INTRODUCTION

> A certain perception takes place in the brain, prompted by the bodily senses, which is then transmitted to the faculties of discernment, and adds to the treasury of knowledge something that was not there before. The eloquent Gregory says that the mind which is determined to ignore corporeal things will find itself weakened and frustrated.
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> John of Damascus, *On the Divine Languages* 1.11[1]

> The humble one approaches the beasts of prey and as soon as their eye rests on him, their wildness is tamed and they come to him and accompany him as their master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and his feet. For they smell from him the smell which spread from Adam before his transgression, when the beasts gathered near him and he gave them names, in Paradise—the smell which was taken from us and given back to us anew by Christ through His advent, which made the smell of the human race sweet.
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> Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 82.[2]

Christianity emerged in a world where smells mattered. They mattered for what they did. They mattered for what they meant. Smells affected what or whom they touched, rendering the encounter attractive, repulsive, soothing or dangerous. Smells revealed things about the object, person, or place from which they wafted. Smells mattered because they were invisible, because they were transitory, because they were mobile, because they lingered, because of their potency to change substance or experience or meaning. Throughout the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean regions, a common understanding prevailed that sensory experiences carried effective power for good and for ill in physical, social, and political terms; further, that sensory experiences carried cosmological significance, ordering human life within the cosmos. The place of smell in these cultures demonstrated just such an understanding.

Ancient Christians shared in broad traditions regarding olfactory sensibilities, indications, and practices. From one end of the Mediterranean to the other as far as ancient memory stretched, good smells were associated with all that was "good" in life and beyond: good food, good health, good relationships, incorruptibility, immortality, divine presence, divine favor. In turn, bad smells indicated the reverse: ill health, decay, disorder, disfavor, mortality, evil inclination, destruction. Furthermore, there was general agreement across Mediterranean peoples as to what constituted good and bad smells, enabling the proliferation of olfactory practices that displayed and expressed these associations as cultural codes. These codes were not based on symbolism as a disembodied language, but on the concrete view that smells participated in effecting the processes they represented. Odors could cleanse, purify, ward off, or heal; they could contaminate, pollute, endanger. Medical science, mythology, social systems, and ritual practices converged to sustain this olfactory orientation across the Mediterranean world.

To the ancient mind, then, odors fair and foul could order and classify human relations in the social or political spheres, as well as human-divine interaction. Such an orientation toward smells was gained through cultural habits. Christians utilized those habits, drawing upon them as instruments by which to construct experiences, practices, and meanings that would yield a distinctly Christian worldview and identity in the midst of the huge and variegated population that interacted in the Mediterranean regions. By holding up the familiar, by articulating and demarcating its possibilities, Christians could realign patterns of the common olfactory legacy and reconfigure their consequences for social meaning.

Earliest Christianity was characterized by an austerity in its religious practices, both in ritual and in devotional piety, in keeping with its general alienation from worldly (non-Christian) order. With its legalization and subsequent shift to political and social domination in the Roman Empire over the course of the fourth century, Christianity also came to demonstrate a changed relationship to its physical context. A dramatic elaboration of Christian practices accompanied this change, with a striking intensification of sensory engagement. Developments in the uses and meanings of smells were part of the process. By the fifth century, a lavishly olfactory piety attended Christianity in its expressions, ritual practices, and devotional experiences. To name but a few examples: incense, almost uniformly condemned in Christian writings prior to the late fourth century, now drenched every form of Christian ceremonial, both private and public; scented oils gained sacramental usage; perfumed unctions were liberally applied in paraliturgical rites. In ritual activities, homiletic literature, hymnography, hagiography, historiographical texts, and disciplinary

manuals, smells were often stressed. For the late antique Christian, odors served to effect changes in moral condition, to discipline the body towards a more perfectly fashioned existence, to instruct on the qualities and consequences of human and divine natures, to classify and order human-divine relation and interaction in explicitly Christian terms.

This book is a study of how Christianity participated in the ancient uses of and attitudes towards smells. Above all, it is a study of how Christians took note of their cultural inheritance, granted it deliberate attention, engaged and changed it for their own purposes. My concern is with the Christian exploration of the ancient olfactory imagination. I will argue that olfactory practices and their development within Christian ritual contexts affected how Christians constructed the experience of smell even at the most mundane level in their daily habits. The results were a distinctive religious epistemology which, in turn, yielded a particular human identity. That is, I will argue that Christians used olfactory experience to formulate religious knowledge: to posit knowledge of the divine and, consequently, knowledge about the human. The two quotations at the beginning of this introduction are statements of this understanding. John of Damascus reminded his readers that sensory experiences provided knowledge which eluded the rational intellect alone and could not be gained in any other way. Isaac the Syrian evoked the Christian goal: the humble one—that person whose knowledge of God had engendered the life of perfect devotion—was one who had recovered the identity of humanity in its original, prelapsarian condition, an identity made known by its smell. How could olfactory experience be construed in revelatory terms? What specifically could it convey? How and what could be known through smell?

The Christian use of olfactory experience for purposes of religious epistemology was one strategy in the larger process of Christianization that marked the whole of late antique Roman history. As such, this study looks at one strand of a much larger tapestry. I make no claim that smells were more important for Christians than for other religious groups of the ancient Mediterranean. Rather, I will argue for the distinctive ways by which Christians utilized olfactory practices and their significations in order to construct a particular identity. Again, I make no claim that smell was more important than other senses in the ancient Christian reckoning, for Christians shared the perspective of their broader culture that sight and sound were the most important experiences of the human sensorium. Rather, I seek to redress an imbalance. Modern scholars, like their ancient counterparts, have tended to privilege the visual in their treatment of ancient Christianity (notably as culminating in the eastern Christian piety of icons), and have utilized the imagery of sight and hearing as dominant themes for analyzing the history of western Christianity.[3] Recent discussions of

"embodiment" and of religion as an "embodied" activity have shown a marked interest in expanding our understanding of the role of the senses.[4] For the study of antiquity, an exploration of the "lesser" senses is required if we are to grasp more fully how the ancients understood the body as a whole body, and bodily experience as a necessary component of religion, and indeed, of human life. I choose to focus on smell as a category of religious experience in order to expand our understanding of ancient Christian piety as practices that carried cultural meanings available for epistemological purposes.

When we look at primary sources in terms of sensory experience, a wealth of material emerges that is significant for epistemology and identity both, but which has not received adequate scholarly attention. These materials point towards variegated practices of the Christian community, and not only to explications by theologians or spokespersons who seized the roles of interpreters and teachers. Intellectual, philosophically informed discussion was one aspect of what religious epistemology required in the ancient understanding. But we can learn as much, and sometimes more, by considering the sensory imagery that laced hymnography, or that punctuated hagiographical narratives. Such imagery will have been more commonly encountered than, for example, the highly refined medical (and therefore philosophically cultivated) expositions of Aristotle or Theophrastus or Galen or Nemesius of Emesa.

My exploration of olfactory experience in ancient Christianity has been influenced by several developments in current scholarship. First is the reassessment of early Christian asceticism that has taken place in recent years, in concert with interest in the body as a primary topic for cultural study.[5] This reassessment has cast vivid light on the importance of the physical body in the early Christian world. Much of this scholarship has presented asceticism as a practice involving the deliberate, constructive use of the body by ancient Christians with profound social and political consequences.[6] Nonetheless, there remains a tendency to interpret early Christian asceticism as a "world-renouncing" behavior, in a religion characterized as fundamentally hostile to the body and to physical experience.[7] The study I offer here seriously challenges that lingering tendency. It does so first by bringing into consideration the importance many ascetic texts gave to sensory experience in its ritualistic and epistemological possibilities. But furthermore, current interest in the body generally stands in the context of cultural debates about sexuality, defined at the most basic level in terms of procreative sexual activity and then further with respect to power and relation. The study of sense perception allows consideration of the body, its cultural and social locations, experiences, roles, and functions from a different perspective. This difference in vantage point opens fresh encounters with our ancient subjects, and reveals aspects of their world

we have not previously taken into account but which, for the ancients, were clearly essential to their habits of activity and thought.

To add richer texture to the picture, I have found that Syriac Christianity—often cited as generating the most extreme of late antique ascetic movements—also provides some of the most sophisticated olfactory material of that time period.[8] This is true both in terms of preferred literary imagery, and in the extant evidence for the expansion of olfactory uses in Christian ritual (developments in the use of incense, or of holy chrism, for example). Such sensory—and specifically olfactory—emphasis in practice and in rhetoric demands special consideration when its occurrence coincides with ascetic practices of particular severity, or else we are missing crucial aspects of the ancient understanding of ascetic activity. By adding close consideration of Syriac evidence to the more familiar material of Greek and Latin writers, I hope to deepen our knowledge of the cosmopolitan culture of the later Roman Empire and of the diverse traditions that contributed to the Christianity of the time.

A further impetus to my study is that scholarship on early Christian asceticism has often obscured, or left aside, the fundamental religious context of the liturgical community as that in which Christian piety was molded. Yet in the most basic sense, liturgy provided the terms by which ancient Christian writers negotiated the body. Liturgy, like ascetic practice, was a means by which the body was reformed and remade. The senses no less than bodily desires were disciplined and refashioned in the process of the liturgy's movement and over the course of the liturgical cycle. An adequate treatment of early Christian asceticism requires an understanding of its liturgical context as the prerequisite for and continuing base of the ascetic vocation. Liturgy framed the Christian perception of bodily condition, discipline, and transformation.[9] The study of olfactory experience moves this context into the foreground, recasting the contours of discussion to include ancient views of the body not apparent when asceticism is studied in counterpoint to sexuality. The uses and meanings of scents in sacred ritual, their interpretation in mystagogical commentaries, and the analysis of sense perception by ancient theologians for purposes of religious epistemology are areas of inquiry that conjoin liturgy, asceticism, and theology as mutually inclusive domains of experience—as they were for the ancient Christian participant.

From another vantage point, the growing literature on the anthropology and history of the senses demands an application to early Christian materials. Recent studies on the anthropology of smell have argued that de-emphasis or devaluation of olfactory experience is a trait peculiar to the modern west and its specific intellectual traditions.[10] Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott have claimed further that lack of attention to olfaction as a cultural experience impoverishes our ability to understand the richly textured

methods by which cultures express the nature and meaning of order and relation in their communities as well as their cosmologies.[11] I have found their work especially helpful in suggesting models by which to approach cultural understandings of sense perception generally, and smell in particular. The groundbreaking historical work by Marcel Detienne in *The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology,*[12] and Alain Corbin in *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* demonstrated how much can be gained when olfactory experience is pursued as a category of socio-cultural analysis (in their respective instances, for classical Greece and for modern France).[13] Jean-Pierre Albert's *Odeurs de Sainteté: La mythologie chrétienne des aromates* has applied their models to the Christian imagination of medieval Europe.[14] More recently, the illuminating dissertation and subsequent articles by Béatrice Caseau reconstruct daily life in late antiquity according to the uses and roles of smells.[15] Caseau's research is a tour de force of historical investigation that continues the work Saara Lilja undertook with classical poetry, but with a far more sophisticated approach to religious activity.[16] Caseau has laid out the cultural spectrum of odors, their uses and meanings, that confronted Christians in their early centuries; and she has traced the ways in which Christians came to appropriate these in both religious and profane contexts. Her use of material evidence is especially helpful for historians as she gives considerable attention to the traffic in spices, the production of incense and perfumes, recipes for different concoctions, and above all medical and hygienic uses of smells. Béatrice Caseau's work stands in relation to the present study as a history of practices in relation to a study of discourse. Her focus on the concrete *realia* of ancient olfactory practices enables a focus like mine on the religious uses of cultural imagination through ritual and disciplinary (ascetic) activity.

With these methodological considerations underlying my study, then, I have organized the material as follows.

Chapter 1 surveys the olfactory culture into which Christianity emerged, including Greco-Roman and Jewish perspectives. It presents Christianity's early austerity in its olfactory piety, as well as its formative explorations of the religious dimensions of smells. In particular, the biblical tropes—both from the canonical texts and from their extracanonical elaborations—are presented as providing the literary paradigms most influential for the outworking of a Christian olfactory understanding. Two basic paradigms governed the development of a Christian olfactory culture: incense as the marker of sacrifice, the process of human-divine interaction; and perfume as the marker of divine presence, signifying the condition of blessing or grace.

Chapter 2 charts the elaboration of Christian ritual in the post-Constantinian era of the fourth and fifth centuries, considering how Christian rituals remade

and redefined the human body, sustained its new identity, and provided guidance for individual and social conduct in ritually defined terms. Consistently, I argue, fragrances, their uses and reception, were fundamental to the construction and maintenance of these perspectives. These ritual developments took place in the context of a dramatically changed political setting for Christianity, and were accompanied by a striking reorientation to the natural world and its physical encounter through bodily experience. Liturgical hymnography, catechetical homilies, civic sermons, and hagiography all illustrate the multiple ways by which the lay Christian population was taught to experience the world through the body explicitly as a place of human-divine encounter and relation. The lavish proliferation of incense usage and holy oils that characterized liturgical and devotional developments during this period contributed distinct habits of practices and perceptions, enabling a changed Christian sensorium to be established.

Chapter 3 examines the emergence of a Christian consensus that the body of the Christian in its received experiences and enacted responses yielded distinct knowledge of God. Ancient medical and philosophical traditions provided sophisticated intellectual tools for the analysis of sense perception and its role in epistemology. Christian thinkers engaged those traditions and utilized them in conjunction with biblical and theological resources to seek nuanced and critical understandings of the manner by which sensory experience contributed to a Christian knowledge of the world, the human person, and divinity. The instructive capacity of smell was crucial to this understanding, due to the distinctive qualities of olfactory experience. Invisible, silent, yet tangibly felt, smells were acutely effective in conveying divine presence or absence, demonic activity, or moral condition. Uncontainable, smells were transgressive in movement, crossing human and divine domains as intersecting paths of interaction. Smells provided concrete encounters that appeared to defy articulation or form, yet necessitated a physically informed mode of understanding. Christian intellectuals utilized olfactory experience to explore religious epistemology through practical knowledge and scientific expertise; or as analogies, metaphors, or illustrations from nature. Above all, they engaged olfaction as a bodily sensation that was intrinsically revelatory of identity, moral condition, and divine relation. Framed by such a sophisticated intellectual context, Christian preachers and hymnographers could employ concise yet highly effective patterns of olfactory imagery in the instruction of their congregations.

Chapter 4 considers how an ascetic discourse extended the ritual process for Christianity, beyond the ecclesiastical structures of institutional practices into the body of the individual believer in its social and political locations. I argue that Christian leaders used an ascetic rhetoric to designate sensory contexts:

where catechetical and liturgical instruction had encouraged sensory engagement within the liturgical or devotional setting, homilists would also, in turn, admonish their congregations about the grave moral dangers of sensory pleasures outside those ritually defined boundaries. Ascetic instruction was used both for the lay congregation and in monastic communities to train the Christian not only in the proper use of the senses, but also in the appropriate location of their sensory experiences. That is, the body of the ascetically trained Christian was rhetorically and ritually positioned so that sensory experiences engaged their liturgical counterparts, no matter where the individual was. The emergence of the "spiritual senses" as a strategy for biblical interpretation developed, in the context of this larger ascetic discourse, to define bodily experience in terms that rendered it inclusive of divine as well as human or natural encounter. Liturgy provided the practices and images used to frame the ascetic's activities, allowing even the most physically isolated or severe forms of ascetic discipline to be ritually connected to the liturgical life of the larger ecclesiastical community. Olfactory piety and imagery were again the most consistent vehicles for this reorientation of Christian sensory experience.

To illustrate the intersections of ascetic discipline, devotional piety, and liturgical community, I take the case of the early stylite saints Simeon the Elder and Simeon the Younger, two saints whose cults were characterized by extensive incense practices. The hagiographical depictions of these two saints exhibit strong liturgical patterns as their ordering frames. Incense piety is the clearest marker for this orientation, and hagiographical texts that highlight incense practices tend also to emphasize olfactory experience in broader terms (the smells of wounds, illnesses, relics, ointments, decay, perfumes, heavenly visitations). The hagiographies for these two saints utilize such olfactory references to implicate the body of the witness (the one who heard or read the story) as deeply as the body of the saint itself as a locus for change and redefinition (the experience of the body as redeemed).

Chapter 5 addresses the situation of grave religious tension created by the prescribed (and described) ascetic practices of late antique Christianity. More often than not, these generated odors that seemed to violate not only the inherited system of olfactory codes, but even that constructed through Christian ritual and teaching. The complexities of ancient Christian olfactory culture stand out most clearly in the context of asceticism. How, indeed, was the Christian to understand stench? Although the term "odor of sanctity" captures the ambivalence of bodily smells in relation to holiness, late antique Christians were profoundly dismayed in those instances where foul smells were deliberately employed in devotional practices or offensively yielded through them. I consider how and why foul odors were normatively used in Christian discourse to

express moral condition; the stark challenge to such moral ordering that holy stench represented; and the singular articulation of the human moral dilemma it offered, when experienced in the instances of saints who died of illness.

Chapter 6 turns to the telos of Christian knowing. The problem of holy stench in late antique Christian texts leads invariably to the question of eschatology, the subject which underlies the entire liturgical—and conceptual—framework of ancient Christianity. Would the resurrected body of the life to come be a sensorily active one, and if so, why? The place of olfactory experience in ancient Christian anticipation of the resurrected life provides a fitting discussion by which to draw together the social, ritual, contemplative, and literary aspects of this study.

