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Sensing More in Ancient Religion

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In this essay I offer reflections on the importance of the bodily senses for ancient Christianity.[1] My broad frame will be the Roman Empire in late antiquity, roughly the third through the sixth centuries CE, the period when Christianity emerged fully as a religion in its own right. My hope is to suggest fresh appreciation for the role of embodiment in Christian tradition by drawing attention to those qualities that sensory awareness added to the Christian's bodily practice of religion during this formative era.

I will focus on three "scenes": first, the fifth century Christian historian Sozomen on the nature of ancient religion and its practices; second, religious sound as intrinsic to the practice of hymn singing and also as a source of religious knowledge. Finally, Romanos the Melodist, the sixth century Greek hymn writer, will help us consider religious knowledge in its most basic cosmological formulation.

1. Religion in a Sensing Body

Genesis 18: 1-15 tells of the famed encounter between the patriarch Abraham and his Lord, who appeared to him at the oaks of Mamre in the form of three (unnamed) men. Abraham offered his visitors generous hospitality, while in the tent his wife Sarah prepared cakes and also laughed, for the Visitors announced that in a year's time the elderly couple would have a son. The sanctity of the encounter, the memory of the place, and the prophetic quality of the Visitor(s)' announcement have rendered Mamre a holy site, venerated for millennia even to the present day.[2]

In early Christian times, that veneration took the form of an annual festival at Mamre commemorating the event of Abraham and his Visitors. The church historian Sozomen described the renowned celebration in the fifth century, about one hundred years after a particular series of events he recounted.[3] Sozomen reported that this festival attracted a huge crowd of pilgrims each year, from various religions: Jews, because they claimed their descent from Abraham; Pagans, because they understood the three visitors to be heavenly beings – a divine appearance like

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Center for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University, May 28, 2013, on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate. I am deeply grateful to Dean Fredrik Lindström, Professor Samuel Rubenson, and indeed all the Faculty for their extraordinary hospitality and kindness.

[2] The site remains a place of pilgrimage, under the auspices of Russian Orthodox since 1868.

[3] Sozomen, HE, 2.4. Text edited by J. Bidez with translation by A.-J. Festugière, *Sozomène, Histoire ecclésiastique: Livres I – II*, SC 306 (Paris: Cerf, 1983), 245-9.

those from their own myths; and Christians, because they understood the divine visitors in Trinitarian terms, or to have been the divine Son with two angels. Sozomen went on to describe the events like this:

> This [brilliant] feast is diligently frequented by all nations…. This place was moreover honored fittingly [*prosphoros*] with religious exercises. Here some prayed to the God of all; some called upon the angels, poured out wine, burnt incense, or offered an ox, or he-goat, a sheep, or a cock.[4]

Sozomen continued his account with a description of the religious practices the different pilgrims engaged: "beautiful" [*kalon*] votive offerings, fashioned over the course of the intervening year (perhaps at some expense, and with considerable effort), and offered on behalf of families; processions in which the worshippers wore fine garments; ritual purity in the form of sexual abstinence (this, he noted with astonishment, despite everyone sleeping in open tents and all mixed up together!). At the well adjacent to the famed oak trees, there were burning lamps; while into the water itself people poured wine libations, cakes, coins, myrrh and incense – to such an extent that the water was undrinkable during the festival.

Such religious diversity proved unsustainable in late antiquity, however. It happened one year, Sozomen reports, that the emperor Constantine's mother-in-law, Eutropia, chanced to visit the festival to offer her own prayers. She was scandalized by the festive disorder. In response, Constantine rebuked the bishops of Palestine for allowing such defilement of a holy site, and issued a letter with instructions to dismantle and destroy the existing religious structures and objects. In their place, the emperor ordered the construction of a church, henceforth to be the only site of religious activity at Mamre – now to be known exclusively as a Christian holy place.[5]

Sozomen's account provides a fine picture of religion in the ancient Mediterranean world.[6] Moreover, it is a picture that vividly demonstrates the centrality of the senses for ancient religion. In the course of his passage, he refers to a sacred story and a sacred place; to pilgrimage, prayers, altars, votive offerings, processions, sacrifices, incense, lights (candles/ lamps), wine, special foods, and special attire. The "brilliant" festival Sozomen describes (*lampran panagyrin*) was surely a densely textured sensory celebration, for sights, sounds, tastes, fragrances and textures in riotous abundance would necessarily have attended the ritual actions he mentions. But what significance did these bodily experiences carry for the ancient worshipper?

