

SENSES AND RELIGION. INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

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The theme of the conference of the SIEF Commission for Folk Religion (9–12 September 2006, Celje, Slovenia) was based on two pillars. One was the sensual perception of reality and within this the place of the five human senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste), and the other was religion as a process of cognition, in which the role of sensual perception may differ from one age and one culture to another.

Keywords: *senses, religion.*

Osnovna tema konference Komisije za ljudsko religijo SIEF (9.–12. september 2006 - Celje, Slovenija) je slonela na dveh temeljih. Prvi pomeni čutno percepcijo resničnosti in znotraj nje mesto petih čutov (vid, sluh, vonj, dotik in okus), drugi pa religijo kot proces spoznavanja, v katerem se vloga čutnega dojemaja lahko razlikuje od ene dobe do druge in ene kulture do druge.

Ključne besede: *čuti, religija.*

The theme¹ of the “Senses and Religion” conference of the SIEF Commission for Folk Religion (9–12 September 2006, Celje, Slovenia) was based on two pillars. One was the sensual perception of reality and within this the place of the five human senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste), and the other was religion as a process of cognition, in which the role of sensual perception may differ from one age and one culture to another.

It is through our senses that we experience the natural and social reality around us. With their help we can know this reality, perceive interconnections, and shape relationships. The senses are gateways to memory, gateways to knowledge. This is a kind of cognition and communication that is culturally determined and creates forms dependent on culture. This means that the cultural use of the senses is not incidental, but can be described as a cultural system. However the rules are not immutable; they can be modified with the passing of time and changing circumstances. Especially strong changes have occurred in the past two centuries with the rapid advance of technical civilization.

This applies not only to the culture of the senses, but also to scientific research on sensual perception. The situation has changed from a superficial knowledge of sensual perception to a state of understanding. This is the consequence of psychological, scientific, and medical studies and research on the senses over the past 200 to 250 years. Their findings have been incorporated into our everyday lives, also becoming part of commercial and advertising activity in the 20th and 21st centuries. In recent decades we have even seen the appearance

¹ This theme was proposed at the 2002 conference of the SIEF Commission for Folk Religion in Edinburgh by Prof. Leonard Norman Primiano (Cabrini College, Radnor, Pennsylvania).

of a “virtual reality” of the senses; the digitization of the senses and the creation of a virtual world began not only through computer games, but also with the help of the computer.

A few examples suffice to indicate these processes. Our age is characterized by the dominance and technicalization of sight and visibility (i.e., television, film, magazines). Many changes can also be observed in taste, where strong internationalization is taking place. This can be seen in the rapid spread of international fast food chains: the food available in McDonald’s restaurants, Chinese restaurants, and Italian pizzerias. At the same time, parallel with the internationalization of tastes and perhaps as a counterbalance or supplement, we can also see the use of local flavours and tastes of past ages at various local celebrations and festivals.

Technical civilization has had a great influence on the use and culture of the senses. Mechanization has introduced new sources of noise that were previously unknown: railways, industrial machinery – or, more recently, techno music, dance clubs, and the walkman and discman so popular with young people that have become inseparable parts of our lives. In short, new sources of noise have appeared in our world.

Over the course of time, European thinking feminized and aestheticized the senses and sensual perception. It was thought that women were determined by the senses and emotions, whereas men were characterized by thinking, reason, and recognition of reality.

In the age of technical civilization and through its means, the human body can also be eliminated from the use of the senses. For example, what can be seen is recorded with the help of an instrument: the camera and film. Technical civilization has also changed the culture of smell and hearing, bringing them closer to the dominance of sight. Modern technical means (such as the microscope and the telescope) can improve our senses, but they can also make perception individual and subjective. We also encounter the refined manipulation of the senses, particularly in the world of cosmetics and body care products.

