

Smelling God: Olfaction as Religious Experience

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Introduction

Although it is common place within many religious traditions to talk of ‘hearing God’s voice’ or ‘seeing God at work’, or even ‘being touched by God’, the fact that a chapter entitled ‘Smelling God’ likely brought a smile to your face, demonstrates the disconnect many of us will feel in speaking of olfactory experiences and religious experiences in the same breath. We are not used to people using olfactory language, even metaphorically, to describe their encounters with the divine, even though, if God is immaterial, it is surely true that God no more has a specific scent than he does an appearance or a sound.

But yet, as I will explore in this chapter, there is a rich history of using olfactory language in both symbolic and literal ways to explain religious experiences. In the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, language relating to smell is often used in describing the sacrificial and anointing rituals of the Jewish tradition, and God is often said to be pleased or displeased at the smell of the Israelites’ worship. Moreover, as the apostle Paul describes, Christians are to carry the *fragrance* of Christ into the world (2 Corinthians 2). In exploring recent work by Yael Avrahami (2012) and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (2006), I show how olfactory experience played an important role in the religious traditions described in Scripture and the early Christian church. As Harvey illustrates, by means of certain liturgical practices, early Christians described olfactory experiences as providing a kind of knowledge of God. And thus, she argues we should not interpret their claims in merely metaphorical terms (as modern readers may be tempted to do).

I will begin by considering why the olfactory sense lends itself well to the discussion of religious experience by showing how it differs from other sense modalities. Following this, I discuss the historical place of olfaction in theology. Note that the purpose of this chapter is not to explore all of the philosophical implications of the theological role of smell in Hebrew Scripture or in early Christian practice. But rather the chapter asks if we took seriously this emphasis on olfaction in the Christian theological tradition, how could we make sense of experiences of smell as examples of religious experiences today? For as we have already acknowledged, if God is immaterial, then it makes little sense to talk of smelling God in a literal way. The claim defended in this chapter is that whilst these experiences should not be thought of literally, neither should they be thought of in merely metaphorical terms.

How, then, can we make sense of the claim that olfactory experiences are encounters of God in a way that is non-metaphorical? This is the philosophical question which the latter half of this chapter focuses on providing an answer to. To give a response to this question, I begin by giving an overview of the categories of religious experience which are commonly used in contemporary philosophy of religion, before raising some issues with the narrowness of these categories. In particular, I argue that the typical way of thinking about religious experience, as a direct perception of God, is too narrow to accommodate the kinds of religious experience outlined in this chapter. Instead, by drawing on recent work by Adam Green (2009) on sharing-attention with God, I argue that ordinary sense-perception (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and, indeed, smelling) should be thought of as providing opportunities for indirect, but non-metaphorical experiences of God.

Finally, to fill this account out, I develop recent work on cognitive penetration of perception and its application to cases of religious perception, I explore what N. Russell Hanson (2002) and Michael Rea (2018) call experiences of ‘seeing as’. Just as an ultrasound technician sees black blobs *as* the limbs of a foetus, I argue that we might experience the smell of sweet-smelling incense, or even freshly brewed coffee, *as* an encounter of the divine presence. And thus, since such experiences are indirect experiences of God mediated through the physical

world, we can make sense of God's immateriality and yet still retain the idea that olfactory language is used in a non-metaphorical sense in reference to religious experience.

Why smell?

Let me begin by highlighting some reasons why the olfactory sense is of importance for thinking about religious experience. There are some features of the olfactory sense which distinguish it from other sense modalities, and which provide us with good reasons for focusing on smell when thinking about encountering God.

First, as we will see stressed throughout the discussion in this chapter, olfactory experiences have an ephemeral, mysterious quality in which the location and character of the object of perception is mysterious. This feature of olfactory experience lends it well to thinking about experiencing the divine. We often cannot locate the specific character or location of a smell, even if we are undoubtedly experiencing it. As Gregory of Nyssa writes in a homily on the Song of Songs, smell seems particularly apt for experiencing God as transcendent. He writes that,

the divine power is inaccessible and incapable of being contaminated by human thought processes, for to me it seems that by this statement there is conveyed something like the following: that the Nature that has no boundaries cannot be accurately comprehended by means of the connotations of words.... It is as if by certain traces and hints that our reason guesses at the Invisible; by way of some analogy based on things it has comprehended, it forms a conjecture about the Incomprehensible. For whatever name we may think up, she says, to make the scent of the Godhead known, the meaning of the things we say does not refer to the perfume itself. Rather does our theological vocabulary refer to a slight remnant of the vapor of divine fragrance. In the case of vessels from which perfumed ointment is emptied out, the ointment itself that has been emptied out is not known for what it is in its own nature.... Here, then, is what we learn from the words: the perfumed ointment of the Godhead, whatever it may be in its own essence, is beyond every name, and every thought, but the marvels discerned in each name and thought provide matter for our theological naming. By their help we name God wise, powerful, good, holy, blessed and eternal, and judge and saviour and the like. And all these refer to some slight trace of the divine perfume that the whole creation imitates within itself, after the manner of a jar unguents, by the wonders that are seen in it. (2012, 39-41)

Secondly, experiences of smell involve the object of experience as internal to the subject. Louise Richardson (2013[a]), in discussing whether olfaction is an exteroceptive (i.e. informative about the external world) or interoceptive (i.e. only informative about our own experiences) sense, expands more specifically on the unique nature of smell. She writes,