In his account, Sozomen adds further qualities to the sensory aspects he mentions, beyond simple description. He includes a strong element of religious critique, describing and also assessing the activities he identifies. Thus he stresses characteristics appropriate to religious ritual in general (and perhaps especially in terms of the event being commemorated – an encounter of divine generosity and human hospitality). The festival was radiant (*lampran*: brilliant): commemorating a divine appearance (itself a radiance), and lit by lamps, candles, sacrificial fires, and the excitement of the accompanying fair. There was beauty: the offerings were precious, made with fine craftsmanship; the women were "more than ordinarily studious of their beauty and adornment". The public processions were decorous, and no one behaved "imprudently", despite the suspension of normal social conditions. Self-discipline, then, was part of the events and a fitting expression of reverence. Offerings were manifold, and freely, even lavishly given. By such details Sozomen tells us much about what was valued in the practices of ancient religion: brilliance, beauty, decorum, variety, and generosity.

But Sozomen's rhetoric also makes clear the context of religious competition. For although it seems that people attending the festival had no trouble finding the truths of their own religious traditions made evident by the story of Abraham

[4] Sozomen, HE, 2.4; trans. Chester D. Hartranft NPNF[2] 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,1989), 261.

[5] Sozomen, HE 2.4. The letter is also recorded by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Life of Constantine*; see Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius: the Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 141-3.

[6] See especially James Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007).

and his Visitors, yet to Sozomen (and to Constantine and his bishops), shared ritual piety did not mean shared religious truth. In order to differentiate true religion (Christianity) from its competitors at the festival, Sozomen adds moral or ethical qualities to the sensory experiences involved, so that rhetorical description carried moral and ethical ramifications.

Accordingly, although speaking of the religious activities at Mamre as "fitting", Sozomen also suggests otherwise. By noting the abundance and variety of sacrifices, he suggests excess. His concern about sleeping in open tents raises question of impropriety. His comment that the well water was undrinkable due to the offerings thrown into it, hints at concern for impurity bordering on disgust, always a morally coded emotion. And by noting that Constantine's mother-in-law was shocked by the "established custom" of festive mood, he implies that the festival harbored a general tone of irreverence. Excess, impropriety, impurity, and irreverence: these are vices opposed to the virtues he has noted for the very same ritual practices. All these vices and virtues are implied rather than stated concretely in Sozomen's account, which is notably without rancour. But the reader cannot miss his view.[7]

Clearly, the senses mattered for religion in late antiquity. Sensory experience could not be left unparsed, any more than scripture could remain unexamined. For Sozomen, sensory experience indicated what was fitting for worship of the divine, and what was not. The senses thus provided crucial information for the participants: they revealed the moral and ethical qualities of human-divine relation. But there was more. Amidst the sensory beauty of proper worship, divine presence and divine participation might be made known by sensory encounters that recognized more than the limits of physical experience.

We could set a definition of religion in the ancient world from Sozomen's account of the events at the Oak of Mamre. Ancient religions were fundamentally relational systems, first between the human and divine realms, and then within human social order. Religion comprised the practices and structures by which people established and maintained human-divine relation; and by which they accordingly defined themselves within a social and political order founded on that human-divine relation. A shared treasure chest of ritual tools provided the practices that enabled such relationality, enacting it across domestic, social and political landscapes.[8] These practices engaged a rich sensorium, whether in the simplest individual act (lighting a candle, saying a prayer) or in the grandest public spectacle in city streets or grand cathedrals – or at a festival such as that at Mamre.

