The Fragrant Seal of the Spirit: the Aesthetics of Chrism

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Despite recent developments in the fields of olfactory aesthetics, phenomenology of liturgy, religious aesthetics, and theological aesthetics, the complex presence of odours in the Christian culture has been scarcely discussed. This study is meant as a contribution to a future systematic exploration of the aesthetic 'osmology' of theology, by focusing on the fragrant chrism oil (in the Eastern Church called Holy Myron). Technical-historical explanations regarding the olfactory composition, preparation and use of this sacramental oil are followed by an examination of the semantics of its odour in patristic theology and medieval popular imaginary. This rich symbolism has been lost in the 'anosmic' modern Catholic and Orthodox sacramental theology. | *Keywords: Fragrance, Theological Aesthetics, Chrism Oil / Myron, Spirituality, Symbolism*

1. Introduction

Chrism is a consecrated oil used in several Churches, including the Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox, the Oriental Orthodox and the Nordic Lutheran, it smells pleasantly and has a complex odorous composition. This paper begins by introducing recent developments which testify to an increased general interest in corporeal and material aspects of religious experience despite its still relatively scarce thematisation in theology. Given the complexity of the olfactory culture in the Christian world, the discussion is further confined to the chrism oil. Explanations regarding its composition, preparation and use in the Latin and Byzantine rite (where chrism is called Holy Myron) are followed by a historical retrospective of its symbolism. While Ephrem the Syrian focused on the oil in the Myron, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita acknowledged its fragrance and the contribution of olfaction to the knowledge of the holy. During the following centuries, analogies between the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world and the spreading of fragrances, as well as olfactory metaphors in general, have lost importance, and modern sacramental theology ignores the odour of chrism. This 'anosmia' contrasts with medieval legends about the balsam and its adventurous purchase in a mirific Orient, which are mentioned in the last section of the paper.

The following cross-disciplinary analysis aims to expand the sources of aesthetic experience to a category of texts that have been hitherto largely ignored by the aesthetics of olfaction. Historical and theological references are meant to support the assertion that the believer's liturgical experience is intrinsically aesthetic (in both senses of sensorial and pleasant), even though the olfactory delight derived from preparing, anointing, being anointed or merely attending rituals was (and still is) by no means autotelic.[1] Perception is moulded by cultural symbolism and the hedonic dimension of smell must be considered in correlation to its epistemic function. Moreover, the understanding of olfaction in religious contexts cannot be abstract from the rhetorical use of olfactory images in theological treatises, sermons, and legends. An 'external' subject (a non-believer) may easily subsume such metaphors to the as-if-modus of metaphysical imagination, which has already been discussed in aesthetics (e.g. Hepburn, 1996). However, I claim that believers, too, make an aesthetic experience when inspiring the fragrance of the chrism oil and that paying attention both to the quality of its odorous composition and the olfactory symbolism in theological commentaries can enrich the religious experience as well. Eventually, both olfactory aesthetics and religious aesthetics would benefit from such analyses.

2. Religious Olfactory Aesthetics

The symbolism of smells has been explored in relation to the Indian culture (McHugh, 2012), ancient Egypt (Kügler, 2000) and Greco-Roman antiquity (Detienne, 2000; Kügler, 2000a), but also the Old Testament (Bechmann, 2000), the New Testament (Kügler, 2000b) and the early Christianity, with focus on classical Syrian theology (Harvey, 2006). A Christian 'osmology' (from Greek *οσμός*, odour) involves various contexts: Patristic literature distinguishes between good and dangerous pleasant smells (e.g. John Chrysostom, 1951). Liturgical Byzantine commentaries include elaborate explanations of the symbolism of incense (Ică, 2012), while the Catholic liturgy clearly regulates the use of incense (Pfeifer, 2008). Legends on the fragrance of the saints' corpses are known both in the Latin and the Byzantine world; however, in parallel with the leitmotif of the odour of sanctity the traditions of foul-smelling 'pillar saints' (stylites) and of 'holy fools' have circulated. Moreover, the Christian olfactory imaginary opposes the fragrances of paradise to the stench of hell, associating virtues with pleasant odours and vices with bad ones. However, smells are barely mentioned in the New Testament and the Epistles of Paul (Kügler, 2000b). This fact, along with the recession of the liturgical use of incense after the Second Vatican Council, may explain why research on the Christian 'osmology' has remained marginal. A systematic study of smells in the Christian world is still a desideratum.

Three contemporary research directions promise to shed light on the pervasive presence of odours in Christian theology, traditions of piety and religious practices: an incipient phenomenology of liturgy, recent developments in religious and theological aesthetics, and (philosophical) olfactory aesthetics.

[1] At the same time, to project the modern distinction between values onto premodern religious experience may appear as anachronistic.

First, phenomenological approaches have emphasised the importance of corporality for practising faith. For example, Christina M. Gschwandtner claims in her phenomenology of orthodox liturgy that liturgical and sacramental practices constitute the subject: "Anything that is 'experienced' in liturgy is mediated through the senses. We experience liturgy as we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Liturgy is fully incarnate, corporeal, and sensory experience" (Gschwandtner, 2019, p. 111). Sometimes, the sensory richness of the liturgy can even appear as "sensory overload" with "too much 'smells and bells'" (Gschwandtner, 2019, pp. 101f). In contrast, John Panteleimon Manoussakis' draft of a 'theological aesthetic' in a post-metaphysic age (2007) takes over from phenomenology only analyses related to sight, hearing and touch, yet ignores smell.

