

**Neither *Bhukti* nor *Mukti*:
The New Sensorium in Devotional Practice**

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that religious practices of imagination can answer Hans Urs von Balthasar's call for the development of a "new sensorium" for experiencing the divine. For him, a theological aesthetics should resist the self-negation of extreme forms of apophatic mysticism as well as the reduction of human fulfillment to mere physicality. The author compares two textual case studies of imaginative devotional practices that meet these criteria: Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu*, a sixteenth-century text that was foundational for the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement in Bengal. As contributions to a contemporary theological aesthetics, both texts demonstrate that imagination is rooted in bodily experience but reaches beyond these confines toward the transcendent.

In developing his theological aesthetics, twentieth-century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar navigates between two extremes with regard to the human senses. On one side, he carefully avoids aestheticism, which reduces revelation to the natural realm. He eschews "aesthetic theologies" that exclude the deathly, fearful, and ugly aspects of existence, opting instead for a "theological aesthetics" normed by the suffering and death of Christ.¹ On the other side, Balthasar steers clear of radical varieties of apophatic mysticism that negate the bodily senses

along with all other human capacities as the soul becomes absorbed into God.² For him, Christ's incarnation and presence in the sacraments root theological aesthetics squarely in the physical realm.³ In avoiding both the glorification and annihilation of the sensual, he hopes to locate the proper role of the senses and imagination in human experience of the divine.

For Balthasar, the discipline of theological aesthetics is a practice of viewing the cosmos and history through the lens of divine glory. Done properly, it unites the concreteness of the human body with the transcendence of divine mystery. Balthasar turns to the Christian tradition of the spiritual senses in order to demonstrate this confluence. Beginning with Origen, he explains, Christians have embraced sensory practices that foster an encounter with God.⁴ In light of revelation, humanity's natural perceptive faculties are not withdrawn, but incorporated and transformed within a capacity he calls the "new sensorium," where "the profane human senses, making possible the act of faith, become 'spiritual', and where faith becomes 'sensory' in order to be human."⁵ The process is both profoundly divine and intensely human:

The love which is infused in man by the Holy Spirit present within him bestows on man the sensorium with which to perceive God and, so to speak, an understanding for God's own taste. . . . This new sensorium is infused into the natural sensorium and yet is not one with it: for all that it is bestowed on man *as his own* (and increasingly so as he is the more unselfed), equally it is his only as a gift.⁶

A sacramental worldview forms the theological cradle for Balthasar's discussion of the senses as conduits to participation in the divine life. For Balthasar, because of the incarnation, the divine and the human co-reside in the new sensorium: as the body of Christ reveals the glory of the Lord, so too bodies become able to perceive God's glory.

Christian theologians working in theological aesthetics today should note that the tension Balthasar highlights between aestheticizing and radically apophatic tendencies in relation to the senses is not unique to Christianity and its particular concerns with sacrament and incarnation. This essay explores foundational texts of two different religious communities—one within the Catholic worldview and one from a Hindu perspective—to compare models of how "all the senses perceive the non-sensual sensually"⁷ in devotional practice. Together, these historically and culturally situated traditions challenge Balthasar's dismissal of any theological aesthetics not explicitly rooted in the cross of Christ. The practices of both traditions are suggestive of the sorts of concrete instantiations of religious experience that Balthasar's new sensorium—and a contemporary theological aesthetics—might accommodate.

The *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* (*The Ocean of the Nectar of Devotion*) is a foundational sixteenth-century text for the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement in Bengal. I demonstrate how this text, in its avoidance of *bhukti* and *mukti* (terms that are provisionally analogous to the aestheticizing and the apophatic), develops a spirituality that is at the same time sensory and transcendent. I then turn to the subject of one of Balthasar's case studies: the *Spiritual Exercises*, in which Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, propounds a discipline for imaginatively attuning the senses to the

mysteries of the faith. The benefit for the Christian theologian of the comparative detour through Hindu practices is that upon returning home, once-familiar categories no longer look the same.⁸ Knowledge of the practices of others may yield new imaginative possibilities for a theological sensorium. The final section reflects on the fruits of comparing these Hindu and Christian traditions, illuminating the challenges and enrichments of Hindu practices for Christian modes of orienting the human imagination toward the divine.