At work was a cosmology in which human and divine domains intersected. However separate ontologically, to the ancient mind these domains were constantly and mutually permeable. Here is where the senses did their work, for these made every encounter tangible, and every practice greater than its appearance. One could *sense* more than one could see or hear or smell. Religious practices molded sensory awareness by cultivating a basic religious epistemology: the divine could be perceived. Something could thereby be known. Even if only a partial glimpse, yet such perception was a concrete experience, providing vividly real knowledge of God.[9]

While pagan and Jewish authors had long attended to such perspectives, Christian writers began to show marked and sustained interest in the sensory aspects of religion during the fourth century, as they gained legal recognition, imperial favor, and (by the century's end), the status of state religion in the Roman Empire.[10] In catechetical homilies, sermons, hymns, and other forms of public teaching, Christians gave atten-

[7] On the moral implications of disgust, see William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997).

[8] In addition to Rives, *Religion*, see also Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985); Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994); Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, eds., *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 2 Vols.

[9] See S.A. Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[10] Harvey, 57-98.

tion to the work of the senses as significant for religious practice and meaning.

Just so did the fourth century hymn writer Ephrem the Syrian sing the wonders of bodily experience:

> Let us see those things [God] does for us every day!
> How many tastes for the mouth! How many beauties for the eye!
> How many melodies for the ear! How many scents for the nostrils!
> Who is sufficient in comparison to the goodness of these little things? [11]

From such a perspective, each sensory encounter could be a gift from God. Each revealed a wondrous continuity between ordinary life in its daily familiarity – with its tastes, sounds, sights, smells, textures – and God's constant presence. The senses mediated between human and divine realities; the body was the site where the encounter was realized.

In homilies and hymns, Christian leaders noted how sense perception affected one's body, and more importantly, its resulting impact on one's religious understanding. Most often, Christian authors showed an interest in the epistemological result of such a view: how the sensory encounter yielded greater knowledge of God, or what kind of knowledge was gained.[12] Though beyond the scope of this essay, one ought also consider the rise of Christian monasticism, severe asceticism, mystical and visionary literature in this broader context. These were practices that sought to change the body, rendering it anew: able to perceive and experience the divine in ever more profound degrees.[13]

2. Sensing Experience, Sensing knowledge

In late antiquity, as noted, religious practice invariably took place in the context of religious critique and competition. Here, especially, the senses were important. In part, this was because the different religions of the Empire followed similar practices, as Sozomen had shown for the festival at Mamre. How could one distinguish between truth and falsity, if the practices seemed the same? Furthermore, how could one distinguish between beauty offered to God, and sensory indulgence? Such distinctions were crucial for right relation with God, as with one another, and critical to knowing truth. The senses were necessary to adjudicate right practice and true knowledge.

Let us take the example of hymns, the one dimension Sozomen did not include in his account of Mamre, but unquestionably part of its sensorium. Hymns were sung; they were heard and overheard; they were performed, received, and joined into. Their content offered instruction, while their presentation enabled participation. They worked simultaneously in various registers. In the unsettled context of late antique religion – the context Sozomen delineated so clearly – the work of hymns as a method of religious teaching was considerable.

Late antique Christian liturgy was notably oriented towards instruction, fitting for an era when large numbers of converts entered the church and few had the means to own a Bible. The liturgy provided an education in Bible and doctrine through scripture readings, homilies, and church decoration that included depictions of biblical scenes, often with sacramental elements.[14] Hymns, however, were particularly important. Their format invited active lay participation, while their melodies lingered in the mind. Written in different patterns of verse punctuated by simple refrains, hymns could be performed in various ways. They elicited sung exchange among and between chanters, choirs (male and female), clergy, and congregation, thereby directly involving the church community as a

[11] Hymns on Virginity 31.16; trans. Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 401.
[12] Harvey, esp. 105-47.
[13] Harvey, 99-155.

[14] The account from Gen. 18 of Abraham, Sarah, and the Visitors at Mamre was a frequent example, notably depicted in churches such as Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, or San Vitale in Ravenna. Especially helpful is Jeffrey Spier, ed., *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven: Yale UP/ Kimbell Art Museum, 2007).

whole in their presentation.[15] Moreover, they were singularly flexible: they need not be confined to formal services within church buildings. They could be sung anytime, anywhere, by anyone. By their participatory nature and performative diversity, hymns were a ready component of religious competition in the late antique civic domain. They were a means for the public sounding – and the public hearing – of 'real truth' and 'right' religion.