Secondly, the emergence of a new discipline called *Religionsästhetik* (Mohn, 2004), *Religionsaisthetik* (Mohn, 2012), the 'aesthetics of religion' (Schlieter, 2010) or 'religious aesthetics' (Burch Brown, 2014) sounds promising for exploring the aesthetic dimension of odours in religious contexts. Yet this field appears as a "somehow fluid 'map'" (Burch Brown, 2014, p. 13) at present and the connection of such theories to aesthetics is often confined to merely enumerating the presence of arts, aesthetic imagination and beauty in religions. In the German-speaking scholarship, this new field reflects the recent developments of aesthetics, as when Jürgen Mohn (2012) focuses on 'perceptual spaces' and Anne Koch (2007) on 'bodily knowledge'. Nevertheless, both scholars mention smells only randomly. Once one takes into account Jens Schlieter's 2010 remark that an 'aesthetics of religion' is still in its infancy, it cannot be excluded that an olfactory aesthetics is yet to come in Religious Studies. In his overview of Swiss research in this field, Schlieter characterised the research on other senses than sight and vision as a 'hot issue' and a challenge to science due, among others, to terminological difficulties (Schlieter, 2010, p. 246).

At present, most studies on religious aesthetics and theological aesthetics[2] omit any mention of odours and odorous practices, as the following two examples demonstrate. The first one is Richard Viladesau's systematic approach to 'religious aesthetics', a term which covers in his view specific (artistic) practices and aesthetic theories insofar as they relate to the sacred or are practised by religious communities (Viladesau, 2014). The theories of religious aesthetics (should) discuss six major topics: the laws of perception; the investigation of sensation and imagination; feeling as a non-conceptual knowledge that includes emotional reactions; beauty; art in general and the visual arts in particular; finally, issues of taste (Viladesau, 2014, p. 27). Regarded in this context, theological aesthetics represents a particular, namely a Christian, version of religious aesthetics. The second example is Edward Farley's 'theological aesthetics' (2001).[3] Unlike Viladesau, Farley sets forth

[2] A separate discussion would deserve the label "theological aesthetics", which is originated in the works of the Protestant phenomenologist of religion Gerardus van der Leeuw (1957) and of the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1965). However, their approaches are less relevant to my present topic.

[3] For the reconstruction of the history of theological aesthetics in the 20th century in Catholic and Protestant contexts see Farley (2001, pp. 67–81).

the classical reduction of aesthetics to the investigation of beauty and art. In his attempt to rehabilitate the aesthetic (plainly equated to beauty) against its marginalisation and even suppression in the traditions of the Judeo-Christian iconoclasm, asceticism and legalism, Farley emphasises the positive impact of aesthetic enjoyment on the "benevolent ethical self-transcendence towards any and all others" (Farley, 2001, p. 120) and, finally, on the pursuit of redemption. Unfortunately, fragrances remain absent in both Viladesau's and Farley's approaches.

Finally, aesthetic theory has largely retrieved the domain of olfaction lately. Scholars have provided phenomenological descriptions of the olfactory experience (Tellenbach, 1968; Diaconu, 2005), argued in favour of the artistic status of perfumery (Shiner, 2020) and of including it in the field of everyday aesthetics (Brady, 2005) and urban aesthetics (Diaconu, 2012; Henshaw, 2014), developed a specific critique of the olfactory art, etc.[4]

In sum, despite the complexity of the Christian olfactory culture, the hitherto mainly cultural-historical and liturgical research has been insufficiently phenomenological (in the broad sense of being experience-centred) and omitted aesthetic evaluations. Scholars drawing on phenomenology to better understand liturgy have hardly paid attention to odours; the same goes for theological aesthetics and the new discipline of religious aesthetics. Finally, with few exceptions (e.g. Diaconu (2015, 2016), (philosophical) olfactory aesthetics has ignored the religious Christian experience. This has brought about a strange coexistence of 'two cultures', to take up C.P. Snow's expression for the gap between the (literary) intellectuals and the (natural) scientists of his time (Snow, 1959). Snow criticised that these two groups were not willing to communicate, manifested no interest in the others' field and had deformed images of each other. "Mutual incomprehension", "hostility and dislike", and even reciprocal despise were the consequences of this situation, not to mention an "intellectual loss" and "illiteracy" in the others' domain. Contemporary olfactory art – which is still the core topic of (philosophical) olfactory aesthetics – and theology of olfaction, too, form "two subjects, two disciplines, two cultures [...] two galaxies" (Snow, 1959, p. 15) and ignore the creative potential of dialogue. On one side, in case olfactory artists manifest interest in the religious experience and do not ironically relegate olfactory practices to superstitions,[5] they associate their works with shamanism and meditation practices, having a rather confused understanding of spirituality with which they tongue-in-cheek play. On the other side, the Christian culture has either restricted the liturgical use of odours or uses them unreflectively; the rich symbolism of the odorous liturgical-sacramental practices, as is commented in the patristic theology, has been forgotten. When contemporary art is displayed in settings of Christian worship, the most 'audacious' works and installations remain indebted to an oculocentric modern aesthetics, as if

[4] For an extensive discussion of the development of olfactory aesthetics in the context of contemporary aesthetic theory see my introduction to this issue, *What Is and Can Become Olfactory Aesthetics?* (Diaconu, 2024).