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3 OLFACTION AND CHRISTIAN KNOWING

> Behold, the smell of my son
> is as the smell of a plentiful field which the
> Lord has blessed.
>
> Genesis 27:27

Late antique Christianity cultivated a piety that was both sensorily rich and sensorily self-aware. Liturgical developments, paraliturgical rituals, and the activities of personal piety (whether in domestic or monastic contexts) all served to engage participants in practices that included sensory experience as an essential component. Both through ritual practice and through related instruction (homilies, hymns, or other forms of didactic discourse), Christians granted value to the senses as channels through which believers could approach and encounter the divine. But more was at stake than engagement of the senses in the process of human-divine interaction. A consensus was apparent that the body of the Christian in its received experiences and enacted responses yielded distinct knowledge of God. The instructive capacity of smell was crucial to this understanding, due to the qualities of olfactory experience that caused it to differ in its results from what might be gained through the other senses.

Thus far we have considered how scents were ritually employed in the ancient world to structure the process and condition of human-divine relation. Furthermore, we have seen how Christian writers drew attention to olfactory experience for its religious value as an epistemological tool. In this chapter I will argue that amidst the variety of significations late antique Christians granted olfactory experience, its most important contribution was seen to lie in its capacity to reveal identity. Smells were concretely evident when sights, sounds, and tastes were not; olfactory experience was tangibly perceived, although it did not involve the body's limbs as did touch. These qualities made

smell a singularly effective means of discerning divine presence or absence, demonic activity, or moral condition. Such significations expressed the cosmological orientation of the ancient Mediterranean world, whereby olfactory codes served to structure human experience in relation to divine order. These codes operated by signifying identity within a cosmos understood to be morally constructed: "good" identity (God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, angels, saints, virtuous believers) smelled "good," as did the places associated with it (paradise or heaven); "bad" identity and its locations smelled "bad" (Satan, demons, hell, heretics, sinful people). Moral ambiguity—the uncertainties of human experience—yielded ambivalent olfactory cues, as we will see in chapter 5. Whether in clear or murky circumstances, however, ancient Christians used smells to ascertain, probe, and explicate identities within both the human and divine domains: olfaction provided knowledge—essential knowledge—to which there was no other means of access.

Two basic knowledge "systems" (for lack of a better term) were available to ancient Christians for approaching olfaction epistemologically. The first was what we have been considering thus far, in chapters 1 and 2: a system of cultural habit—the instincts, associations, and traditions through which cultural codes were constructed and by which societies granted sensory experience qualitative meanings. The second was through science, comprised of the knowledge acquired through philosophy, medicine, and other modes of scientific inquiry. These two systems of knowledge co-existed at times with considerable tension between them.[1] Clement of Alexandria was a case in point, as he attempted to negotiate a Christian response to the prevalent use of perfumes, substances he recognized to be medicinally useful even while morally dangerous; these traits he had to reconcile with sensory experiences he understood to be important reminders of God's good work as loving Creator. In late antiquity, Christians laid claim not only to the physical world in which they lived (as we saw in chapter 2), but further to the modes of knowledge available within it. Precisely what, then, did Christians claim to know through smell, and how did they know it?

Sense Perception in the Ancient Mind

Sense perception as an area of scientific inquiry had vexed the minds of Greek philosophers and medical experts as early as the pre-Socratics and their Hippocratic counterparts. Questions about the senses were part of the investigation of the human person as a physical, cognitive, and moral entity. In some schools of thought, the senses represented the bridge between the body and its soul—with "soul" serving as a collective term to denote the life principle,

rational mind, and emotive faculties that made a body a living, thinking person. Other times the senses were treated as that faculty through which the human person (body and soul) was joined to the physical cosmos. Debates, research, and speculation continued throughout the Greco-Roman world right through the late antique period, as ancient scientists puzzled over a fundamental set of problems: what was the purpose of the senses? how did they work? what comprised the experience of perception? how could the different senses be accounted for? could the senses contradict one another? did they convey true knowledge, and if so, what kind of knowledge was it? Was the relation between subject and object simply a mechanical one, or did sense perception effect a cognitive change in the perceiver?

Ancient thinkers often compared sense perception in animals with that in humans; in the case of Aristotle, for one, such comparative study was extensive in scope.[2] Ancient scientists admired animals for their instinctive cleverness, and the theme of animal "wisdom" was a favorite motif in philosophical discussions, especially those of the Stoic tradition with its stress on the beneficent order of nature and the cosmos.[3] But the comparisons were also stylized in presentation. Their ideological agenda lay in establishing clear boundaries between "animal" and "human" natures, to uphold a hierarchy of natural order in which the human person stood at the pinnacle. Ancient authors might stress the superiority of the sensory faculties in certain animals as compared with their human counterparts—for example, that the human capacity for smell was considerably weaker than that of other animals.[4] But the point was to demonstrate that the intelligence of animals was effectively limited to their sensory cognition, whereas humans added rational thinking to knowledge gained through the senses.

As philosophers saw it, humans and animals alike required the senses in order to navigate the world and survive; but humans alone could think beyond the sensible world to other modes of understanding. Sensory knowledge by itself was limited in content to the sensible domain, its usefulness immediate and pragmatic, applicable to physical survival but not to a higher truth. Humans could compensate for weak sensory capabilities (for example, olfaction in general or specific instances like blindness) and also exceed the limitations of sense perception by their ability to utilize sensory knowledge through the sophistication of the rational mind. Sensory experience could then be used to greater ends, be they social, intellectual, or moral.

Ancient theories of perception understood the senses to be basically tactile in orientation: to involve some kind of direct contact between the sensing subject and the object being sensed.[5] In Platonic and Stoic physics, a ray extending outward from the eye encountered the object of vision. In the atomistic tradition,

particles streamed continuously from objects into the atmosphere to strike the subject's eye or ear or nose. All agreed that taste and touch both operated by tactile engagement with their object. Perception might (or might not) take place through an elemental intermediary—transmitted by air, water, or fire. But sense perception was commonly understood to be an experience of physical encounter, in a universe the ancients believed tobe physical, or material, even in its incorporeal aspects.[6] Thus experience of the divine as described by ancient writers was traditionally rendered in sensory terms, even when the divine being was represented as incorporeal: divinities "appeared" in visions or in sightings; deities "spoke" in disembodied voices, or through oracles or signs; odors signalled divine presence (favorable or dangerous). Some thinkers, like Plato or (much later) Plotinus, saw the senses as limited to the experience of sensible things.[7] By contrast, for the Epicureans the senses were the source of all knowledge: as Lucretius stated, "You will find that it is from the senses in the first instance that the concept of truth has come, and that the senses cannot be refuted."[8] But in the ancient understanding, the cosmos itself was a material order, inclusive of all nature—and of divine and human beings and domains. Corporeality *and* incorporeality were both forms of material existence.[9] In such a cosmology, sense perception could not be considered inconsequential, even if its scope of operation was held to be limited.

Different schools of thought argued over which was the active or dominant aspect of sensory experience and which the passive, reflexive one: subject, object, or medium of transmission. They argued further over the kind of knowledge sense perception conveyed. Aristotle's student and successor Theophrastus was dismayed at what he held to be the flawed and inadequate analyses of sense perception offered by those philosophers who preceded his own efforts.[10] In his treatise, *On the Senses*, extant only in fragments, Theophrastus divided previous investigators into two basic camps: those (like the atomists) who accounted for sensory experience through similarity in nature, when, through a process of effluence, like was borne towards like; and those (whose model Aristotle would develop) who saw sensation as a process of alteration in which opposites rather than likes affected each other. In this work, Theophrastus critiqued the theories of Parmenides, Empedocles, Plato, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, Clidemus, Diogenes, and Democritus; even Aristotle's views were deemed wanting, though by implication rather than explicit discussion.[11] Theophrastus insisted that sensory experience yielded genuine knowledge of a world infinitely varied in the diversity of its life forms. Objects of perception and their sensible qualities existed independently of the sensory process. Theophrastus admitted that sense perception was to some extent unstable: it was biased by the subjectivity of the one perceiving, and prone to error

or illusion. Yet he held up the senses as essential and trustworthy guides through which to examine the cosmos. Aristotle had valued the senses for their role in the empirical generation of knowledge about a universe he understood to be rigidly ordered in function and purpose, culminating in the overarching notion of final causality. For Theophrastus, the senses revealed a cosmos of such complexity that final causality could not account for it.[12]

During the Hellenistic era, in keeping with dramatic changes in medical science, philosophers shared Theophrastus's dissatisfaction and lifted sense perception to an area of primary concern.[13] Though disagreeing profoundly in their epistemological teachings, both Stoics and Epicureans saw the senses as the source of all knowledge, indeed the only source that could be had. Both schools struggled to account for sensory illusions, false impressions, and disparity between sense experiences. These schools of thought located the processing of sensory information in different parts of the human person. For the Stoics, sense organs received impressions of what they encountered and carried information to the *hegemonikon,* or governing principle of the mind, which then had to assent to the sense impression to complete the process of perception. For the Epicureans, sense organs were themselves the processors of their experiences, in such a way that every perception held the measure of its validity and accuracy. Yet for both, the senses were foundational for any discussion of knowledge or truth.[14]

Consideration of smell as a discrete category of sensory experience took place within these overall trajectories. In the *Timaeus,* Plato had discussed smell in the very terms Theophrastus would later find so unhelpful.[15] Plato here understood the human faculty of smell to lack any definite pattern; smells themselves, "half-formed things," he saw as indefinite to such a degree that they could not be classified by names or types, but only according to whether they were pleasant or unpleasant. Nonetheless, Plato posited two attributes of smell that offer interesting correlation to its cultural significance in the ancient Mediterranean world. First, he claimed that smells occurred when substances were in the process of changing their state through liquification, decomposition, dissolution, or evaporation. Their source was the condition of instability, cast by Plato in terms that left no question as to its inferior and even frightening aspects. Second, whether in pleasant or unpleasant form, smells affected the body to an extreme degree, either doing it great violence or restoring it to its "natural condition." Thus Plato identified smells as powerful agents, but also as powerfully indistinct, operating in some fashion without clear pattern or classification.[16]

Aristotle followed Plato's paradigm in its general aspects, stressing the difficulty of analyzing smell and its objects because humans have an "inferior"

sense of smell and a resulting lack of ability to discriminate odors accurately.[17] However, Aristotle also suggested possible ways of categorizing smells according to analogies with taste, and he was expressly interested in the physiological process of smell both in humans and in animals.[18] His successor Theophrastus, as seen above and in chapter 1, was particularly vexed about the question of olfactory categories.[19] Theophrastus was less concerned with olfaction as a sensory process than with smells, their types, and the conditions or circumstances by which they were generated. Later theorists, including the great Roman doctor Galen, cited Aristotle and Theophrastus together as authorities whose discussions of sense perception in general and smell in particular could be taken as definitive.[20]

Because knowledge in antiquity was a moral enterprise, the senses and their experiences could be ranked in value. Plato began a seemingly intractable tradition when he declared sight to be the worthiest and most important sense: through sight, he taught, we have observed the universe. In the process of that observation we have by necessity invented numbers, gained the understanding of time, inquired into metaphysics, and learned philosophy.[21] Aristotle mused that while sight conveyed the largest amount of information and offered the greatest aesthetic value through its capacity to apprehend beauty, yet hearing was of great ethical import because it was the means by which to encounter language, persuasion, and reasoning.[22] Touch and taste, agreed to be the lowest of the senses because they were common to the most lowly of creatures, were nonetheless seen as essential for survival.[23]

There was disagreement as to where smell belonged in this scheme: some placed smell with the "lower" senses, others saw it as more kindred to sight and hearing in the worth of its experience. Galen viewed smell as a superior sense because he thought the nostrils were directly linked to the brain, allowing unmediated information to be processed at once without the need for an intervening sensory nerve.[24] Cicero provided a Stoic version of how the human body exemplified the ordered cosmos, with the senses in a privileged location and olfaction placed for optimum function:

> Human beings are sprung from the earth not as natives and dwellers there, but to survey the heavenly realm above, an insight granted to no other species of living creatures. Our senses have been created and located in the citadel, so to say, of our heads, for necessary purposes; they identify and give notice of external objects. The eyes are our watchmen, and so they occupy the highest vantage-point . . . Again, the nostrils are both aptly set high because every smell is borne upwards, and with good reason they are aligned with the mouth, because they have an important role in discriminating food and drink.[25]

Lucretius, perhaps the most eloquent of the Epicureans, explained perception as the encounter with the fine particles that emanate from all things: "So true it is that from all things there is a different something which passes off in a flow, and disperses in every direction around; there is no delay, no rest to interrupt the flow, since we constantly feel it, and we can at all times see all these, smell them, and perceive the sound."[26] The particles that were bent, or crooked, in certain distinctive shapes were those that caused perceptible smells.[27] Lucretius understood smells to be of weaker impact than sights or sounds, and, it would seem, somehow also less admirable:

> For [smell] moves slowly in coming, and is ready gradually to die away first, being dispersed abroad into the breezes of the air: first because it is emitted with difficulty from the depths of each thing. . .again it may be seen that smell is made of larger elements than voice. . . A further reason is that smell is evidently composed of larger atoms than sound . . . Wherefore also you will see that it is not so easy to trace out in what part the scent is situated; for the blow grows cold in its leisurely course through the air and does not run in hot to the sense with news of the object.[28]

Lucretius dismissed smell as physically—and apparently, morally—inefficient, inconsequential, and inept. If harsher in judgment than other commentators on the senses, Lucretius's appraisal was not discordant with the overall picture, which ranked smell as decidedly less important than sight or hearing, and of marginal significance beyond its role of identifying amenable or adverse substances. Conscious consideration of olfaction, then, tended to result in the relegation of smell to relative insignificance, albeit recognizing the usefulness of smells for certain practical points of knowledge.[29] Such considerations and conclusions stand in tension with the prominent role smells played throughout the ancient Mediterranean sphere in cultural and social fields of meaning. Christian thinkers would present a similar paradox, informed by their particular contexts of discussion.

Christian Senses in a Christian World

The Common Era added another set of voices to discussion of the senses: those of Christian thinkers. Christian intellectuals from their earliest writings had made use of the accomplishments of philosophy and classical learning in their efforts to articulate a distinct identity for their community of believers. The New Testament letters of Paul had already set this course.[30] In chapter 1, I considered this situation in terms of how Christian leaders guided their flocks

through the challenges of daily life in a non-Christian society. But Christian intellectuals also faced the task of reconciling the legacies of philosophy and science—legacies they had imbibed deeply in their own education and intellectual training—with biblical traditions and theological problems that did not necessarily share the same presuppositions. Was there an unbreachable gap between knowledge granted by divine revelation and knowledge available through classical modes of empirical inquiry? Despite Tertullian's famous challenge, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[31] early Christians argued that if their God was the creator and ruler of all, as they believed, then science could only support their beliefs. Knowledge of the world and of the human person in it could serve to demonstrate the extent of God's provident workmanship as displayed in the created order. Bishop Theophilus of Antioch late in the second century would insist on this view in his apology *Ad Autolycum*, quoting extensively from Genesis and the Psalms.[32]

Attention to the physiology of sense perception was part of ancient Christianity's response to this larger challenge. In the early church, discussion of the senses often took place in the context of debates about the corporeal and physical reality of the incarnate Christ, or about creation *ex nihilo*. Both positions were immediately problematic to the intelligentsia of the Greco-Roman world. Quite apart from arguments about whether or not the physical world was intrinsically evil, these positions were at odds with current views of the necessary qualities of "nature"—in which, for example, corruptibility and incorruptibility were mutually exclusive categories that could not be altered or mixed; and views which held matter to be by nature eternal, subject to its own requisite laws, and to that degree unable to be altered by divine whim. These points were strongly argued by the pagan critic Celsus, whose late second-century work, *On True Doctrine*, provided the first sustained examination of Christianity by an outsider.[33] How could a divine power (God) violate the laws of nature to create a physical realm without any matter to start with? How could Christian claims that Jesus was divine yet incarnate as a human person be evaluated scientifically? What was the worth, and what the relative truth-value, of biblical miracles based on sensory experience?[34]

In his monumental reply *Against Celsus*, Origen sought to defend a Christian position that would acknowledge the physical world and physical experience within it as wholly God's work, yet also protect the absolute "otherness" of God. Like other early Christian writers (especially Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian), Origen insisted that Christians must utilize the physical world and knowledge gained through sensory experience in order to seek God, whose reality and nature exceeded the realm of the senses.[35] Sense perception was necessary for the demands of life in a physical world, and God had created the

human body accordingly. But neither the body nor the physical world could chart the whole of what could be known:

> Anyone interested should realize that we need a body for various purposes because we are in a material place, and so it needs to be of the same character as that of the nature of the material place, whatever that may be. . . . But in order to know God we need no body at all. The knowledge of God is not derived from the eye of the body, but from the mind which sees that which is in the image of the Creator and by divine providence has received the power to know God.[36]

Origen represented a version of Platonic tradition (much though he disliked Plato) that held to a rigid distinction between knowledge from the senses, which was necessarily limited, and knowledge from the intellect, which could far surpass the confines of a finite, physical existence. His views were shared by some intellectuals, Christian and non-Christian, who like him sought the solution in an alternative set of "spiritual" senses that would allow one to seek a knowledge distinct from and superior to that of physical nature. We will turn to the spiritual senses in chapter 4, but before we can assess what that tradition might represent, we must consider how late antique Christians analyzed and evaluated the physical senses, including smell.