We may be sure that hymns were public fare, easily accessible to people. Chronicles and hagiographies note liturgical processions through city streets of mixed religious populations, or proceeding from village or towns through countryside to holy sites; or liturgies performed at monasteries or shrines often visited by Christians and non-Christians both, in search of healings or other assistance.[16] These citations mention the singing of hymns. Sometimes they mention competing song, as rival groups led by their bishops attempted to out-sing each other.[17] The sound of hymns included their verbal content as well as their manner of presentation: what was sung, how it was sung, by whom, and where. These sonic qualities reverberated across the civic domain, striking chords of meaning for hearers and participants alike.

In this broader context, consider the hymns of the fourth century Syriac poet Ephrem the Syrian (c. 307-373 CE).[18] Ephrem composed his hymns for the services of the night vigil in local churches in the eastern cities of Nisibis and Edessa where he lived. His verses often reference civic life and civic context. In his Hymns on Virginity, for example, Ephrem presents a number of New Testament women in striking manner.[19] With characteristic exuberance, he sings to them directly, as if they were present among the congregation. In Hymn 26 he sings first to Martha the sister of Mary, "Blessed are you, Martha, to whom love gave the confidence to open your mouth…. Blessed is your mouth that sounded forth with love" (26.3). To the woman who

[15] Christopher Page, *The Christian West and its Singers: the First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), 29-88; Robert F. Taft, *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It* (Berkeley: InterOrthodox Press, 2006), esp. 29-132.

[16] E. g.: *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*, sec. 31, 35, 36, 43, 100; "The Heroic Deeds of Mar Rabbula," trans. Robert Doran, *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth Century Edessa* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 103-5. Both Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *History of the Monks of Syria*, 26.7, 9, 11-16, and the anonymous Syriac *Life of Simeon the Stylite*, 28, 29, 50, 54, 56-64, 118-28 (his death and funeral) mention liturgies performed at Simeon's pillar (or, earlier in his career, at his ascetic site) by various clergy and bishops, with huge crowds of pilgrims, including non-Christians. The texts are conveniently translated together in Robert Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992). John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks *PO* 17-19 (Paris, 1923-1925), contains numerous examples of services held in monastic and ascetic contexts, with a mixture of participants, monastic and lay, Christian and non-Christian. For an outdoor civic liturgy, see G. Khouri-Sarkis, "Réception d'un évêque syrien au VIe siècle," *L'Orient Syrien* 2 (1957), 137-48; Taft, 64-7.

[17] For example: Nicene and Arian Christians in Constantinople, Socrates, HE 6.8; Sozomen HE 8.7. Nicenes, Arians and Valentinians in Milan, Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.7; Ambrose of Milan, Ep. 22.24, 50.16. Meletians and Nicenes in Alexandria, Theodoret, *Haer. fab. comp*. 4.7. Christians in Antioch sang Psalms to harass the Emperor Julian on more than one occasion: Sozomen, HE 5.19; Theodoret of Cyrus, HE 3.19.1-4. A public ethos of polemic seems also to have contributed to the development of Jewish liturgical poetry of this period, particularly piyyut. See, e.g., Wout van Bekkum, "Anti-Christian Polemics in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry (Piyyut) of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries", 297-308 in *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays* (eds. J. Den Boeft and A. Hilhorst; Leiden: Brill, 1993); Israel Jacob Yuval, "The Other in Us: Liturgica, Poetica, Polemica", 364-85 in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity* (eds. Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

[18] See especially Sidney H. Griffith, "*Faith Adoring the Mystery": Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian* (Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 1997); Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992); McVey, 3-59.