[5] Like in Claudia Christoffel's *Für und gegen alles* (2021).

no considerable expansion of the aesthetic theory had taken place during the past decades. However, the artists' tendency to exoticise spiritual fragrances and the theologians' attachment to modernism in art can hardly find common ground for a fertile encounter. In fact, what lacks in both directions is the reflection on the multi-layered symbolism of odours, as encrypted in theological writings, liturgical-sacramental practices and the popular religious imaginary. Given the confined frame of this study, the following analysis focuses on the chrism oil.[6]

3. Preparation and Use of the Chrism/Myron Oil

In the ancient Mediterranean cultures, olive oil was used for food, lighting and as a remedy and was therefore invested with a symbolic meaning. In the Old Testament, too, oil symbolises the fertility of the earth and the family; moreover, the aromatic oil stands for God's blessing. Chrism oil is one of the holy oils used liturgically for consecrations and anointings, yet, unlike other holy oils (e.g. for catechumens in the Roman Catholic Church), it smells pleasant, being prepared by adding balsam (the sap of the balsam plant, a fragrant resin obtained from the *Commiphora opobalsamum*, which grows in Arabia and Judea) or also other fragrances to olive oil. Originally, priests used balsam from Judea; in the Middle Ages, substitute fragrances were circulating, and after the discovery of America the balsam from Peru was considered particularly precious.

In the Eastern Orthodox churches, too, the Myron oil is prepared from a mixture of olive oil and aromatic substances. Around the fourth century, baptisms probably employed either pure olive oil or olive oil mixed only with balsam. However, interest in spices and herbs, which were used for various anointings (of bridal couples, for ordinations of priests etc.) and were also mentioned in the Song of Songs, was already growing in late antiquity. As a result, the formula of Myron oil became increasingly complex over time and, during the Byzantine Empire, the Myron for the consecration of the Patriarch of Constantinople contained 52 fragrances (cf. Harvey, 2006, pp. 73f.). Nowadays, an orthodox abbey in France uses an anonymous source from the 19th century that requires to cook first olive oil and red wine, together with 43 odorous substances, further essences being added at the end (Fraternité monastique orthodoxe de Nîmes, 2011).[7]

In the Arab countries, the Maronites add saffron, cinnamon, rose essence and white frankincense, among other ingredients, to the olive oil and balsam. Nevertheless, the Syrian-orthodox Church considers a mixture of olive oil and balsam to be quite sufficient, because it symbolises the union of the divine Logos (the balsam) with the flesh of human nature (the olive oil) (Dolabani, 2006, p. 21). In general, the number of odorants required for preparing the

6 The present study is part of a forthcoming monograph on the multidimensionality of the olfactory aesthetics in the Christian culture and theology.

7 The first category of odorous ingredients includes orange blossom water, rose water, mastic bush, two kinds of pepper, nutmeg, myrrh, cloves, cinnamon, white Lebanese frankincense, white ginger and wild ginger or turmeric. The second one consists of cinnamon oil from Ceylon, balsam from Mecca, oils from rose, lemon, marjoram, clove, lavender, laurel, as well as Chinese musk and grey or 'true' amber.

Myron oil varies between 38 and 77. These figures alone give a first impression of the complexity of its fragrant composition, which seems to be in no way inferior to modern perfumery.

However, in contrast to the composition of the 'noses' (perfumers), the production of chrism/Myron is strictly regulated.[8] Usually, in both the Catholic and the Eastern-Orthodox Churches this holy oil is consecrated on Maundy Thursday, however In the Roman Catholic Church it is consecrated by bishops yearly, whereas the Myron oil is prepared at rather long intervals.[9] Moreover, the consecration of Myron oil remained a prerogative of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople until the 16th century, the Orthodox Churches having been allowed to consecrate it only after the attainment of the autocephalous status (i.e. mostly in the 19th and 20th century). To give an example, in the Romanian Orthodox Church, during the first three days of the Holy Week over 40 spices and resins are boiled together with oil and wine, while priests are praying; then, on Holy Thursday, the Myron is consecrated in the presence of the patriarch and of all the bishops.

