tasting and knowing recalls the immediate relationship between experience and comprehension.

BENEDIKT ECKHARDT (Münster) investigated the attractivity of cultic meals from the social dimension of group-definition. His analysis focused less on individual phenomena than on communication conveyed by texts. He distinguished four modes of advertisement to join a cultic meal: legislative, honorific, invitation, persuasion. The meal is an interactive system and an association as organizing system. But there is also a strict distinction: men and gods never eat together.

This tradition, that men and gods never eat together is broken by early Christian communities. JAN SCHÄFER (Bochum) analysed the early Christian supper described in 1 Cor 11,17-34 and the use of wine in the gospel of John. He compared several elements with motifs in the cult of Dionysos and stressed the idea that the consumption of wine can be used to connect with god. The language of John was comprehensible across cultures especially because of the close relation between Dionysos and wine imagery.

GÖRGE HASSELHOFF (Bochum) analysed a conflict within the first two centuries about the idea of purity of food. One position was represented by Jesus who generally allowed any kind of food according to the Gospel of Mark in contrast to the Old Testament. However, not all of his followers agreed. Therefore Act 10 can be interpreted as critical to this liberal position. Hasselhoff stressed also that this text could also be understood as an agreement. Justin the Martyr gives a different interpretation of the prohibition of food in the Old Testament in his Dialogue with the Jew Trypho, written about 156/7: He stressed the

prohibition as a kind of protection against non tasting food.

Smelling is also a very intimate sense. The spirit as a breath of God is related to divine categories. In Genesis God blew the breath of life into the nostrils to make man a living being. But the phenomena of smell can also be observed as a boundary for example by the use of incense as part of a divine sacrifice.

ALEXANDRA VON LIEVEN (Berlin) gave information about the production of perfume in Egypt as a gift given thrice daily and the sensual perception of smells and colours. The identity is formed by the know-how to combine different substances. A few sources tell us about the preparation and use of perfumes in Egyptian temples. Exact rites were prescribed for the procedure of preparing and attributing the correct substance to the gods. Smell is harmonizing and separating: only some people are able to prepare perfume but many participated by spreading the substances.

PHILIPP REICHLING (Bochum) pointed out further dimensions of smelling, which can also be found in contexts with other senses. Smell is a very important factor for religious identity because it is not only a collective or individual experience, but forms a memory and connects past, present and future as an element of identity. In this way actual impressions can be extended to a fundamental certainty of the cult and to individual knowledge like certain confession. In his analysis of the Golden Legend, likeable and unlikeable smells are to demarcate between saints and heretics.

Finally the haptic category relates to the use of relics and other objects of worship. For religious contacts such touchable objects are very important because they can be handled and taken from one place to another.

JASON NEELIS (Waterloo, Ontario / Bochum) reviewed Buddhist categories of six spheres of sensory perception and stressed the dependent nature of touch and other sensations. Relics of contact embody the disembodied by establishing links with the living presence of the Buddha and recall memories of objects he touched and places the visited. His talk raised further questions about the transfer of qualities via touch, the allegorical

use of the touch sensation and the structural difference between touching and the perception of touching.

ROSEL PIENKA-HINZ (Marburg) defined sensory perceptions in terms of two directions: the one who touches and what or who is touched. Touch itself starts an interaction between both and creates unity between subject and object. In literary sources objects of touch can be material and immaterial, animate and inanimate beings. Views may be considered equivalent to touch. Eye and the view can influence other persons since to look at someone can lead to death. The meaning of the senses, especially touch, must be defined more broadly than physical action.

ASLAM SYED (Bochum) stressed the amazing power of senses: all senses, touching, smelling and tasting, hearing and looking are affected and always leave a subjective impression depending on the cultural context. Philosophers of different cultures have stressed that physical acts by using the senses have a substitutional function. For example: to kiss a sculpture of a god means to kiss god. To state this idea the question of the whole workshop has to be turned around: One does not have to ask any longer for types of contact between religions but to look for the change of meaning of sensual impressions because of a religious context and understanding.

Conference Overview:

Volkhard Krech / Philipp Reichling (both Bochum): Welcome/Introduction

Section: Taste

Svevo D'Onofrio (Bologna / Bochum): Savouring the Ineffable. Metaphors of Taste in Mystical Experience across Religions

Benedikt Eckhardt (Münster): The Attractivity of Cultic Meals. Advertisements, Observations and Polemics in the Graeco-roman World

Jan Schäfer (Bochum): Wine as a Medium for Religious Experience in the Last Supper

Görge Hasselhoff (Bochum): Jews and Christians of the 1st and 2nd Century CE on Eating and Drinking. Surmises on Justin the Martyr and his Contemporaries

Section: Smell

Alexandra von Lieven (Berlin): „Thy Fragrance is in all my Limbs“. On the Olfactory Sense in Ancient Egyptian Religion

Philipp Reichling (Bochum): About Odoriferousness and Malodorousness in the Golden Legend

Section: Touch

Jason Neelis (Waterloo, Ontario / Bochum): „Relics of Contact“ for Worshipping the Buddha

Rosel Pientka-Hinz (Marburg): „Touching Aspects within the Debate on Ancient Near Eastern Religious Contacts

Aslam Syed (Bochum): „The Ecstasy of External Senses in Islam“

Meret Strothmann (Bochum): Summary

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