[19] Ephrem, Hymns on Virginity (hereafter HVirg): Syriac edited with German translation by Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Virginitate*, CSCO 223-224/ Scr. Syr. 94-95 (Louvain: CorpusSCO, 1962). I cite from the translation in McVey, 261-468.

called a blessing to Christ from the crowd in Luke 11:27, he sings thanks for her "voice that became a trumpet…among the silent" (26.5). To the Canaanite Woman who dared to approach Jesus despite her heathen status, and insisted that he heal her daughter despite his rebuke (Mt. 15: 21-8), Ephrem sings praise for her boldness that "conquered [Christ] the Unconquerable One…Blessed are you who broke through the obstacle fearlessly" (26.9). In between each verse, the congregation sang in response, "To You, [O Lord], be praises from all!"[20]

Ephrem's delight in these women is perhaps surprising: Jesus had rebuked each one for the very same actions Ephrem here praises! In each case, the action was that of bold speech in the presence of others, without shame or apology. What was irksome in the original gospel stories is presented by Ephrem as laudatory, even cause for thanksgiving. The hymn, then, recalls Biblical stories but does not report them; it interprets with interesting exegetical liberty! For the interpretation is offered not only by the words of the song, but also by its presentation: sung boldly and loudly, the hymn enacted the actions it praised.

The bold speech of New Testament women is highlighted in this same collection by the special regard Ephrem grants to the Samaritan Woman of John 4, who met Jesus at the well and returned to her city to proclaim that the Messiah had come. In Hymn 22, Ephrem praises her as the enlightener of her people, celebrating her speech for its manner as much as its content, while the congregation sang in response to each verse, "Praises to your humility, [O Lord]!" At the well, Ephrem sang, the Samaritan Woman spoke "with perception" (22.5), "as a learned one, as a disputant, yet modestly" (22.6). "Her voice was authoritative", he sang, as she exchanged conversation with Jesus, who led her step by step in dialogic exchange to understand him first as a Jew, then as a prophet, and finally as Messiah.[21]

In Hymns on Virginity 23, Ephrem sings that the Samaritan Woman's public preaching of Christ to her people was a wonder as great as the virgin birth. He addresses her directly, praising her speech:

> For [Mary] from within her womb
> in Bethlehem brought forth [Christ's] body as a child,
> but you by your mouth made Him manifest
> as an adult in Shechem, the town of His father's household.
> Blessed are you, woman, who brought forth by your mouth
> light for those in darkness.[22]

The congregation offered its refrain, "Glory to the Discoverer of All!" while Ephrem went on to contrast Mary's physical conception with the Samaritan woman's spiritual one. Both received God's revelation by word, and both brought that Word forth.

> Mary, the thirsty land in Nazareth,
> conceived our Lord by her ear.
> You, too, O woman thirsting for water,
> conceived the Son by your hearing.
> Blessed are your ears that drank the source
> that gave drink to the world.
> Mary planted Him in a manger,
> but you [planted Him] in the ears of His hearers.[23]

In this hymn, with his habitual style, Ephrem both sings to the Samaritan Woman and sings about her. His song elides biblical moment with liturgical gathering, as he exclaims, "Your love was zealous/ to share your treasure with your city".[24] The biblical encounter is brought to life, enacted and joined as his choir and congregation themselves 'zealously sing with love to share their treasure with their city'. Ephrem here teaches the biblical story by having the church gathering become the very story their singing recalls.

Elsewhere Ephrem showed high attunement to the sensory import of singing. Birds or other creatures also sing, as he pointed out in the Hymns on Nativity, but without comprehension of their act, or its content. God is the one "who Himself constructed the senses of our minds,/ so that we might sing on our lyre something that the

[20] H Virg 26; McVey, 377-81.
[21] H Virg 22; McVey, 355-60.
[22] H Virg 23.4; McVey, 362.
[23] H Virg 22.5; McVey, 362.
[24] H Virg 23.1; McVey, 361.

mouth of the bird/ is unable to sing in its melodies."[25] Indeed, Ephrem sings, all of creation should join together in hymns of thanksgiving: "Let us glorify with all our mouths the Lord of all means [of salvation]."[26] It is a frequent theme of his, as for the feast of the Nativity:

> Unveil, make joyful your face, O Creation, on our feast!/ Sing, O Church, with a voice! Heaven and earth [sing] in silence!/ Sing and confess the Child who brought manumission for all.[27]