The French thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty stresses the embodied nature of perception. He writes that people do not have passive bodies that see and understand an objective world ‘out there’. All experience of our world is mediated through our perception of it – via biological, psychological, and spiritual mechanisms, or senses [cf. Bowie 2002: 44]. These conference papers consider the biological and psychological foundations of sensual perception as given and do not address them, but rather turn their attention to the role played by the functioning of the five senses in religious culture. In particular, they look at the roles of the senses in the given religious rite, because religiousness involves a combination of cognition, emotion, and action [Wulff 1995: 269]. The contributors to the conference use the angle of the five human senses to interpret the religious practice of individuals and communities, its elements and means in different historical periods, in the past or the present, in various Christian and non-Christian religions.

Religion claims to provide the meaning of life, to explain the world as a whole. However, it wishes not only to answer the questions of past, present, and future, the macrocosm and the microcosm, being and non-being, this world and the world beyond, body and

soul, good and bad – it also wishes to interpret man and the transcendent in their entirety and in their interconnections. Religions perform this role in a communication process, in which the Sacred declares and communicates itself, and for this they may make use of all the senses. In this way, they evoke and cultivate religious feeling in people. Although faith cannot be taught, religious feelings and experience can be aroused, assisted, and expressed with special means. These means all come together in the liturgy and appear in the range of instruments used: word, spectacle, movement, gestures, and use of space, in direct or indirect contact with the Sacred. In short, all our senses can take part in our encounter with God and the Sacred: *hearing, sight, touch, smell, and taste*. In this way, too, they can provide a feeling of wholeness.

Liturgical means use the symbolic language of rites and ritual elements. The aim of our conference was to examine and interpret these principally from the angle of the *five senses*. In addition to the word, sound, music (*hearing*), and the visual image, statues, buildings, the use of space, or the arts in general (*sight*), we know little or almost nothing about the way religion uses means linked to *taste, smell, and touch*, their effect and purpose. Separately or together, these means can help shape the individual and community religious experience. The rite is the expression of something, and the model-like transmission of something (rite of and for something). It uses a varied range of instruments that are linked to the period concerned and its task is to transmit changing contents of spirituality. In many cases, these rites make up for some kind of lack, compensating for the finite and fragmentary nature of the human being. They make the invisible, the unfathomable, the immortal, the imperceptible visible, tangible, audible, and perceivable. They manifest the unmanifestable.

Various cultures and religions have taken different attitudes to the senses. It is sufficient here to mention the nature philosophy of India, China, the Greeks and Romans, mediaeval Arabs, and Christians. Islam recognizes five pillars of religiosity: faith, five daily prayers, alms, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. In Judaism, the five books of Moses frequently mention the senses: Genesis = the eye or sight, Exodus = the ear or hearing, Leviticus = smell, Numbers = taste, and Deuteronomy = touch [Jütte 2000: 90]. Not only different cultures but also different religions ranked the senses in a hierarchy: sight was first, hearing second (e.g., Hear, Oh Israel), followed by smell, taste, and touch.

The dominance of individual senses differs in the various rites: differences between Eastern and Western, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant can be mentioned. The rites use the senses as important vehicles of meaning; they may play an important part in the creation or restoration of harmony. In Christian religion(s), sight and hearing are the most important. There is perhaps no need to emphasize the role of sight. Evidence of this can be found in the altars and images of Catholic churches, or in the iconostases of Eastern rite churches. This expression of the invisible in visible form manifests the “power of images” [Freedberg 1989], and in the wider sense led to the development of religious aesthetics in religious studies [Münster 2001]. However, it is striking that nowadays there are growing numbers of cases of “spiritual sight, visions, and apparitions”. In Protestantism, especially

Calvinism, hearing is the most important source of faith and knowledge of faith (faith comes from hearing). In addition to the spoken word and singing/music, silence also has an important place in the liturgy. Taste plays a part in religions in sacrifices: in sacrifice, communion, and the funeral ceremonies of the Eastern rites. A good taste is the numinous, the taste of the Lord: *Taste and see that the Lord is good!* [Psalm 34: 8] is true even if it is to be understood metaphorically. Touch is the sign of meeting in religion, taking form among gestures of the kiss, stroking, or touching. A good smell is an expression of holiness – as the legends of the saints show.