In order to smell or taste something, we must take it into our bodies. In smell, or at least, in what we usually think of as smell, this happens when we breathe in through the nose, which is to say, when we sniff. For brevity I will use 'sniffing', here, to include breathing through the nose, except if otherwise indicated. When we sniff, odiferous molecules are drawn up through the nostrils to the nasal cavity, and the receptive cells of the nasal epithelium. Sniffing harder increases the rate of flow through the nasal cavity—up to hurricane speeds with vigorous sniffing—and directs it upwards to the olfactorily receptive cells. As a result, more odiferous molecules reach the olfactory receptors.... Olfactory experience does not just involve awareness of certain qualities, such as vanillaryness or mustiness or whatever. It also involves odours that have these qualities seeming to be brought into the nose when we sniff. To see this, consider how things

seem to you when either breathing normally, or sniffing vigorously, never mind for now whether in so doing you're aware of anything odiferous. The experience you have is one of air being brought into the nostrils, from without, though the air is not represented as being at any distance or direction from you. Your experience of the air you breathe then is exteroceptive, even though the visual model of exteroceptivity is not appropriate to it. The point I want to make is that this is part of normal olfactory experience, too. In olfaction, odours seem to be brought into the nostrils, from without. In this way, olfactory experience, despite differing in its spatial character from vision, is nevertheless also exteroceptive: odours seem to be brought into the nose from without, and thus seem to be extra-bodily. (2013[a], 9-10)¹

Richardson's emphasis on the act of sniffing in experiences of smell highlights an important way of seeing why olfactory experiences of God have a religious significance that other sensory experiences might not. For in smelling, one takes an odour into one's body in by the act of sniffing in order to experience the scent. There is no clear analogue to this in seeing, hearing or touching. The relationship between smell and taste is arguably more complex—there are clearly important connections between smell and taste (try tasting something fragrant whilst holding your nose, to experience this yourself), and there are surely important points to be made about taste and religious experience too, but I limit myself to discussing the olfactory sense here.² Smelling requires that the act of breathing (which is itself a life-giving act) takes in certain objects of perception into one's body. It is through this act of bringing an object of perception into the body, that one experiences smell.³ This provides a helpful way for thinking about the way in which Christian theology emphasises God's presence as distinct from us, but somehow within us—this is the foundations of a theology of being in union with God.⁴ Like the odorous particles

¹ It is worth remarking how similar this account of smell is to that described by Avrahami in the Hebrew scriptures—the connection between breath and smell is noted by both. Avrahami notes that, in the way it is described in Hebrew scripture,

[t]he nose does more than just smell. In many biblical verses, it explicitly refers to the breathing organ, with its connotation of life itself. When man was created, God “breathed into his nostrils...the breath of life” (Gen 2:7). Elsewhere the breath in the nostrils, or nose, is used to express life...(Job 27:3). The nose recurs as an organ containing the spirit (i.e. breath) in descriptions of God...(Ps 18:16[15])...The dual function of the nose as the smelling and breathing organ, together with the physiological basis of smelling as the intake of air, is strongly reflected in the interchange of meanings of the root [word] and its derivatives...To sum, the nose in the Hebrew Bible is both the organ of smelling and of breathing, and the borders between both experiences are not easily discerned. (2012, 125).

² Richardson (2013[b]) discusses the relationship between smell and taste in depth elsewhere.

³ It might be suggested that these differences are fairly superficial—in seeing and hearing we bring something external into the body (i.e. photons or sound waves). Yet, it is really the phenomenology of bringing a smell (or, indeed, a taste) into the body that interests me here, and this does seem to be importantly distinct from how we think about our experience of sight and sound. We experience an object as ‘out there’, whereas, smells often have the phenomena of being brought from without to within, particularly, as Richardson argues, through the act of sniffing.

⁴ See Stump (2010) for a detailed philosophical account of being in union with God. As suggested by Kevin Timpe, an expansion of this discussion to the theology of taste would provide a rich analysis of the role of the Eucharist in engaging our senses.

which we experience each day in our engagement with the world, the Holy Spirit is brought into the individual's body and is experienced both from within, but yet as distinct from oneself.

Thirdly, smell plays an important role in memory recollection and emotional attachment. As recent psychological work has shown, olfactory evoked memories are 'associated with a higher emotional arousal that could not be accounted for by the perceptual stimulation alone' (Willander and Lasson, 2007, 1659). By testing the role of smell in evoking memories of childhood in older individuals, John Willander and Maria Lasson show that such memories are more deeply rooted (i.e. they can attach to older memories) than memories evoked by verbal queues. They write that, 'odor-evoked memories were experienced as more emotional and pleasant, and associated with stronger feelings of being brought back in time as compared to events evoked by verbal cues' (2007, 1662). Again, this has theological implications for thinking about why smell is important for religious experience—for in using incense in liturgical practice, for instance, one is building memories of worship and engagement with God which are potentially more deeply rooted and emotionally attached than many other sensory or verbal engagements. If the spiritual life is thought of as the development of certain spiritual habits, then the use of smell in spiritual practice can play an important role in forming spiritual memories.

Finally, there are important connections to be made between smell and disability, which can provide us with motivation for giving an account of olfactory religious experience. A moving example of this can be found in Barbara Newman's description of her friend with autism who does not recognise people by sight, but rather by smell. Newman recalls her friend saying that, 'I know all of you are looking forward to seeing Jesus in heaven, but I can't wait to smell him' (Timpe, 'Disability in Heaven', 7.29). An over emphasis on the audio and visual senses in thinking about religious experience can exclude many for whom olfactory experience plays a central role in their experience of the world.

While it is clear that olfactory experience might have important religious significance, what is less clear is how best to interpret such experiences. We begin by considering the ways in which the olfactory sense has been used in the history of Christian and Jewish thought.

