



## KHK Working Paper Series

### III. Senses

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**ABSTRACT** Our goal for *Entangled Religions* is to inform 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. *Entangled Religions* publishes case studies on the issues outlined above. The engagement with explicit analytical concepts is of specific importance, as those concepts shall serve as *tertia comparationis*, which allow comparability of individual case studies. We invite authors to consider engaging their material with analytical concepts, categories and approaches that have been discussed in the Käte Hamburger Kolleg (KHK) “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” (2008–2022), or to introduce other concepts and theories to the discussion. The KHK Working Paper Series informs readers about some major aspects of the KHK’s thinking about these concepts. We are looking forward to your contributions to this ongoing conversation!

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There has been an increasing amount of scholarship on religion and the senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell).<sup>1</sup> [1]

As Volkhard Krech has pointed out, the question whether a sensual perception is a religious perception is an empirical question: An object is only relevant for religion when a religious meaning is ascribed to it. Consequently, sense-perception only qualifies as religious when it is communicated as a religious experience. For example, only if a sound is addressed by and as religion, e.g. as demonic noise or heavenly chimes, it is a religious issue. On the other hand, e.g., Christians complaints that the chants of the Imam make noise and disturb is not an instance of religious communication, but part of the legal and political process. [2]

A large amount of scholarship on religion and the senses has dealt 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 (Thurkill 2016; Bull and [3]

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1 This working paper was written in 2017 and updated in 2023.

Mitchell 2015; Promey 2014; Fishman 2014; Hallett 2013; de Boer and Göttler 2013; Morgan 2012; McHugh 2012; Green 2011; Gavriluk and Cloakley 2011; Keane 2008; Barna 2007; Harvey 2006; Fulton 2006a, 2006b; Shannon 2004; Chen 2001; Sterckx 2000; Classen 1998; Detienne 1994; Staal 1986; Fraigneau-Julien 1985). 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 (McHugh 2007). 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 (Thurkill 2016; Hallett 2013; morgan\_embodied\_2012; Green 2011; Pentcheva 2010; Morrison 2008; Harvey 2006, 2001; Fulton 2006a; Shannon 2004; Chen 2001; Sterckx 2000; Lewisohn 1997; Detienne 1994; Fraigneau-Julien 1985). 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 (Hecker 2005; van Gelder 2000; Bynum 1998).

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, adaption, 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 (Lipton 2012, 1999; Epstein 2011, 1997; Shalev-Eyni 2010; J. A. Harris 2002; Strickland 2003; Melinkoff 1999, 1993; Block 1995). 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 (Owen 2012; Pons 2011; Flood 2009; for other areas see: Moller 2009; Allsen 2002). 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. [4]

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 (Egmond 2003; Merback 1999; Cohen 1993; Kisch 1954). The physical appearance of humans is frequently imbued with religious meaning (Kopelson 2016; Hochmann 2014; Resnick 2012). 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 context (Bynum 1998). By contrast, well-fed youthful male beauty in certain Sufi circles was an impetus to divine contemplation (El-Rouayheb 2007, 209–10). 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. [5]

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 (Karlsen 1987, 65–70).

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 (see for example Killerby 2002). This requirement was extended to prostitutes in parts of Western Europe, and this tactic was later adopted by the Nazis in World War II (see Caplan 2010, 86). 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 (Amer 2014). 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 (Zakharia 2001–2002, 53–54; Kilpatrick 1999, 2003; Fowden 2007; Campbell 2009; Troupeau 1975). 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 religio-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 (Corbin 2000). 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 2002 (Jaspert 2009; Constable 2010; R. Harris and Dawut 2002). Music, more aesthetically attractive than

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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 (see for example LeVine 2008, and @aidi\_rebel\_2014). 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. 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, respectively (Green 2011; Sizgorich 2009, 124–27; Harvey 2006; Cuffel 2007; Halevi 2007, 230, 233; Kuegel 2007, 65–67; Tolan 1998; Classen, Howes, and Synott 1994, 52–55; Brown 1988, 5–8, 26–28, 85–86, 92–102, 293–303). 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. [9]

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 (Freidenreich 2011). 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 (Cuffel 2018). [10]

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. [11]

Touch can be imbued with religious meaning through expectations that sanctity, and with [12]  
 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 (see for example Brogan 2015).  
 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 (Mayeur-Jaouen 2012; Poujeau 2012).

Pain, especially the pain of martyrdom, is frequently perceived as sanctifying (Glücklich [13]  
 2001). 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 view-  
 ers/readers on the one hand, and of denigrating the religious outsiders who inflicted such  
 pain (Einbinder 2002). Demarcation through touch is/was often an imaginary or symbolic  
 one, for example, imagining that witches had sexual intercourse with the devil (Roper 1994).

None of the senses or activities which evoke sensory experiences are, in and of themselves, [14]  
 “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 individu-  
 als. 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 *Entangled Religions*, authors are encouraged to consider these and other issues relating to [15]  
 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.

## Relevant *Entangled Religions* Articles

- Cuffel, Alexandra, Licia Di Giacinto, and Volkhard Krech. 2019. “Senses, Religion, and Reli-  
 gious Encounter: Literature Review and Research Perspectives.” *Entangled Religions* 10.  
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