The individual wishes to participate in the practice of religion with his or her entire personality. The five senses express this fullness. A feast is an occasion for the complex and generally intensive use of the senses. This is why festive occasions of worship make intensive use of the senses. The religious service is a sacral drama that always acts on all our senses, even if in different ways. The use of the senses or, on the contrary, their elimination (I am thinking of fasting or silence) may play an important role as symbols. The use of symbols can mean use of the senses, and this ensures an atmosphere of solemnity. The senses open a gateway to the emotions, but they must not be confused with the emotions.

The number five appears to be important in religions and it is often associated with the five senses. Of course, it has other associations as well, such as the five angelic choirs and the five wounds of Christ. In mediaeval art, the five senses seem to have marginal importance because a kind of hostility to the body appears during the Reformation in both Catholic and Protestant piety, and many people even today still regard this as characteristic of Christianity. Examples of the visual representation of the senses can be found in the time of the Catholic restoration and the Baroque.²

And what have ethnography, folklore studies, and anthropology learned and studied about the problem mentioned above, the connection between the senses and religion? The answer is: almost nothing. In this respect, the literature of ethnography and anthropology has studied almost exclusively non-European peoples.

Making preparations for this conference, I found that many ethnographic and anthropological works deal with the senses in non-European cultures and societies, but only a few present data about our own life.³ This is not only because anthropology has traditionally concentrated on the study of non-Western societies, but also because emphasizing, analysing, and interpreting the roles of the senses – sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing – in culture and society is a rather new viewpoint in the social sciences. We cannot undertake an overview of the relevant material in European ethnology. Good guides from the viewpoint of cultural history can be found in Robert Jütte [2000], Geurts [2002], and David La Breton

² To cite only one example from Jütte's book: a painting by Juan Antonio Escalante titled *The Victory of Faith over the Senses* illustrates the official attitude of the Catholic Church at the time. Faith is personified as a female figure with a cross on her left and a chalice on her right. The five senses are personified by five female figures that use gestures to indicate the sense each one represents [Jütte 2000: 93].

³ For further extensive bibliographies, see Howes [2003], Bendix [2005], and Stoller [1989].

[2006] in the thematic issue of *Etnofoor*, including the introductory study by Regina Bendix [2005]. The extensive literature contains data mainly on sight [cf. Jenks 1995] and hearing [Erlmann 2004; Bull-Back 2004], with much less mention of taste [Stoller 1992], touch, and smell [Rey-Hulman & Boccarda 1998; Vajstein 2003].

This short introduction can perhaps show the breadth and depth of the anthropology of the senses and draw scholars' attention to studying the connection between the sensual and the religious. I would also like to refer to the conference held in Szeged at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the beginning of October 2006, also dealing with the roles of the senses in religious life. I was very surprised at the great response to the invitation and call for papers: more than 50 papers were submitted and there were at least 40 speakers at this three-day interdisciplinary conference. This was the first survey in Hungary of the complex connections between religion and the senses.

One of the lessons of ethnographic research, conferences, and literature is that the role and significance of the individual senses in the cognition process is not the same. Although Western societies themselves have complex sensory orders, a great deal has been written on the role of sight in Western culture. The other sensory domains remain scarcely investigated. This is why Western culture, especially now, is interpreted and characterized by the hegemony of vision [Howes 2006: VII].

One of the lessons of the anthropological study of the senses among non-European people and cultures is that the senses operate in relation to each other in a continuous interplay of impressions and values. They are ordered in hierarchies of social importance and reordered according to changing circumstances. As we know, sight was generally deemed to be the highest and most important of the senses in pre-modern Europe; within a religious context, hearing – attending to the word of God – was often given primacy. Smell and touch were rather neglected. In Christianity the five senses are represented allegorically [Jütte 2000: 284–299].

It has also been customary in Western society to associate the senses and sensuality with only certain social domains, most notably aesthetics and sexuality.

If we wish to understand the cultural formation of the senses in religions, we have to turn to the given (European or non-European) cultures. There are divergences from the dominant sensory model by individuals or groups in the society. This is true when we focus on Western Christianity: senses have a different meaning in various Christian denominations. In Protestant denominations, there is emphasis on hearing, “faith is through hearing”, while in the Roman Catholic and especially the Eastern rite all five senses participate in deepening the religious experience.