A theological sense of smell

While the concept of smell as an experience of God might seem odd to the modern ear, it is important to see that our modern ways of thinking and experiencing the world are dominated by an emphasis on sight and sound. Even within my own prose, the eagle-eyed reader will notice, both vision and hearing metaphors have already been used to refer to our understanding of certain terms or concepts. Such use of metaphor is not uncommon. We talk of '*seeing* the point', of some argument '*sounding* right' and of people 'coming to the light'. If points are less clearly communicated, we talk of claims 'falling on deaf ears'.⁵ It is interesting to note that most of the metaphorical uses of smell that are used commonly in the English language in this way are negative. 'This smells fishy to me' or 'This smells off' are most often used to denote an argument's flaws or failures.⁶

This way of thinking has permeated our theological thinking too. We talk of spiritual enlightenment, and of experiencing visions and voices of the divine. In many contemporary contexts, worship is an almost entirely visual and auditory experience, involving listening to sermons and prayers and singing hymns from hymn sheets and projector screens. Apart from the practice of the Eucharist, in which participants engage their gustatory senses in worship,

⁵ As Kevin Timpe helpfully points out, the disability community has lots of thoughts about how these metaphors function. For instance, the move, in academic contexts, from 'blind review' to 'anonymous review' is an attempt to eliminate some of the bias against disability built into so much of our language.

⁶ Others include: 'I smell a rat', or, 'Your argument stinks'. The only positive use I have so far come across is 'on the scent'.

sight and sound are the dominant sense modalities of contemporary worship services. The olfactory sense is rarely, if ever, engaged in such a context. Moreover, as Harvey observes, ‘Modern scholars... have tended to privilege the visual in their treatment of ancient Christianity...and have utilized the imagery of sight and hearing as dominant themes for analysing the history of Western Christianity’ (2006, 3). In contrast to this modern emphasis on sight and sound, as Harvey put it, ‘Christianity emerged in a world where smells mattered. They mattered for what they did. They mattered for what they meant.’ (2006, 1). Let us explore some of these historical emphases on olfactory experience.

In Jewish and Christian scriptures, the olfactory sense plays an important role in various rituals and practices and experiences of smell are imbued with important meaning which speaks of how human beings and God are related. For instance, ‘sweet-smelling cinnamon’ was an important component of the anointing oil used in the anointing of the tent of the meeting, the ark of the covenant, as well as in the consecration and anointing of priests (Exodus 30:22-33). In the ordination of priests, the writer of Exodus describes the Lord commanding that Aaron and his sons lay their hands on a ram to be slaughtered, preparing it for sacrifice by washing and cutting, and then smoking it on the altar to provide a ‘pleasing odor, an offering by fire to the Lord’ (Exodus 29: 15-18). In making atonement for sin offering, Leviticus describes the priest as taking ‘a censer full of coals of fire...and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense’ to ‘incense of the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the covenant’ (Leviticus 16: 11-14). We are told in many places that God finds the odors of certain burnt offerings pleasing or displeasing (Genesis 8:20-21, Leviticus 26:30-31, Isaiah 3:24, Isaiah 34:3).

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul talks of Christian believers as carrying ‘the aroma of Christ’ (2 Corinthians 2:15), which comes from knowing Christ and of the fragrance of ‘death’ that such aroma brings to those who are perishing. As Gregory of Nyssa describes, Paul’s use of olfactory imagery highlights important theological points. He writes that, Paul ‘said that he was the “aroma of Christ” (2 Cor 2:15), capturing within himself the scent of that transcendent and unapproachable Grace and providing himself for others to have a part in according to their ability, as though he were an incense: others to whom, in accordance with the present disposition of each, the sweet smell became either life-giving or death-dealing. (2012, 101).

As Yael Avrahami explores in some detail in her work *The Senses of Scripture*, the writers of the Hebrew Bible did not think in modern terms about human senses.⁷ More specifically, Avrahami argues, the Biblical authors rejected the idea that the senses were mere ‘physical tools’ (2012, 185) employed by the mind to further understanding. But rather, for the writers of the Hebrew Bible, the senses themselves play an important role in a person’s understanding. The senses provide ‘a physical way of functioning’ that includes thought and action, obedience and disobedience, enjoyment and suffering’ (2012, 185). The writers of Scripture describe our senses as playing an important role in our capacity for emotional experience, in perceiving help and harm, in understanding and knowing the world, in forming moral judgments, and in our capacity for autonomy. Surprisingly to our modern perspective, smell plays an important role in all of these capacities, and the writers of Scripture use olfactory language in describing these ways of relating to the world. It is not the case that such experiences furnish the mind with concepts to be understood and ordered, so that we might use sense data instrumentally to approach the world, but that our sense are an intrinsic part of our epistemological and moral judgments.

This emphasis on olfaction in relating to God and to the world was also present in early Christian thinking. As with its use in Scripture, olfactory language is used in a more than metaphorical sense in early Christian thinking and writing. As Harvey puts this point, antiquated use of olfactory language is ‘not based on symbolism as a disembodied language, but on the

⁷ Another helpful discussion of this can be found in Aviya Kushner’s discussion of the role of the nose in *The Grammar of God*.

concrete view that smells participated in effecting the processes they represented. Odors could purify, ward off, or heal; they could contaminate, pollute, endanger' (2006, 2). Olfactory senses were also thought to play an important role in relating to God and providing knowledge of God.⁸ Through the use of various ritual practices, early Christians thought of the senses, including smell, to allow us encounter and experience God, thereby allowing for a kind of knowledge of God.⁹

There are many reasons why olfactory experiences were thought of in these terms; smell has an ephemeral and mysterious character to it, which lends such experiences well to religious contexts. Expanding on this thought in explaining Paul's use of olfactory language in 2 Corinthians 2, Harvey writes that in experiencing an odour, 'one knows that it has a source: but the source need not be visible or even near...Indelibly expressive of its source, a scent yet operated apart from it. An odor thus revealed something even as it concealed it' (2006, 115). Analogously, in the case of experiencing God through encountering those who carry the fragrance of Christ, we are able to acquire 'distinct knowledge, of an indistinct source...such was the Christian witness to a God who defied the limits of human comprehension' (2006, 115).

