

2015

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This article was originally published as:

Ryan, T. (2015). Our pathway to God: Scent. *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology*, 45 (1), 25-30.

Original article available here:

<http://compassreview.org/spring15/6.pdf>

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OUR PATHWAY TO GOD: SCENT

TOM RYAN SM

AT A FAMILY Christmas gathering recently, one of the women opened her gift. She found a bottle of Chanel No. 5. Need more be said about her reaction...?

Why? This particular designer brand name has been almost cauterized into our modern consciousness—much to the dismay of its competitors. Think of the billions of dollars spent annually on perfume, *eau de cologne* and after-shave lotions. Or in the advertising industry that surrounds them...

For Marcel Proust, the taste of a small cake or *madeleine* triggers his literary journey into his childhood. But perhaps fragrances and scents are the most powerful triggers to memories. The aroma of bread in a toaster evokes for me a winter night with a family having soup with toast made on an open fire.

Or we catch the lingering scent of someone who has left a room and a forgotten world reappears. Or it may tell us who was in the room without actually seeing them...

Again, think how we appeal to the sense of smell as a benchmark for our everyday life and, even, of a basic moral code. 'That's a bit off' or 'it's on the nose.' Staying out of trouble is 'to keep one's nose clean.' We evaluate someone as being in 'good' or 'bad' odour. And, of course, a good journalist needs to 'to have a nose for a story' or a detective to have the confidence to 'follow his nose.'

It is interesting how scent, goodness and authenticity are so often connected. This will be a theme we return to as we reflect on how the sense of smell can be a pathway, not only to God, but between God and us.

Scent and the Lavishness of Love

Let's start with graphic stories about scent as

found in Luke 7: 36-50, Mark 14: 3-9 and John 12:1-11... Discussing these fully and their differences is not our task here. Perhaps take time to read the passages. Let's ponder two thoughts.

First, in each scene a costly ointment is the common factor. The washing of Jesus' feet and the 'anointing' with the 'pure nard' highlights the excess of love expressed. Further, when, as in the John scene, we are told that 'the house was full of the scent of the ointment', this is an evocative way to reinforce the extravagance of the gesture of love. The excess of love is matched by Jesus' graciousness, even, a sense of 'hang the expense.'...

Second, let's focus on the final phrase in the Luke version: 'your faith has saved you, go in peace.' This phrase illuminates what 'salvation' means in Luke. It is certainly an expression of the expansive hospitality of God. This whole episode is a miniature drama. It shows us that salvation is not only a matter of being forgiven. It is about what happens to the whole person from that experience. The woman is transformed, coming to see herself and the world with different eyes, with a different heart. By contrast with Simon, she now shares in the divine impulse to love and serve with extravagance. Her tears 'bathe' Jesus' feet; she does not 'cease' kissing his feet. But, importantly for our purposes, the lavish desire driving her love is captured in the use of costly ointment and its pervasive fragrance.

Scent, Jesus and Wisdom

In what way is scent used in relation to Jesus? We find in Ephesians 5:1:

Try, then, to imitate God, as children of his that

he loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in our place *as fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God.*

The reference (italicized phrase) to Exodus 29:18 points the way. Our lives are to be modelled on the love of the Son of God manifested in his sacrificial death, 'whose fragrance will appease Yahweh.' This is expressed both in self-surrendering in love for God and for our neighbour.

But there is also the suggestion of a link between fragrance and the power of witness, something taken further in a text from 2 Cor. 14-17.

Thanks be to God who, wherever he goes, makes us, in Christ, partners of his triumph, and through us is spreading the knowledge of himself, like a sweet smell, everywhere. We are Christ's incense to God for those who are being saved and for those who are not; for the last, the smell of death that leads to death, for the first the smell of life that leads to life... In Christ, we speak as men of sincerity, as envoys of God and in God's presence.

This passage is rich in its theology and its associations. It is built on the analogy of a victorious general making his ceremonial entry into Rome. However, rather than subservient foot soldiers under a leader, we are 'partners' with Christ in his triumph. Further, we are both collaborators with, and instruments of, Jesus in spreading of the 'knowledge' of Jesus, namely, of God revealed in him. The allusion here is to Ecclesiasticus 24:15 where personified Wisdom has 'exhaled a perfume like cinnamon and acacia (and) breathed out a scent like choice myrrh.' Together with Christ, the Wisdom of God, as faithful disciples, we are called to be transformed from within by divine wisdom. This enables and impels us to be carriers of divine wisdom (its incense, aroma) both in preaching and our way of life. The scent of God, here, is mark of authentic existence, a pointer to what is true and good. This raises another consideration.