Some of these differences may be institutionalized in European cultures. For example, women may be understood to have different ways of sensing than men. Women have been traditionally associated with the more “corporeal”, “proximal” senses of taste, touch, and smell, and men with the more “rational”, “distal” senses of sight and hearing. In terms of everyday practices, women were expected to concern themselves with sewing, cooking,

cleaning, and childcare at home, while men went out to hear and discourse, to see and “oversee” the world.⁴

Differences often arise from the different situations and experiences of members and groups within society. Alternative models may be elaborated that correspond to the particular experiences of the persons in question and challenge the dominant order [Howes 2003: 29–58].

The connections between the senses and religion have not been elaborated in anthropology or the ethnology of religion. The papers published in this volume will help fill this gap; they analyse the role of the senses or a particular sense, and interpret this in a religious context.

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ČUTI IN RELIGIJA. NEKAJ UVODNIH MISLI

Zdi se, da religija trdi, da zagotavlja pomen življenja in da razlaga svet kot celoto. V tem okviru išče več kakor le odgovore na vprašanja o preteklosti, sedanjosti in prihodnosti, o mikrokozmosu in makrokozmosu, biti in ne-biti, o tem svetu in onstranstvu, telesu in duši, dobrem in slabem; želi tudi interpretirati človeka in transcendenčno v celoti in njuni povezanosti-

Religije uresničujejo to vlogo v procesu komunikacije, v katerem se sveto samorazkriva in sporoča in pri tem uporablja vse čute. Ti zbujejo in negujejo v ljudeh versko občutje. Čeprav se vera v religijski praksi kaže kot "milost" in je zato ni mogoče učiti, se vendarle verska občutja spodbujajo, krepijo in izražajo s posebnimi sredstvi. Ta sredstva se združujejo v 1) liturgiji, kjer se kažejo v nizu uporabljenih pripomočkov: besedi, uprizoritvi, gibanju, gestah, rabi prostora, neposrednem in posrednem stiku s svetim, kakor tudi v 2) dogodkih, ki spremljajo liturgijo ali verske dogodke (npr. romanja itn.). Skratka, ko se človek srečuje z Bogom in svetim, so udeleženi vsi čuti: sluh, vid, tip, vonj in okus. Na ta način omogočajo občutje celostnosti. Zagotovo je posebej zanimivo dejstvo, da čuti prestopajo meje med svetom svetega prostora in zemeljskega sveta profanega in postanejo ambivalentni. To je posebna tema za terenske raziskave.

Liturgična praksa uporablja simbolni jezik in elemente obredov. Cilj naše konference je to preiskati in interpretirati pruenstveno z zornega kota petih čutov. Razen o besedi, zvoku in glasbi (sluh), vidnih podobah, kipih, zgradbah, rabi prostora ali umetnosti nasploh (vid), malo ali skoraj ničesar ne vemo o tem, kako religija uporablja sredstva, povezana z okusom, vonjem in tipom, o njihovih učinkih in namenih. Ta sredstva ločeno ali skupaj prispevajo k oblikovanju individualnih in skupnostnih verskih izkušenj. Obred je izraz nečesa in je model za posredovanje nečesa. Uporablja niz pripomočkov, ki so povezani s konkretnim obdobjem, njegov namen je posredovati spremenljive usebine duhovnosti. V mnogih primerih so obredi nadomestek za nekakšen primanjkljaj in kompenzirajo končno in razdrobljeno naravo človeškega bitja. Nevidno,

neizmerljivo, nesmrtno in nedojemljivo postane vidno, oprijemljivo, slišano in zaznano. Izražajo torej neizrazljivo.

Želimo, da bi sodelujoči uporabili perspektivo petih čutov za interpretacijo religijske prakse posameznikov in skupnosti, njene sestavine in sredstva v različnih zgodovinskih obdobjih, v preteklosti in danes, in v različnih krščanskih in nekrščanskih verah, kakor tudi poti teh praks med svetim in zemeljskim, ki izražajo človekovo stalno prizadevanje, da bi dosegel transcendenco.

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