As with the use of olfactory language in the Hebrew Bible, the emphasis on God's revelation through smell has a particularly important role in ritual or liturgical practices. It is in the engagement with certain kinds of liturgies which early Christians were often most exposed to olfaction as a kind of religious experience. Writing on the sensory experience of God in liturgy, Dionysius the Areopagite (circa. 500 AD) states that,

it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearance of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness. The beautiful odors which strike the senses are representations of a conceptual diffusion. Material lights are images of the outpouring of an immaterial gift of life. (*Celestial Hierarchy*, 1.3, 146)

Dionysius is not claiming a relationship of analogy between the physical and the heavenly here.¹⁰ But rather, the liturgy can act as a 'guide' to train the senses, 'so that they lead the believer to experience realities beyond the immediacy of the concrete situation. The immediate setting opens the senses, allowing them to blind the mundane, sensory experience of the worshipper to the celestial domain in which it must ultimately take place.' (Harvey, 2006, 136)

What is most notable here is the way in which olfactory experiences are thought of in literal terms to reveal something of the divine reality. The point is not, for Dionysius, that we extrapolate or infer from our experience to knowledge of God, but rather, our senses furnish us with an experience of God, thereby giving us knowledge of God. Indeed, as Harvey is keen to stress, the use of olfactory language in early Christian theology and practice was not merely symbolic. She argues:

⁸ 'Christians used olfactory experience to formulate religious knowledge: to posit knowledge of the divine, and, consequently, knowledge about the human' (2006, 3).

⁹ Harvey writes that,

Both through ritual practice and through related instruction...Christians granted value to the senses as channels through which believers could approach and encounter the divine....A consensus was apparent that the sense body of the Christian in its received experiences and enacted responses yielded distinct knowledge of God. (2006, 99-100)

¹⁰ Harvey, 2006, 136.

That such usage was never simply metaphor or analogy was clear from discussions about the incarnation. The notion of God become human lifted the role of sense perception in knowing God to intense significance: the senses perceived God through his handiwork in the natural world, yes. But in the incarnate Christ, the senses had perceived God himself; God has chosen to reveal himself according to the human capacity for knowledge gained sensorily as well as through the mind's understanding...From the nativity to the resurrection, God had become known to humankind in and through the senses. (2006, 127-128).

To summarise this brief foray into the history of the theology of smell, what we find in discussions of olfactory sense experience in the Hebrew Bible and the early Christian tradition is as follows:

- (i) Olfactory experience was more significant and more prominent in both of these sources than it is in a modern context.
- (ii) Olfactory language was used in more than a merely metaphorical way.
- (iii) Olfactory experience played an important role in understanding and relating to the world, but not as merely furnishing the mind with sense data.
- (iv) Olfactory experiences were to sometimes be experiences of God and experiences which provided knowledge of God.

Let us now turn to consider the application of these insights to a contemporary religious context, before exploring what philosophical implications follow from this.

Olfactory experience in contemporary religious practice

While it is clear that experiences of smell do not play the same role in modern, Western religious contexts, as they did at other times in the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, contemporary religious thought is not entirely devoid of its olfactory sense. A quick web search of 'smell and religious experience' will rapidly expose one to the weird and wonderful world of pseudo-scientific spiritual writing on smell. One can also come across many descriptions of the olfactory sense in religious contexts which share many of presuppositions found in ancient Christian sources too. For instance, Kelly Isola, a Unitarian minister and blogger on issues pertaining to spirituality and mysticism writes,

The activity of prayer effuses a trail of the most luxurious perfume, which I know as the presence of the holy. Smell is one of our external senses, that quickly attracts us to something or repels us. The spiritual sense of smell comes alive as our inner attraction for prayer and the Silence, to be still and wait to be drawn into oneness with loving attention. It's not that we are going to physically smell an aroma of Spirit, but rather it's as if the divine perfume is an irresistible and inescapable attraction to our encounter with our Source. We long to know and belong with God, real, attentive, and authentic. We experience the sweetness of this attraction as though Spirit were that delicious fragrance, like morning coffee, fresh flowers, or an ocean breeze, arising from within us and around us. (n.d.)

Isola's use of perfume to describe the presence of the holy seems to resemble many of the ways in which Harvey describes ancient sources as thinking about olfactory experience. But yet, it is clear that Isola is keen to distinguish what she calls a 'spiritual sense of smell' and 'physical sense of smell'. As we have seen, olfactory language is used metaphorically in the Christian and Jewish traditions, but it is not the only use of such language. And there is nothing all that philosophically puzzling about how this metaphorical use of smell might be made sense of.

There are some instances of contemporary olfactory experience which are more philosophically puzzling. Let us briefly consider the way in which smell plays a role in certain liturgies to see that this is the case. Those who are familiar with certain Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and High Anglican liturgical traditions will be familiar with the use of incense in worship. Those reflecting on these traditions often invoke the importance of smell to explain the significance of these practices. For instance, St Michael and All Angels Church in London, explains on its website that

[i]n the Anglo Catholic liturgy we engage all our senses in the worship of God. Symbols and signs help us point our minds to the invisible in ways that are richer than words alone. ...Incense symbolises three aspects of our worship. It signifies the presence of God; it is a symbol of prayer and it is a sign of offering. The rising of the smoke signifies our prayers rising up to God and its perfumed smell evokes a sense of God's presence- as the psalmist says in Psalm 141 'Let my prayer rise before you like incense' (St Michael and All Angels, n.d.)