In the Eastern Church, this holy oil is used for baptism, for the consecration of a church (walls are symbolically anointed with it), of the Holy Table, and of the communion utensils, in the Latin Church, at baptism, confirmation and the ordination of priests, as well as for the consecration of altar, church and bells. Regarding the persons' anointing, in the Orthodox Churches, this is administered immediately after baptism, in the Catholic Church separately. In the Orthodox Church, the priest anoints crosswise the person's forehead, eyes, nostrils, mouth, ears, chest and feet right after the immersion in the baptismal font, saying during each of the anointings: 'Seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit'. In the Latin Church, it is the bishop who "breathes over the chrism and speaks a thanksgiving praise, in which he makes special reference to the anointing of Christ's spirit at the baptism in the Jordan. During the subsequent prayer of blessing, the concelebrants extend both hands towards the chrism" (Berger, 2008, p. 375).[10] Despite such differences,[11] this initiation rite is related in both Churches to the Holy Spirit. Although the function of this rite is, obviously, not aesthetic in the common sense of enjoying a sensory experience, given its being mediated by the senses, mainly touch and smell, it falls within the scope of aesthetics understood as theory of perception and sensibility (in German *Aisthetik*). Moreover, the following analysis demonstrates that olfaction is particularly appropriate to suggest the presence of the spirit.

8 In the Catholic Church according to the Ordo of Oil Consecrations of December 3, 1970, in the Eastern Church(es) following the rules recorded in the *Archieratikon*, the liturgical book for bishops.

9 For example, approximately every ten years in the Greek Church or every seven years in the Romanian-Orthodox Church.

10 Whenever non-English writings are used in this paper, their English translations are mine.

11 The separation between baptism and the laying on of hands (which was a prerogative of the bishop) can already be documented in the second century, but it became normative in the fifth century (Vorgrimler, 1992, p. 128).

4. The Symbolism of the Fragrant Oil

The origin of this sacrament is apostolic, being linked to the Pentecost, when the apostles received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-41). Other interpretations relate the child's anointing after having been immersed in the baptismal font to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, after which the Holy Spirit floats down on him as a dove (cf. Benz, 1971, p. 31). Finally, other scholars draw an analogy to the anointing of Jesus in Bethany by the sinner woman (in other sources, Maria, Lazarus' sister) and the anointing of the sick by the apostles (Mark 6:13) or by the priests (James 5:14–15) (Harvey, 2006, p. 66).

Therefore, unlike incense, anointing is likely to have existed since the beginning of Christianity, even if evidence of such practices is sparse and its meaning unclear. The Chrismation during the baptism is documented from the fourth century onwards, when the previously widely varying baptismal practices were also standardised. Nevertheless, even after that, there were still differences regarding the number of anointings, their timing within the baptism ceremony, and the body parts on which they were performed. The influence of hygienic and medical practices on the development of this ritual may explain why the holy oil is considered a healing one and baptism symbolises the healing of the wounded human nature. Late antique commentaries emphasise the apotropaic function of the chrism oil, occasionally in analogy with the anointing of athletes before battle. Put differently, the anointing confers the person the power to ward off malefic forces due to its identifying function: according to Theodore of Mopsuestia (352-428), the Myron marks the persons who belong to Christ similar to the way sheep were branded or imperial soldiers were tattooed to make their affiliation visible (Harvey, 2006, p. 70). Myron oil resembles an invisible armour that is put directly on the skin.

Even today, chrism or Myron anointing symbolises the individual's incorporation into the Church and her/his becoming a 'Christian'. There is indeed a direct connection between the Greek *χρῖσμα* ('anointing oil') and the etymology of 'Christos' (*χριστός*) as 'the anointed'. However, linguistic analyses of the New Testament revealed that in some pericopes it is not clear whether the anointing was meant merely metaphorically or really took place. Moreover, the focus lies on the *gesture* of anointing and not on the sensorial-aesthetic quality of the oil; there is no mention either of the visible traces left by anointing on the body or of its odour, although the odorous aspect was intrinsic to both Greek terms for the holy oil, *chrisma* and *Myron* (Harvey, 2006, p. 67). Therefore, Chrismation and incensing shared this irrelevance of olfaction in late antiquity. This olfactory silence may be explained by using different oils: pure olive oil for the catechumens and fragrant Myron oil for the post-baptismal anointings. Sometimes the candidates for baptism were prepared for this transition from unscented to scented oil by anointing the forehead, eyes and especially the nostrils.

The direct association between *oil* and Christ appears clearly in the hymn *De Virginitate* authored by Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373) when he mentions that the name of the oil is "a symbol and shadow of the name

'Christ'" (Ephräm, 1967, p. 69). Although Ephrem often resorts to olfactory metaphors in his writings, his comments on the Holy Myron omit mentioning odours, which makes Susan Ashbrook Harvey (2006, p. 70) assume that at that time non-fragrant oil was used for Chrismation. More important for him were the visible traces left by anointing, given that they make the divine invisible perceivable: "The image of the king is formed with visible colours, and the invisible image of our invisible king is formed with visible oil" (Ephräm, 1967, p. 70). In this respect, the chrism oil has the aforementioned *identificatory* function, distinguishing the anointed person from non-Christians. In addition to this, the oil has a *lustrative* effect, by cleansing the body, which recalls the penitential psalms.[12] This absolution, however, must be preceded by repentance:

> The oil, in its love, becomes a companion for the diver, who hates his life because of his poverty and descends, burying himself in the water. The oil, a nature that does not sink, joins itself to the body that sinks; and submerging, it brings out of the depths a rich treasure (Ephräm, 1967, p. 71).