The Aesthetics of Krishna Devotion⁹

Gaudiya Vaishnavism is a religious movement dedicated to the worship of Krishna and his divine consort Radha that arose in the sixteenth century under the saint Caitanya (1486-1534). Muslim control of Bengal at the time contributed to a shift in religious focus from the kingly, warrior-like aspects of the god Vishnu to his playful, amorous incarnation as Krishna. Because the socio-political situation did not encourage the full operation of Hindu *dharma* in society, it fostered an imaginative praxis that transcended the political order.¹⁰ When the tradition's founders, the Goswamins of the city of Vrindavan, first met their teacher, Caitanya, they left their posts as ministers in the Muslim court at Gauda and subsequently systematized and propounded the methods and doctrines he inspired. Rupa Goswamin's *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* (henceforth *BRS*) presents Krishna devotion (*bhakti*) in terms of Indian aesthetics. Its novelty lies in its application of the *rasa* theory (a theory of emotional "tastes") of Bharata's treatise on dance, the *Natyasastra*.

The Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana discipline within Gaudiya Vaishnavism makes special use of the *BRS* and its commentaries. In this community, practitioners imaginatively enter Krishna's eternal drama through spiritual identification with its key actors.¹¹ The discipline consists of three parts: fundamental practices (*sadhana bhakti*), development of an emotional and mental state conducive to devotion (*bhava bhakti*), and an increasingly spontaneous state of emotional involvement with God (*prema bhakti*).

Sadhana bhakti employs the organs of the body in worship, with the purpose of translating these practices into devotional feeling (*BRS* 2.2). There are sixty-four *angas* or "limbs" to this practice, each of which is a distinct type of worship. Involving all of the senses and the imagination, these include "tasting the food offerings presented to the deity;" "drinking the water used for washing the feet of the deity;" "smelling the scent of the flowers offered in worship" and the "fragrance of incense [and] garlands;" "touching" and "viewing the image of the deity;" "listening to the Lord's name, adventures, qualities, etc.;" and meditating on the Lord's beauty, qualities, and pastimes (*BRS* 2.160-181).¹² Taste, touch, smell, sight, and sound, alongside activities such as contemplation and service to the temple or one's guru, are conducive and indeed essential to developing the appropriate devotional attitude.

Bhava bhakti, the result of such practices, is a transformed state of thinking and feeling consistent with one's enduring emotional relationship with God (*sthayibhava*). The devotee receives

initiation into one of the five primary *sthayibhavas* associated with Krishna: *santa* (peace or indifference), *dasya* (servanthood), *sakhya* (friendship), *vatsalya* (parental affection), and *madhura* (sweetness and delight). The roles of the initiates correspond, respectively, to the inanimate objects, servants, boyhood friends, parents, and female attendants that populate the Krishna drama.¹³ *Bhava bhakti* plainly appropriates the language of traditional Indian aesthetics with the claim that *bhava* (an emotional state) awakens in the heart of the devotee, who cultivates a special taste (*rasa*) for Krishna. *Rasa* is excited by the *vibhavas* (determinants) of seeing and hearing the Lord and expresses itself in the *anubhavas* (consequents) of appropriate looks, gestures, and expressions of emotion such as laughter and tears.¹⁴ Though Bharata's *rasa* theory features eight *rasas* or emotional "tastes" (humor, sorrow, anger, heroism, fear, disgust, astonishment, and love), Gaudiya Vaishnavas subsume all *rasas* under love. They become transient emotions experienced *within* the five primary modes of love for Krishna. Hindu *bhakti* poetry explores all of these tastes, from the sorrow of Krishna's lovers when they are apart, to their jealous anger when they suspect his affection for others, to their fear as they venture into the forest at night to rendezvous with him.