Origen's view is that most often cited—or even assumed—in scholarly treatments of ancient Christianity. It is often illustrated, for example, by an author such as Augustine of Hippo, who shared Origen's Platonic inclinations in setting up soul (mind, for Augustine) and body in a hierarchical dualism that privileged the former dramatically over the latter. Yet we must be careful in how we read discussions of the senses, for an author may present one kind of view in philosophical discussion and another through the literary use of sensory imagery and allusion in broader writings. Augustine's treatment of the senses is in fact ambiguous, in part as a result of the conflicting vocabularies on which he drew: the intrinsic dualism from his deep immersion in the middle Platonism of Plotinus and the Neoplatonic foundations of Ambrose of Milan's preaching did not readily cohere with the biblical rhetoric that exclaimed on human-divine relation through the wonders of the created universe. In a lengthy discussion on the senses in his treatise on *The Trinity*, Augustine argues for two types of knowledge, that which the mind knows through the senses of the body, and that which is known through the mind itself; these he represents through the imagery of the "eye of the body" and the "eye of the mind." The bodily senses, he notes, generally present knowledge that is wrong, distorted, deceptive, or the product of dreams, illusions, or insanity. They present unstable unknowledge. By contrast, the eye of the mind can search out stable, certain,

unchanging truth. Even while acknowledging that the bodily senses have something to offer by their perception of God's creation, he yet discounts their significance even in that capacity. Genuinely unenthusiastic about what the senses might offer the believer, Augustine claims it is sufficient for him to take the example of only one sense, that of sight, for sustained analysis on the question of epistemology.[37] For such a thinker, it would appear that olfactory experience or the possible significations of smells should scarcely warrant comment.

Indeed, by his own admission Augustine had little interest in smells of any kind,[38] and his understanding of olfaction as a physiological process was unsophisticated in comparison with other ancient philosophers, medical writers, or Christian intellectuals.[39] Because of these limitations, however, Augustine's views are pertinent to an appreciation of the ways in which olfactory experience had wound itself inextricably into the religious sensibilities of the late antique Christian mind. Examples from the *Confessions* make the point.[40]

In the *Confessions* Augustine presented his turbulent quest for Christian truth through an extended narrative trope, casting the body and its sensory experiences as primary obstacles against which his will had to contend before he could find the rest and peace of faithful devotion to God. He used olfactory metaphors to add texture to the trope. Describing his student years, for example, he commented, "I rolled in the dung [of Babylon] as if rolling in spices and precious ointments."[41] The olfactory imagery elicits moral judgments of decadence, sin, and wanton, undisciplined self-indulgence, with allusions that parody the imagery of the Song of Songs to demonstrate the extent of his own self-deception. In another instance, Augustine recalls the intense desire for God that his Neoplatonic studies awakened in him. Reflecting on his inability at the time to pursue that desire with wholehearted commitment, Augustine summons the capacity of smell to strike the consciousness with tangible force, to herald the promise of its source—a source as yet unperceived—and to linger in the memory: "I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. . . . I carried with me only a loving memory and a desire for that of which I had the aroma but which I had not yet the capacity to eat."[42]

Repeatedly in the *Confessions* Augustine attempts to offer a positive valuation of the senses, yet each time he presents them as inherently limited and limiting in the knowledge they may provide.[43] At best, he sees the senses as well ordered when they are properly disciplined, insofar as they are God's deliberate handiwork. Still, they are but a way station to be passed in pursuit of the highest truth. At Ostia, in the vision he shared with his mother Monica, "The conversation led us towards the conclusion that the pleasure of the bodily

senses, however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering."[44]

Nonetheless, Augustine offers a poignant comparison between the experience of the physical world and his encounter with God. In book 4, when he recalls the devastating blow of the death of his unnamed friend when they were young men, he speaks of the emptiness of sensory experience in grief: "There was no rest in pleasant groves, nor in games or songs, nor in sweet-scented places, nor in exquisite feasts, nor in the pleasures of the bedroom and bed, nor finally, in books and poetry."[45] The antithesis to this emptiness is presented in book 10, where Augustine struggles to find a language to fit his experience of God:

> But when I love you, [O Lord,] what do I love? It is not a physical beauty nor temporal glory nor the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the gentle odors of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace of my inner man, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God.[46]

The language here, with its evocation of the "inner man," sets the passage within the tradition of the "spiritual," or interior, senses, to which we will return in chapter 4. But should this passage be bracketed into such a concrete bodily dualism, in which physical experience, its processes, its modes of perception and sensory awareness are entirely disconnected from the mind's experience of God (as Augustine calls it)? Is there not something far more nuanced here, in which sensory experience both frames and informs the human-divine encounter Augustine seeks to capture? In another depiction of the experience of God in *Confessions* book 10, Augustine requires the reader to summon all the senses in all their power, and (as argued in chapter 2), in terms that recall the full splendor of liturgical celebration as that context in which the Christian's faith is wholly expressed:

> [O Lord,] you called and cried aloud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.[47]

Here, surely, is human experience that requires the body even as it exceeds the body's limitations. And for this, even in Augustine's hands, the five senses—including smell—are necessary. They are necessary for the qualities of experience they make possible, for the varied means of reception they open, for the diversity of engagement and interaction they make available to the human person. To capture most fully what Augustine wants to express, he cannot, in the end, eliminate the senses, each with its own contribution to the process of knowing God. If nothing more, these passages must be taken as moments that show the impress of a liturgical context and devotional piety that relied on sensory engagement for the formation of a Christian epistemology.

However, Origen and Augustine were not the only voices of late antiquity. There were other Christian responses to the questions raised by science in relation to Christian teaching, voices that were both more common and more accessible to a broader range of Christian discussion. In fact, the amount of attention given to philosophically informed or scientific consideration of the senses in late antique Christian writing is sharply notable in contrast to that of the pre-Constantinian works.

In a series of fourth- and early fifth-century texts—for the most part contemporaneous with Augustine's career—Christian intellectuals drew upon the science of the human body as it was presented in the academies of their day to demonstrate the intrinsic goodness, beauty, and foresight of God's work as Creator. Their inheritance in this endeavor included the perennial problem of the relation between the incorporeal soul and the instruments of physical sensation contained in a corporeal body; the Platonic understanding of the soul as pre-existent and impassible; the Peripatetic teaching, exemplified by Aristotle and Theophrastus, that there was no perception unmediated by a body; the Epicurean and Stoic insistence on the sensory foundation of all true knowledge; and the question of whether or not some form of atomism operated in the physical domain and activated sensory experience. The eclectic results that could come of such varied traditions were already apparent in the writings of medical experts like Galen.[48] That educated Christians, too, should attempt to reconcile such a smorgasbord of views was no surprise, for the enterprise might be expected of any intellectual of the time.[49]

Hence we find treatises by Lactantius, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and (in most sophisticated form) Nemesius of Emesa, all taking a detailed consideration of the human body, its construction and physiological functioning, as a platform through which to praise the wondrous providence of God.[50] To some extent, these form a continuum with earlier Christian writings, especially as seen in the work of Clement of Alexandria, where a learned medical understanding was also apparent—an indication of the traditional

place of such study in classical education.[51] The difference lies in the changed perspective of late antique Christian literature, with its exuberant celebration of the created world as the magnificent expression of its Maker.[52] These treatises share the perspective of Christian leaders addressing a more general audience during the same era. Cyril of Jerusalem's discussion of the human body in his *Catechetical Homilies* presents a similar if simplified exaltation of the wonders of human anatomy; Basil of Caesarea's *Homilies on the Hexaemeron* presume such an understanding in his explication of the marvels of the natural order. Indeed, Gregory composed "On the Making of Man" to complete this unfinished series of Basil's sermons.

These treatises all show a marked appreciation for sense perception as a valued means by which created beings could obtain knowledge of their Creator. In the human person, they instructed, sensory knowledge serves the intellect to guide the mind towards a fuller understanding of God's works and God's nature. Hence, Lactantius explains, the senses are located in the head, the highest part of the body, so that they can quickly administer their experiences to the brain.[53] The greater such understanding, the stronger one's devotion to God will be. Knowledge in the widest sense serves to deepen the human-divine bond, for it brings a more profound understanding not only of the greatness of creation as a work, but, further, of God's extraordinary love for humanity in providing such a world. Nemesius chastised those who downplayed the importance of the body by seeing it as a mere instrument of the soul. "Man's being is on the boundary between the intelligible order and the phenomenal order," he wrote.[54] Located thus, humanity stood as the unique point of connection between the two domains. Commenting on the creation story in Genesis, Nemesius admonished,

> God created both an intelligible and a phenomenal order, and required some one creature to link these two together, in such wise that the entire universe should form one agreeable unity unbroken by internal incoherences. For this reason, then, man was made a living creature such as should combine together the intelligible and phenomenal nature.[55]

The senses, then, did not merely navigate the physical world; they joined it to the whole of God's work, providing a fit and proper fullness to knowledge thereof. Gregory of Nyssa explained that the particular parts of the body were formed for three reasons: to give life, to make that life good, and to allow life to continue through propagation. The brain, heart, and liver were organs necessary for life. The senses were the organs that made life good. The procreative organs allowed a future, by ensuring a succession of descendants. The senses

were a kind of extra blessing, allowing humanity to enjoy the world but not strictly necessary for survival since even if one or more was lacking, a person could nonetheless live. But, "without these forms of activity [i.e., the senses], it is impossible to enjoy participation in the pleasures of life." The senses, therefore, were made that we might experience the goodness and beauty of God's creation.[56]

Moreover, as Theodoret pointed out, the variety of the senses made them all the more valuable. For "all these [body] parts we have mentioned, as well as those we have passed over in silence, contribute to the perfection of the one body. Although each is entrusted with its proper function, it contributes to the good of the whole." All the more reason that we must be grateful to God in his wisdom, for when the eye sees or the ear hears or the mouth tastes or the nose smells, none of these parts is alone in the enjoyment or benefit of what it experiences; rather, God made "what is proper to each to the advantage of all."[57] In fact, Nemesius argued, one might think that because there were four elements (earth, air, fire, and water), there should also be four senses—each one appropriate to perceiving each of the elements in kind. But smells do not easily conform to this model, for "vapors and the whole range of scents" are by nature intermediate between air and water. "Therefore, a fifth sense, that of smell, has been invented by Nature for this reason, that nothing capable of being known should evade our perception."[58]

Hence the sense of smell had an essential (if not primary) role within the body's harmonious constitution. Lactantius noted that the nose has a beautiful construction, usefully placed so as to protect the eyes, and efficient in its threefold operation of breathing, smelling, and expelling unnecessary mucus.[59] Theodoret praised its efficiency in processing odors, taking in the pleasant while repelling the unpleasant, and fashioned in such a way as to both protect and assist the brain.[60] Nemesius, the most learned of ancient Christian medical commentators, opined that smell was useful for its ability to discern objects in which the humors were rightly balanced (fragrant), those of average constitution (indifferent odor), and those of inferior or unsatisfactory constitution (offensive odor). He noted that smells like sounds could be perceived from all directions; further, that smell, sight, and hearing could convey the purest pleasures since these senses could operate from a distance, not requiring actual contact with their object in order to take in its pleasures, as did taste and touch.[61]

In these and other patristic treatises containing detailed discussion of anatomy or physiology, Christians did not add anything original to the medical knowledge of their time. Instead, they utilized existing conventions to serve their theological agenda: to demonstrate a good and provident God, to extol the wonders of creation as God's work, to use the human person as a prime

example thereof. The content and rhetorical devices in these instances do not differ from those in similar discussions by contemporary non-Christians. Praise for the benevolent order of the cosmos or discussion of "the nature of things" had been long-standing themes in classical philosophy since Plato's *Timaeus*, their appropriate treatments included in the curricula of grammar and rhetorical schools.[62] One need not have been highly trained in medical science to draw on its rhetoric for purposes of moral, or theological, exposition (although Nemesius, at least, clearly was). Perhaps because the theme was a conventional one with set tropes, these texts are notably free of the distrust and admonitions against the senses that so often characterize Christian preaching of this period. Instead, these treatises by Lactantius, Gregory, Theodoret, and Nemesius seem to follow a model of rhetorical tradition, in which the cosmos and humanity's place in it are praised for their intrinsic moral order, goodness, and aesthetic beauty. This was a fitting theme in an era that raised the significance of incarnation theology as Christians came increasingly to the fore in every area of social and political leadership within the Roman Empire. It resonates with oratorical suasion, with ceremony, with ritual splendor. It was, in fact, a fitting theme for a Christianity concerned with locating itself in the public arena.

Denouncement of sensory experience as a source of moral decadence, or ascetic exhortation to free the soul from the confines of the senses to enable more perfect contemplation of God, were discursive themes often heard in late antique homiletic and monastic literature. Scholars have sometimes presented such treatments as if they were the primary, or even the sole, attitude towards the senses or bodily experience in the ancient church.[63] But the changes in Christian practices, rituals, and devotional piety that characterized late antiquity require a more nuanced understanding. As we will see, representations of the senses as morally detrimental had a particular place in the worldview of late antique Christianity. But so, too, did the positive assessment found where the stress lay on creation as God's handiwork, and the human person—body and soul—as its culmination.

Despite the occasionally lavish praise for the body's wondrous workings, no ancient author would have claimed sensory knowledge to be sufficient in relation to God. Even while extolling the unique contribution each of the five senses made to the composite knowledge available to the human mind, Lactantius, Gregory, Theodoret, and Nemesius all presented sensory knowledge as of practical, and therefore limited, value. Sense perception could provide plentiful information about the qualities of the physical world; to that extent, it revealed something about the God who made it. The senses were witnesses to God's work. They made known its manifold nature. Through this activity they could, and should, lead the believer to look beyond the confines of the

physical world. Precisely because the senses provided knowledge of a bounded kind, they offered a fundamental teaching about the incomprehensibility—the "unboundedness"—of God. These sentiments were pervasive in ancient Christian literature. As Basil of Caesarea repeatedly stressed, sensory knowledge was a partial knowledge, but nonetheless true in what it could offer. So, too, he admonished, was human knowledge of God partial yet true: one could know God's attributes and actions, but not God's substance (*ousia*).[64] Gregory of Nazianzus exhorted that creation itself, by virtue of being God's work, exceeded the limits of what the senses could grasp or the mind, through and beyond them, could understand. Instead of finding God in the visible world, "every thinking being . . . [must discover] God through the beauty and order of things seen, using sight as a guide to what transcends sight without losing God through the grandeur of what it sees."[65]

Late antique Christian intellectuals drew on the traditions of philosophy and science to provide an adequate appreciation for the natural world as God's work. The effort required them to discuss the nature of sense perception, its contributions and limitations as a source of human knowledge. Their assessment from this perspective was necessarily positive, lest they imply that God had created any part of his creation without purpose or benefit. But the epistemological approach based on the ancient system of scientific inquiry allowed Christian thinkers a further boon: olfaction as a basic human experience could provide instructive theological metaphors through which to teach about God and the nature of divine identity. From the conventions of philosophical and scientific discourse, Christian thinkers drew a series of striking olfactory models for just that purpose.

Olfactory Analogies as Theological Tools

When John Chrysostom preached on 2 Corinthians, he lingered on the text of 2 Corinthians 2:14–16, the oft-cited Pauline passage that interwove a complex of sacrificial and perfume imagery.[66] It was in fact the olfactory language that held his attention, for reasons that resonated all the way back to Plato's *Timaeus* and its unhappily vague treatment of smell. For Plato and the sensory commentators who followed him, as we noted above, the experience of smell was disturbingly cryptic, difficult to control because smells eluded distinct formation or clear classification.[67] For Chrysostom, however, these were the qualities that rendered Paul's language appropriate. Commenting on verse fourteen, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere," Chrysostom expounded, "[Paul] did not say, 'the knowledge;' but 'the fragrance of the

knowledge;' for such is the nature of the present knowledge, not very clear nor uncovered." It was precisely the discernible yet elusive character of smell that Chrysostom held up as analogous to human knowledge of God.

> Now the one who perceives the fragrance knows that there is ointment lying somewhere; but of what nature it is he does not yet know, unless he happens before to have seen it. So also we. That God is, we know, but what in substance we know not yet. We are then, as it were, a royal censer, breathing whithersoever we go of the heavenly ointment and spiritual sweet fragrance.[68]

Perceiving a smell, one knows that it has a source: but the source need not be visible or even near, as the ancient commentators had noted. Indelibly expressive of its source, a scent yet operated apart from it. An odor thus revealed something even as it concealed it. So, too, instructed Chrysostom, did the Christian inform the world, still largely non-Christian, about God: spreading a sense of God through the witness of their lives and teaching (he in fact goes on to refer to the martyrs), they themselves could not offer more, for human knowledge of God was necessarily incomplete. Certain experience, of a source whose substance remained uncertain; distinct knowledge, of an indistinct source: such was the Christian witness to a God who defied the limits of human comprehension. Such was the fragrance from a perfume, proximate yet unseen.