Similarly, as Andrew Gould describes the use of incense in Eastern Orthodox liturgies in the *Orthodox Arts Journal*,

Incense truly sanctifies the seductive power of perfume! With it, the church forges in us a permanent emotional bond to the liturgy. Its positive influence is probably much greater than anyone suspects, as it works upon us so subconsciously – so different from liturgical texts and painted icons, whose meaning must be cognitively understood to be of much benefit. Rather incense is akin to the sound of bells – we never know what it means, but it pierces instantly to our hearts, and awakens in us an unexpected joy. (Gould, 2014)

Finally, as St Therese the Little Flower Catholic Church in Memphis, Tennessee explains on their website,

As Catholics, we express our worship of Almighty God in words and gestures. The burning of incense is a prayer in itself; a prayer in action. Furthermore, for Catholics prayer is action, and that action becomes ever more present through the visual and sensory experience of incense...Not only does the smoke symbolize the prayers of the faithful drifting up to heaven, incense actually creates the ambiance of heaven. ...incense connects us to God's altar in heaven and allows us to utilize all of our senses in our prayer...Incense helps to support an atmosphere of solemnity and beauty that is fitting to the greatest gift given by Christ to His Church, and the highest prayer the Church has to offer to God: the True Worship of God the Father as offered by Christ on His Cross. It helps us to understand that at Mass we enter into and are united with the worship offered God in Heaven by His Angels and Saints. If we are told, after all, that the angels stand amid clouds of incense singing God's praise in heaven, why shouldn't they do the same gathered around the altar, as they are, singing God's praise during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? (St Therese the Little Flower, n.d.)¹¹

¹¹ Another use of smell in contemporary religious practice I have come across in discussing this chapter with colleagues and students can be found in the informal charismatic traditions of the Christian church. It is common in some charismatic traditions to talk of God providing 'words and pictures' to the mind, which one is encouraged to share with fellow believers. But in some traditions (which I have not experienced), believers are also encouraged to share prophetic smells or scents when praying for others.

We can see, in these three accounts of the use and value of incense from three different Christian traditions, that many regard olfactory experience to be an important part of the Christian experience today. Some of the language used demonstrates thinking of olfactory experiences as pointing us towards an experience of divine presence (e.g. incense ‘*signifies* the presence of God’), but we can also see that a more literal understanding of olfactory experience as a religious experience is found in contemporary traditions (e.g. ‘Not only does the smoke symbolize the prayers of the faithful drifting up to heaven, *incense actually creates* the ambiance of heaven’).

Thus, whilst an emphasis on smell in contemporary religious traditions may be uncommon, it is not entirely unprecedented. Moreover, the way in which olfactory language is used points to the significance of our embodied experiences as being imbued with religious significance, much in the same way that the early Church thought about sensory experience. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to consider the philosophical implications of the practice of incense in Catholic and Orthodox liturgy (as interesting a task as this may be), but to think more generally about how our embodied experiences of smell might be thought of as religious experiences. Thus, whilst incense clearly has a rich religious tradition, this might not be the only olfactory experience which could be considered to have an important spiritual role for an individual. Could the smell of freshly brewed coffee count as a religious experience? Or might the smell of freshly cut roses somehow be thought of as an experience of divine presence? If we are happy to think that experiencing a beautiful sunset (see Plantinga (2000, 174-175)) or a piece of sacred music (see Perlmutter (2016)) can be an experience of the divine, then there is no reason to exclude olfactory experiences from having such significance too.¹²

It is this general question, of how olfactory experiences might be thought of as religious experiences in a non-metaphorical way, that I now consider. To provide such an account, I first outline the categories which contemporary philosophy of religion has typically used to think about religious experience, before considering how and where olfactory experience might fit in this analysis.

The philosophy of religious experience

As William Lycan notes, ‘the philosophy of perception has been warped and skewed by its persistent focus on vision’ (2000, 273), ignoring the important philosophical questions which emerge by thinking about our other senses, including the sense of smell. If this is the case for philosophical literature on perception more generally, it is even more the case for the philosophical discussion of religious experience. The philosophical literature on religious experience focuses almost entirely on accounts of visual, auditory or mystical experiences of God.

Yet, despite this narrowness in the kinds of experiences considered, there has been a keen interest in the nature of religious experience in philosophy of religion over the past few decades. This discussion has largely focused on giving an account of mystical experiences and explaining how these can epistemically support, justify or give warrant to, religious beliefs. William J. Wainwright (1981), in his philosophical work on mystical experiences specifies that the term ‘mystical experience’ should be restricted to:

- (1) ‘unitary’ states which are
- (2) noetic [i.e. connected to the intellect], but
- (3) lack *specific* empirical content

¹² As Blake Hereth suggests to me, it might be thought that olfactory experiences are relevantly different to these examples since it is often difficult to trace the source of smells. On the account I develop, this does not rule out the possibility of smelling God, but it does give olfactory religious experience a distinct phenomenology.

In such experiences, Wainwright explains,

[t]he distinctions which are ordinarily drawn between subject and object, between one object and another, and between different places and times are radically transcended. Although they are noetic, or perception-like, they are not experiences of specific items within the phenomenal world but intuitive apprehensions of the (character of) the space-time world as a whole or something which transcends it. (1981, 1)

Wainwright includes the *unitary* specification to emphasise that mystical experiences involve some sense of overcoming the distance between the object and subject of experience; in such experiences ‘distances are annihilated, and distinctions are overcome. If the experience has an object, the mystic experiences identity or union with that object’ (1981, 5).