Prema bhakti is the most intense state of attachment for Krishna, described in *BRS* 4.1 as "the *bhava* that is intense in nature, marked with abundant attachment ('my-ness') and a mind that is completely softened."¹⁵ *Prema* can arise either from the practices outlined above or directly from the grace of the Lord. Because the Raganuga sect focuses especially on *madhurya*, the enticing nature of Krishna, it provides further elaboration on the fifth and highest *sthayibhava*, that of Krishna's female friends and attendants (*sakhis*), who represent the extraordinary intimacy that Krishna offers to his devotees. Different degrees and aspects of their intimacy correspond to specific types of attendants in Krishna's entourage, culminating in *mahabhava*, the exclusive enjoyment of Krishna that belongs to his prime consort, Radha. The bliss of Radha and Krishna is the source of all the pleasure in the universe and symbolizes the union between the soul and God.¹⁶

With this brief introduction to the discipline prescribed in the *BRS*, I now turn to the problem posed by Balthasar: how can one employ the senses in devotion without lapsing into either aestheticism or ambition for absolute union with God? This question is not foreign to the Gaudiya Vaishnavas. One of the stages in reaching an ideal relationship with Krishna is *anartha-nivritti*, the cessation of all offenses or obstacles (*BRS* 4.15). The problem of properly locating sensory experience vis-à-vis the desire for pleasure and the desire to merge with the Absolute is one of the foremost obstacles. Rupa Goswamin and the other teachers of the Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana take pains to distinguish their position from either of these extremes. He uses the shorthand terms *bhukti* and *mukti* for these one-sided attitudes: "As long as the malevolent spirit who longs for *bhukti* (enjoyment) and *mukti* (spiritual liberation) resides in the heart, how can the rise of sweet devotion (*bhakti*) take place there?" (*BRS* 2.22).¹⁷ *BRS* 1.36 states that the attainment of *bhava bhakti* is extremely difficult and rare, making the enjoyment and liberation that are legitimate ends in other spiritual disciplines seem comparatively easy to achieve. Proper guidance and discernment are mandatory in following the more advanced stages of the Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana.

Practice can be dangerous and lead to ruin if one is less than prudent: “Unless this method and its true nature and concept as well as interpretation are correctly understood or rightly followed, one may very easily be misled to a wrong path and sheer mental imagination in an unripe stage of spiritual advancement.”¹⁸

In their refutation of *bhukti*, which is analogous to aestheticism, Rupa and the other Goswamins make it clear that the aims of their discipline are unlike those of quotidian life. Devotees no longer desire the four traditional goals in Hindu life of *artha* (wealth), *kama* (pleasure), *dharma* (societal duty), and *moksha* (liberation). Even though one could easily attain them through the Lord’s grace, one should reject them (*BRS* 2.26). One absorbed in service to Krishna is indifferent to everything, including heaven and hell (*BRS* 2.33). Furthermore, although the tradition cultivates the senses in service of Krishna, the goal of these practices is not *bhukti*, but *bhakti*—not sensual enjoyment, but devotion itself.

Divinity is not directly accessible to the mundane senses; yet neither is the experience of *rasa* entirely unconnected to the senses:

The name, etc. (i.e. the form, qualities, realm, associates, and pastimes) of Lord Krishna cannot be grasped by the senses. When the tongue and the other senses are prepared for service, then these appear on their own initiative. (*BRS* 2.234)¹⁹

All of the sixty-four “limbs” of the discipline are oriented toward training the senses so that when the Lord graciously chooses to appear, the devotee will be ready to receive him properly. The mind and body attuned to God are open to the perception of the divine form. In *prema bhakti*, “an individual soul . . . now beholds the Lord face-to-face with the *darshana-rati* or attachment of vision, and realizes that this luminous experience far excels all [previous] experiences.”²⁰ The eyes, nose, ears, tactile sense, and tongue function as the soul’s organs of perception, operating at a “supra-mundane and transcendental” level.²¹

The commentary’s discussion of the benefit of living in Mathura, the place of Krishna’s youth, further illustrates the idea that the senses operate on multiple levels. Mukundadasa Goswamin comments that Goloka (Mathura) actually belongs to Gokula, Krishna’s transcendent realm: “As the glories of Gokula are superior to those of Goloka, Goloka has been described as the wealth of Gokula. In Gokula there is absolute *madhurya* [sweetness], whereas the glories of this *Absolute Madhurya* of Gokula are manifest in Goloka.”²² One might say that sacred geography sacramentally heightens one’s perception of divinity, for the special connection between the mundane and the divine is most intense in the land where Krishna actually lived.