The bold and loud voices of biblical figures hence provide the model for the voices of the (women's) choirs that sing forth Ephrem's hymns, and for the congregation who join their voices for the refrain.[28] Their voices should be "joyful shouts", with powerful effect on those who hear them, whether believers or unbelievers.[29] On Easter morning, Ephrem exalts:

> This joyful festival is entirely made up of tongues and voices:
> innocent young women and men sounding like trumpets and horns
> while infant girls and boys resemble harps and lyres;
> their voices intertwine as they reach up together towards heaven,
> giving glory to the Lord of glory.
> …
> [And the refrain:] Blessed is He for whom the silent have thundered out![30]

Other Syriac sources praise the loud voices of the (women's) choirs, and exhort the congregation to sound forth their parts in like manner. Shout, call out, thunder forth: such are the summons to the congregation in Syriac liturgical texts, whether for responses, collective prayer, or hymns.[31] The liturgy itself (in Greek, Syriac, Latin) recalled the seraphim singing likewise in Isaiah 6: 3, as the congregation joined in the Sanctus. For the bishop and preacher Jacob of Serug, late in the fifth and early in the sixth century, the sound of hymns brought peaceful heart to the Christian, but irksome annoyance to Satan.[32] Boldness of voice was Jacob's resounding image for Christian triumph:

> The sound of Your praise [O Lord] thunders awesomely among the congregations,
> and through it the impudent song of idolatry was silenced.
> From Your hymns, Your sermons, and Your teachings
> the entire inhabited world shouted out and thundered to sing praise.[33]

Such texts tell us something about religious practice as sensory experience. Ephrem and Jacob stress the sensory quality of voice: important

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[25] Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* (hereafter HNat): Syriac edited with German translation by Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, CSCO 186-187/ Scr. Syr. 82-83 (Louvain: CorpusSCO, 1959). English in McVey, 61-217. Here H Nat 3.16; McVey, 86.

[26] H Nat 3.19; McVey, 87.

[27] H Nat 22. G9; McVey, 181.

[28] On the women's choirs, see S. A. Harvey, "Performance as Exegesis: Women's Liturgical Choirs in Syriac Tradition," 47-64 in *Inquiries into Eastern Christian Worship: Acts of the Second International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy* (eds. B. J. Groen, S. Alexopoulos & S. Hawkes-Teeples; Leuven: Peeters, 2012).

[29] H Virg 19.2.

[30] Hymns on the Resurrection 2.2; Syriac and English in Sebastian P. Brock and George A. Kiraz, *Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006), 169-79, at 171. The entire hymn makes this point.

[31] For example: Jacob of Sarug, "On the Partaking of the Holy Mysteries, (Hom. 95)," Syriac and English by Amir Harrak (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009), lines 203-340; (ps.)-Narsai, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, trans. R. H. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1909), "Homily 17: An Exposition of the Mysteries", at p. 6. John of Ephesus described the "loud voices" of the women's choirs founded by Simeon the Mountaineer: *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ch. 16; ed. and trans. E.W. Brooks, *PO* 17 (Paris 1923), on pp. 229-47. Ephrem repeatedly summons the congregation to sing out their joy: e.g. HNat 22 and 25. Jacob of Sarug's festal homilies often end with a summons to the whole of creation – including the congregation – to sing forth with exultation.

[32] Jacob, "On Partaking," l. 244; Harrak, 30.

[33] "On Elisha 4", lines 21-30; Syriac and English in Stephen A. Kaufman, *Jacob of Sarug's Homilies on Elisha* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010) at p. 176. Jacob goes on to note the power of the women's singing, in particular.

not only as something heard, but also as something sounded forth, a physical engagement and encounter. Other Christian authors reflected on the same sensory experience. In his *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo described the impact he felt when hearing hymns during the liturgy, following his conversion to Christianity. He addressed the experience to God:

> How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your Church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart. This caused the feelings of devotion to overflow. Tears ran, and it was good for me to have that experience.[34]