In writing on the noetic features of mystical experiences, Wainwright stresses the ‘perception-like’ (1981, 1) quality of such experience. This is a point elaborated in detail in William Alston’s influential work *Perceiving God*. According to Alston, in a typical mystical experience ‘it seems to the subject that something (identified by the subject as God) is directly presenting itself to his/her awareness as so-and-so’ (1991, 67). Such experiences should count as perceptual since, he argues,

it is both necessary and sufficient for a state of consciousness to be a state of perceptual consciousness that it (seem to the subject to) involve something’s presenting itself to the subject, S, as so-and-so, as purple, zigzagged, acrid, loud, or whatever. A case of perceptual consciousness is a case of something’s looking, smelling...so-and-so to S. (1991, 38)

This ‘phenomenon of apparent presentation of an object’ (1991, 37) distinguishes perceptual experiences from other modes of consciousness, and thus, mystical experiences should be regarded as perceptual. According to Alston, since God is ‘purely immaterial’ (1991, 19) it makes little sense to say that he could look, sound, or, indeed, smell a certain way. Instead, Alston thinks, perceiving God should best be understood as a kind of non-sensory perception which involves mystical phenomenal qualia (although, it might also be accompanied by experiences of ordinary sensory qualia).

Along with mystical experiences, Wainwright states that there are a number of other kinds of religious experience, which he lists as:

- (a) ‘ordinary religious feelings and sentiments’,
- (b) ‘numinous experience’, and
- (c) ‘visions, voices and such occult phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition’ (1981, 1).

On Wainwright’s taxonomy, the other three categories of religious experience can be contrasted with mystical experiences in some way. For instance, *ordinary religious feelings and sentiments*, such as feelings of ‘love, awe, trust, fear, devotion, gratitude and other religious affections and sentiments’ are all important instances of religious experience, however, such experiences lack the perceptual character that he suggests is essential for mystical experience. Whilst such affections and sentiments have ‘a cognitive dimension’ (1981, 3), they are not perceptual in the way that mystical experiences are. Furthermore, whilst *numinous experiences* share with mystical experiences ‘a sense of perception’, which makes such experiences noetic, they are not unitary experiences (1981, 4). As Wainwright puts it, whilst mystical experiences invoke a sense of unity with the object of perception, numinous experiences involve ‘a sense of absolute otherness, or

distance, or difference' (1981, 5). Like both mystical and numinous experiences, Wainwright thinks that *visions* and *voices* are perceptual, noetic experiences. Yet, unlike mystical experiences, such experiences lack specific empirical content and thus are 'empirically falsifiable; in a way that mystical experiences are not (1981, 7).

Where should we fit olfactory experiences within this taxonomy? Whilst olfactory experience might be the cause or stimulus of mystical and numinous perceptual experiences, it would seem strange to describe the smelling experience itself in these terms. Similarly, the descriptions Wainwright provides of religious feelings, sentiments, visions and voices, do not straightforwardly capture instances of olfactory experience such as those considered above. And so we ought to consider how religious experience might be thought of more broadly.

Broadening the discussion of religious experience

Philosophers of religion have recently argued for a broadening of the categories of religious experience (Wynn, 2009; Green, 2009; and Rea, 2018). In particular, as Rea argues, the categories of religious experience considered by Wainwright, Alston, and others, appear to ignore instances of '*garden-variety divine encounters*' (2018, 115; emphasis in the original), that is, 'divine encounters that are not aptly described as visions, voices, or occult phenomena, are more than mere religious affections or sentiments, but do not rise to the level of being numinous or mystical experiences' (2018, 115-116). Such examples might include experiences of God's presence in liturgy, in nature, or through our engagement with friends (2018, 116).

As Mark Wynn notes, unlike many of the paradigm examples of religious experience discussed by philosophers of religion, there appear to be many cases which 'may involve not so much a direct encounter with God, or some non-dualistic experience of God, as the recognition of the religious meaning of some material context' (2009, 163). These experiences are 'not fundamentally those which involve seeing God as 'the efficient cause of certain events characterized in neutral or meaning-independent terms—rather, the sense of God is realized in some recognition of the existential meaning which attaches to a material context' (2009, 149-150). As Wynn highlights, there appear to be many examples of experiencing so called 'sacred spaces' which appear to be cases of religious experience, even if they are not perceptual experiences of God in the way that mystical experiences are. Our engagement with places, and particularly sacred or religious places, is often imbued with meaning and emotion, such that our experience of environments provides a kind of encounter with God. As Wynn puts it, in such cases, 'it is not that God is encountered directly, or recognized as the cause of various neutrally characterized or 'objective' events, but rather that God is made known in apprehending the meaning which is borne by a particular place' (2009, 157).

Similarly, Adam Green (2009), in his critique of Alston's model of mystical experience, contrasts the phenomenology of perception with that of interpersonal presence. As Green notes, we do not ordinarily experience a person's actions or emotions in a direct way, analogously to, say, perceiving a ripe apple on the table, but rather, our perception of a person's lowered brow and red eyes provides us with the experience that the person is sad. Similarly, even in many cases of paradigm mystical experience, individuals do not primarily report God as an object of perception, but rather, they describe God as 'strengthening' 'forgiving', 'sympathizing' and 'speaking' (examples all taken from Alston, 1991, 44). Green suggests that instead of thinking of religious experience in perceptual terms, we should think instead of such experiences as interpersonal engagements with God, which involve what psychologists have called 'shared attention' experiences. As Naomi Eilan defines it, shared attention occurs when

each subject is aware, in some sense, of the object *as* an object that is present to both subjects. There is, in this respect a 'meeting of minds' between both subjects, such that the fact that both are attending to the same object is open or mutually manifest. (2010, 5)