Chrysostom continued to verses fifteen and sixteen, "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life." Consider, Chrysostom reflected, the ambiguous power of smells. They were medicine and poison; they could heal or destroy. God's fragrance was surely sweet, and surely as unchanging as God's nature. But it was manifested in the world, through the presence of Christians, among believers and non-believers, among those who would heed its scent and those who would not. The fragrance of God remained the same. It was the disposition of the recipient that determined how the scent would work. So, too, Chrysostom reminded his audience, light was still light even when it blinded the weak, and honey was still sweet even when it tasted bitter to those with disease. Christians were the "aroma of Christ to God" on two accounts, through the sacrificial act of their own martyrdoms and through their accompaniment of (or witness to) Christ's death on the cross, just as incense accompanied traditional sacrifices. From either view, Chrysostom admonished, Christians were this aroma among the saved and the damned.

> For this sweet fragrance some so receive that they are saved, others so that they perish. So that should any one be lost, the fault is from himself: for both ointment

> is said to suffocate swine, and light (as I before observed,) to blind the weak. And such is the nature of good things; they not only correct what is akin to them, but also destroy the opposite.[69]

Chrysostom explicated the Pauline passage in terms that echoed two frequent observations among the ancient medical discussions: the cryptic perception of odor (tangible yet invisible, derived from a source yet distinct from it), and the odor's effect upon the one perceiving it (an effect determined by the perceiver's disposition). In Chrysostom's exegesis, the first quality revealed something of God; the second, something of the human person. Both revelations pertained to the truth of each of the two identities. Both identities without the olfactory encounter were not necessarily evident (God was invisible, and the person who seemed virtuous might or might not be truly so). The Pauline passage in Chrysostom's exposition gained graphic theological clarity simply by considering fundamental qualities of olfactory experience.

The relation between scent and source also lent itself to Trinitarian problems. Church leaders struggled to expound the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: to account for particularity and unity within the Godhead, to safeguard equality among the divine persons, and to present a dynamic mutuality of existence and activity between them. Analogies from light—the sun, its rays, and heat; the light of one torch lit from another—had been freely drawn since the second century, memorably presented by Justin Martyr and Tertullian, and enshrined in the Nicene Creed at the ecumenical council of 325.[70] Gregory of Nyssa found it fruitful to expand the visual and tactile models of light by adding analogies from odors. In his treatise, *Against Eunomius*, Gregory argued for the consubstantiality of God the Father and God the Son (that the two divine persons were of the same divine essence [*ousia*]); and that the Son was co-eternal with the Father (that divine generation did not imply a hierarchy with the Son as a later and lesser divine being than the Father). To make the point, he discussed the different types of generation known from the natural world. Generation caused by effluence, he argued, offered fitting analogy.

> [Other types of generation] again are by material efflux. In these the original remains as it was before, and that which flows from it is contemplated by itself, as in the case of the sun and its beam, or the lamp and its radiance, or of scents and ointments, and the quality given off from them. For these, while remaining undiminished in themselves, have each accompanying them the special and peculiar effect which they naturally produce, as the sun his ray, the lamp its brightness, and perfumes the fragrance which they engender in the air.[71]

Scripture made use of this type of generation by material effluence, Gregory continued, when it spoke of the Son as "the brightness of the glory" (Heb 1:3), or "the scent of ointment" (Song 1:3), or "the breath of God" (Wis 7:25). The analogy was a model applicable both for the concept of consubstantiality and for that of eternal coexistence:

> We must understand by the significance of this expression, an existence at once derived from and subsisting with the Father. For neither is the figure of breath intended to convey to us the notion of dispersion into the air from the material from which it is formed, nor is the figure of fragrance designed to express the passing off of the quality of the ointment into the air, nor the figure of effulgence the efflux which takes place by means of the rays from the body of the sun: but as has been said in all cases, by such a mode of generation is indicated this alone, that the Son is of the Father and is conceived along with Him, no interval intervening between the Father and Him who is of the Father.[72]

The use of odor and source as an analogy for Father and Son had been employed some decades earlier by Eusebius of Caesarea, though in less developed form.[73] Such usage rested on the philosophical and scientific traditions that had highlighted the distinct qualities of sense perception and of olfaction in particular: the singularity that could at times characterize the perceptual encounter of each of the senses, and that enabled smell to function without other sensory assistance (that one could smell what was invisible, silent, and incorporeal); further, the physiological nature of the object that caused it to yield its scent, or, in the case of the sun, its light or warmth. The fruitfulness of this model for discussion of divinity had not been lost in philosophical circles. Plotinus had used it to explain how the One, by nature unmoved and unmoving, could be the source of what comes into being in time. The passage is instructive for its indication that patristic use of this analogy was part of broader intellectual discussions in late ancient culture. Plotinus begins with the analogy of light from the sun, which radiates from and surrounds the sun without the sun's itself changing.

> All things which exist, as long as they remain in being, necessarily produce from their own substances, in dependence on their present power, a surrounding reality directed to what is outside them, a kind of image of the archetypes from which it was produced: fire produces the heat which comes from it; snow does not only keep its cold inside itself. Perfumed things show this particularly clearly. As long as they exist, something is diffused from themselves around them, and what is near them enjoys their existence.[74]

The manner in which odors demonstrated this intimacy of relation and separation was especially apt. As Lactantius had noted, "the taking in of an odor causes no loss whatever of the matter of the odor."[75] Insofar as scientific inquiry had sought to explain both olfaction and its object—both the experience of smell, and smells themselves—the olfactory analogy provided nuanced material for consideration. It spoke to the experience of encounter; it offered ways to image the source of what was encountered; it accounted for perception and source in a dynamic relationship that protected the inviolability and incomprehensibility of the source itself. One of the most striking applications of the scientific olfactory model, roughly contemporaneous with Plotinus, is found in the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*. The passage uses the physiology of olfactory generation to describe how God the Father fills the Elect (his children) with his presence.

> For the father's children are themselves his fragrance, for they are from the loveliness of his face. Therefore the father loves his fragrance and manifests it everywhere. And when it mingles with matter it imparts his fragrance to the light, and by his silence he makes it superior in every way to every sound. For it is not the ears that smell the fragrance, rather it is the spirit that possesses the faculty of smell and draws the fragrance towards itself for itself and sinks down into the father's fragrance; thus it nourishes it and takes it to what it emanated from, the original cold fragrance. And it is a soul-endowed modeled form, being like a cold liquid that has sunk into some loose earth; and those who see it suppose that (only) earth is there. Afterward, it reevaporates when a gust (of wind) draws it off and it becomes warm. Cold fragrances, then, result from division. For this reason, faith came and did away with division, and it brought the warm fullness of love . . .[76]

The analogy was substantive, yet—again the essence of olfaction—elusive. These characteristics were amply explored by that most subtle of theologians, Cyril of Alexandria, in discussions about the Holy Spirit and aspects of Christology.[77] Fragrance and its source provided him analogies for consubstantiality, incarnation, and hypostatic union within the Godhead, as well as for the way the human person could have knowledge of or participation in the divine while still preserving the complete distinction between divine and human natures. The olfactory analogies he used were the same ones employed by John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa, applied to further points of theological debate. Again, his use echoes philosophical and medical considerations of olfaction and odors. John of Damascus would later summarize such imagery as being that which creation provided to make visible the invisible things of God. By means of these sensory images, he explained, the Christian would be

reminded, for example, of the Trinity: "we use the images of the sun, the light, and burning rays; or a running fountain; or an overflowing river; or the mind, speech and spirit within us; or a rose tree, a flower, and a sweet fragrance."[78]

A further set of analogies took up smell as encountered through perfumed oil/ointment. These appear most often with several frequently cited biblical citations: Psalms 45 [44]:7–8 ("Therefore God, your God, has anointed you / with the oil of gladness above your fellows; your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia"); Psalms 133 [132]:2 ("the precious oil upon the head / running down upon the beard, / upon the beard of Aaron")—both referring to the perfumed holy oil used to anoint the high priests of Israel;[79] and Song 1:3 ("Your anointing oils are fragrant, / your name is oil poured out; / therefore the maidens love you").[80] The verses from Psalms were often invoked by Christian authors in relation to holy oil, whether for baptism or for other uses. The citation from the Song of Songs was routinely applied to Christ; along with Psalms 141 [140]:2 and 2 Corinthians 2:14–16, it was a favorite verse of patristic authors east and west, and tremendously influential in the discourse of olfactory piety.

Analogies involving these verses appear throughout patristic literature, and place the focus on fragrance as encountered in oil or ointment. This specificity of source and location distinguishes such analogies from those considered above, where invisibility or uncertainty of the odor's source was crucial to the figure's meaning. Furthermore, these analogies deliberately highlight the medium through which the scent is carried: the substance of oil or ointment is essential for the olfactory image being invoked. In the image of perfumed oil, smell is enhanced by touch to add dimensions of quantity, texture, and transferability.

Ambrose of Milan drew repeatedly on the image of perfumed oil in his treatise, *The Holy Spirit*, at different points applying the image and its biblical verses to the Holy Spirit or to Christ.[81] In chapter nine, he has an extended discussion of the Spirit as the oil with which Christ was anointed by God at the baptism in the Jordan.[82] Ambrose begins by reminding his audience that perfumed oil is a composite substance, whose scent is generated by the various ingredients it combines: "And well is [the Spirit] ointment, because He is called the oil of gladness, the joining together of many graces giving forth fragrance."[83] A series of biblical citations follows, to justify the title Oil of Gladness for the Spirit and to demonstrate that this indeed was the oil with which Christ had been anointed. Ambrose then uses this identity as "oil" to argue the full divinity of the Spirit within the Trinity. Where Gregory of Nyssa had used scent and source to present a concept of generation that would uphold Father and Son as consubstantial and co-eternal, Ambrose uses the chemical characteristics of oil

(which he has already defined as "fragrant") to argue the Spirit's uncreated nature as the Third Person of the Godhead.

> And well did [the Psalmist] say oil of gladness, lest you might think [the Spirit] a creature, for the nature of the oil is such that it by no means mingles with the moisture of another nature. . . . So since he wastes his time who wishes to mingle oil with moister material, because, since the nature of oil is lighter than others, while other materials settle, it rises and is separated, how do those meanest of hucksters think that the oil of gladness can be fraudulently mingled with other creatures, when surely corporeal things cannot be mixed with the incorporeal, nor created things with the uncreated?[84]

Ambrose uses the trait of oil's viscosity as an image for the fundamentally incompatible (literally, unmixable) material of created (e.g., human) and uncreated (divine) natures. Viscosity leads him to the image of oil as medicine. The oil with which Christ was anointed, Ambrose insists, could not have been a "customary or common oil" such as either "refreshed wounds or relieved fever". It needed to be a life-giving medicine for a world afflicted by mortality, powerful enough to "destroy the stench of sorrowful death."[85] Although he does not present the elision from oil to medicine in olfactory terms, Ambrose's ancient audience knew that it was spices, herbs, and their smells that made healing balms medicinally effective. Viscosity prevented oil from mixing with other types of liquids; but the same trait made it suitable for absorbing and transferring the aromatic substances that healed wounds or sores, or regulated the temperature of bodily humors. Ambrose does not have to mention the scents of medicinal oils, for his audience could not have imagined medicine without its odor (fair or foul, depending on the need)—an odor again yielded, as in perfume, from a composition of ingredients. As we saw in chapter 2, baptismal anointment was often treated as a medically therapeutic act—like the Eucharist, undertaken "for the healing of soul and body." The oil used necessarily carried healing properties whether or not it was the same as that consecrated for anointing the sick, by virtue of its aromatic ingredients. "Oil" could be used as a medical image for theological instruction; but to indicate therapeutic value the image had to include the notion of scent even when no olfactory qualifiers were attached to it. When Ambrose spoke of the Holy Spirit as an oil that could heal mortality, the trope evoked an olfactory sensibility.

In Gregory of Nyssa's treatise, *On the Holy Spirit*, he, too, used the image of oil to discuss Christ's anointment with the Spirit, but in his case the issue was the Spirit's relation to the Son as full Persons of the one Godhead.[86] Gregory also

found the viscosity of oil a fruitful analogy, but this time for its tactility, the manner of oil's absorption by the skin.

> . . . the thought of "unction" conveys the hidden meaning that there is no interval of separation between the Son and the Holy Spirit. For as between the body's surface and the liquid of the oil nothing intervening can be detected, either in reason or in perception, so inseparable is the union of the Spirit with the Son; and the result is that whosoever is to touch the Son by faith must needs first encounter the oil in the very act of touching; there is not a part of him devoid of the Holy Spirit. Therefore belief in the Lordship of the Son arises in those who entertain it, by means of the Holy Ghost; on all sides the Holy Ghost is met by those who by faith approach the Son.[87]

Although the passage is clearly discussing the anointing of Christ, scholars have debated whether or not Gregory is also alluding to baptismal anointment. If so, the text would provide evidence about the baptismal practices followed in fourth-century Cappadocia.[88] However, the passage does not require exact correlation to baptismal practice for the audience to grasp its meaning. The description of oil's penetration into skin such that no interval "either in reason or in perception" can be discerned, offers a vivid analogy to the biblical image of Christ's anointment with the Spirit. They remain separate "things," but so intimately connected that no separation can be detected; moreover, they are so interconnected that one cannot encounter one without encountering the other at the same moment. When scholars wonder how the late antique populace could grapple with the complexities of patristic theology, they are forgetting the use of such analogies or metaphors to present orthodox teaching to the larger community in accessible terms.

But I would also stress that Gregory's analogy is a functionally olfactory one, although the passage does not identify the model by its scent. Because the discussion explores Christ's divine anointment with the Holy Spirit, and because that image itself conflates the Old Testament passages of priestly anointment with fragrant holy oil, the consideration of ointment in the analogy necessarily includes the ritual ointment's perfume. The sense would link with the pervasive image of the Holy Spirit as an invisible but perceptible fragrance: for when scented oil has been absorbed into the skin it is the fragrance that is most immediately apparent. It was this quality that Cyril of Jerusalem had discussed in his catechetical lectures, when he noted that the baptized congregants would exude the perfume of the holy oil, signalling also that they were now filled with the Spirit, while the unbaptized were anointed with unscented oil. Oil's capacity for absorption was a trait primarily known through touch; but its fragrance marked the action.

Gregory's passage need not have referred to the actual baptismal practices of his audience for its meaning to carry olfactory sense. All of the analogies we have considered in this section are noteworthy for how they employ the common themes of olfaction as considered through scientific inquiry and empirical experience. Their meaning is based on the common understanding that was part of medical and philosophical investigations, and grounded in how smells were generated, encountered, experienced, and effective in the course of mundane life. However, although these analogies were based on physical experience, their use in theological discussion also set them within the domain of religious, and hence ritual, meaning. Any mention of perfumed oil or ointment used in relation to the divine in theological discussion echoed also with its correlate of holy oil in Christian ritual practice. The appearance and exploration of olfactory analogies, images, or metaphors in late antique theological texts coincide with the proliferation of olfactory practices in Christian worship and devotion. These developments are not so much causally related—for no deliberate decision regarding the sensory changes in Christian piety or theological discourse of the fourth and fifth centuries can be located—but they are rather mutually inclusive expressions of the same shift in physical sensibility that marked late antique as distinct from earlier Christianity.

The post-Constantinian increase in olfactory rhetoric was part and parcel of the proliferation of olfactory piety: the rhetoric and piety both testify to Christianity's changed orientation towards the physical world in which it was located. As Christians gained political and social power in the world around them, the world gained positive valuation among Christians as their context for encountering, knowing, and living in relationship with the divine. Physical or sensory experiences in the world exuded theological implications for the Christian thinker who sought to reconcile science and philosophy with the Bible. Furthermore, the Christian thinker's task was to articulate a set of beliefs that could integrate history and practices with a biblical literature that provided the imagistic resources through which Christians saw their place in the cosmos as God's ordered intention. This situation is sharply evident when olfactory analogies appear in theological treatises, bringing together biblical references and the rhetoric of scientific observation.

Christian intellectuals also made use of perfume imagery through play upon its sweet fragrance apart from its mediating substance (of oil or ointment). Ambrose of Milan often drew upon the Song of Songs in his discussions of Christ. In his treatise, *The Holy Spirit*, he takes Song 1:3 first as a verse uttered about the Spirit, but then speaking of Christ the eternal Son and Christ in history.

> For the name of the Son also is poured forth. . . . For just as ointment inclosed in a vase keeps in its odor, which odor is held back as long as it is in the narrow confines of the vase, although it cannot reach many, yet it preserves its strength, but when the ointment has been poured forth, it is diffused far and wide; so, too, the name of Christ before His coming among the people of Israel, was inclosed in the minds of the Jews as in a vase. . . . But after by His coming He had shone throughout all the world, He spread that divine name of His throughout every creature. . . . Therefore, the pouring out of [Christ's] name signifies a kind of abundant exuberance of graces, and a plenitude of heavenly blessings, for whatever is poured forth flows forth from abundance.[89]

Ambrose here draws on different practical aspects of perfume: the containment and preservation of its scent in closed jars, its powerful strength of fragrance when released, and again its composite nature as the source of its abundant scent. These provide him instructive analogies by which to present the salvation drama as told in biblical history: before the incarnation, Christ was enclosed in "the mind of the Jews" (in their scriptures, in prophecy, in the divine presence among them) as perfume in a stoppered bottle, his scent restricted to their small number. With the incarnation Christ poured into human history as perfume from the bottle, his scent—his name—no longer confined but spread throughout the world in "abundant exuberance." The image of perfume poured out evokes richness, beauty, generosity, unrestricted celebration.

Later, Ambrose returns to the Song for its floral imagery, again to instruct on the work of Christ. The passage, remarkable for its depiction of beauty increased by violence, is worth citing at length.

