Sacred Scents in Early Christianity and Islam

By M. Thurlkill (2016)

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Sacred Scents in Early Christianity and Islam seeks to uncover the similar yet different ways that bodies in late antiquity and the early Islamic period navigated the material world to delineate religious meanings and experiences through their sense of smell. Mary Thurlkill argues that given the highly subjective ways that smell negotiates the ephemeral connections between odour and import, olfaction – more so than sight and sound – can reveal profound insights into the formation of individual preferences, collective values and cosmic truths. Noting recent studies that take up the ‘lower’ senses of smell, touch and taste (e.g. Deborah Green, Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Alain Corbin), Thurlkill likewise focuses her book on scent as a signifier of religious meaning. Her primary concern is to compare the different ways scent encodes sectarian differences, social roles and gendered identities, as well as marks the boundaries between the sacred and profane, in early Christian and Muslim contexts. Overall, this book makes a valuable contribution to an evolving wave of new scholarship that reflects a growing interest in the multiple ways that perception, emotion and sensory experience can generate religious meaning.

To accomplish her goal, Thurlkill has divided the book into three separate parts, which she heads with short summaries of the main topics that individual chapters will take up in further detail. Part 1 (‘Sensory Worlds’) examines the role of scent in its structuring of civic and domestic

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space through hygiene/bathing practices, rites of passage, dress, cooking manuals, diet and medicine. In the three chapters included in this section, Thurlkill explores the practical and figurative role of scent among ancient Mediterranean Jews, Romans, early Christians and Muslims to suggest how access to profitable trade afforded them a shared repertoire of aromatics to which they ascribed comparable meanings, derived similar emotions and pleasures, and governed access and usage in like ways through wealth and prestige. Through a jumbled array of examples that stretch across time and space, Thurlkill captures the multiple ways that men and women employed fragrance as part of their personal toilet, as aphrodisiacs, as forms of contraception, as flavours to enhance food and drink, as medicine for the sick, and as anointments for the dead. She concludes that these everyday usages of scent in civic and domestic Mediterranean spheres – as well as their avoidance – coded bodies as moral or immoral, effeminate or virile, as pious or impious, and cued individual identities, social relations and communal boundaries.

Part 2 ('Sacred Scents'), which purports to be 'a more careful review of what [scent] signals' (p. 85), explores those liminal moments where scent served to mediate between human and divine. Starting with a tour of Greco-Roman and Jewish views of the relationship between sacrifice and scent, and then shifting to early Christian and Muslim rituals where scent was likewise employed, Thurlkill demonstrates how various odours marked significant transformations and movements to and from different states of being, which indicated contrasting views about the body, and variant perceptions of ontological/existential realities. In the Christian context, scented postbaptismal anointments, the sweet-smelling bodies of martyrs, or the putrid stench of demons, for example, signalled existential transitions from sin and death to renewal and life. In the Muslim context, since humans could not transcend their created natures, scents took on a more pleasurable, worldly significance. Thus, scents such as the musk used by menstruating women before their return to prayer, the masculine perfumes that men donned during Friday mosque gatherings, or the pilgrim's avoidance of fragrance during the *hajj*, gestured more concrete transitions from purity to impurity, or facilitated shifts in private status to public persona. The three chapters in Part 2 provide the most in-depth textual analysis of olfactory experiences and their representations in Christian and Muslim contexts.

The shortest section by far, Part 3 ('Scents of Paradise') and its one chapter, moves the reader back and forth between the earthly and paradisiacal realms as they are depicted in Jewish, Roman, Christian and Muslim texts. Thurlkill discusses how the pleasurable scents that one encounters

on earth, such as cinnamon and balsam, point to those choicest of fragrances in the heavenly garden, and vice versa. The presence of such sweet odours drifting boundlessly between the earthly and paradisiacal realms serves to break down the barriers in time and space that separate them. In this section, Thurlkill contrasts early Christian and Muslim appropriations of their heavenly scents. Christians believed those scents to be experienced through, and marked by, paradisiacal bodies that were (ironically) freed from fleshly desire and sin. Muslim bodies, on the other hand, that either dwelled in the garden or longed for that experience, encountered such smells through the perfected forms of their earthly versions, which meant their enjoyment of them was much more carnal in nature than the Christians'. I know I was very grateful for the 'Conclusion,' which ties up the loose ends and draws out the main points of the work.

Thurlkill nests these three parts within a larger comparative framework that, at least according to the Introduction, looks to compare the (collective) category of 'olfaction and transition' (p. xvii) in early Christian and Muslim contexts. Her approach does not suggest linear dissemination, transmission or 'cultural borrowing,' but instead examines 'both similarities and distinctions related to embodiment and the sensorium among two separate, emerging religious systems' (p. xvii). She argues that such a comparison between two religious traditions generates 'a third term to "make meaning"' (p. xvii). While the author roots this overly brief summary of her methodology in Jonathan Z. Smith's ground-breaking analyses of the comparative enterprise, she never references the specific works from which we could learn more about how Smith and therefore Thurlkill might define this 'third term.' Oddly, Smith is not even mentioned or cited in either the footnotes or bibliography.

Without reference to Smith, and in the absence of a more thorough discussion of method, it is not clear if Thurlkill's comparative agenda is evolutionary, typological or heuristic, or a combination of the three. Spending some time delineating a clear method would have helped the author structure the book more coherently and frame the examples in logical ways that would give the reader a better sense of what the endgame is supposed to reveal. As it stands, the overarching, theoretical questions and goals toss and churn amidst a sea of examples that frequently bypass scent as the common denominator for analysis, and, in many cases, are drawn from contexts outside early Christianity and Islam. As the reader is quickly pulled from Jewish bath houses to Roman marriage rituals, from grave sites at Saint Denis to monastery kitchens in Gaul, from South Arabian usages of *storax* to gift-giving practices among Umayyad caliphs, from Roman emperor worship to accounts of baptism and exorcism in the *Apostolic*

Traditions, the purpose behind the initial exercise becomes lost. Given that there are many ways to compare, and many justifications for what can and should be compared, the book might have benefited from a more detailed assessment of its own stated approach, as well as the how, what and why of the particular examples/phenomena selected for its consideration.

Beyond this framing problem, there are other issues that make for a difficult read. For example, traditions are often treated monolithically, even to the point of being personified, as exemplified by such statements as, 'Islam and Christianity understand the body differently' or '[b]oth Romans and Arabs associated disease and death with physical and spiritual impurity' (pp. 158, 57). Such sweeping generalisations are illustrative of the author's privileging of breadth over depth. However, by choosing breadth over depth, Thurlkill forfeits a more sustained analysis of any particular text (e.g. the Qur'an), author or time period that might, in fact, yield evidence to call into question these monolithic categories she projects as fundamentally 'Christian' or 'Muslim'. While all authors make such choices, they need to be explicitly and carefully rationalised.

In summary, *Sacred Scents* begins to negotiate the complicated question of how to interpret sensory material and rhetoric – both practically and/or figuratively – and identify the ways they can signify religious meaning in Christian and Muslim contexts. Thurlkill's book certainly lays the groundwork for future contributions to this important area of study.