Repentance and absolution are considered here in analogy to physical processes in which oil does not sink in water and does not mix with it. Oil thus stands for the divine nature and water for the human one. 'Burying oneself in water' means abandoning oneself to sin and by that, forgetting the image of Christ within oneself. The double dynamic of ascent and descent is reminiscent of incense, which also rises (with the prayer) so that divine mercy can descend. However, this symbolism is completely opposed to Ephrem's metaphor of oil and water: it is the body that is dragged down by sins and the divine that accompanies the submerging body out of love. Both body and soul are linked to each other without mixing. One is heavy (water/body), the other light (oil/soul), and these qualities are akin to dynamic forces: the body pulls one down, while the soul drives him/her up. This recalls Plato's image of the human as a team with two winged steeds pulling one down and up (*Phaedrus* 246 a–b, Plato, 1982, pp. 435–436). Plato left the task of steering the soul correctly to the spirit, whereas the Christian is required to become aware of his/her sins (*metanoia*) in order to be cleansed of them. To use Ephrem's image, it is the oil that, although it never sinks due to its nature, can 'submerge' and thus bring 'out of the depths a rich treasure'. Ephrem connects this physical impossibility of the oil submerging in water and bringing something back up again with the 'scandal' of Incarnation – Christ took on human nature to redeem mankind[13] –, which solves the riddle of the immersing oil as an image of Christus.

While Ephrem's analogy focuses on the duality of the human being, Chrismation could also stress the *positive role of the body* in gaining divine knowledge. This interpretation is supported by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita's theology, which postulates the continuity between heaven and earth (although

[12] E.g. "Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." (Ps 51:7)

[13] "Christ, the nature that does not die, clothed himself in a mortal body, submerged and brought out of the water the treasure of life to the progenitors" (Ephräm, 1967, p. 71).

both are strictly hierarchically structured). Therefore, the knowledge of the holy and the suprasensible can be mediated by senses, including olfaction. Moreover, sensory perception is even necessary for this divine knowledge, being considered appropriate for embodied beings. Visible beauty mirrors the invisible harmony and "the diffusion of sensual fragrances" reflects "the diffusion of thought" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 29). According to this cataphatic logic, transcendence can and should be translated into physical symbols. This also applies to smells, which are considered a kind of "emanation of what can be thought" that "fills our thinking organ with divine pleasure" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 127). Evidently, such signs are not indexical (pointing to something external), but symbolic or *theophoros*: sensible phenomena carry the sacred within themselves.

In Pseudo-Dionysius' view, the ordinary (ecclesiastical) liturgy communicates with two other invisible divine services taking place simultaneously within the human soul and in the heavenly Church. His commentaries on the Holy Myron extend the analogies between the sensible and the suprasensible to smells: physical odours used to spread; *mutatis mutandis*, after the 'mysterious consecration of the fragrant oil'[14] during the holy mess, the Myron is distributed to churches and, through them, it reaches the faithful.

Other occurrences of olfaction in Pseudo-Dionysius' commentaries appear nowadays as merely metaphorical, as when he discusses virtues. From a Christian perspective, virtuous behaviour indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit, with whose fragrant seal the person was marked through Chrismation. This explains why Pseudo-Dionysius characterises the virtues as "beautiful, fragrant likenesses of the hidden God", that are acquired through the imitation of their divine model and whose pleasant odour reflects "the fragrance of goodness" that resides in "the innermost depths of the divine principle" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, pp. 124 f.).[15] Given the long history of European oculocentrism, today's readers may find it difficult to understand how image and imitation can function in olfactory contexts and how believers are supposed to look at the "supernatural, fragrant beauty of God's thoughts" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 124). In Pseudo-Dionysius' view, this olfactory vision can be experienced already when attending the consecration of the Holy Myron, yet people only see what they are able to perceive according to their degree of spiritual perfection. The consecration of oil thus has a visible beauty and an "even more divine" one, which "fills us with the fragrance that is not concealed to rational beings" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 125). The concept of such cognition transcends the modern understanding of perception: being experienced by the whole person, the fragrance of the Myron has effects on the state of mind and morality.

It would be far too easy to dismiss such mentions of odours as purely metaphoric and fictitious, given that, almost disconcertingly, Pseudo-

[14] In the same context, Pseudo-Dionysius refers also to the odour of incense when he mentions the "fragrant intercourse of the hierarch with every point of the sanctuary" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 123).

[15] This olfactory image for virtues is still widespread in the spiritual literature of the Eastern Church.

Dionysius continues by referring to odours in the common sense. Smells, he claims, produce well-being and cognition to a healthy nose that is able to react appropriately to stimuli. Similarly, if our thinking is not weakened by the propensity for what is inferior, it can perceive "the fragrance of the divine principle", being "filled both with sacred well-being and with the most divine nourishment" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 127). The condition for perceiving God's fragrance – a metaphor that can be traced back to the Paulinian Epistles[16] – is a correct *orientation* (towards the divine). Even then, the sensitivity[17] to the "divine fragrance emanations" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 127) remains dependent on the subject's own sanctity (which means nearness to God), angels having a finer 'nose' than the humans. Moreover – he continues –, these gifts of fragrance penetrate the mind, feeding thinking and bringing joy, pleasure, and well-being. The later distinction between knowledge and pleasure, let alone between the Kantian *Annehmlichkeit* and *Wohlgefallen*, are unconceivable in this early Christian context: divine pleasure represents an anagogical tool that enables a participatory knowledge of God.

