

KHK WORKING PAPER SERIES

III - SENSES

Last update: September 2016
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Our Goal for ERiC is to create a comprehensive, easy-to-use online companion to **Eurasian Religions in Contact** that informs readers about occasions, themes, modes, conditions and consequences of contacts between religious groups and the way religious thought and practice developed in and through such contact phenomena, eventually creating both the larger and smaller religious traditions of today and the religious field as a social entity distinct from other fields such as politics, economics and art. The companion will be comprised of **case studies** with each case study focusing on a particular geographical region, a particular moment in or period of time and a particular constellation of two or more religions encountering each other. Each case study will extrapolate the occasions as well as the historical and social contexts of such encounters and, most importantly, shed light on the issues, notions, themes and practices addressed in the particular contact situation.

In each case study, authors will present their material in light of a specific theoretical concept or approach. We particularly encourage authors to consider engaging their material with theoretical concepts and approaches **developed at the KHK *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe over the past years***. This includes specific understandings of the role of concepts such as "purity", "secret", "tradition", "gender", "media", "the senses", "the immanence/transcendence-distinction" and "dynamics/stability". The **KHK Working Paper Series** informs readers about some major aspects within the KHK's thinking about these concepts. We are looking forward to your contributions to this ongoing conversation!

There has been an increasing amount of scholarship on religion and the senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell) dealing with how senses affect individual religious experience and the discourses between religious groups. While some address the senses as a broad category for the analysis of religious experiences and phenomena, more frequently scholars have chosen to focus on one sense in particular within a specific religio-cultural sphere, or a specific aspect of religious experience.¹ Among those who have attempted to take a systematic approach examining the role of multiple senses within a given religious tradition, some have attempted to provide a hierarchy of senses and the religious meanings assigned to them in that tradition.² Others have analyzed rituals designed to evoke certain sensory experiences, the multifarious effects of a given type of sensory input, for example, sound, in the lives of members of a given community, comparing secular and religious contexts, or finally, concentrated on the symbolic meanings attributed to a sense in a given group's conceptualization of holiness, the divine, or evil.³ Very often, scholars focusing on one or more of the senses, or on an activity which by nature is intimately involved with sensory experience, such as eating and/or fasting, address the tension between

embodiment and existence in the physical world and aspirations to come into contact with a largely transcendent, disembodied divine sphere or being.⁴

More rare, however, are investigations of the role of the senses, in their plurality, or individually, in religious encounter, whether in the form of polemic and other methods of demarcation, or in processes of transfer, adaptation, or resistance. One notable exception to this lacuna is the visual, which is the one field where long-standing and substantive research has been done on its functions in interactions between different religious communities. Much of this research has been dedicated to the area of visual polemics, where the field of medieval Jewish-Christian visual polemics is especially rich.⁵ The role of visual and material culture in the transfer of religious ideas and symbols has also garnered considerable interest, however. Scholars of religious and cultural interaction in pre-modern India are particularly notable in this regard, although this is certainly not the only region for which such research is being undertaken.⁶ Sometimes examinations of intercultural and interreligious exchange have been combined with explorations of visual polemic, as scholars increasingly consider representations from both cultures/communities, rather than focusing on one alone.

Yet visual polemic is not merely confined to artistic productions. For example, in times of war or as political or moral statement it was often common to publically display the “mutilated” bodies of opponents, criminals or hated religious minorities. Such displays were very much intended to assault the visual experience of passers-by.⁷ The physical appearance of humans is frequently imbued with religious meaning.⁸ While old-age, disease and infirmity often characterize the religious other in polemic, emaciated ugliness might be seen as a marker of holiness within an ascetic context⁹. By contrast, well-fed youthful male beauty in certain Sufi circles was an impetus to divine contemplation.¹⁰ Characterizations of the religious other in terms of what a given culture or religious traditions considers ugly, sinful, or holy serves as another way of marking the religious other or individuals within a religious community as outsiders or otherwise undesirable. An example for this would be the ways in which elderly women were sometimes associated with the evil eye or witchcraft in general in late medieval and early modern Europe.¹¹

Another way in which the visual functions as a marker of otherness is through sumptuary laws. During the Middle Ages in the Islamic, Byzantine and Western, Latin Christian dominated world, religious minorities were sometimes required to wear clothing or some other form of decorative item, which distinguished them from the majority.¹² This requirement was extended to prostitutes in parts of Western Europe, and this tactic was later adopted by the Nazis in World War II.¹³ . One has seen a curious reversal of this

impulse in modern Europe, where instead of requiring members of a religious minority, in this case Muslims, to set themselves apart from members (at least nominally) of the religious majority, they have faced pressure to abandon religiously distinct clothing in favor of the styles current among the majority population.¹⁴ In both instances, one sees religious anxiety and questions of inclusion vs. identity focused on a very clear visual marker, namely clothing, although the reversal raises questions of how Western Europeans' strategies for coping with difference have changed over time. It should be noted, however, that positive connotations may be attached to distinguishing dress as well; for example, in the ways that members of religious orders, Christian and Buddhist monks, or Sufis choose to adopt a particular garb which clearly signals their religious vocation. Again, clothing becomes the visual clue par excellence, of religious belonging, even as clothing can evoke more than mere seeing, in the religiously sensual experience of the wearer.