As with the senses, the emotions too operate on various levels. Practices such as chanting the divine name, venerating images and scriptures, and living in Mathura give rise to an emotional relationship between the devotee and the Lord similar to, but not altogether coextensive with, common human emotions. Rupa Goswamin writes,

Having been transformed mentally, devotees go about appearing bright and glorious as if they possessed this light inherently. Actually, that *rati* (affection, delight) is, as it were,

[both] the reason for the enjoyment of Krishna and the enjoyment itself. (*BRS* 3.4-5)²³

Although devotional feeling appears to be a property of the mental faculties of the devotee, this is not entirely the case. *Rati* is both the cause (from Krishna) and the effect (in the devotee) of the emotional experience. The commentators illustrate this transformation with the example of the iron rod that glows when placed in the fire: “As fire is not changed into the iron rod, so also [*r*]ati does not turn out to be a faculty of the mind—they only look identical.”²⁴

Moving from the rejection of *bhukti* to the other extreme, Jiva Goswamin enumerates five forms of *mukti*, or emancipation from bondage: (1) *Salokya-Mukti*, living in God’s realm; (2) *Sarshiti-Mukti*, possessing similar powers as God; (3) *Samipya-Mukti*, living in the presence of God; (4) *Sarupya-Mukti*, possessing the form of God; and (5) *Sayujya-Mukti*, being merged in God. Each of these forms of liberation entails pleasure for the devotee that he or she should reject (even if Krishna offers them) in order to serve the pleasure of Krishna alone. Although the first four forms are not entirely incompatible with the goals of *bhakti* (living in Krishna’s presence, for example, may not hinder service to him), single-pointed devotees (*ekantinah*) are so absorbed in their service that they have no desire for them (*BRS* 2.55). The fifth form, complete absorption into *brahman*, however, is irreconcilable with devotion, which requires distinction between the Lord and his followers.²⁵ In rejecting *Sayujya-Mukti*, which is similar to the radical apophaticism that Balthasar criticizes, the Goswamins distinguish the objective of their practice from that of non-dualist Advaita Vedantins who aim for salvation in the form of complete merger with the absolute *brahman*. Devotees of the Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana find Krishna’s form so attractive that they spontaneously reject this type of *mukti* for the experience of contemplating the Lord (*BRS* 2.24). The commentators remark that “three aspects of supra-mundane delight” make devotion superior to merging into the absolute: “the bliss of joy that is in the service of the supremely beautiful Feet of the Lord, the bliss of drinking the nectar of the Beauty and Gracefulness of the Person of the Lord, and the bliss of tasting the wondrous Pastimes of the Lord.”²⁶ How can one enjoy the beauty, activities, and service of the Lord if one ceases to recognize the distinction between self and the divine? Therefore, *BRS* 1.4 describes superior devotees as those who “discard all the rivers of *Mukti* that ultimately merge and disappear in the Ocean of *Bhakti*.”²⁷

While Gaudiya Vaishnavas reject direct identification with Krishna, scholars debate limits to identification with Radha and the other original models in the Krishna drama. Donna Wulff argues that Caitanya originally aimed for direct participation in Krishna *lila*, but that a more distanced form of observation soon evolved.²⁸ David Haberman finds two valid options within the tradition. The less direct route to emotional imitation is to imagine oneself in the service of one of the inhabitants of Krishna’s realm as a *manjari* (servant) of Radha or one of the *sakhis*. One would then identify with the *emotions* of the figure he or she serves, but without aspiring to the same level of union. Precedent in Krishna lore for this restraint lies in the example of the *sakhis*, each of whom is “completely competent to be a *Nayika* [mistress]” but sacrifices her personal pleasure in order to attend upon Radha and Krishna.²⁹ *Sakhis* experience bliss simply in thinking of the pleasures of

the divine couple, relishing the sweetness of their union without seeking it themselves. The more direct mode of participation lies not in complete identification with Radha or one of the original models, but in conceiving of oneself as a *similar but unique* character. Jiva Goswamin argues that straightforward identification would be improper,

since it confuses the distinction between a human soul and one of the original models, who have never been touched by the influence of *maya* and are held to be part of the essential nature ... of Krishna himself. ... The divine model and the imitator never become completely identified.³⁰

The teachers warn against literal identification with any of the eternal figures, for “by such undesirable thoughts of arrogating to oneself Eternal Associateship with the Supreme Godhead, one would only throw oneself in the vortex of offences.”³¹ One must seek to serve Krishna in accordance with the sentiments, actions, and permanent relationships that these associates represent, but never confuse oneself with the eternal actors themselves. In either route, *bhakti* must steer clear of both *bhukti* and *mukti*.