Yet Augustine remained suspicious of the experience and its intensity, which he marked as both sensory and emotional in impact. Later in the *Confessions*, he reflected on the dilemma. In his view, there was danger and even sin when the beauty of the music – whether melody or singer's voice – moved him apart from the sacred words of a hymn or Psalm. The sensory pleasure seemed to him "enervating" and "deceptive".[35] Nonetheless, Augustine recognized that omission of the music altogether was a response of "too much severity", itself sinful in nature. The conflict led him to an uneasy recognition that sometimes the weak could be helped to truth through the beauty of liturgical music.[36] Augustine was also mindful that criticism worked both ways. The Donatists criticized his catholic churches for their "rather sluggish" manner of singing:

> so that the Donatists reproach us because in church we sing the divine songs of the prophets in a sober manner, while they inflame their revelry as if by trumpet calls.[37]

Jacob of Serug preached in poetic verses that urged his congregation to recognize the significance of hearing for the disposition of one's soul. He pointed out that the sounds of the city could pull one in every direction, tugging one's attention with conflicting emotions: the sounds of excitement in the marketplace, or the sad weeping of funeral processions, or the sounds of the theater with its impious debauchery, or of gossip with good news or bad. (Indeed, Ephrem had prayed to forget the sounds and voices heard during the day![38]) By contrast, Jacob exhorted, the liturgy filled one's ears with holy hymns, the sweet voices of choirs, the cadence of sacred readings, the intoned beauty of homiletic instruction, the bodily sensation of singing responses and recitative prayers.[39] The sonic qualities of liturgy – its voices heard and offered in their patterned sequences – worked on the worshipper, disciplining the body and bringing the soul to a radiant calm.

Amidst pleas for careful attention and bold public disposition, we can hear the late antique person confronted by a confusing cacophony of shared religious behaviors. Boundaries might be lost, distinct identities blurred. Religious leaders, like Ephrem, Augustine, Jacob of Serug, or Sozomen, sought clarity and exclusivity. Sensory rhetoric could give the impression of sharp, clear difference in a context that disallowed such certainty. However effective, however affective, sensory experience could be an unstable tool, especially in the context of late antique pluralism.

3. Sensory Knowledge

In the clarity of one's own community, nonetheless, the senses could teach with deep, even satisfying power. Taking the cue from hymns, let us look closely at one more passage, this time from the sixth century Greek hymn writer, Romanos the Melodist.[40] In his first of two hymns

[34] *Confessions* IX.vi.14; trans. Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 164.
[35] *Confessions* X.xxxiii.49; Chadwick, 208.
[36] *Confessions*, X.xxxiii.50. Cp. Aug., *Ep.* LV.34-5, trans. in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 163-4 [#377].
[37] Augustine, *Ep.* LV. 34-5; in McKinnon, 163-4 [#377].
[38] Ephrem, H Nat 51-2; McVey, 93.
[39] "On Partaking"; Harrak.
[40] See especially Derek Krueger, "Romanos the Melodist and the Christian Self in Early Byzantium", *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21-26 August, 2006* (Aldershot:

on the Raising of Lazarus, fully half of the eighteen verses (stichera) are devoted to a dialogue between Death and Hades as Lazarus begins to arise.[41] In an imagined conversation, in an imagined place, Romanos presents two imagined beings fretfully discoursing on the nature of mortality and their own diminishing power over it. Their dialogue is drenched in sensory details and sensuous imagery. Hades weeps and laments as he is struck with nausea and prepares to vomit Lazarus forth. Death "bellow[s] and cr[ies] out with anger", as divine power convulses them.

Now the work of resurrection begins, and it is an olfactory matter. In John 11:39, Martha had wept that there would be a (foul) odor when the tomb was opened, since Lazarus had been dead four days. In strophe 12, Romanos takes us to the exact process underway. Disintegration, putrefaction, bad odor, and worms had been at work in the corpse of Lazarus; now they have disappeared. In their place there is re-assembly, the busy-ness of ants, and the fragrance of Jesus, who "has perfumed the ill-smelling corpse."