A final way in which the visual is significant in religious encounter has to do with its capacity to inspire religious awe in the members of the community on the one hand, and to, potentially, attract individuals outside that community. The capacity to attract members of the religious other may come from beauty. For example, Muslims from the Umayyad and Abbasid period praised the visual (and other sensory) delights of Christian monasteries and alluded to its resultant religious pull.¹⁵ Very often the capacity of the visual to successfully lure members of the religious other to holy spaces or rituals, also comes from successfully engaging a common visual symbolic language which one or more neighboring communities share. During the past year at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg in Bochum, one of the areas that was explored, based on the research of Dr. Ophira Gamliel, was the ways in which members of various religious communities in South India use sensual, including visual, elements in their rituals which both serve to distinguish a community, but remain comprehensible enough to outsiders to allow easy participation. Presumably much the same principle is at work with the transfer and transformation of visual religious symbols, such as the representation of various goddesses or the Virgin Mary from one religious-cultural milieu to another.

While scholarship on the role of the visual in religious encounter may be the most developed, many of the same patterns apply to other sensory realms. A number of scholars have focused on the role of sounds as a religious demarcation strategy. Alain Corbin has discussed the control of church bells in marking religious festivals in the phase of French Revolution.¹⁶ Nicholas Jaspert and Olivia Remie Constable have explored the role of religious sound such as the Muslim call to prayer and church bells and the attempt to control religious noise as an integral part of Christian-Muslim encounter in the Middle-Ages, and continues to be relevant in Muslim-Christian relations in the modern period.¹⁷

Music, more aesthetically attractive than mere talking, further serves as both a venue for polemic and/or for missionizing, whether in medieval Jewish or Christian liturgical songs, or in modern hip hop.¹⁸ The beauty of certain types of religious noise, such as that of the Qur'an being recited, is sometimes portrayed as having the potency to inspire religious outsiders to convert.¹⁹ In considering sound and its religious meaning, it is important to grasp sound as a medium unto itself – sometimes it can convey verbal meaning, as when a particular song is sung, however, discussions of the past year, have increasingly underscored the ability of specific sounds – that of a bell, or tune, or even recitation of a text – which have been imbued with religious meaning, often through ritual, to provoke religious experiences in the hearers or producers (i.e. singers, chanters, etc.) of those sounds, regardless of whether they understand the verbal, narrative component of that sound. In the instance of a religiously plural society, sounds having a common, or at least recognizable religious significance across multiple communities or religious traditions, would be quite powerful as potential attractors from one religion to another. As for the visual, one may consider the impact of a common auditory symbolic vocabulary between communities, and the degree to which such commonalities might foster shared religious practices or conversion.

In a number of cultures, pleasant fragrance or the lack of smell served as a marker of holiness and spiritual accomplishment whereas foul smell was an indicator of false religion, heresy and the demonic, respectively²⁰ Such a schema lent smell an obvious role in religious polemic. Much foul smell as polemic sprang from not actual smell but described or imagined smell within written texts, so that attributing foul smell to a person, place or animal, was to mark it as evil, or at the very least, religiously defective. Therefore, the production of pleasant scent in a religious context could then serve as an olfactory witness to the “truth” of a given religious tradition, holy person, etc. As with seeing and hearing, having a common “language of odors” would potentially facilitate shared rituals, or even conversion from one tradition to another.

While taste certainly can carry religious meaning, in terms of the dynamics of religious interaction, what matters more than taste per se, is eating, cooking, and the manners of eating. The establishment of specific food laws, different from the surrounding cultures, served to create a distinguishing religious identity, even as mocking those who failed to follow these laws established further borders between religious groups.²¹ Yet demarcation often does not end with official regulations. Regularly in religious texts, the adoption or retention of foodways that are technically not forbidden, yet are still associated with the practices of members of another religious community are censured. Here, rather like the

modern argumentation regarding Muslim women's clothing, foodways which are not the same as those practiced by the groups in power, are seen as threatening or problematic.²²

Assigning transcendent meaning to food, drink, or act of eating a particular substance or at a particular time, for example, the Christian Eucharist, or at a Hindu Puja creates a powerful, physical path to the divine for the participant, on the one hand, but on the other, becomes a potent form of exclusion on the other – not merely from a given religious community, but, symbolically, from the transcendent yet embodied encounter with the holy. Accusing the religious other of eating the wrong food, is a further form of exclusion, increasingly so when the “other” is accused of cannibalism, as were the early Christians, or of eating or drinking a foul substance, for there, the religious other becomes not merely other, but monstrous.