A correspondence may be drawn between the poles in Balthasar’s theory and those in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. As with Balthasar’s concern that a merely “aesthetic” theology gravitates solely toward the beautiful and pleasurable, the Gaudiya Vaishnavas proscribe attachment to the gratification of *bhukti*. As with Balthasar’s eschewal of the negation of form in one’s experience of God, the Gaudiya Vaishnavas avoid the absorption of diverse forms into a *mukti* of undifferentiated union. Neither Balthasar nor the Gaudiya Vaishnavas skirts the dark and painful aspects of experience. Terror, anger, and revulsion are contained within the full spectrum of the *rasas* as well as in the contemplation of the cross.

Ignatius on the Senses and the Imagination

The foregoing excursus into a devotional tradition foreign to many in the Christian West will, I hope, offer new lenses for viewing practices that lie closer to home. As an example of the paradigm Hans Urs von Balthasar advocates, I examine a text that he lauds for its employment of human sensory and imaginative capacities in fostering religious experience: the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).³² The *Spiritual Exercises* fundamentally shaped the praxis of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, an order that emerged amidst the European Reformations. After examining the text’s treatment of the senses, I observe how, in Gaudiya Vaishnava terms, Ignatius avoids of the pitfalls of *bhukti* and *mukti*.

The *Spiritual Exercises* is a manual for instructors in the format of a month-long spiritual retreat. It provides a program of imaginative prayer that evolved from Ignatius’ observations and experiences in advising retreatants over a number of years. The four weeks of the retreat are designed to move from contemplation of sin (Week One), to a consideration of the life of Christ from the Annunciation to Palm Sunday (Week Two), through the Passion (Week Three), culminating

in the Resurrection and Ascension (Week Four). Each contemplation follows a general pattern: first, one must first recall the narrative, try to see the place,³³ and ask for a specific grace, often the palpable experience of a certain emotion. After these “preludes,” a number of “points” elaborate upon the physical and mental habits appropriate to the contemplation at hand. For example, the second contemplation of the second week, on the nativity, prescribes the following:

[111] The *first prelude* comes from the narration that has to be reviewed of the departure of the Blessed Virgin from the town of Nazareth: for example, how being already nine months pregnant, and sitting on a she-donkey (we may piously meditate), with her companion Joseph, with a young maid servant and an ox, they left for Bethlehem to pay tribute imposed by Caesar.

[112] The *second prelude* will be the consideration of the journey, estimating its length, direction, how smooth here and hard there. Thereafter, we may examine also the place of the Nativity, which was similar to a cave: how wide or narrow, flat or slanted, comfortable or not.

[113] The *third prelude* will not differ from the previous contemplation [which reads in *SE* 104, “The *third prelude* contains the request for grace: That I know intimately why the Son of God became man because of me, so that I would love Him more fervently and consequently follow him more resolutely”].³⁴

The preludes for contemplation on Christ’s prayer and arrest in the garden of Gethsemane follow the same structure but evoke a very different mood. After rehearsing the details of the narrative and reconstructing the place (to “look at the path: steep, level, and rough; to do the same with the Garden, describing its size, shape, and appearance”), the supplicant is to “ask for sorrow, tears, anguish, and other similar interior pains, so that I suffer with Christ suffering for me” (*SE* 202-203).

The points for meditation typically apply each of the five senses, which Ignatius calls the “five senses of the imagination” (*SE* 121), to the narrative at hand. He writes,

[122] The *first point* will be, with the imagination, to see all persons, and after having noticed the occurring circumstances regarding them, to draw out what is useful for us.

[123] The *second point* is to take out for our own use either what we hear them saying or what might be appropriate for them to say.

[124] The *third point* is to sense, through a kind of internal tasting and smelling, the great gentleness and sweetness of a soul imbued by the divine gifts and virtues, according to the person we are considering, and adapting to ourselves whatever should be of any fruit.