* * *



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Scent and the Spiritual Senses

In an earlier article, we mentioned how, in the Christian tradition, the language of sense-perception is used to describe the divine-human encounter. In other words, while it is not the physical mode of perception of the five senses (since God is not material), it is still an experiential reality somehow involving the whole person. It is appropriate, then, to speak either metaphorically or by analogy, of seeing/hearing/touching/tasting/smelling God. Authors suggest these are the forms of a more generic 'sense' expressed in Proverbs 2:5. By searching diligently for wisdom, clear perception and discernment for the 'heart' (the seat of intellectual and moral life), one will 'discover the knowledge of God' or wisdom.

It is instructive, for our purposes, to note a distinction found in some 13th century authors (Alexander of Hales, Thomas Gallus and St Bonaventure). They aligned spiritual sight and hearing with the intellect (*intellectus*) whose object is what is true. Whereas they associated touch, taste and smell with affectivity (*affectus*) whose object is what is good.¹ Further, the best image or analogy for the higher forms of theological contemplation are the senses of touch, taste and smell because they have more immediate proximity to their object compared to sight and hearing.

Bonaventure sees spiritual sensation as following the presence of grace. It brings

the apprehension of a spiritual object, namely, the uncreated, incarnate and inspired Word and the associated delight in the Word. The soul recovers the spiritual senses through the theological virtues whose object is the Uncreated Word: hearing and sight through faith; taste and touch through the delight in embracing with the Word with love; and, leading from faith into love: 'when the soul longs with hope to receive the inspired Word, she recovers, because of her desire and affection, the spiritual sense of smell.'²

It comes as no surprise, then, that the spiritual sense of smell, in patristic and later sources, was associated with spiritual discernment and discrimination. Smell and scent, so understood, are aligned with the Scriptural passages just discussed together with common usages noted earlier in this article in relation to moral sensitivity. Smell is the sense that is the paradigm for those of maturity with 'minds trained by practice to distinguish between good and bad' (Hebrews 5:14). Through the practice of virtue, a moral benchmark has been interiorized that brings a 'nose' for what is right and wrong in judgments and decisions. It is a share in the wisdom of Christ, as noted earlier. The faithful are said to inhale the 'sweet aroma of Christ', in another rendition of 2 Cor. 2:15.

In pondering these scriptural scenes of texts about smell and scent, we have seen their association with the lavishness of love and sacrifice—in divine and human form—and of wisdom's pervasive aroma from sharing in the life of Christ and in living authentically. But there is another dimension to scent, suggested by a Gospel scene in Matthew, namely, the visit of the Magi. They came to venerate the child as Son of God ('they did him homage'). Their gifts, in later tradition, take on a theological significance: gold for Christ's kingship; incense for his divinity and myrrh for his redemptive suffering.³ The association, then, between scent and adoration offers further possibilities for our reflections.

Incense, Adoration and Wonder

In a religious context, incense filtering into the atmosphere, evokes an aura of silence and prayer. We see wisps of incense at a funeral - the gesture acknowledging a sacred gathering place (Church or chapel) or the deceased as a temple of the Holy Spirit. We speak of the 'odour of sanctity' to capture a certain 'other-worldliness' revealed in a person who is close to God.

In terms of prayer, it is interesting that if we look at the Psalms, it is difficult to find one whose dominant theme is Adoration. Consistently we find attitudes of Praise, Petition, Sorrow and Thanksgiving. We do find a sense of wonder and awe in response to the glories of creation (Ps. 8 and 104).

Throughout the Bible incense is used as a symbol of prayer rising to God. For instance 'Let my prayer rise before you like incense and my hands like an evening offering.' (Ps. 141: 2). The attitude naturally evoked by incense is *Adoration*. There is silence that brings reverence, an urge to bow, to be prostrate before the mystery of God. We are in the presence of what is so far beyond us.

We find ourselves with the Psalmist in the *Office of Readings*.

*Come in; let us bow and bend low;
Let us kneel before the God who made us
For he is our God and we
The people who belong to his pasture,
the flock that is led by his hand.*

Wonder and Creation

In our lifetime, in reaction to the God who is distant and demanding, there has been a needed and healthy emphasis on the God close and loving.