To conclude, the pleasant smell of Myron oil distinguishes Christians from non-Christians, the attendants of a sacred ceremony from outsiders, and finally, the sacred space from the mundane, creating an invisible 'aura' of the sacred. In general, pleasant fragrances (nota bene, in liturgical contexts) announce God's presence, which, in Harvey's view (2006), represents a heritage of the ancient Mediterranean cultures. Moreover, experiencing these scents is not merely intellectual participation in the divine, but *transforms* the humans themselves: one cannot make the experience of the Spirit without being "contaminated" by it, just as by entering a smelly place we take on this smell ourselves and pass it on. Smelling something is inseparable from smelling something; the subject that perceives an odour turns into an *osmophoros*, an odour carrier, and, in the special case of sacramental and liturgical scents, into a *theophoros*.

While we do not necessarily look like what we see and do not replicate the sounds we hear, the peculiar 'logic' of smells implies that we are *physically* impregnated by the odorous spaces we cross or live in. In Pseudo-Dionysius' words: "the composition of the oil is an 'assembly' [*συναγωγή*] of fragrant substances" and "those who receive something from it become fragrant depending on how much fragrance they have received" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 126). This mixture does not produce a specific olfactory form of a new quality through chemical interactions, as Edmond Roudnitska and other perfumers consider (Diaconu, 2015, pp. 306 ff.), but a *synagoge* that produces *meaning* through interpersonal interaction. From Pseudo-Dionysius' perspective, this meaning is eventually the olfactory image of Jesus as the source of all fragrances, a metaphor that is admittedly hardly comprehensible based on the mimesis theory.

16 Various English translations mention the 'odour', '(sweet) fragrance', 'sweet-smelling perfume', 'lovely smell', 'savor' or 'aroma' of the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 2:14 - Bible Gateway, no date).

17 This aptitude is usually known in the Christian spirituality as power of discernment.

Finally, the Myron oil being a sacrament, the transfer of odour from the Good to good people and from God to the faithful also produces, in Pseudo-Dionysius' view, the elevating *sanctification* of the profane, be these people, spaces or objects of liturgical use. In this respect, consecration represents a "philanthropic principle" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1986, p. 129) *literally*, expressing the love of divinity for the humans.

5. The Loss of Smell in Sacramental Theology

Byzantine sacramental theology achieved a systematic form in the 14th century grace to Nicholas Cabasilas. His *Book of Life in Christ* (1981) interprets the sacraments (in Eastern Church diction: 'mysteries') of Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist in olfactory terms due to their pneumatological dimension. While Logos inspires Cabasilas light metaphors, the Holy Spirit primarily awakens olfactory associations, as in the following description of the future Aion (of the eternal life): "The delicious fragrance of the Pneuma flows forth and fills the universe; but he who then still has no sense of smell receives none" (Kabasilas, 1981, p. 16). On one hand, this is meant to prompt believers to develop their 'spiritual organ' before it gets too late, on the other, it announces that a saint way of life enables one to feel the foretaste of the afterlife already in this world, because "the supra-heavenly Myron has already been poured out in these polluted regions" (Kabasilas, 1981, p. 17).

In the same context, Cabasilas claims that the sacraments as "gates of righteousness" (Ps 117:19) are even 'more venerable and salvific' than those of paradise: they are true gifts, being received without struggling or suffering like Christ, but simply by believing in him and accepting his gifts. Later, the gate metaphor reappears in relation to the body: only because the sacraments are material can Christ "occupy" nose and mouth as "entrances of life": "through one door as fragrant Myron, through the other as food" (Kabasilas, 1981, p. 38). Whether the sacred is breathed in or ingested, in both cases, the sacred penetrates the human body and brings about its unification with the holy into one body, which – from a Christian perspective – is eventually the ecclesiastical body, with Christ as its head.

In the chapter on Chrismation, which is much shorter than the discussions regarding the Baptism and the Eucharist,[18] Cabasilas considers the anointing with Myron oil necessary to make effective the energies received by the subject through baptism. These gifts of grace differ among various persons, which guarantees the functional unity of the community. Once received, the charisms must be practised consciously and continuously to keep them active. However, smell only plays an indirect role in Cabasilas' commentaries on Chrismation. For example, when he refers to the Incarnation as the removal of the dividing wall between man and God, he mentions that 'the wall of separation itself has already become Myron' and evokes Jesus' anointing in Bethany with fragrant oil by an anonymous woman:

[18] This peculiarity characterises also later treatises on sacramental theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

> So it is as if an alabaster vessel were transformed to Myron through some feat. Then this Myron could no longer be prevented from communicating itself to what it is outside; it would no longer remain inside, no longer for itself alone (Kabasilas, 1981, p. 91).