[125] The *fourth point* is to feel, through an inner sense of touch, and to kiss the clothes, the places, the footprints, and everything connected with such persons; so that, from it, a larger increase of devotion or of any spiritual good will happen for us.

This mental recreation of the sight, sound, taste, smell, and feel of the original drama is typical of most of the meditations. The contemplation of hell is especially vivid, picturing “the large fires burning in hell, and there the souls as if locked in burning bodies like a prison,” hearing the “lamentations, cries, screams, and blasphemies against Christ and the saints coming out of that place,” smelling “smoke, sulfur, the stink of excrement, and the foulness of decay,” tasting “the most sour things, like tears, bitterness, and the worm of conscience,” and “with the sense of touch [feeling] those same fires that consume souls enveloped in them” (SE 66-70). The roles of the devotee shift from scene to scene and do not approach the level of identity with a single character that is reached in Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The goal is to move beyond being a passive spectator of the divine drama and participate in it from as many angles as are useful. Such practices enrich the process of Christian formation, deepening one’s personal involvement with a variety of sacred stories and doctrines.

Ignatius appreciates the usefulness of the physical senses and emotions as well as the senses of the imagination. The last section of the *Spiritual Exercises* sets out rules “to be observed in order to truly feel with the orthodox church” (SE 352). These rules resemble the “limbs” of the Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana and include hymns, songs, prayers, sacraments, religious vows, and fast days as well as the praise of relics, saints, pilgrimages, churches and their ornaments, candles, images,³⁵ and the teachings of one’s superiors and church doctrines (SE 352-370). With grace, all of these exterior forms and activities have the potential to awaken a new sensory experience of the divine. They foster “the true sentiment which we ought to have in the church.”³⁶ Senses and emotions work together in Ignatian practice: at various points in the text Ignatius invites the devotee to pray to feel awe for the incarnation, fear of the terrors of hell, sorrow at the crucifixion, and deep joy because of the resurrection. He also accounts for emotions that come from outside oneself such as the consolations and desolations of the soul brought by good and bad angels and provides instructions for discerning between them. As Balthasar and the Gaudiya Vaishnavas would urge, Ignatius arrives at a new sensorium that avoids both aestheticism and radical apophaticism, both *bhukti* and *mukti*. He makes it clear that he does not want to locate the experience of God entirely in the natural realm. The *Exercises* have the expressed purpose of “conquering” oneself (SE 21); passages containing rules about eating (SE 210-217) and regulating one’s thoughts, words, and deeds (SE 32-42) provide methods for disciplining the body. Ignatius emphasizes the spiritual nature of the exercises at the outset:

By the words “Spiritual Exercises,” we should understand any method of examining our own conscience, and also of meditating, contemplating, praying mentally or orally, and finally of dealing with any other *spiritual* activities. ... In the same way that walking, traveling, and running are corporal exercises, so *preparing and disposing the soul* to remove all inordinate attachments and, after they have been removed, searching and finding the will of God about the management of one’s life and the salvation of the soul are *spiritual* exercises. (SE 1, my emphasis)

The retreat setting affords relative isolation from one's family, acquaintances, and daily concerns that is intended to aid in the removal of distractions and "inordinate attachments." The text advocates the cultivation of indifference toward created things outside their usefulness for achieving the spiritual ends of praising and serving God (*SE* 23), so that the employment of the sensory imagination is always in service of prayer.

Turning the gaze in the opposite direction, we see that Ignatius never approaches the apophatic negation that worries Balthasar, the absolute merger of God and soul that troubles the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, or an extreme form of mysticism in which one has immediate access to the divine presence. The sweetness of the "consolations" of God's nearness is always balanced with "desolations," the negative experience of sadness and divine absence. The spiritual director helps the retreatant to recognize these experiences so as not to be tempted or discouraged (*SE* 6-8, 313-336). Whether these emotions arise from good and evil spirits (as in Ignatius) or from the vicissitudes of one's individual psychology,³⁷ they require discernment and are not to be accepted in their immediacy. With the guidance of confessors, sacraments, and doctrines, the Christian imagination navigates the overlap between spiritual union and the physical senses to integrate both in the life of faith.