But it can be at a cost. It is easy to 'domesticate' God. We can overlook that aspect of the divine mystery in which God is totally beyond us. At times, we need to be aware of the God who prompts awe, wonder and adoration.

We know that divine love (given for us and to us) is celebrated in the Eucharist. But that mystery has another side. It is of the all holy God present in our midst in the Blessed Sacrament in Church or chapel. Love leading to silent adoration in Jesus' presence is a precious Christian practice that we should not lose.

We mentioned earlier Psalms celebrating God in creation. St. Thomas Aquinas said God is revealed to us through a work of two volumes—Creation and the Scriptures. For Aquinas, theology starts with the sense of wonder—in the experience of beauty in people or nature, in moments of amazement at mysteries so great that we are totally lost for words. But it also leads us to ask questions, to want to learn and understand.

The rediscovery of nature for many people today may not just be a reaction to their blockages with institutional religion. Think of couples who request a garden or a beach wedding. Perhaps we need reminding that the primary religious experience for most of humanity is a response to the wonder of creation.

The Anglican writer Evelyn Underhill suggests that adoration 'is the first and greatest of life's responses to the spiritual environment.' She cites a story by Osbert Sitwell about a traveller in equatorial forests.

He is awakened in the night by strange sounds. He looks out and sees a great ape, 'one of those tragic creatures just verging on the human', in its fenced enclosure. He sees it 'bowing in solemn adoration before the splendour of the rising moon.' The traveller, filled with awe at the spectacle, says 'I had seen the birth of religion.'

Underhill sees this primitive, instinctive act of worship as creation, through this creature, in profound abasement before the mystery beyond itself. It is nature 'finding in that first vague moment of consciousness something beyond itself which it must adore; the first and simplest of the self-disclosures of God.'¹⁴

What does all this have to do for us today?

It is a call to revive our sense of wonder. Advances in cosmology, physics and biology have generated questions for scientists and theologians—questions concerning creation, how it grows and continues through evolution and the origins of the universe—by design or by chance? In terms of our Australian environment, Eugene Stockton points out that there are a number of signs that are leading us to 'the prospect of reaching out to God through our own environment, of seeking the face of God in our own land.' It is a call to learn from the aboriginal mysticism and from *dadirri*—described by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr as 'the inner deep listening and quiet still awareness...and waiting.'¹⁵

Stockton observes that advances in science, a greater sense of the environment and learning from indigenous spiritualities are opening up

incredible wonders of creation and of the One behind it all. A fitting response to that wonder is our echo of wonder. Wonder, I find, is the single English word closest in spirit to Aboriginal *dadirri*...wonder recaptures that sense, long suppressed and long forgotten, of the wild-eyed child who once explored his or her new world.⁶

Again, nature is both a pointer to God beyond us but also mediates God as close and reassuring. There is, then, a healing side to nature. In *A Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson points out that

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts...there is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.

For some, however, nature may be healing and also sustain a sense of wonder. It may open up to the mystery of life and of the universe. But it may not be expressed in terms of belief in God.

Some may be turned off by caricatures of God. Often, those who deny there is a God are denying distorted images of God or the God

presented by other people. Others may find that they cannot reconcile evil and suffering, especially of the innocent, with the idea of a good and loving God.

We need to recall the wisdom of Karl Rahner SJ. A person's expression of an 'anguished atheism' may, in reality, be a 'sharing in the desolation of the Cross.' Or when a writer implicitly or explicitly denies Christianity, such writing may, in fact, be the 'false or inadequate explanation and interpretation of a quest for the fullness of life, which is nevertheless, under God's blessing.'⁷

These considerations point to some of the anomalies arising in people's lives, and here, in those of non-believers. David Hay has remarked that, in our secularized era, recognition of the Spirit and its fruits can take puzzling forms. The dissonances between head and heart, image and reality, illusion and truth can be resolved in ways that are harmonically paradoxical. For instance, Hay cites someone saying

I know that since I concluded some years ago that my mind could not accept a personal God I seem to have become more aware of this all-pervading power which to me is strength, comfort, joy, goodness.⁸

Whether this is rejection of a distorted image of a personal God or not, it is clearly an instance of Rahner's comment above. The person's openness to the 'fullness of life' is an openness to transcendent mystery, to divine grace and its effects. Or, as Bernard Lonergan once observed, they 'may love God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads.'⁹

Let us consider a final thought on wonder, worship and hope.