In a similar way – he continues –, human nature was divinised in Christ's body, so that nothing can separate them anymore. The image of the alabaster pot whose fragrance irresistibly spreads obviously recalls the anointing in Bethany, when a sinner (Lk 7:39) broke an alabaster jar of precious nard oil to anoint the feet and/or head of Jesus (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9; Lk 7:36-50; Jn 12:1-8), after which "the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil" (Jn 12:3). The emanation of the scent cannot be prevented, not only in the church ('the house') but also beyond its boundaries, into the wider world. In general, smell stands for breaking down boundaries, for continuity and not least for a specific dynamic. Even the fundamental restoration of communication between God and man grace to the Incarnation in no way means their alignment, but activates an infinite process that Cabasilas calls "a life in Christ" and which the theology of the Eastern Church calls *theosis* or deification. The "chaste pleasure of Myron" (Kabasilas, 1981, p. 37) restores the human's attraction to the divine so that the Myron sets in motion the human being.[19] The *smell* of the Myron oil, however, can only be inferred indirectly: partly phenomenologically, knowing the peculiarities of olfaction compared to other senses, and partly hermeneutically, through Cabasilas' allusion to the anointing in Bethany. The physical odour of the consecrated oil is simply overlooked.

Even more striking is the 'anosmia' of the later explanations of Chrismation, both among Orthodox and Catholic theologians. The fragrance of the Myron oil and its complex aromatic composition, as described in the first part of this paper, receive no mention at all in Alexander Schmemann's (1974), Herbert Vorgrimler's (1992), Nikos A. Matsoukas' (2006) and John D. Zizioulas' (2011) commentaries to Chrismation. The following discussion is confined to the theologians of the Eastern Church.

At the centre of Schmemann's interpretation of anointing is the sanctification of the body which, alluding to Paul (1 Cor 6:19), is consecrated as the temple of God and whose life should itself become a liturgy. In this respect, Schmemann criticises a reductionist spiritualisation of faith and calls for a positive attitude to life in the world: the Spirit primarily conveys *joie de vivre*. In contrast to Schmemann, Matsoukas emphasises the power of the sacrament to bend the will of the anointed person in order to "fight the demonic forces" and progress on the path to perfection (Matsoukas, 2006, p. 358). Finally, Zizioulas emphasises that the Eastern Church sets forth the symbolism of the anointing of priests and kings in the Old Testament. Through its embedding in the baptismal rite, Chrismation stands for "participation in Christ's royal priesthood, by virtue of which the baptized would become himself a king and a member of the people of Christ as the anointed God" (Zizioulas, 2011,

[19] "So we live through this bread and *move* by virtue of the Myron, after we have received being from the baptismal bath" (Kabasilas, 1981, p. 23, my emphasis).

p. 119). Whether a mission for the world that conveys a sacramental dimension to everyday life, as in Schmemann, energy in the fight against evil, as in Matsoukas, or dignity of the laity as a world priesthood, as Zizioulas believes, the semantics of Chrismation has much to offer despite its status of a 'stepchild' in sacramental theology. Integrating the symbolism of smell would certainly enrich even more its semantics.

However, this analysis would remain incomplete without mentioning medieval popular beliefs related to the chrism oil. These testify to the possibility of a specific olfactory aesthetics that differs both from the 'anosmia' of contemporary sacramental theology and merely empirical interest in the fragrant composition of the chrism oil.

6. The Imaginary of the Balsam in Western Popular Christianity

Traditionally, balsam was the main (or even only) fragrant component of the chrism oil. In his analysis of medieval popular literature[20] about the balsam, Jean-Pierre Albert (1990) identified a chain of analogies between the balsam tree, the tree of life, the cross and the bleeding Christ, all revolving around the Crucifixion. Although their semantics considerably diverges from the theological interpretations of Chrismation, legends that circulated in Western popular Christianity are worth mentioning as evidence for the complexity of the olfactory symbolism of chrism and for its power to spark the imagination.

In the Western Middle Ages, Jesus was considered the new tree of life who reconciles man with God and promises eternal life. Moreover, life was regarded as the sap of the tree of life and at the same time as the balsam which is extracted from the balsam bush; combining these meanings, the tree of life (which complemented the cross) was believed to exude balsam. In this setting, by allowing precious balsam to flow from his wound, Christ nourishes the world. However, the "aromatic secretion" (Albert, 1990, p. 177) does not only symbolise the principle of life, but it also reveals what is concealed, manifesting an *essence* in both the physical and metaphysical sense (i.e. the divinity of the Crucified). Although the legend of the fragrant cross might have historical explanations as well (crosses used to be oiled with balsam), modern interpretations ought not to underestimate the power of collective religious imaginary in a highly symbolic culture as the Middle Ages were.