These traditions agree that reality always exceeds what is present through sight, touch, and sound. The imagination, subject to the critique of being mere fantasy or projection, is also humbled by divine mystery. Presence and absence, the apophatic and the cataphatic, consolations and desolations all have a place in the human experience of God. The dialectic is never fully resolved: the body is the only locus of access to the divine, yet there is always more that the senses cannot comprehend, an absence that transcends and eludes and intensifies one's thirst for something more. The Jesuits and the Gaudiya Vaishnavas provide texts and mentors to help the practitioner locate herself within the alternation of apophatic and cataphatic moments. When a devotee becomes distracted or obsessed with a particular practice or image, her guru or spiritual advisor might advise her to remove the image, try a new practice, or focus elsewhere. For both, discipline in the appropriate lifestyle, immersion in worship, and guidance by wise members of the community are key elements in fostering a healthy imagination of the divine.

Reaping and Relishing: Some Fruits of Comparison

This essay has extended Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics by investigating how spiritual disciplines both inside and outside the Christian tradition take into account the human faculties. By Balthasar's criteria, both traditions succeed in theorizing a devotional practice that avoids unhealthy extremes. Each provides the means to move beyond the literally given of bodily experience. The senses, emotions, and imagination are all developed from their natural capacities and attuned to the divine. For Ignatius, the senses must pass through the contemplation of sin and the fires of hell in the first week of retreat before they can be reborn with Christ.³⁸ Gaudiya Vaish-

navas warn against clinging to the sensory and emotional pleasures of devotion. Pure aestheticism or enjoyment (*bhukti*) cannot remain in either practice. Each tradition also eschews the immediacy of the most extreme forms of apophaticism or *mukti*, insisting that the human body and its capacities must be the locus of the divine-human encounter. The Gaudiya Vaishnava rejection of *mukti* addresses Balthasar's reservations about the radical negation of individual identity in union with God more directly than the *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius may simply assume this restraint, but the Goswamins spell out the limits of union with Krishna and of identification with the eternal actors in his divine realm.

Neither *bhukti* nor *mukti* can represent the fulfillment of devotion. For both traditions, human nature only fully and finally realizes its end in the attunement of both body and mind to God. This attunement is bi-directional: while the human being can train the mind and body to be open to God, God's grace both responds to and takes the initiative in the attunement of the human agent. Rupa Goswamin attests to the divine freedom to bestow the appropriate spiritual state upon devotees at any stage of service (after all, the glow of the iron rod is due to the fire, not inherent in the rod itself); and Ignatius prefaces all of his prescribed activities with a prayer for God to grant the practitioner success. To state the *bhukti/mukti* opposition in incarnational terms, the graced encounter is neither a solely human nor a solely divine event.

In observing the prominence of the senses and imagination in the devotional practices of these two textual traditions, I have noted ways in which the texts appear self-consciously to be avoiding similar pitfalls. A more sustained comparison would also test the flexibility of these traditions by mining other parallels and significant differences between them.³⁹ In conclusion of this limited exercise of comparative theological imagination, I offer three juxtapositions for further reflection: first, on the primary sensory metaphors of each tradition; second, on the relative contributions of the physical senses to the imagination; and third, on the potential flexibility of prescribed devotional roles. Each node invites further exploration in contemporary theological aesthetics.

First, differences in the primary sensory metaphors of our two examples elucidate the kinds of paradigms that Balthasar's theory of the new sensorium might be expanded to accommodate. Ignatius mainly calls upon visual metaphors of image and imagination for recreating scenes of meditation.⁴⁰ A similar practice occurs among the sixty-four limbs of *sadhana* with the practice of *smarana*, which Haberman translates as "'remembering,' 'bearing in mind,' or even 'visualizing'" the stories of Krishna in Vrindavan: "If one could somehow hold in mind (*smarana*) a mental image harmonious with Ultimate Reality, one would live in or participate in (*bhakti*) that reality. One becomes what one 'holds in mind.'"⁴¹ As Haberman describes *lila-smarana*, meditation on the play (*lila*) of Krishna and his companions,