This basic kind of sharing attention with another person (sometimes called dyadic shared attention) can then give rise to a mutual object attention, whereby both participants are aware of one another's perception of other objects in their perceptual field (sometimes called triadic shared attention). According to Green, we can think of experiencing God in these terms too. In mystical experiences, Green thinks, individuals become aware (or come to believe) that God is sharing attention with them through ordinary acts of perception. As Green explains,

using the shared-attention account, we can claim that sound, light, and affect are all mediums that can be manipulated by God in such a way as to reveal the mind of God toward the subject of the experience. The subject hears the sound of a voice reading a psalm that responds to his situation, a manipulation of auditory stimulation that evidences an awareness and concern for the subject by some theistically affiliated entity. He or she then experiences an unnatural light which seems patterned to reinforce the extra-natural nature of the reassuring voice. Then, the subject has the experience as of being loved and then one of peace...The preceding pattern of light and audition does not seem epistemically incidental to the experience of being loved. The shared-attention model allows the preceding pattern of sensory imagery to enter into how one experiences whatever qualia were present in the experience such that it is experienced as being loved by God. (2009, 463-464)

Thus, for Green, as on Wynn's account, our ordinary experiences of the physical world can be opportunities to experience God through the mediums of sense perception. What neither discusses directly is the role in which olfactory experiences might fit in such an account. In the next section, I turn to consider recent literature on what is often called 'cognitive penetration of perception', and then to Rea's application of this literature to religious experience. I argue that this way of understanding perceptual religious experiences can accommodate many of the instances of smell we have been considering and provide a non-metaphorical account of smelling God.

Cognitive penetration of perception and religious experience.

The philosophical literature on cognitive penetration of perception surrounds the question of whether perceptual states such as seeing, hearing, and smelling stand in a causal relation to cognitive states like believing or desiring. As Dustin Stokes defines it,

A perceptual experience E is cognitively penetrated if and only if (1) E is causally dependent upon some cognitive state C and (2) the causal link between E and C is internal and mental. (2013, 650)

Note that perception is cognitively penetrable only if it is possible for two perceivers to have experiences of distinct character or content whilst attending to the same object in the same conditions (i.e. the conditions of the two perceivers' sensory organs and environments are constant; Fiona Macpherson (2012)). Moreover, as Susanna Siegel (2012) has shown, cognitive penetration can have both positive and negative epistemological value. For instance, it seems beneficial that the X-ray technician's perception of X-ray scans is cognitively penetrated by her beliefs (2012, 201). Yet, if Jack interprets his spouse's facial expressions wrongly because he is angry at them, then this might weaken or defeat his justification for believing on the basis of his perception (2012, 202).

Take the following example which is often cited in this discussion. Bruner and Goodman (1947) have shown in a series of experiments in which children were given cardboard discs and coins of identical sizes that children consistently overestimate the size of the coins compared to the discs, despite their identical dimensions. What examples like this demonstrate, some

philosophers have argued, is that the desire for wealth, or one's background beliefs about coins, alters one's perception of the objects. And thus, it is feasible that two subjects might have perceptual experiences of the same object with a different character or content because of the differences in how their cognitive states are related to their experiences.

Yet, as Dustin Stokes (2013) notes, many philosophers in the analytic tradition take 'perception to be *cognitively impenetrable*', that is, they think that '[c]ognitive states do not directly affect the way we see, hear, taste, and otherwise perceive the world' (2013, 647). What is going on in cases like the coin perception, according to the defender of this view, is that the differences between subjects are entirely cognitive, and that their experiences are uniform. Thus, the fault comes in forming the wrong kinds of beliefs about one's veridical experiences of the coins, rather than one's beliefs altering one's experience in some way. It seems clear that no amount of empirical testing will fully determine the fact of the matter concerning cognitive penetration of perception, and we will have to make do with philosophical theories which provide the best explanations of the empirical data.

Yet, we need not delve too deeply into this contentious debate to see its application in the case of religious experience. For as Rea notes, regardless of our stance on whether perception is cognitively penetrable, we can see that there are many cases which we *describe* as perceptual, but which depend on certain cognitive states. For instance, an anxious person will see and hear a creaky house at night differently to a sober headed individual (2018, 104). An ultrasound technician, in virtue of her training, sees a blob on a screen as the leg of an unborn child (2018, 102). These examples are all cases of what N. Russell Hanson (2002), calls 'seeing-as'. As Rea argues, it is possible to stay neutral on the cognitive penetration of perception debate, whilst using its insights to help make sense of cases of *seeing as*. As he puts it, by using the language of

cognitive *contribution* to experience, or of *cognitively impacted* experiences, with the understanding that this way of talking is meant to be neutral on the question of whether cognition affects the character or content of the experience of itself or instead only affects our spontaneous responses to experience (2018, 105).

In other words, the phenomenon of *seeing as* appears to occur, regardless of whether this phenomenon is best explained as an instance of cognitive response to experience or cognitive penetration of experience. And it is the phenomenon, not the causal explanation, which is useful for explaining examples of religious experience.

Rea argues that *seeing as* experiences (regardless of how we interpret the cognitive/perceptual causal connection) can help us to think about certain kinds of religious experiences. On Rea's view, religious experiences,

are cognitively impacted experiences whose stimuli (whether internal or external) are purely natural phenomena. The ability to experience natural phenomena in this way is, furthermore, a kind of skill—one that may not have been consciously or intentionally developed by the subject, but is, nonetheless, partly the product of socialization, training, and various other learned ways of experiencing and engaging with the world around her...it is important to recognize that this characterization of divine encounters is fully consistent with the view that at least some of the are experiences *of God*, and even (e.g.) *of God's voice*; and so there is no reason to think that, in general, it casts doubt on experiencers' own characterizations of their experiences...So long as the natural events stimulating these experiences were at least partly explained by God's intention that the subjects experience them in the ways that they did, it is appropriate to say that God communicated with them...So long as God is intentionally causally involved in these

encounters, it seems appropriate to speak of these experiences as veridical. (2018, 106-107)