> Christ is the flower of Mary, who sprouted forth from a virginal womb to spread the good odor of faith throughout the whole world, as he himself said: 'I am the flower of the field, and the lily of the valley.' (Song 2:1)
>
> The flower, even when cut, keeps its odor, and when bruised increases it, and when torn does not lose it; so, too, the Lord Jesus on that gibbet of the cross neither failed when bruised, nor fainted when torn; and when cut by the pricking of the lance, made more beautiful by the sacred color of the outpoured blood, He grew young again, Himself not knowing how to die and exhaling among the dead the gift of eternal life.
>
> A good rod, as some think, is the flesh of the Lord which raised itself from the root of the earth to the regions above and carried about the world the sweet-smelling fruits of the holy religion, the mysteries of the divine generation, and pouring out grace upon the altars of heaven.[90]

In this instance, Ambrose takes the techniques of extracting floral fragrance as a model for the story of Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection. The life cycle of the flower becomes the analogy. A flower's beauty is known when it blooms and sheds forth its scent; the scent is extracted for perfume by different methods which safeguard and even intensify it, but require the flower's complete destruction in the process.[91] So, too, the "good odor" of Christ—an image surely alluding to 2 Corinthians 2:14–16 as well—was spread openly with the incarnation; collected and intensified by the passion and death; and dispersed, now as the fragrant breath of life, throughout the world in the sweet scents of religious practice, theology, and worship.

Chrysostom had used the image from 2 Corinthians 2:14 of "the fragrance of the knowledge of God" to denote humanity's necessarily incomplete understanding of the divine: we know the fragrance, not its source; the scent carries a suggestion, a partial revelation, a mark of presence not fully known. Other theologians used the relationship of fragrance and source as analogous to that between the three Persons of the undivided Trinity, or to account for different aspects of it. In each instance, the fragrance is part of a much more complicated whole, from which it may operate with some independence but without which it could not exist. Ambrose, with the depiction drawn from perfume production, evokes also the echo of sacrificial scents. For both perfume and sacrifice, the perfection of the fragrance is released only through the annihilation of the source: like gold purified of dross, the scent is the purified matter that survives (at least briefly) when flower or resin have been destroyed. In these contexts scent is the perfected transformation of the whole, the continuing and present reminder, or revelation, of a source wholly changed in the process of its being made known—as if, once yielded, the scent reveals a source far different from that first seen.

Most often, however, theological play with the language of perfume and sweet scents had its origin in the Song of Songs, an incomparably influential text for Christian writers. The rich sensory images of its love story were dominated by references to spices, flowers, fruits, perfumes, unguents, and delight in every delicious scent. Ancient Christian commentators almost uniformly presumed the identity of the Beloved to be Christ or the Holy Spirit, and that of the Bride to be the church or the individual believer; Jewish thinkers similarly interpreted the Song to address God's relationship with Israel.[92] The Song hovered close by all discussion of divine love, of human-divine relation, of Christ as Heavenly Bridegroom, of the church or the believer as Bride, of baptism as marriage. It was not only direct exegesis of the Song that elicited this reading of its content, presuming its subject to be the love between God and humanity in its various forms. Any treatment of Christ or the Holy Spirit in

ancient Christian writings could include allusions to the Song's lush olfactory imagery. Divine presence, divine nature, divine love, divine action in history; the impact of such divine traits or attributes on the human person, how the human person experienced them or responded in turn—all were presented with and through the Song's language of perfume.[93] The exegesis of the Song of Songs in ancient Christianity is a topic in its own right.[94] What I wish to highlight here is that the Song's perfume imagery could be used for olfactory analogies in the same mode of philosophical and scientific discourse that we have been considering. Ambrose's passage on Song 2:1 and the methods of perfume production is a prime example.

Elsewhere, however, Ambrose followed the more common route of taking the Song's perfumes as images for the love between Christ and the church.[95] In an address to a group of newly baptized Christians, he likened their reception of baptismal anointment to the response of the maidens in Song 1:2–3 to the Beloved's perfume, "How many souls renewed today have loved Thee Lord Jesus, saying: 'Draw us after thee; let us run to the odor of thy garments,' that they may drink in the odor of the Resurrection."[96] The image here is not an analogy used to convey a difficult point of theological debate. Instead, Ambrose engages the traditional identification of divinity by sweet scent, further enhanced by Christ's promise of resurrection for those who would follow him—a promise here imaged by the suggestion of its fragrance, a hint of the breath of life. When Christians shared the ancient association of divinity with perfumed odor, they participated in a system of knowledge based in cultural habit rather than science or philosophy. For late antique Christian writers, this system instilled in believers the means to express human experience of the divine, and further, contributed in distinctive ways to human knowledge about the divine. In late antiquity, moreover, this orientation was continued in a context of Christian practices that now ritually supported it through the proliferation of olfactory piety. The expanded use of ritual scents contributed to the cultural habits by which Christians might think about or articulate divine identity and human identity in relation to it.

Revelatory Scents: Olfaction and Identity

Theophrastus had asserted that everything that had a smell had its own, distinctive smell. Further, he argued that every smell belonging to a living thing conveyed not only identity, but also condition and circumstance.[97] The cultural correlate to this position was the tradition of interpreting smells as indicators of identity, nature, character, and moral state. This perspective explained why smells could function diagnostically: they indicated the essence of something

by revealing its aspects or attributes. The model was pervasive in late antique Christian writings. Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa mention the common medical practice of diagnosing illness by smelling the patient's breath, a practice Galen had encouraged.[98] The breath's odor would indicate the balance of humors in the sick person's body, as well as other marks by which the illness could be properly identified. Similarly, Syriac astrologers could predict whether a person would exude a pleasant or unpleasant smell based on the month of birth.[99] The cultural assumption was that fate was determinative of the circumstances in which one conducted one's life; one's smell could reveal whether those given conditions were favorable or unfavorable for prosperity and good fortune.

The monk Hilarion was able to diagnose moral condition from personal odors: "The old man had extraordinary grace to know from the odor of the body, the clothing, and the things that anyone had touched what devil or what vice had predominance over him."[100] Indeed, smells made known one's manner of life. When Mary, the niece of the holy man Abraham of Qidun, fell into perdition and fled to a brothel, Abraham went to her rescue disguised as a soldier; the young niece recognized him by "the smell of asceticism that issued from the blessed man's body."[101] When the Syriac saint Malkha fled from his family to become a monk, his mother and sister thought he had returned when they recognized his smell in clothing he had given away.[102] Indicative of one's own person and state, one's smell could transfer one's moral characteristics to others. Gregory the Great adapted a familiar topos from epistolary convention, combining it with 2 Corinthians 2:15, when writing to a friend he dearly missed:

> And we, as often as we hear anything of good people, draw in as it were through our nostrils a breath of sweetness. And when Paul the Apostle said, 'We are a good odor of Christ unto God,' it is plainly given to be understood that he exhibited himself as a savor indeed to the present, but as an odor to the absent. We therefore, while we cannot be nourished by the savor of your presence, are so by the odor of your absence.[103]

It was a sensibility that endured. In the eighth century, Syrian villagers who converted from Christianity to Islam were recognized as apostates because of their odor:

> But they [the converts to Islam] grew different from the faithful people in both person and name; in person, because their once happy personal appearance became repugnant, in such a way that they were recognised by the intelligent

ones through their persons, odor, and the look of their eyes. . . . instead of a sweet odor of the holy myron a stinking and fetid smell emanated from them.[104]

The correspondence of personal odor with moral condition pervaded biblical interpretation in the same fashion. Ephrem Syrus used scents to contrast types of marital relations from Genesis with that of the Virgin Mary at the incarnation. Tamar had deceived her father-in-law, Judah (Gen 38:13–26), while Joseph had maintained virtuous fortitude (Gen 39:41–45): "Tamar reeked of the smell of her father-in-law, / for she had stolen perfumes. Not even the slightest scent / of Joseph wafted from the garments of his bride." But because Mary conceived Christ, the Glorious Lily and Treasure of Perfumes, there was no need of sexual intercourse, "of the flower or its fragrance."[105] The smells in such texts did not function literarily as analogy or metaphor. Rather, the uniqueness of personal odor expressed what was most profoundly intrinsic: the essence of character, the moral self as true self. An anonymous Syriac verse homily told the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac from Genesis 22 through the imagined view of Sarah's perspective. Believing her only son to have died in innocence, Sarah grieves with poignant lament, wishing she could fly like an eagle to see the place of his binding and his ashes, "and bring back a little of his blood, to be comforted by its smell."[106]

Personal odors conveyed identity and revealed the individual's moral condition. They could not be disguised, either by intention or design: "Do not," Paulinus exhorted, "wander abroad with perfumed clothes and hair seeking recognition from men's nostrils wherever you pass."[107] One's odor expressed one's nature, the truth of one's self. To smell that odor was to gain the knowledge it contained. In the *Acts of John*, the apostle John banishes an evil spirit with an exorcism formula commanding, "Be removed, then, from those who hope in the Lord; from their thoughts, from their minds, from their souls, from their bodies, from their action, from their life, their behaviour, their way of life, their practice, their counsel, from their resurrection to God, from their fragrance in which you can have no share. . ."[108] The ancient Mediterranean belief that divine presence was made known through sweet fragrance was another variation on this theme. Late antique Christian writers drew on the topoi of divine fragrances, as we have already seen, to signify divine presence and participation in human affairs, in sacred ritual, and in human history. But they also employed these conventions for epistemological use, to explore and convey knowledge about God.

That such usage was never simply metaphor or analogy was clear from discussions about the incarnation. The notion of God become human lifted the role of sense perception in knowing God to intense significance: the senses perceived God through his handiwork in the natural world, yes. But in the

incarnate Christ, the senses had perceived God himself; God had chosen to reveal himself according to the human capacity for knowledge gained sensorily as well as through the mind's understanding. When Ephrem recalled the story of Jesus' rejection by the people of Nazareth in Luke 4:28–30, he exclaimed about this very paradox: "They spoke ill of our Lord because of His body and thought that He was not God. . . . yet it was because of His body—the body that they experienced as passing among them—that they recognized that He is God."[109] From the nativity to the resurrection, God had become known to humankind in and through the senses. The *Gospel of Truth* had caught the significance of this direct sensory engagement: "Acquaintance from the father and the appearance of his son gave [the people] a means to comprehend. For when they saw and heard him, he let them taste and smell of himself and touch the beloved son."[110] While the immediacy of that encounter was confined to the historical moment of the gospel story, its power was seen to continue to permeate every sensory encounter revelatory of the divine. Ephrem had lambasted the heretical Bardaisanites, among other charges, for reducing God to nothing more than divine fragrance—mere perfume or smoke that could be dissipated but had no greater reality.[111] To the true believer, the fragrance of God heralded that divinity which could only (as John Chrysostom had said) be partially realized—but the whole was there.

The notion worked as a powerful aid in devotional piety, especially when seeking an affective impact on the believer. In an anonymous Syriac hymn, the hymn writer presents a kind of meditation on the Christ child, newborn and cradled in the Virgin Mary's lap. Repeatedly, it is the baby's scent on which he dwells. Even while stressing Christ's humanity, the hymn thus proclaims his divinity:

> The sight of You delights, Your smell is sweet, Your mouth is holy. . . .
> How sweet is Your breath, how lovely Your baby state.
> . . .
> Your eyes are merry with delight at all who kiss You,
> Your lips distil the fragrance of life,
> While balsam flows from Your fingertips.
> Your eyes are lovely
> As they gaze on Your mother
> . . .
> Who can set eyes on You and not breathe in Your fragrance?
> Even Your dribble causes onlookers to wonder,
> And Your manifest form amazes rational beings.
> Your tiny hands are clasped,
> Your feet are kicking,

How lovely You are in every way.
Even Your mouth's murmur tells of Your Father.
How gorgeous is Your beauty, how sweet [Your] smell –
Your mouth is very honey,
O infant God![112]

This "sensibility" of God—the availability of God to the human senses—came increasingly to be stressed in late antique Christian aesthetics. The emergence of icon piety at this point in time was no accident.[113] In literary expression, late antique Christian writers routinely used fragrance to identify divine characters in the stories they told. An angel's arrival would be apparent first by a heavenly scent "seeping down from the sky and into the nostrils;" his departure would "lend fragrance to the air from afar with his holy scent."[114] Legends proclaimed that divine perfume had poured from the cave where Jesus was born; that the scent of the Magi's spice offering filled all the towns through which the three Persians passed; that the odor of the Christ child's clothing had healed a blind child.[115] Monks visiting the shrine on Mt. Sinai, marking the place where Moses had received the Law, described it as redolent with celestial perfume.[116]

Such instances had their counterparts in personal recollections. Augustine remembered how his mother, Monica, "used to say that, by a certain smell indescribable in words, she could often tell the difference between [God's] revelation and her own soul dreaming."[117] Cyril of Scythopolis told how his work as hagiographer began when the two saints Sabas and Euthymius appeared to him in a vision and placed on his tongue a substance with the texture of oil, a taste sweeter than honey, and an ineffable fragrance that lingered in his mouth and gave him the strength to begin his writing.[118] There was a pervasive expectation that the Holy Spirit would be present to the praying Christian with purity of heart, a presence known by its fragrance; so John Cassian: "we are often suddenly filled in these visitations with odors that go beyond the sweetness of human making, such that a mind which has been relaxed by this delightful sensation is seized with a certain spiritual ecstasy and forgets that it is dwelling in the flesh."[119] The Egyptian monk Ammonas wrote to his monastic brethren that upon those whose hearts were perfectly cleansed in preparation, the Holy Spirit would not cease to pour fragrance and sweetness.[120]

But there was expectation, too, that divine fragrance would work upon and change the one perceiving it. Smells penetrate and permeate what they encounter; they are transferred by contact, attaching their odor—and the knowledge it carries—to whatever and whomever they touch. This was true of smells generated in the physical realm, as the ancients often noted. How much more so, then, must it be true of divine smells. Paulinus praised the new ascetics

in Nola and among them Eunomia, a young virgin devoted to Christ from her childhood. Upon her, Christ had early sprinkled "the perfume of his name. Accordingly, the tresses of her soul [were] steeped in it, and the chaste head of her mind anointed with it, and so her breath [had] the holy scent of her heavenly bridegroom."[121] The Syriac version of the *Life of Antony* spoke of reptiles finding the saint when he was enclosed in the abandoned fortress because his smell was "not of human beings."[122] Indeed, frenzied dogs could be stilled by St. Ioannikios's sweet scent.[123]

The transference of holy scent from divine presence to the chosen person took place within an olfactory dialogue. Personal odor revealed the inner disposition (moral nature) of the chosen one, above and beyond any devotional act that person performed; that odor was then transformed by the divine fragrance poured forth in response, leaving the chosen one redolent with a grace that could be smelled by others. An anonymous Syriac hymn wrongly attributed to Ephrem describes the exchange in the case of the biblical prophet and king, David, when he was anointed with ritual holy oil. The anointing gave him an odor pleasing to the Holy Spirit because it was rightly performed, but the "odor of his heart" was the more pleasing offering. In response the Spirit dwelt in him, granting his heart fragrant blessing:

> At David's anointing, my brothers, there came down the Spirit who gave scent to his heart; for the scent of David's heart pleased him, just as the scent of the oil; the Spirit dwelt in him and sang in him.[124]

Divine visitation might fill persons with holy fragrance beyond that of their own dispositions. Yet holy fragrance was as transitory as any scent: it could not be preserved in a faulty container. "Into hearts that are pure the Spirit enters," Prudentius wrote; but the consecrated heart that grew defiled with the "murky vapors" and "black corruption" of fiery passions forced grace to depart.[125] One might pray to receive divine fragrance, as when Abo the Perfumer prepared for his martyrdom at the hands of Saracens, petitioning Christ that he be filled "with the imperishable perfume" of divine love.[126] But the perception of divine fragrance was itself an act caused by grace, no less than exuding its scent.

Late antique Christian writers presented the encounter with divine fragrance as revelatory of the one whose scent poured forth, and of the one who was able to perceive it. Such encounter was also shown to be transformative of the human subject, who might well be found to breathe forth a holy scent as a result. Christian authors hence presented faith itself as a process in which olfactory experience might mark stages on the way towards the life of true devotion. Such, for example, was the impact described by Severus of Minorca in his *Letter*

on the Conversion of the Jews.[127] The mass conversion in Minorca that Severus recorded was punctuated, by his account, with divine signs and portents that contributed to the heightened emotional state of the community. Among these were recurrences of mysterious, sweet-tasting, fragrant substances that appeared like hail or rainwater; and the sudden filling of the church "with such a marvelous and truly heavenly odor that nearly all the brethren sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit, which we had also sensed sometimes in the past, but only a few among us."[128] By the fragrance was the nature of the presence known.

The fragrance of divine identity did more than bestow the mark of grace upon the faithful believer who perceived it. It was itself the carrier of what was intrinsic to the divine: the power to give life. The "fragrance of life," a phrase pregnant with meaning in this late antique context,[129] was not a didactic figure of speech used to instruct the faithful. It was the expression of how God's creative force worked in the universe. Romanos the Melodist put the image to work in his second *Hymn on the Nativity* (*Nativity* 2).[130] The hymn tells the story of how Adam and Eve, asleep in Hades, awake at the birth of Christ, the event that begins the process of their redemption into new and everlasting life. Eve is the first to perceive that all things have changed. As she had once heard the voice of the serpent in deceit, now she hears the voice of Mary singing to the newborn Christ child. She summons her husband, who fears to trust his ears that had formerly deceived him. The story moves from auditory to olfactory knowing: exhorting Adam not to fear his hearing—which had once led him astray through her words—Eve calls him to smell what is happening.