Where are your Heart and your Hope?

First, Jesus links worship with the values that drive our life. See Luke 4:8 and Deuteronomy 6:4. 'You must worship...serve [God] alone.' In Matt. 6: 24-34 Jesus takes this further. 'Worship' here is being obsessed with 'idols', e.g., money

and possessions. Worship now is related to what is at the centre of my life ('where is your heart?').

Second, one of life's struggles as we get older is between hope and despair. It can involve a sort of sadness, even cynicism—'what's the point?' It is a shrinking of mind and heart about God's goodness and love. It is accompanied by a curving in on oneself.

In the spiritual tradition this is known as *acedia* or sloth. It is not really about physical or emotional laziness, becoming an 'all-round couch-potato.' That may be a symptom. Another is a constant restlessness whereby we are 'distracted from distraction by distraction' (TS Eliot).

But in its deeper and subtle roots, sloth is lethal (as a deadly 'sin' or more accurately 'vice') because it is an ingrained disposition to give up on *hope*. Aquinas considered such movements against hope as more dangerous than those against faith and love. They erode the instinct to be nourished by *life itself*. For Aquinas, sloth means 'I can't be bothered' to let myself be touched by awe and wonder.¹⁰ From a modern perspective, Dag Hammarskjöld reminds us

God does not die on the day we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of the wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason (Markings)

Conclusion

Some years ago, Australian journalist Barry Oakley wrote that the French dramatist Jean Cocteau once asked Sergei Diaghilev (Russian composer and art critic) what he could do for him in the theatre.

Diaghilev's reply was 'astonish me.'

If life, people, nature and art continue to 'astonish' me, I have little to worry about *acedia* and sloth. I am open to life, to mystery, to God and to prayer.

Finally, the example of a virtuous life and its association with the scent is captured in

this prayer of the Divine Office for the third week of the Church's year:

All-powerful, ever-living God,
direct our steps in the way of your love,
so that our whole life may be fragrant

with all we do in the name of Jesus, your
beloved Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the
Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever, Amen.

NOTES

1. Paul Gavrilyuk & Sarah Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (New York and Cambridge UK: CUP, 2012), Introduction, 5.
2. George F LaNave, 'Bonaventure,' in Gavrilyuk & Sarah Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses*, 159-173, at 164.
3. Benedict T Viviano OP, 'The Gospel according to Matthew' in R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, R. Murphy (eds), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 631-674, at 636a.
4. Eveylyn Underhill, *The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life* (London UK: Methuen & Co., 1932), 161.
5. Eugene Stockton, *Wonder: A Way To God* (NSW: St Pauls, 1998), 16-17.
6. Stockton, *Wonder*, 18.
7. Karl Rahner, 'The Task of the Writer in Relation to Christian Living', *Theological Investigations*, vol 8 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 118.
8. David Hay, 'The Spirit blows free,' *The Tablet*, May 17, 1997, p. 627.
9. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 278.
10. *Summa Theologiae* 2.2.20, 3-4.

Saints are not those who cultivate their own self-abnegation; they are engaged in the honest and forgetful business of giving themselves freely and freely receiving from others. In a remark on religious humility, Williams observes that the kenosis of Christian sociality means not that we should go about saying 'no' to who we really are but that 'each self hears its "yes" from the other and not from its own depths.' Indeed, a saintly life might be marked by a sort of 'holy egotism,' a term he used of figures like Desmond Tutu and Karl Barth. Such egotism is neither pride nor false humility, only an unselfconscious enjoyment of the expansive capacities of the self. The ego is displaced just by regarding it lightly, by treating it with reckless enjoyment, as though it were a gift. CS Lewis has finely observed that humility means enjoying your own gifts as though they were somebody else's; you could design the world's best cathedral and rejoice just as much as if someone else had done it...

*...That is what Williams means by holy egotism: not pushing everybody else to the edges to make room for your own inflated ego, but sharing yourself around in such a way that helps others to become truly themselves...someone like the title character in the 1987 film *Babette's Feast* (a film Williams has described as an 'animated icon'). When unassuming Babette wins the lottery, she spends the entire fortune on the flagrant extravagance of one glorious, stupendous dinner for her friends. That is what the holy life looks like: a joyous intensification, a generous and reckless enlargement of the self, as one particular human life is placed wholly at the disposal of others.*

—Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*, 76