A complex symbolism of odours evinces also the archbishop Jacobus of Voragine's *Sermones aurei* in the 13th century. His sermon for Passion Sunday mentions that Christ was anointed four times: by his father (with charisma, grace, or the gifts of the Holy Spirit), by his mother (with tears by laying his corpse in the tomb), by Magdalene (during the anointing in Bethany) and by "the Jews" (who anointed his whole body when he blooded during the Passions) (apud Albert, 1990, p. 173). Moreover, his sermon for Holy Week, cited by Albert (1990, pp. 174–175) compares Christ not only to a "bag (*sac*) full of mercy" that God sent down to earth and that was torn to pieces in the Passion, but also to a vessel of fragrant oil, to a cupboard with medicines, and

[20] Albert founds his interpretations mainly on the literature of *mirabilia*, completed by legends, hagiography, Christianised folklore and 'superstitions'.

to medicinal herbs. The 'old' man, to use Apostle Paul's expression, was captive and his wounds were foul-smelling (*puant*). Christ himself puts himself in the same position, but only to restore man's original state: he must be wounded so that his fragrance may be released into the world and redeem the captive humanity.

First, Christ was full of ointment, as much as an alabaster vase, and for this, he willed it to be broken by many wounds: so that the precious ointment might come out, by which the wounded are healed. The allusion to the broken alabaster jar in Bethany is unmistakable. Second, this image of *Christus medicus* is reinforced by the analogy with the pharmacy cupboard (*apotheca, armoire*):

> Christ's body was filled with balsam like a cupboard and he willed that this should be opened so that the balsam might flow out of it, by which he who stinks is healed. This cupboard was indeed opened when a soldier opened its side with his spear. Of the odour of this balm, it is said: *I have made my perfume like cinnamon and fragrant balm*.

Christ's body is full of precious remedies, yet must be opened in order to administrate the medicines to the foul smelling wounded human (*celui qui pue, le blessé*). Similarly, the Crucified's body was 'opened' by the spear, which allowed the fragrant essence to flow out and fill the world.

Third, Christ shares the fate of aromatic plants. When his body is compared to the bark of the tree, his words to the leaves and his soul to the seeds, his 'precious blood' can only stand for the sap of the plant, which must pour out. And just as medicinal plants must be crushed, triturated and pounded to create a plaster for an abscess, so Christ's body was tortured (Jacobus uses here the same verb as for the plants, *triturer*) to empty 'the abscess of our pride'. Incidentally, similar extraction methods apply to the balsam and the oil, both components of chrism oil. The oil, too, is extracted from seeds or fruits, like a hidden essence that only manifests itself through pressing.[21] A comparison of the sacramental interpretations of the chrism oil, as mentioned before, with this symbolism of essences that connects balm and oil testifies to a shift in emphasis from a pneumatological and ecclesiological context to a Christological and staurocentric[22] theology.

Finally, medieval Catholic Christianity connected aromatics with stones, in particular gemstones. One reason for this analogy may be physical: fragrant resin is a solidified liquid. In addition to this, legends circulated since Antiquity about their common origin in a fabulous Orient and their dangerous purchase: being extremely precious, aromatics and gemstones must have originated in a kind of paradise on earth. According to some legends, the balsam for the chrism oil came from the region of Jerusalem, considered at that time the symbolic centre of the world. One such story from the 15th or 16th century mentions that the exquisite odorous substances for the holy oil

[21] This parallel was indeed used by ancient authors for the "oil" of the frankincense bush (cf. Albert, 1990, p. 179).

[22] I.e. centred on the Crucifixion.

are the sparse product of an otherwise dry tree that is guarded day and night by a dragon (Albert, 1990, p. 83). The balm can be stolen only once a year, on Saint John's Eve (on the night of 23/24 June), when the dragon falls asleep. Such legends recall those already mentioned by Herodotus regarding the difficult extraction of frankincense in Arabia Felix despite dangerous snakes hanging in the trees.

Although the aridity of the 'tree of life' and the close presence of snakes is plausible for the Arabian balsam bush, such narratives were necessary both for the symbolic and the commercial value of balsam. Life (the remedy) and death (the serpent's poison) are inextricably linked in the mythical Orient where, as the legend says, the traveller comes only one day away from the earthly paradise. In the medieval and early modern Christians' collective imagination, the chrism was converted from a rite of initiation and admission into the homeland of the Church to an invitation to adventure in exotic lands. Spiritual dwelling was replaced by dreams of conquest, and the participation in the common life of the Church according to specific charisms, by the individual's heroic deeds. The seeds of modernity are already perceivable here.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, the implications of this investigation on the olfactory symbolism of chrism oil and Chrismation are at least threefold. First, it challenges the widespread prejudice regarding the hostility of theology to the body due to its dualistic anthropology. Secondly, it revives the logic of symbolism which has been impoverished since the triumph of modern scientific and philosophical rationalism yet has survived in art and the aesthetics of daily life. Moreover, the present case contradicts philosophers' common dismissal of olfaction as unleashing a merely sensory pleasure which cannot be subject to interpretation. Thirdly, the paper makes the case for initiating a dialogue between philosophical and religious aesthetics. Despite the considerable expansion of the field of aesthetics during the past decades, philosophers still manifest a general disinterest in the religious experience, although it makes an essential part of everydayness in several cultures worldwide. In so doing, aesthetic theory has remained indebted to its roots in the Western philosophy of the Enlightenment and has not sufficiently reacted to the imperative of a global aesthetics and to theories about the 're-enchantment' (Berman, 1981) of our present, post-secular world.

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