> Be fully reassured, my husband, by the words of your wife;
> For you will not find me again giving you bitter advice.
> The ancient things have passed away,
> And Christ, the son of Mary, brings to light all things new.
> Catch the scent of this fresh smell, and at once burst into new life.
> Stand erect like an ear of corn, for spring has overtaken you.
> Jesus Christ breathes forth a fresh breeze.[131]

Adam takes note, and it is indeed his sense of smell that alerts him to the incomprehensible change that has begun. He smells beauty, paradise, the Tree of Life, life itself:

> I recognize, wife, the spring, and I sense the luxury
> which we enjoyed in the past; for indeed I see
> A new, another paradise, the virgin,
> Bearing in her arms the tree of life itself, which once

The cherubim kept sacred, kept me from touching.
And I, watching the untouched tree grow,
Am aware, wife, of a new breath—bringing life
to me, who was formerly dust and lifeless clay,
Making me come alive. And now, strengthened by this fragrance,
I advance to her who causes the fruit of our life to grow,
Mary, full of grace.[132]

Thus to smell God was to smell life as it would be fulfilled in immortality, what Ambrose had called "the odor of the resurrection." It was a smell that could be known in this present world by the one who lived in devotion to God. As Isaac the Syrian said, "Thus the one who lives with love in this creation smells life from God. He breathes here of the air of resurrection. In this air the righteous will delight at the resurrection."[133]

While this scent of life was a smell of beauty to the faithful, it was a smell whose scent was powerful and therefore terrifying to the forces of death, just as the Pauline passage of 2 Corinthians 2:16 had warned. It was a smell that not only identified its divine source but also did God's work in the act of granting life. In his hymns, Ephrem portrayed the final work of Christ in pungent terms. Adam was the one who "became leprous and repulsive / because the serpent had breathed on him;" hence "the Garden cast him from its midst."[134] Fragrant Eden could not tolerate the stench of mortality. But neither could Death endure the odor of life breathed forth from the crucified Lord, an odor that struck Death with terror when he approached the cross to smell Christ's blood.[135] It was this odor that raised the dead when Christ descended to Sheol.[136]

Instead of death which has breathed the fragrance of mortality
upon all,
The Living Fragrance who gives life to all breathes forth
in Sheol.
From His life the dead breathe new life,
for death dies within them.[137]

Elsewhere Ephrem linked the concepts of inhaling and consuming, of fragrance and food. At times he switched his framing of Christ's descent to Hades from olfactory to alimentary imagery, from Christ as the Fragrance of Life to Christ as the Bread of Life. When Sheol could not bear the presence of Christ within its midst, it vomited him forth and all the faithful dead with him.[138] Because Christians consume Christ's body and blood, wrote Ephrem, they too will be intolerable for Death. As we noted above, consuming the Eucharist

mingles the being of Christ throughout the being of the believer: "All of Him has been mixed into all of us."[139] Consequently, "For this reason, You mixed Your blood, which repelled death and terrified it, in the bodies of Your worshippers, so that the mouths of [dead idols] who consume them would be repelled by their life."[140] The presence of Christ within the believer—the result of consuming the Eucharist—will be salvific in a cosmic sense: all creation will be healed and saved. But Ephrem implies that until the final triumph of God's Kingdom, the force of divinity within the believer is also specifically apotropaic in the place where the dead repose.

At least on this point, Ephrem's successors seem both to conflate the layers of Ephrem's imagery on the Fragrance of Life, and to narrow its sense to a sharply honed apotropaic force exerted by the odor the faithful breathed forth—the odor they acquired by Christ's presence within them. In the *Epiphany Hymns*, written from Ephrem's school and very near to his theology, the baptismal anointing is "an odor loathsome to Satan, [but] to God its perfume is sweet."[141] Subsequently, Jacob of Serug finds the scent from the Eucharist to be all-conquering and abominable to the forces of death. The oblation offered in memorial services yields a scent that sustains the dead like food while they await the final resurrection:

> To the Fragrance of Life pouring forth from the great sacrifice,
> all the souls gather and come to receive pardon.
> And from the resurrection which caused the body of the Son of God to rise
> every day the dead breathe in life and receive mercy from it.[142]

Where Ephrem had portrayed the harrowing of hell in alimentary terms (Sheol vomiting Christ out), Jacob presents an olfactory version of the apotropaic powers gained from consuming the Eucharist: "May the fire [of Gehenna] stand awed before my members, when the odor of Your body and pure blood, mixed in me, strikes forth."[143] The image is preserved almost verbatim in an early medieval burial hymn still used in the funeral rite of the Maronite church: "I consumed Your holy body so that the flames would not consume me . . . For the flames will flee from my path as the fragrance of Your holy body and blood emanates from me."[144]

In this context of cosmic warfare between mortality and immortality, the Fragrance of Life is a weapon to preserve the faithful from the destruction of death. Residing within the believer's body, Christ's odor is a hardened armor, protecting but not changing or teaching the faithful who receive its power. These apotropaic passages appear to be derived from Ephrem's images of scent and salvation, albeit impoverished renderings thereof.[145] The believer gains

protection from the forces of death as an interim condition. Emphasis on the apotropaic effect of divine odor represents a model of human-divine relation simplified from that which Ephrem and other late antique Christian writers sought to nurture. Here, the breach separating Creator and created order remains absolute. The odor of Christ resides in the believer who has consumed the Eucharist, a power that remains separate from the being and condition of his partakers even while mingled within them. Ever vulnerable to the powers of destruction, the believer is shielded more than transformed. Right relation with God places the believer in a privileged location of shelter as the forces and powers of the cosmos are reordered to be subservient to divine will. This, too, is a salvific model, but one that allows little human participation in the event of redemption. The believer is essentially the passive recipient of divine help, rather than the active participant in its process. Yet there remains an awareness that the air one breathed could carry the promise and power of salvation, the fragrance of life itself. Odor identified the nature and state of its source.

Remembering Knowledge: Liturgical Commentaries

The post-Constantinian era brought tremendous change in Christian rituals and devotional practices. Often these changes occurred over time without direct guidance from leaders or councils, but rather as shifts in local or common practice that were explicated subsequently through official channels (conciliar statements or canons, episcopal instruction, imperial decree). The catechetical homilies of the fourth century were a response to this situation, providing congregations with careful exposition of liturgical rites and offering instruction on the actions, gestures, and spoken formulae of ecclesiastical rites. These were especially useful in an era that brought a huge influx of population into the churches, and when adult baptism was the normal practice. After the fourth century, as infant baptism became more common, the great catechetical sermons of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan circulated widely in numerous copies, ensuring a continuing instruction of the lay population.

At the end of the fifth century, however, a new form of liturgical instruction began to appear, directed to a different audience and with a different intention. These were the liturgical commentaries properly speaking. They were addressed not to a catechumenate of recent converts, nor to a lay populace in need of teaching. Instead, they targeted those who had already received instruction in the faith: monastics especially (who sometimes felt they were not required to

participate in the standard activities of Christian sacramental life), or clergy and bishops. Their purpose was to provide more advanced teachings on liturgical practices, and to summarize interpretive traditions of the church.[146] In their Byzantine and Syriac forms, they self-consciously develop the themes of the earlier catechetical sermons.

Liturgical commentaries have something in common with biblical commentaries, for they approach the liturgy as a performance that can be read as one would read a biblical text, through established exegetical and hermeneutical strategies. They see liturgy like scripture: as a form of divine revelation whose every moment contains levels of meaning, each level able to convey some essential portion of divine truth to the faithful. Because they offer a self-consciously considered exposition of sacred ritual intended for an audience of ritual specialists (that is, monastics and clerics), I would suggest that we might also read them as texts primarily concerned with epistemology. In their attention to details of gesture and movement, of objects and garments, sequences, order, spaces, and form, these commentaries bring together the ritual memory of Christians, in terms that evoke both systems of knowledge this chapter has explored—that of intellectual training passed on through philosophical and scientific traditions, and that of cultural habit. The explications they provide would not have been self-evident to a practitioner of another religion who might have accidentally wandered into a Christian liturgy with no prior preparation. Moreover, their instruction would only have been as familiar to the Christian congregation as clergy or monastics had taken the opportunity to make it known.

What did the different priestly vestments signify? What was the purpose or meaning of the liturgical fans? Why was incense burned at certain points of the service? Why was incense carried through the nave? Why were the gospel books brought out to the congregation and then carried to the altar? A wealth of description and explanation on such details survive in these commentaries, granting conscious intention to each. As with any literature of this type, we should be careful not to take these texts as representative of "standard opinion," nor as widely read. But they do offer insight into important traditions of ritual knowledge—of religious epistemology as codified in the liturgical practices of their time. As literature that developed well after the ritual and devotional changes begun in the fourth century, they provide reflection on the kind of knowledge these practices made available to Christians. Accordingly, they have important contributions on the olfactory practices that came to punctuate late antique Christian worship. For incense and myron, at least, the Byzantine and Syriac traditions continue to show a markedly greater emphasis and appreciation

than what develops in western practices during the same period.[147] It is from these commentaries, then, that I take notable highlights by which to consider the issues of the present chapter.

In a formal sense, we can mark the emergence of the eastern liturgical commentaries around the year 500 with the works of the unknown author who referred to himself as Dionysius the Areopagite.[148] Scholars have long struggled with Dionysius, puzzling in particular over the matter of his evident debt to Neoplatonism and the charge that his writings verge on being nearly "Christless."[149] The setting of Neoplatonism in direct opposition to a Christian notion of revelation by modern scholars has unfortunately dominated discussion of this author, and indeed has led to considerable distortion of his content.[150] More recently, as scholars have established the late antique Syrian Orient as Dionysius's milieu, there has come a welcome effort to set his writings within the distinctive ascetic and liturgical contexts warranted by that location. What is emerging is a liturgically grounded, profoundly Christocentric reading of this author, in which Platonic influence is overshadowed by—or at the least, contextualized within—an embodied and enacted liturgical piety.[151] For our purposes, I wish to note two emphases in Dionysius's writings that are often overlooked by others, but which stand out in the context of the changing post-Constantinian orientation to the physical world: his insistence on the significance of sensory experience as an epistemological tool, and the extraordinary prominence he gives to the olfactory aspects of liturgical practices. Both raise intriguing questions if one is committed to reading "Platonism" in rigid terms.

In the *Celestial Hierarchy,* Dionysius states bluntly that humans require sensory experience for their understanding of God and of the divine realm. By this he does not mean that the physical, sensory realm stands in analogous relation to heaven. He does not posit a baldly symbolic correlation, in which the physical components of worship are set forth as images of a "higher" reality. Instead, he argues that the liturgical setting guides (or trains) the senses so that they lead the believer to experience realities beyond the immediacy of the concrete situation. The immediate setting opens the senses, allowing them to bind the mundane, sensory experience of the worshipper to the celestial domain in which it must ultimately take place.

> For it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness. The beautiful odors which strike the senses are representations of a conceptual diffusion. Material lights are images of the outpouring of an immaterial gift of life.[152]

The liturgy conducted here, in the visible, corporeal, and odoriferous reality, is an icon of its celestial counterpart: it opens beyond itself at the same time that it participates in the prototype it images, a participation that provides the essential reality of its own activity. The church's liturgy thus stands in iconic relation both to the interior actions of the individual believer's soul at worship, and to the celestial reality which is itself a liturgy. The material symbol or image does not "stand for" a divine counterpart; it is rather "theophoros," God-bearing, that which conveys the divine. "Everything can be a help in contemplation . . . even those forms drawn from the lowliest matter" because worship is the activity of the human-divine relationship.[153] It is so for Dionysius in three simultaneous, coexistent "liturgies," or "churches": that of the interior person, the soul (called elsewhere in Syriac tradition the "little church"); that of the exterior, visible, and earthly church; and that of the celestial, heavenly church.[154] So complete is the coordination of these realms of activity that sensory experience within the liturgy is necessarily, and always, iconic: it is experience that is by nature incarnational, as the divine is present in and through it.[155] For this reason, Dionysius says, theologians may use sensory imagery and sensory experience within the liturgy "not only to make known the ranks of heaven but also to reveal something of God himself." They might use "the most exalted imagery, calling God for instance sun of righteousness;" or they might, surprisingly but not inappropriately, use images "of the lowliest kind, such as sweet smelling ointment."[156] There are different domains of reality, and there are different capacities for receiving and understanding religious truth. Each level of knowledge is worthwhile, as each can serve to bind the believer through the liturgy to the divine. This is in fact the liturgy's purpose. From this perspective, no element of liturgy is gratuitous or insignificant in itself. Form and function are as important as the divine presence they signify, and the senses are essential to their realization. In the above quotation, Dionysius highlights not only the fragrant scents of worship, but their characteristic movement of diffusion—the qualities by which smells work are not less meaningful than their beauty.

In his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,* Dionysius provides a commentary on the various rites and offices of the church. These, like the scriptures themselves, are gifts to us from the divine that are ours in the form of "sacred symbols."[157] Whether through scripture or rite, perceptible images and perceptible experiences are used to bestow religious knowledge; "sacred symbols are actually the perceptible tokens of the conceptual things" that lead to the understanding of divine reality. Every perceptible aspect is heavy with meaning. In baptism, anointment with holy oil gives the initiate a sweet scent, but the joining to the Holy Spirit that it marks is "not something [ultimately] describable . . . for it is in the domain of the mind that [this outpouring] does its work of sweetening and of

making perfect."[158] In preparation for the eucharistic liturgy, the priest censes the altar and then, walking through the nave, censes the entire church prior to the liturgy's commencement. The actions and their olfactory impress mimic and enact the transfusion of divine presence into the world, a presence that in no way diminishes the divine being in its eternal essence:

> We must look attentively upon the beauty which gives [the image] so divine a form and we must turn a reverent glance to the double movement of the hierarch when he goes first from the divine altar to the far edges of the sacred place spreading the fragrance and then returns to the altar. For the blessed divinity, which transcends all being, while proceeding gradually outward because of goodness to commune with those who partake of him, never actually departs from his essential stability and immobility.[159]

In Book 4, Dionysius presents a third rite, "belonging to the same order" as baptism and Eucharist, the sacrament of the holy myron.[160] The section is arresting in part because it describes a ritual—the blessing of the holy oil—not mentioned in the earlier catechetical homilies that survive in Greek or Latin, but rather finding its counterpart in Syriac texts of the sixth century and thereafter. But more unsettling is its olfactory emphasis in a work that otherwise seems to privilege the practices and imagery of visual piety (as one would expect in a Platonic system). Dionysius describes the rite as one that sets the myron in a literal and ritual space of singular power. After dismissing the "imperfect orders" (the laity as well as the unbaptized), the bishop censes the inner sanctuary of the church while the attendant clergy chant psalms and read from the scriptures. Then the bishop takes the myron, "covered by a dozen sacred veils," and sets it on the altar. Unlike baptism or eucharistic liturgy, no processions enter or leave the larger area of the church nave; the consecration is confined to the clergy, within the (separated) sanctuary, at the holiest of holy loci. On the altar, the myron is blessed. There it remains, for use "in the holy sacraments of sanctification for almost all of the hierarchy's rites of consecration."[161]

Dionysius follows this summary description with a discussion of the ritual's meaning, dwelling at length on olfactory experience as revelatory of divine truth and as vehicle of religious knowledge, in a treatment unparalleled in previous works of liturgical instruction. Even the handling of the ointment is pregnant with sense:

> It shows us that divine men cover in secret the fragrance of that sanctity within their minds. For God himself has forbidden that sacred men, in some wish for

> glory, should vainly scatter abroad the beauty and fragrance of their virtuous striving for resemblance to the hidden God. These divine beauties are concealed. Their fragrance is something beyond any effort of the understanding.[162]

Among the most perfect—the true clergy and hierarchs of the church, the monastics, the saints—sanctity resides within, concealed by an external, mundane appearance, invisible. Yet it is perceptible, a "fragrant, secret beauty," "an exact likeness of God" (4.3.1). The holy person is as the rite itself: disguised by a "fine exterior appearance," by "splendid and sacred ceremony" (4.3.2). Perfected believer and sacrament are together "truly divine images of that infinitely divine fragrance" which is God's own being (4.3.1). Beyond the exterior veil, Dionysius exhorts, lies the reality.

> Let us see it for what it is, stripped of its veils, shiningly available in its blessed splendor, filling us abundantly with that fragrance which is apparent only to people of intelligence (i.e., the perfect). . . . For the ray of the most holy sacred things enlightens the men of God . . . it spreads its sweet fragrance into their mental reception openly. But this fragrance does not spread in a similar way to those [people] on a lowlier plane.[163]

The consecration of the myron, Dionysius explains, is a rite equal to the synaxis (eucharistic liturgy) "in dignity and effectiveness" (4.3.3). Its ritual components elicit the same experiences, perceptually and in understanding: the censing of the sanctuary serves, just as the censing of the nave in the synaxis, to mark God's outpouring even as he remains unchanged; God is everywhere perceptibly present, and nowhere visible. The parallels in ritual segments continue, enfolding the myron in actions that render it ritually like unto the eucharistic bread and wine. And indeed, as Dionysius moves through his levels of meaning, from this ecclesiological level of sense to the Christological one, he will end with the arresting image of the blessed myron being poured out to consecrate the very altar on which it is placed: the image, Dionysius exhorts, of Christ in his essential activity, "Jesus himself, our most divine altar . . . Jesus who consecrates himself for us."[164]

But the myron holds singular meaning beyond its ritual handling, and beyond the olfactory dimensions that attend or are emphasized by those actions. Dionysius expounds on the myron's constitution:

> The ointment is made up of a mixture of fragrant substances. It has within itself fragrances of rich quality. Now the participants receive these fragrances, but they do so in proportion to their capacity to have a share of this fragrance. In this way

we learn that the transcendent fragrance of the divine Jesus distributes its conceptual gifts over our own intellectual powers, filling them with a divine pleasure.