Just as the training of the ultrasound technician means that her various background beliefs and other cognitive states incline her to have certain experiences *as* perceptions of arms and legs of foetus's, a person with the relevant cognitive states might perceive an internal sense, and audible voice, or a beautiful sunset as an experience *as* perceptions of God. As Rea argues, such experiences clearly do not fit within the schema offered by Wainwright or Alston, but yet, appear to be common experiences described by many ordinary religious believers. Indeed, Rea goes further, noting that it is plausible to think that

all divine encounters—including apparent perceptions of external voices or visions, communications from God occurring wholly within the subject's own mind, and general senses (vague or vivid) of divine love, forgiveness, comfort, presence, and the like—involve entirely natural stimuli and require no special causal contact with God, and that cognition enters in as part of the explanation for why the stimuli are *experienced as* divine encounters. (2018, 121)

As I argue in the next section, this model provides a helpful framework for thinking about how ordinary experiences of smell can have religious significance in a non-metaphorical way.

Smelling God: olfaction as religious experience

Let us turn to consider the application of Rea's account to olfactory examples. Rea writes that while his primary examples are cases of visions or voices, his account 'obviously applies equally to encounters that have olfactory, tactile or gustatory character as well' (2018, 113). It is not difficult to see how the examples of encountering the sweet-smelling incense in the ritual of anointing the ark of the covenant, or the experience of smell in the Catholic scenting of the altar, might be interpreted as encounters with God by some individuals. For as Rea has highlighted, certain kinds of cognitive states can influence how one perceives or responds to one's perception of the world. And so, if one experiences an instance of inhaling the liturgical incense *as* an experience of smelling the presence of God, so long as God intended for such experiences to be understood in this way, then one encounters God through smell. The close connection between memory and smell noted previously seems particularly pertinent here; for these are often rituals which are embedded into a community, in which the experience of God is something which provides important connections to the past.

Thus, as we have seen, thinking about olfaction as a religious experience can be theologically helpful and such comparisons are ripe with symbolism. But we can also go further than metaphor, I think. It is important to see that interpreting olfactory experiences as non-metaphorical does not amount to saying that one is directly or literally smelling God. God does not have a scent any more than he has a sound or a specific appearance. Rea's model of 'seeing as' provides a way of providing a non-literal but yet non-metaphorical account of smelling God. *Smell as* experiences are those in which an experience of the material world is interpreted as having a particular religious content or significance. On this account, the very same smell, whether that be of freshly brewed coffee, or sweet-smelling incense, can be experienced differently (or can cause different spontaneous responses to experience) in different individuals. Given that we each have different background beliefs, and each have developed different associations with various smells in our memories, these religious experiences should be seen as interconnected, not competitive or exclusive.¹³ And thus, it is possible that the experience of the religious believer who has olfactory experiences can be experiences of smelling the pleasing

¹³ Thanks to Kevin Timpe for raising this clarification.

odour of God's presence. To my knowledge, such experience has been given little attention in the philosophical literature. But yet, I have attempted to show that philosophical reflection on such experiences can provide to be rich and, I hope, spiritually illuminating.

One benefit of this account is that it leaves room for the kind of subjectivity (or subject dependency) of religious experience. This can be seen by taking an overly literal reading of Paul's use of olfactory language in 2 Corinthians. A very good reason why the aroma of Christ is a sweet-smelling fragrance to some and a smell of death to others can be explained by thinking about the background cognitive states of each and how these background states influence one's experience or response to experience.¹⁴ Those saved by Christ have the requisite desires and beliefs about Christ which make the experience of Christ's presence amidst his Church a pleasing experience, whereas those who are 'perishing' (to borrow Paul's language) lack these background cognitive states. And thus, to over-literalise Paul's point (but in a way which I think is instructive for many other cases), a religious believer might experience certain smells as having significance or meaning that a non-believer would not. The literature on cognitive contributions to perception can explain how experiences can differ from subject to subject, even if the object of experience is perceived in relevantly similar conditions.

Finally, what is helpful about the literature on cognitive penetration of (or contribution to) perception is that it emphasises the way in which the Hebrew writers and the early Christian church thought about cognition and perception. For as both Harvey and Avrahami note, the modern distinctions between cognition and perception were less pronounced in such cultures and worldviews. Perception played an important role in thinking about human understanding and knowledge of the world in a way that many philosophers have since rejected. One way of making sense of these sources and ways of thinking in modern terminology is to see that such thinkers were committed to the cognitive penetration of perception (or something similar). This can help us to make sense of how olfactory language is non-metaphorical, but yet still retain the intuition that God does not have a scent or odour of any kind.

Conclusion

Is it possible to smell God? According to many in the Christian tradition, our olfactory experiences provide us with a way of encountering God. While it is tempting for us to think that all such language is metaphorical, or even nonsensical, I have shown that there are ways of making sense of such claims. It is possible, I have argued, in smelling some material object to encounter God.¹⁵ While the philosophical discussion has been insufficiently narrow to accommodate such experiences as religious or encounters of God, more recent work in this area has shown how even the most mundane experiences might have religious significance and count as encounters of God.¹⁶

¹⁴ As Blake Hereth helpfully points out, it is important to note that whilst my view can *accommodate* a very plausible explanation here, it is not the *only* thing that might explain these disparate experiences.

¹⁵ As Kevin Timpe helpfully points out to me, the medievals thought there was always a trace of the Creator in the creation. If this is correct, then the connections argued for in this chapter should not be surprising.

¹⁶ I would like to thank David Eford, David Worsley, Kevin Timpe, and Blake Hereth for their helpful feedback and comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. I would also like to thank members of the Logos Institute staff/student work in progress for their feedback and to the Templeton Religion Trust for their generous funding during the writing of this paper.

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