

Do we have a Preferred Sense for God?

Bruce Stevens

Aristotle identified the five senses: sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste. We are born with these senses and it is how we encounter reality. But do we have a preferred sense? Imagine the following:

You arrive at your holiday destination. It is a beach resort. What is your first reaction? (a) Do you enjoy the feel of the sand under your feet? Or the warmth of the sun? Or the cool sea breeze on your face? (b) Do you hear the waves breaking? The sound of sea gulls or the rustling of leaves in the wind? (c) Do you enjoy the view of the beach, the blue sea and the movement of people? (d) Do you enjoy the smell of the sea or the flowers around? (e) Or do you look for exotic dining with new dishes to try out?

Can you identify a preferred sense through this exercise? Maybe a secondary? There are spiritual implications which we will now explore.

The Bible records the divine human encounter. The assumption is that all the senses are involved: 'hear the word of the Lord' (Isa 1:10); a promise that 'the pure in heart ... will see God' (Matt 5:8); 'O, taste and see that the Lord is good!' (Ps 34:8); the faithful 'spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him' (2 Cor 2:14. All emphases mine). Indeed, the original witnesses to the resurrection testified that 'we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our own hands, concerning the word of life' (1 John 1:1, emphases mine).

The expression 'spiritual senses' (*sensus spiritalis*) first occurred in the Latin translation of Origen of Alexandria (who died about 254 AD). Other theologians have emphasised the experience of God through the senses. Augustine, for example, in his *Confessions*, writes:

I have learnt to love you late, Beauty [God] at once so ancient and so new! ... You called me, you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance

enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odor. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace. (R. S. Pine-Coffin, Trans., *St Augustine: Confessions*, 1961, Book 10:27, 231-232)

“**THE CHRISTIAN FAITH HAS AN EXPERIMENTAL DIMENSION. OVER THE YEARS PEOPLE HAVE RECEIVED VISIONS, REVELATIONS, SPIRITUAL INSIGHT AND OTHER COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE DIVINE REALM.**”

More recently Paul Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley have argued for the continuing relevance of the senses in the theological tradition (*The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, 2012, 1-2). However, there is an unresolved tension in relating to a God who is unlike us and inherently mysterious: 'We look not at what can be seen but to what cannot be seen' (2 Cor 4:18).

The Christian faith has an experiential dimension. Over the years people have received visions, revelations, spiritual insight and other communications from the divine realm. But do we have a preferred sense for the experience of God? John Wesley felt his heart 'strangely warmed'. This experience reflects touch, but others have experienced God through music, a sermon, a beautiful work of art, the taste of the Eucharist or a fellowship meal, or the smell of flowers or incense.

The popular author Gary Chapman suggested that there are *Five Love Languages* (see his 1995 book by the same title). These do not directly parallel the five senses but are listed as

receiving gifts, spending quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service and physical touch. There is value in Chapman's insight, that we feel loved in different ways, and that this has a potential application to how we are most comfortable in relating to God. Can you identify a love language for relating to God?

Our favoured sense influences what style of worship will appeal to us. Some will want to hear the Bible preached with no visual embellishment, others desire a strong musical program, or the atmosphere of candles and lead-light windows, or engaging in a weekly Eucharist and/or the smell of incense. It is not helpful to think of worship in categories of right or wrong but simply in what comes naturally to each of us in relating to God.

It is not clear why we might have a preferred sense for God. I suspect it reflects our earliest experiences, before words or language, about what provides nurture. This lays a template for relating to God in later life. The answer, if it is to be found, is probably in formative experiences of our first years, before language, before any creedal beliefs. Understanding this can better enhance our spiritual life and help us seek more natural ways to encounter God.



BRUCE A. STEVENS

(PhD Boston University) is the Wicking Professor of Ageing and Practical Theology at Charles Sturt University, Canberra. He is an honorary minister-in-association at Wesley Uniting Church. He is an endorsed clinical psychologist who has written ten books, most recently *The Storied Self* (2018). The website for early spiritual learning is earlySpirituality.com.