If there is a pleasurable scent, Dionysius explains, and if one has a healthy nose capable of distinguishing among odors, then one can receive through that healthy olfactory organ the great pleasure of that sweet scent. So, too, if no evil impulse distracts us, our powers of knowledge "can draw in the fragrance of the Deity and be filled with a sacred happiness and with God's nourishment." Hence "the composition of the ointment is symbolic, giving a form to what is without form." Jesus is the "rich source of the divine fragrances," pouring forth grace in "divine fragrances to delight the intelligence." The faithful will receive these scents, each to their own capacity and in proportion to their participation in the divine. The greater the holiness, and the higher the rank (angelic beings over human persons), "the greater the flood of fragrant odors since they are closer to the source."[165]

Dionysius's commentary on the consecration of holy oil draws, then, not only on the deeply familiar olfactory codes that functioned throughout the ancient Mediterranean sphere, but further on the empirical system of knowledge that underlay philosophical, scientific, and medical inquiry. In his exposition, the myron's scent matters because of the tangible delight it causes. Its sweetness is the appropriate adornment for a sacred setting and sacred ritual, marking off the place, its occupants (terrestrial and celestial), and their activities as separate from the mundane world and its occupations. The myron's fragrant beauty signifies the presence of the divine being that works through it, and the changed condition of the human person who partakes of it.

But the myron's smell is only one part of the olfactory work of this rite. For the physiological processes are equally—and perhaps even more so—critical to what is taking place. The myron is a composite substance, composed of multiple beautiful scents. Its fragrance is created by the mixture, and exuded from the ointment which is now its source. Unseen and unfelt, the fragrance fills its immediate space and then wafts far beyond, spreading even beyond the walls of the church itself. It is perceived by beings corporeal and incorporeal who have the capacity to receive its impress. Smelling it, they take it in to the extent of their olfactory capabilities, imbibing it within their innermost parts; its reception, in turn, affects their constitution, causing them to yield fragrant odor of their own. It is not enough, in Dionysius's commentary, to understand what the smell signifies; one must understand the physiology of olfaction, both what generates smells and what the perception of smells entails. Dionysius repeatedly stresses the ultimate goal of intellectual comprehension of the divine, yet his system begins with the body itself experiencing, through its

sensory (olfactory) process, that which the believer must strive to know. Intellectual understanding is the cognitive reflection on that bodily experience, but the primacy of the sensing body renders its epistemological rewards available, to some extent at least, even to those who lack the higher inclination.

About a century later, in the course of the seventh century, Maximus Confessor produced a mystagogical commentary much indebted to Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.[166] Relying on what had come before, however, Maximus does not provide much description of the actual rites nor details from the rubrics, rather taking the occasion to contemplate at length on the liturgy as source and demonstration of theological truth. Like his model Dionysius, Maximus is at pains to establish a profound correspondence between physical, perceptible experience and its intellectual, conceptual counterpart in the mind or soul, where alone can be had the highest knowledge of God.[167]

> For the whole spiritual world seems mystically imprinted on the whole sensible world in symbolic forms, for those who are capable of seeing this, and the whole sensible world is spiritually explained in the mind in the principles which it contains. In the spiritual world it is in principles; in the sensible world it is in figures.[168]

Maximus goes on to work out an elaborate—and eloquent—scheme of human person and cosmos in relation to one another as microcosm to macrocosm. The theme had ancient roots in Greek philosophy but was powerfully transferred by Maximus onto the forms, structures (architectural and institutional), and ritual practices of the human person, the church, and the order of the natural universe.[169] Yet Maximus treats the senses only in their total grouping, as "the senses," or through the example of sight.[170] It is for the reader to work out how Maximus would include olfaction *per se*, and the contrast to Dionysius is quite striking. In this Maximus heralds the decisive turn that Byzantine tradition takes towards visual piety, a focus that will take culminating form in the victory of icon devotion over iconoclasm in the ninth century.[171]

Nonetheless, the significance of the olfactory dimensions of liturgical experience were not lost to later Byzantine commentators, as indeed incense and myron continued their fundamental roles in Byzantine liturgical and devotional piety. We might chart their continuing contribution through two formulations. The first is from the eighth-century liturgical commentary of Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople, writing in the same era as John of Damascus in his defense of icons.[172] Often described as achieving a great synthesis of the earlier

liturgical and exegetical traditions, Germanus begins his commentary with the church itself—both the building and the people of God, the body of Christ. In this opening passage, he defines the church as the Bride of Christ, constructing this identification through olfactory allusions. As Bride, the church is cleansed through baptism, sprinkled with Christ's sacrificial blood, and sealed with the ointment of the Holy Spirit. A cascade of scriptural allusions emphasizes the complex construction of this identity: the fragrance of the lover's perfume poured forth and enticing, and the abundance of the ritual oil of the priestly calling.[173]

Subsequently, Germanus comments on the incense. Discussing the censing that follows the epistle reading, he expounds both Christological and Trinitarian interpretations: the censer is the humanity of Christ, the fire his divinity; the smoke "reveals the fragrance of the Holy Spirit which precedes."[174] But the incense in its censer also displays the divine economy, imaging the outworking of salvation in the course of human history and of each human believer:

> Again, the interior of the censer is understood as the [sanctified] womb of the [holy] virgin [and Theotokos] who bore the divine coal, Christ . . . All together, therefore, give forth the sweet-smelling fragrance. Or again, the interior of the censer points to the font of holy baptism, taking into itself the coal of divine fire, the sweetness of the operation of the Holy Spirit, which is the adoption of divine grace through faith, and exuding a good odor.[175]

Once more, at the procession of the Great Entrance, Germanus comments on the incense. He begins with the Holy Spirit, evoking the whole tradition of identification of the Spirit with sweet fragrance, known to the Christian within the liturgical context through the process and engagement of human-divine relation that sacrificial activity engendered. Nor could any evocation of sacrifice be made without allusion to Christological meaning.

> The Holy Spirit is seen spiritually in the fire, incense, smoke, and fragrant air: for the fire points to His divinity, and the fragrant smoke to His coming invisibly and filling us with good fragrance through the mystical, living, and unbloody services and sacrifice of burnt-offering. . . . [The incense] is also in imitation of the burial of Christ, when Joseph took down the body from the cross, wrapped it in clean linen, anointed it with spices and ointment.[176]

The epistemological concerns here are differently focused from those in the discussions of Dionysius. For Germanus the liturgical practices of anointment

and incense are dynamic symbols that enact, quite literally, a living memory of the gospel story.[177] At the same time, they signify and bring to actualization a human-divine relationship dependent on doctrinal understandings of the nature of the Godhead in its three Persons. The historical significations of the symbols do not override this emphasis on liturgy as an experience through which the church as a whole, and the individual believer within it, gain knowledge of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit. That knowledge is gained experientially through bodily encounter with the components of the liturgy: its location, its sequences, its ritual objects and adornments, its gestures, its actions. This ritual knowledge is perfectly aligned with the knowledge revealed—again both historically and doctrinally—in scripture. Properly understood, each component must point to the whole meaning: the smells alone are able to convey all that is meant to transpire for the believer, both in affect and in understanding.

One last Byzantine example brings this tradition to sharp articulation as it was used to instruct the individual monk. In the tenth century, Symeon the New Theologian presented a discourse to his monastic readers that addressed the matter of liturgy through a discussion of "Feasts and Holy Communion."[178] The content of this, the Fourteenth Ethical Discourse, is strongly reminiscent of Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy,* both in interpretive method and in method of epistemological instruction.[179] Symeon here speaks to monks who are disdainful of the elaborate ceremonial of the liturgy, especially the adornments of lights, candles, incense, holy oil, and choral music. They clearly view these outward trappings of liturgy as turgid, pedantically belabored symbols of a religious truth that can only be distorted by such exterior expression. As monks, they seek God through a higher means: through the illumination of contemplation, through the interior practice of prayer. Symeon speaks passionately against such a view, insisting that corporate liturgical worship in its fullest ceremonial glory is not only appropriate for the person of faith, and not only worthy of God, but further—and most importantly—it is necessary for the believer who seeks true knowledge of God. "I indeed advise and encourage you to do these things [the use of lamps, candles, perfumes, incense, music], and to do them lavishly. Only, I want you to know the way you should do so. . . . What do the things you do in types and symbols really mean?"[180]

Symeon first provides simple symbolic correspondences: the lamps and candles should signify the illumined soul; the perfume of myron and incense is the dew of Mt. Hermon, or the oil running down Aaron's beard, or the sweet smell of the Holy Spirit, or the spiritual perfume by which the Spirit anoints the senses and makes everything fragrant. But these are more than simple correlations: through these symbolic meanings Symeon uses the sensory experiences

of liturgy to provide knowledge about the divine. That this is profoundly (and not reductively) so is shown by the turn he then takes to instruct, through the components of liturgy, on the nature and identity of the human person. For only through knowledge of God can the Christian have knowledge of the human. Symeon makes the point most emphatically through his explication of liturgical scents, of incense and myron:

> For, if God has thus adorned what is soulless with fragrance and has glorified it, think how much more He will adorn you, if you choose, with the forms of the virtues and glorify you with the fragrance of the Holy Spirit—you, whom He made according to His own image and likeness. These aromatics, put together by human hands and perfuming your senses with the fragrance of scented oils, depict and, as it were, suggest your own creation by the art of their making. Because just as the perfumer's hands fashion the blended perfumes from different essences and the product is one essence out of many, so, too, did God's hands fashion you, who are cunningly composed and combined with the intelligible elements of the spiritual perfume, that is to say, with the gifts of the life-creating and all-efficacious Spirit. You, too, must give off the fragrance of His knowledge and wisdom, so that those who listen to the words of your teaching may smell His sweetness with the senses of the soul and be glad with spiritual joy.[181]

Symeon's teachings at this point strongly recall the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of Dionysius, but in a pedagogical trajectory that brings to completion the task of knowing Dionysius had addressed. For the earlier writer had taken the cultural associations of scents as well as attention to their physiological properties and activities, and applied these aspects of smells and their perception to instruction on the nature of divinity. Symeon, taking the model to its next step, turns the same olfactory features back upon the human person, this time to illuminate by reflection what can be known and understood about humanity. It is a knowledge that assumes, and indeed requires, the prior instruction about God. For only through that knowledge can knowledge of the human self come, as Symeon expresses it. As Symeon explains, this is not only because the composition of physical fragrances provides a model by which to understand God's act of creating the human person. Furthermore, God has scented that which he has created: perfumed it with the Holy Spirit, given the breath of life as a fragrance of life, so that the human person in holiness pours forth, exudes, the scent of his Maker. And with a final allusion to 2 Corinthians 2:14–16, Symeon reminds that by giving forth the odor of the Creator, the believer is in fact spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of him wheresoever it might be known.

In like manner, two developments in Syrian Orthodox tradition are notable. First, over the course of the middle ages, west Syrian (that is, Syrian Orthodox) writers produced a series of discourses and commentaries on the consecration of the holy myron.[182] Until the thirteenth century, Syrian Orthodox bishops consecrated the myron on Holy Thursday (Thursday of the Passion Week). In contrast to the elaborate composition of Byzantine myron, they used only olive oil and balsam, in a combination often described as imaging the "composition" of Christ's human and divine natures, united in his incarnate Person.[183] For a time it appears these discourses were written to be delivered as homilies in the liturgy for Holy Thursday, the day of consecration, but after the eighth century this practice of presentation seems to have stopped. The earlier commentary by Dionysius the Areopagite was strongly influential, but not determinative for these writers.[184]

Late in the seventh century, the learned bishop Jacob of Edessa produced one of these discourses on the holy myron. Jacob begins with the Old Testament types, or symbols, by which scented oils provided foreshadowings of the divine revelation that would come to fulfillment with the incarnation of Christ and the writings of the New Testament.[185] The biblical examples Jacob cites are a gathering of texts that refer to ritual uses of holy oil, as well as to the bridal imagery of fine perfumes from the Song of Songs. But here, too, the myron as a fragrant oil is taken to be instructive as much for its empirical, scientifically recognizable qualities as for its allusive evocations of scriptural passages. For Jacob, anointment with perfumed oil provides an image for understanding the human-divine relation as it has been displayed in history: "Formerly [in Old Testament times], when the Bride saw the Bridegroom in symbol . . . she compared him to scented oil;" and so the Song of Songs used perfumes to describe the yearning felt by the faithful for God. Now that God is wholly revealed through the incarnate Lord, Jacob continues, the myron allows baptism to enact the joining of the believer to God through anointment with the Holy Spirit: "Here, however, the Church sees openly and clearly, with a pure face, God the Word. . . . She compares him to oil because he anointed and united with his eternal Godhead our temporal humanity."[186] Myron images further the incarnation by which God united himself with a human nature: "The 'oil' with which [Christ] was anointed is the human body which he united to himself; he described it as '[oil] of joy' because he voluntarily united it to his divinity in the hypostatic union and not as the result of compulsion."[187] But the myron's scent is also the mark of "divine knowledge of all sorts, and the variety of glorious understanding concerning [Christ], with which he makes fragrant all those who have shared in his glory".[188] As the spread of its sweet scent

disperses far and wide, so does the myron pour forth teaching and knowledge of the whole of the divine dispensation.

Commenting also on the consecration rite, Jacob is careful to point out that the instructional capacity of the myron speaks to both the human and divine domains of sacred ritual: "on the one hand, [myron] is consecrated as is humanly befitting; on the other, it consecrates and perfects everything, as is divinely fitting" (12). The purity and fragrance of this myron images the holy teachings of the church, while other fragrances, albeit made for medicinal uses, can only image false teachings (13). In contrast to Dionysius, Jacob speaks in his description of the rite, not of twelve veils concealing the myron, but of twelve fans (or "wings"), flanked by twelve censers preceded by twelve lights (15–18). In an image particularly evocative for Syriac tradition, Jacob describes the effect of the incense: "In the twelve censers which give off a single fragrance is indicated the fact that, although [the oil] is single, yet it makes many fragrant, and it is with many in many parts."[189] Incense and holy oil, sacrifice and identity, thus conjoin their characteristics and their affective impact on those who perceive their fragrances, both those believers who participate in the rite and those who encounter its scent in the lingering aftermath.[190]

Syrian Orthodox tradition granted the myron particular importance by the continuation of commentaries devoted to its consecration and meaning. So, too, was incense strikingly valued by Syriac writers. Commencing in the seventh and eighth centuries, and flourishing particularly in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Syrian Orthodox liturgy developed the prayers of the incense offering into a three-fold sequence: prayers said to introduce the incense offering (*prumion*, from the Greek *proimion*), prayers offered during the incense offering (*sedre*), and prayers that followed the incense offering (*'etre*). The process involved both a fusion of earlier prayers that had accompanied the morning and evening incense offerings for particular feast days or liturgical occasions; and their expansion and elaboration into this three-fold sequence.[191] It is an especially interesting development considering that the Syrian Orient was one of the earliest areas to have incorporated the public and devotional use of incense into Christian worship.[192] But further, as we will see in chapter 4, incense imagery played a foundational role in Syriac ascetic tradition throughout the late antique era. It may also be worth noting that here, as with the development of the myron commentaries, we have the legacies of a Christian tradition that took its medieval shape under Islamic domination, for the seventh-century Islamic conquests provided a political severance from the Byzantine empire to compound the theological divide that had already led, in the fifth and sixth centuries, to the formation of separate church hierarchies for the (dyophysite) Church of the East and the (miaphysite) Syrian Orthodox

communities, as opposed to the Chalcedonian Orthodoxy insisted upon by the Byzantine Empire.[193]

The development of a three-fold prayer structure for the incense offering set that point of the liturgy into high relief. These prayers did not always specifically mention the incense, sometimes focusing instead on other imagery appropriate to the occasion as one of offering sacrifice, of penitential action, of offering praise and honor to God, of supplicating God's gracious mercy. But usually the incense was identified by name as the symbol and effective agent of the ritual moment, and with vivid didactic effect. It appears that the oldest association was with the offering of incense for the forgiveness of sins, and the biblical citations recall Aaron's incense offering in Numbers 16:46 on behalf of the people of Israel after they had rebelled against God. Hence the offering was also made with the petition for the purification from sin. The entire sequence moves from the opening doxology of the *prumion*, to the *sedro* (series, or list) recalling divine favors of the past and petitioning for forgiveness, to the *'etro* (literally the smoke or vapor of the incense) with its reference to the incense burned.[194] As both Joseph Amar and Jacob Thekeparampil have stressed, the prayers served well as a teaching medium through which to instruct the congregation on God's actions in history.[195] But as Thekeparampil has pointed out, these prayers are important for their presentation of Christ through the imagery of incense and its olfactory aspects; they present both a strong sacrificial theology, and one that takes self-conscious account of the sensory experience of incense, its odor and its effects on the perceiver.[196]

A number of these prayers use the symbolic, ritual, and sensory aspects of incense to present teachings about the nature of Christ and the meanings of his salvific actions. To do this, they draw together the sacrificial and perfume significations long familiar to Mediterranean cultures. At the same time, they explicitly identify what the believer should experience and thereby know about Christ as a result of what is smelled during and through the incense offering. By turns, the language is penitential and supplicatory, begging forgiveness of sins; it alludes to medical traditions, seeking healing (through smells) "for soul and body;" it presents moral psychology, citing the offering up of good deeds and virtuous conduct. The prayers dwell upon the scent of Christ's sacrificial death, and upon the sweet perfume of his love. In one *'etro* (prayer after the incense offering), the priest bestows on Christ a dazzling sequence of olfactory titles, and with them an elegantly forceful summary of salvation history as played out from creation until the present time.