Touch can be imbued with religious meaning through expectations that sanctity, and with it healing and blessing may be transferred through direct contact. While in few traditions one could directly, physically touch God, once could touch the holy man or woman. Failing that, a garment, other object that had come into direct contact with the holy man/woman or grave space etc. all have the ability to transfer sanctity and healing.²³ The hope of such blessing and healing, often serves as a powerful draw to members outside of a given religious community to the holy person or site.²⁴

Pain, especially the pain of martyrdom, is frequently perceived as sanctifying.²⁵ The description or witnessing of pain endured for the sake of God, in turn becomes a way of creating religious identity, by creating awe and empathy on the part of the viewers/readers on the one hand, and of denigrating the religious outsiders who inflicted such pain.²⁶ Demarcation through touch is/was often an imaginary or symbolic one, for example, imagining that witches had sexual intercourse with the devil.²⁷

None of the senses or activities which evoke sensory experiences are, in and of themselves, “religious”. It is context which makes them so, even as it is context which frames evocations of senses in efforts to create or dismantle boundaries between religious communities or individuals. That being said, the senses are no less vital for our understanding and analysis of religion, for not only are they that which allows us to interact with the physical world, they become the symbolic building blocks for human imagining about the divine and demonic world, and, it seems, the religious other.

For the **online handbook of *Eurasian Religions in Contact***, authors are encouraged to consider these and other issues relating to senses and inter-religious encounter, exchange

and resistance in individual case studies. The trends sketched above are meant as examples, contributors are encouraged to select what paradigms most fit their own findings within their research areas.

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² James McHugh, The Classification of Smells and the Order of the Senses in Indian Religious Traditions. *Numen* 54, 4 (2007): 374-419

³ Thurkill, *Sacred Scents*; Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities*; Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*; Green, *Aroma of Righteousness*; Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual and the Senses* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010); S. Morrison, *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoeitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*; idem, "On Holy Stench: When the Odor of Sanctity Sickens," *Studia Patristica* 35, *Papers Presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1999: Ascetica, Gnostica, Liturgica Orientalia*, ed. M. F. Wiles and E. J. Yarnold (Leuven: Peeters, 2001) 90-101; Fulton, "Praying with Anselm at Admont;" Shannon, "The Aesthetics of Spiritual Practice;" Chen, "Sound and Emptiness," Sterckx, "Transforming the Beasts;" Leonard Lewisohn, "The Sacred Music of Islam: Samā' in the Persian Sufi Tradition," *The British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 6 (1997) 1-33; Detienne, *Gardens of Adonis*; Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels et la vision de Dieu*.

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⁸ Heather Miyano Kopelson, *Performing Religion and Race in the Puritan Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Leah Hochman, *The Ugliness of Moses Mendelssohn: Aesthetics, Religion and Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Irven Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America 2012)

⁹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

¹⁰ Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 36-39; Scott Kuegel, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism Corporeality and Sacred Power in Islam* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 209-210;

¹¹ Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Co. 1987) 65-70.

¹² On this see, for example, Catherine Kovesi Killerby, *Sumptuary law in Italy 1200-1500* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

¹³ See Jane Caplan, "Gender and the concentration camps" in Nikolaus Wachsmann and Jane Caplan, eds. *Concentration camps in Nazi Germany: the New Histories*, (NY/London: Routledge, 2010), 86.

¹⁴ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Katia Zakharia, "Le Moine et l'échanson: ou le *Kitāb al-Diyārāt* d'al-Šābuštī et ses lecteurs: une certaine représentation du couvent chrétien dans le monde musulman médiéval," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales*, 53-54 (2001-2002) 59-74; Hilary Kilpatrick, "Representations of Social Intercourse between Muslims and Non-Muslims in Some Medieval *Adab* works," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 213-224; Idem, "Monasteries through Muslim Eyes: the *Diyārāt* Books," in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in 'Abbasid Iraq*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003) 19-37; Elizabeth Key Fowden, "The Lamp and the Wine Flask: Early Muslim in Christian Monasticism," in *Islamic Crosspollinations: Interactions in the Medieval Middle East*, ed. Anna Akasoy, James Montgomery and Peter Pormann (Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007) 1-28; Elizabeth Campbell, "A Heaven of Wine: Muslim-Christian Encounters at Monasteries in the Early Islamic Middle East." [Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, History Department,

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¹⁹ (Ask Ines for secondary references)

²⁰ Green, *Aroma of Righteousness*; Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009: 124-127; Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*; Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007) 230, 233; Kuegel, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies*, pp. 65-67; John Tolan, "Un cadaver mutilé: Le déchirement polémique de Mahomet," *Le Moyen Age* 104 (1998) 53-72; Constance Classen, David Howes, Anthony Synott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 52-55; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: men, women, and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) . 5-8, 26-28, 85-86, 92-102, 293-303.

²¹ David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2011)

²² Alexandra Cuffel, "Legal but not Licit: Customary Foodways as Banned Markers of Religious Identity between Muslims and non-Muslims the medieval Mediterranean," forthcoming in *Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*

²³ See, for example, Stephen Brogan, *Royal touch in early modern England* (Woodrbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015).

²⁴ Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, "What Do Egypt's Copts and Muslims Share? The Issue of Shrines" and Anna Poujeau, "Sharing the *Baraka* of the Saints: Pluridenominational visits to the Christian monasteries in Syria," in *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims and Jews and Shrines and Sanctuaries*, ed. Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

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²⁷ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in early Modern Europe* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).