Hand in hand, Death and Hades stand in horror, as they watch the "terrifying and awesome sight":

> The fragrance of the Son of God permeated
> his friend,
> and made ready His body for the call of the
> Giver of Life,
> It reordered his hair and reconstructed his skin,
> And put together his inner organs,
> And stretched out his veins so that the blood
> could again flow through them,
> And repaired his arteries,
> So that Lazarus be made ready when called.
> He will be resurrected and will rise up
> Saying: '*Thou art the Life and*
> *the Resurrection*.'[42]

In these two strophes, smell works in antithetical ways. In the first (strophe 12), stench had been the process of death, the destruction of life. The imagery of its smell was nauseating and repulsive – all of the physical sensations of disgust. But (divine) fragrance ended that process, restoring vitality and life. The anatomical description in strophe 13, although detailed and vivid, does not provoke the queasiness of disgust sensed before. Here is a body vibrantly alive: blood coursing through its veins, hair and skin in order, organs in place. Lazarus is made ready for life; Lazarus lives.

In these verses about the raising of Lazarus, Romanos draws on universal pan-Mediterranean sensory paradigms.[43] Mortality is imaged by stench, decay, putrefaction, and the morally-coded response of disgust that accompanies those experiences. Life – and above all, immortal life – is imaged by sweet fragrance, perfume, and health. Immaterial, invisible, yet immeasurably powerful, smells "permeate" Lazarus: smells destroy him; smells restore him. In this passage, smells characterize the extremes of death and life, of humanity and divinity, in terms instantly recognizable throughout the ancient Mediterranean.

But the work of this passage also does more. For Romanos the Melodist sings it to the congregation in church, during the vigil service in anticipation of the raising of Lazarus. The congregation will join him for the refrain, "Thou art the Life and the Resurrection" that closes each strophe, singing in the voice of each character in turn who speaks those words. In the dark night of the vigil service, the imagery of smell takes on other resonances. The sweat, dirt, and weariness of daily life in its grinding harshness are left outside the church's doors. Inside, the church flickers with lamps and candles of perfumed oil and wax; incense sweetens the air with the scent of Paradise; fragrant holy oil anoints the sick and weary. Bread and wine await the believer: body and blood as the very Medicine of Life. To the

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Ashgate, 2006) 1: 255-74; and Georgia Frank, "Romanos and the Night Vigil in the Sixth Century", in *A People's History of Christianity*, Vol. 3: *Byzantine Christianity* (ed. Derek Krueger; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 59-78.

[41] I use the edition by P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica: Cantica Genuina* (Oxford, 1963), 102-9; and follow here the translation in Margaret Carpenter, *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine* Melodist, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1970-73) vol 1: 137-48.

[42] Carpenter 1: 146.

[43] Harvey, 11-56.

worshipper who hears the poet's verses and sings in response, the sensory imagery is cosmological, evoking primordial processes of death and life. But it is also, and especially, liturgical and sacramental. It locates the believer directly in the sensory experience of worship; and it reveals that experience to be salvific: cleansing, healing, and life-giving.

Romanos takes us to the precise intersection between physical sensory experience, and its ultimate – that is, its theological – content. Here is the religious knowledge the believer gains through attention to the senses. To the late antique Christian, the senses were what lifted life in the body out of the limits of mere materiality. The senses enabled physical life to be more than a material matter (or, more than a matter of material!): one could experience more than could be seen or touched or heard. One could know more, tangibly and perceptibly. Most importantly, the senses provided the routes by which the human and divine realms permeated one another, continually interacting in an ongoing, physically encountered relationship and mutual presence. Such awareness profoundly marked ancient Christianity and its adherents. Well might we ask how to assess such awareness now, in the present post-modern, post-enlightenment, post-religious, post-secular world!

Summary

This essay uses three examples to demonstrate the importance of the physical senses for ancient Christianity. First, I consider the fifth century Christian historian Sozomen on the nature of ancient religion and its practices. Second, religious sound is explored as intrinsic to the practice of hymn singing and also as a source of religious knowledge. Finally, Romanos the Melodist, the sixth century Greek hymn writer, uses sensory imagery to present religious knowledge in its most basic cosmological formulation.