> God of holy fathers, Lord of heaven and earth, sweet odor (*riho basimo*) from which all the plants (*'eqore*) and sweet perfumes receive their fragrance, pleasant

smoke of reconciliation (*'etro haniyo d-tar'uto*) that was offered for our sake to your heavenly Father, [O You, Christ] divine myron (*muron alohoyo*), spiritual perfume (*besmo metyad'ono*), concealed incense (*pirmo gnizo*), invisible odor (*riho kasyo*), and heavenly high priest, [he] who offered himself and who accepted himself. Also now, Lord, be pleased, and accept this smoke of incense that was offered to you by us at this hour, so that it may be for the tranquility and concord of your holy church, for the protection and progress of the good education of her children, for the peace, rest, and gladness of the peoples of the earth, for abundant harvests of the year, for temperate wind, for the bringing forth of the fruits of good works, and for the rest and good remembrance of those who preceded and slept in the orthodox faith, now.[197]

By this "incense Christology," as Thekeparampil calls it,[198] the ritual action of sacrifice—the process of human-divine relation—is mined for its epistemological capacities, through direct engagement of its olfactory content. The ritual moment instructs through its activity, its sequential gestures of burning the incense offering. But the words attending that activity instruct the congregation beyond the process thereby enacted. They explicate the nature of the divine with whom the relationship is sought, through the highlighting of the olfactory experience as a perception and as an encounter. There is a notable use here of the liturgy itself as an instructive medium, and not simply the homily as a discursive form within it, or the liturgical commentary as an external explication of it. Indeed, in Syriac tradition the liturgy had long provided the foundational teaching context of the church.[199] In the instance of the incense prayers, we have an example of liturgical pedagogy in which the bodily experience of sense perception within the ritual context was essential to the reception of the religious knowledge being conveyed. The pivotal experience was that of smell: smells generated and offered, perceived and inhaled; transferred, transformative, and finally exuded in turn. It was a knowledge available to all within reach of the wafting incense smoke.

Excursus: On the Sinful Woman in Syriac Tradition

The anonymous Sinful Woman who washed the feet of Christ with her tears, wiped them with her hair, and anointed them with perfumed ointment was a favorite theme of Syriac homilists and hymnographers of late antiquity.[200] While the treatment often blended elements from all three Synoptic versions of the story (Mk 14:3–9, Mt 26:6–13, Lk 7:36–50), it was the account in Luke 7, set at the house of Simon the Pharisee, which seemed most often to provide the homiletic material.[201] Syriac writers kept a distinction between this anonymous woman and Mary of Bethany who, in John 12:1–8, performs a similar act

of anointment which Jesus declares a preparation for his burial; and further, did not confuse her with Mary Magdalene.[202] Rather, for Syriac writers the Sinful Woman with her alabaster flask of perfumed ointment merited her own attention and in her own right. Although the gospel incident was brief, providing no information about the woman except that "she was a woman of the city, who was a sinner" (Lk 7:37), Syriac homilists and hymnographers constructed an extensive narrative tradition about her, offering moral instruction by retelling the gospel episode as *her* story, and granting to her perfume a prominent and multivalent role in its meaning.

A Syriac verse homily, "On the Sinful Woman," wrongly attributed to Ephrem but probably written soon after his death, proved immensely influential in this regard for both Syriac and Greek writers, and eventually medieval Latin.[203] This homily retells the gospel story as a narrative drama about the Woman herself, shifting the scene to the events preceding and leading up to the meeting with Christ at Simon's house—events placed altogether outside the gospel text. The homily begins with the Woman hearing the news that Christ has come to dine with Simon. Immediately smitten with remorse, she laments her state with great anguish. Changing her clothes in an elaborate act of ritual repentance, she then takes her money and sets out for the Perfume Seller's shop. The change in her appearance as well as the lavish sum of gold she presents him as she orders his most precious scent cast the Perfumer into confused dismay. In consternation he addresses her:

> What is this appearance (*schema*) that you show today to your lovers, that you have stripped off wantonness and clothed yourself in humility? Before today when you came to me, your appearance was different than today's. You were clothed in fine raiment and carried little gold, and you sought (cheap) choice perfume to sweeten your wantonness. And now today, you have filthy garments and you carry much gold. I do not understand your change in how you are dressed. Either wear clothing like your perfume, or buy perfume like your clothing. For this perfume is neither fitting nor right for these clothes.[204]

The scene presents a marvelous confluence of visual and olfactory paradoxes. Previously, the Woman had dressed in sumptuous finery, yet worn cheap perfume. Now, clothed in the "sordid weeds of mourning" as Satan describes her soon after (sec. 6), devoid of jewelry, and barefoot, she asks of the Perfumer his most exquisite ointment. What to believe: sight or smell? In a fervent debate, the Woman convinces the Perfumer of her urgent need. With her alabaster jar now filled with the finest scent, she sets forth for Simon's house. Satan then appears in the guise of a former lover and attempts to dissuade her

in a heated exchange. Failing to deter her course, Satan hastens to Simon's house where he seeks to prevent her entrance by rousing Simon against her. Again, the Woman will not be turned from her purpose. Finally, she obtains her entry and her goal, addressing Christ as she washes and anoints his feet. The episode is brought to an abrupt end with Christ offering praise and forgiveness to her, but reproach and the parable of the two debtors to Simon.

Syriac homilies and hymns will follow one of two patterns: they will focus either on the episode at Simon's house following Luke 7, or on the events prior to that incident as imaginatively constructed in the 'Ephremic' homily, "On the Sinful Woman." Other late antique homilies on the Sinful Woman show interest in the gospel incident, but without further narrative development. For example, John Chrysostom focuses on the account from Matthew 26 rather than Luke 7, so that the house is that of Simon the Leper and the criticism of the disciples is of the wasted money the ointment represents.[205] In a different pattern, a Coptic homily attributed to Chrysostom shares with Severus of Antioch, *Homily* 118, not only a focus on the Woman but also a philosophical discourse about the passions and an allegorical reading of the perfume as the virtues of the soul—an interpretation of perfumed ointments traditional to Greek patristic thought (as seen in chapter 1 for Clement of Alexandria and Origen) but not otherwise found in Syriac texts about the Sinful Woman.[206] Instead, Syriac writers on this episode develop the role of the Woman's perfume as an instrument of agency, an epistemological tool, and a sacramental indicator. This is a complex of functions that contrast markedly with the allegorical language of the soul and its virtues.

Ephrem treated the episode from Luke 7 at length in his *Homily on Our Lord*.[207] His central concern is the reality of Christ's divine nature, made known and accessible through the tangible humanity of his incarnate person. Ephrem approaches Christ by recalling the experiences through which various biblical figures encountered him, but his primary attention is on Simon the Pharisee, who repeatedly fails to understand the identity of his dinner guest. When the narrative focus turns to the Sinful Woman, it is her actions rather than a narrative character, or self, that Ephrem presents, in contrast to his portrait of Simon. The Woman's actions are shown to be important because they reveal Christ, Simon's dinner guest, not as the prophet Simon had thought, but rather as the Lord of Prophets, the Treasury of Healing present and at work in the very midst of Simon's earthly, worldly gathering. By her actions, the Woman confesses her Savior:

> Streaming tears immediately announced that they were being shed as in the presence of God. Plaintive kisses testified that they were coaxing the master of

the debt to tear up the bill. The precious oil of the sinful woman proclaimed that it was a "bribe" for her repentance. These were the medications the sinful woman offered her Physician, so that He could whiten the stains of her sins with her tears, and heal her wounds with her kisses, and make her bad name as sweet as the fragrance of her oil. This is the physician who heals a person with the medicine that that person brings to Him![208]

Ephrem delineates the separate elements of her homage—tears, kisses, precious oil—as distinct actions, granting to the Woman's behavior a ritual signification. While sequential usage of water (tears), veneration (kisses), and fine oil (anointment) would evoke strong liturgical associations for the audience, Ephrem insists that the Woman's actions superseded liturgical function because they were offered directly to God's divine self and not, as in ecclesiastical ritual, through the mediating structures of priestly efficacy: "that sinful woman . . . came to God, not to priests, to forgive her debts."[209]

For Jacob of Serug, the entire encounter must be seen as patterned into a eucharistic event.[210] In his homily, the Woman enters Simon's house carrying her perfume as its fragrance heralds her holy purpose. Just as a church sanctuary is perfumed with the mingled scents of incense and holy oil, so did the Woman transform the space of Simon's banquet from the mundane to the sacred by the aroma of perfume compounded with fervent intention: "With the fire of her love she kindled her tears like ointment / and the fragrance of her repentance was increasingly sweet."[211] Hence to the scent of ointment rendered holy by the very feet it would anoint, the Woman added the sacrificial odors of a love that burned so fiercely, she herself was transformed into the dual role of sacrificer and sacrificed.

Weeping was for her a pure censer, and she brought it with her,
and with groans she kindled it to smoke in the Holy of Holies.
She was for herself a priest who made petition for forgiveness,
and willingly with contrition she made sacrifice for reconciliation.[212]

In Jacob's rendering, the fluid meanings of ritual activity are fully explored. In the process of washing Christ's feet, the Woman's tears become the baptismal waters, consecrated with the chrism of the oil she had brought. As she herself washed and anointed Christ's feet, she entered into the "second womb of the Holy of Holies," finding herself baptised in the sea of Christ's love as he cleansed and purified her so that she might rise up pure and reborn.[213] Baptism and eucharistic sacrifice converge in Jacob's telling: "Before the great flood of

holiness she offered herself / And He poured upon her waves of His love that she would be absolved by Him. / Her soul offered to the living fire the evilest body / and it kindled in the thicket of her soul and all of it was consumed."[214]

For Ephrem and Jacob, the perfumed ointment lends a liturgical air, quite literally, to the Woman's actions in her approach to and service of Christ. The ritual associations allow the Woman's actions to take on a collective significance, resonating with the liturgical rhythms of ecclesiastical life whether in a simple village setting or in the grand ceremonial of an urban cathedral. The specific ritual meanings drawn by our homilists lift the Woman's approach to Christ out of its unique situation as a gospel story. Instead, her actions are set into a narratively imposed ritual framework that assimilates them into the liturgical involvements of every believer, lay or ordained. She herself, priest and suppliant, prophet and penitent, fulfills multiple roles that comprise the orchestrated interactions of religious practice for the late antique Christian.

But what is the purpose of such a ritually oriented presentation of the Sinful Woman's story? Is it simply the commingling of biblical episode with liturgical structure, a frequent if important theme for patristic writers?[215] In the *Homily on Our Lord*, Ephrem had stressed that the Woman's actions were significant because of their confessional force, that is, because they indicated and made clear Christ's identity as God incarnate. Thus the Sinful Woman engaged Christ's human existence even while paying homage to, worshipping, and seeking redemption from his divine Person. From this perspective, the ritual elements of the Woman's actions are important for what they reveal—and their revelatory capacity sheds light on the entire episode, its characters, setting, and actions. Through her ritualized activity, Simon and the Woman are revealed as characters of false or true faith, and the dinner is shown to be not an occasion for the physical nourishment of the guests, but a sacramental gathering for the salvation of believers. For Ephrem, Jacob, and other Syriac writers highlighting the sacrificial elements of this story, the ritual qualities of the narrative sequence are held together by reference to the Woman's perfumed oil.[216] The sweet scent of spices allowed the homilists to invoke the sacrificial image of incense burning. Moreover, with the image of fragrance pervading the room as the Woman poured out her ointment, the vivid olfactory qualities of invisible yet tangible presence, of unseen yet physically experienced change, pervade the narrative as well, playing on the ancient Mediterranean topos of perfume as signifier of divine presence and transformation. By highlighting the Woman's perfumed ointment, our homilists bring into play an imagery of complex associations for ancient peoples that is concrete in its referents yet fluid in its evocations.

Perhaps the most original achievement in this group of homilies is the Greek kontakion by Romanos the Melodist, here strongly influenced by the

Syriac trends.[217] Clearly drawing from both the tradition of Ephrem and of the 'Ephremic' homily, "On the Sinful Woman," Romanos offers a telling of this story which utilizes olfactory experience as its primary frame of reference. Thus he opens his kontakion with the image of the Sinful Woman begging that Christ will "receive this perfume as pleader," and grant forgiveness "from the slime" of her deeds. In his telling, it is in fact the odor of Christ which first attracts the Woman:

> When she saw the words of Christ spreading everywhere like aromatic spice
> As they dispensed the breath of life to all the faithful,
> The harlot hated the bad odor of her deeds.[218]

By this concise opening scene, Romanos draws on the whole array of symbolic meanings that smell evoked for the ancient Mediterranean. Sin, mortality, and fallenness are indicated by stench; purity, divinity, and paradise are associated with sweet fragrance. In the "aroma" of Christ's words, the "fragrance of the knowledge of God" (2 Cor 2:15) spreads abroad, pervading the consciousness of those near and far; in this, fragrance and the experience of it provide an exact analogy for the human experience of the divine—invisible yet tangibly known, uncontainable and ever mobile, transgressive across any boundaries humans might set or see.

Buffetted thus by aromas of competing moral states, Romanos's Sinful Woman then agonizes through an internal dialogue, which brings her decision to seek her audience with Christ. Anticipating the liturgical pattern her approach will necessarily take, she explains the salvific purpose that brings Christ to Simon's house: "He sets up a table as an altar on which He is laid as a votive offering."[219]

The Woman's decision to go is also a decision to take perfume, which she celebrates with the announcement, "as I breathe, I renounce the slime of my deeds" (strophe 5). Here and elsewhere in the hymn, Romanos plays upon the verb *emphuo*, to breathe upon.[220] The verb alludes to the baptismal liturgy in which the candidates renounce Satan as the priest breathes upon them, and also to the passage in John 20:22 when Christ breathes upon the apostles, filling them with the Holy Spirit. Directly, in the following strophe (6), the Woman sets up a baptismal context:

> Therefore, I take the perfume and go forward.
> I shall make the house of the Pharisee a baptistery,
> For there I shall be cleansed of my sin
> and purified of my lawlessness.

I shall mix the bath with weeping, with oil and with perfume;
I shall cleanse myself and escape
from the slime of my deeds.[221]

In a whirlwind, the Woman storms through the Perfume Seller's shop, purchasing his most expensive ointment. At Simon's house, she scandalizes the Pharisee into heated exchange with Christ whose verbal chastisement upon the obstinate host is swift and fierce. Absolving the Woman of her past, Christ admonishes the other guests, "Behold the harlot whom you see; consider her like the church / crying out: 'I breathe (*emphuo*) on the slime of my deeds.'"[222] With this, his parting view of the Woman, Romanos conjoins the language of exorcism and baptism, breath of life and rebirth, individual believer and ecclesiastical body.

Consider the olfactory sweep of Romanos's hymn: from the moral quality of stench, through the evangelical experience of the "aroma" of Christ's words, to the sacrificial altar, to the perfume of love, the anointing of baptismal waters, the exsufflation of exorcism, the breath of life. All this Romanos conveys in the smells which attend the Sinful Woman's imaginal thoughts and actions. By contrast, in Ephrem and Jacob's treatments the perfume was employed primarily as an object to signify the important ritual qualities of the encounter between the Sinful Woman and Christ. Here in Romanos's kontakion, the perfume matters not only to demarcate religious ritual from social etiquette, but further as a paedogogical tool to instruct the audience. By attending to the variant qualities of olfactory experience as the homilist draws upon them, the audience is led to a richer understanding of Christ, of the divine-human relationship, indeed of the process of redemption—a process involving change both in one's inner person and in one's external behavior.[223]

With this kontakion, then, we see the perfume carrying an epistemological function, as the Woman learns of Christ, sees him, hears him, and also experiences him through an encounter that is physical—sensorily distinctive—as well as intellectual and spiritual. In another anonymous Syriac homily, the epistemological function of the perfume is turned back onto the Woman herself in relation to Christ. As she moves to anoint the feet of Christ,

The ointment which had made her body sweet she changed, and by the means of Jesus' feet, she caused him to touch her soul and perfume it.

. . . the fragrance of her perfume was sweet, and the repentance she breathed out in her thoughts was even more so, which, for Jesus, was sweeter than any scent.[224]

In this homily, the Sinful Woman engaged her Savior and expressed her devotion through fragrance. So, too, for her character, the odor of her faith revealed her transformed condition, her cleansed spirit, and now chaste bodily expressions of love. In these homilies as a group, ritual provides the channel, and perfume the medium, by which the human-divine encounter takes place and through which its ramifications are known.