The practice usually involves visualizing a particular dramatic scene of Vraja in great detail, establishing its setting (*desa*), time (*kala*), and characters (*patra*). *Mantras* are employed to assist the visualization. The practitioners memorize the descriptions of the various *lilas* in an impressively elaborate manner, using maps and diagrams to locate the more important *lila* activities. The mind is to be withdrawn from the ordinary world and

completely concentrated on and absorbed in the *lila* of Vraja.⁴²

As in Ignatian practice, Gaudiya Vaishnavas mentally recreate and meditate upon scriptural scenes; many practitioners follow Krishna and Radha through a cycle of eight periods each day. But despite the importance of imaginative practices, visualization remains a preparatory step in the cultivation of an emotional *taste*—*rasa*—for Krishna. The word *rasa*, which Rupa Goswamin features in the title of the *BRS*, means not only taste, but also relish or aesthetic delight. Ignatius affirms the aesthetic intent when he asserts that “it is not knowing much, but realizing and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies the soul” (*SE* 2).⁴³ Yet the focus of *bhakti* is subtly different from that of the *Exercises*, and each brings out the emotional and sensory perspectives/flavors possible in its own idiom. Within these primary senses, both traditions employ and refine all of the emotional, imaginative, and bodily capacities to the end of “relishing” God.

This comparison opens up constructive possibilities for fleshing out the new sensorium Balthasar so intriguingly proposes. Could it also be possible to relish the divine in a register dominated by resonance, echoes, and aural overtones? Or perhaps by scent and aroma, or tactile sensations of water, earth, flesh and blood? No single sense adequately grasps the divine mystery. One might even explore (as Don Saliers has done) the phenomenon of synaesthesia, sensory mixing such as hearing in color, for a theory of the new sensorium.⁴⁴ Like the Psalmist who mixes metaphors in the invitation to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8), each of the traditions surveyed here explores, combines, and presses the limits of the epistemological range afforded by sensory capacities.

Second, tasting the traditions together, we see that varying relations of sense to imagination are possible based on the location of the senses within each spiritual itinerary. The physical senses are more primary in the *BRS*, both in the sense of appearing early in the discipline (among the preparatory *angas*) and receiving at least as much detailed attention as the inner life. By contrast, Ignatius gives the bulk of his attention to the inner senses (imagination) and adds a list of useful physical practices only rather late in the work (*SE* 352-370). Balthasar notes that Ignatius’ followers diverge in their interpretations: is the application of the senses an advanced form of mystical meditation, or is it a prelude to the higher forms of prayer?⁴⁵ On the one hand, in his analogical use of the term “inner senses,” Ignatius seems to support the latter interpretation: what he really wants is higher spiritual activity, not a physical experience. One is reminded of Augustine, who resorts to sensory analogies as he struggles to describe his experience of God:

What do I love when I love my God? Not material beauty of a temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light, so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love my God. And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; but they are of the kind that I love in my inner self. ... This is what I love when I love my God.⁴⁶

On the other hand, the analogy must extend beyond language into embodied practice. Balthasar writes that “an either/or between the corporeal senses and the mystical sensibility,” cannot be true to Ignatian intent: “both of these seem to be included by Ignatius and they certainly were to be found as living realities in the author of the *Exercises* himself, without their mutually suppressing or jeopardizing one another.”⁴⁷ The applicability of the sensory analogy to embodied practices receives even more sustained attention in the Gaudiya Vaishnava discipline, where practices such as seeing the deity in the temple, smelling the incense, hearing and chanting the divine name, and caring for the images are genuine means of receiving the divine presence. Such a view of bodily potentiality is not unwelcome in a Christian sacramental universe, but the comparison urges Christians to consider anew the many dimensions of bodily knowing. The new sensorium will unite *all* of the human faculties at *each* stage of spiritual practice.

Finally, to what end is this new sensorium to be employed? Both of the texts I have examined posit service as the goal of devotion. For example, Krishna devotees aim to empty themselves of desire for personal pleasure until their relationship to God becomes pure service.⁴⁸ More explicitly, Ignatius invites the devotee to imagine herself at the Nativity as a “poor little servant, waiting on them according to their needs with the greatest reverence” (*SE* 114); and he transmutes his early knightly ambitions into service of Christ the King, who calls his subjects to war:

Faithful subjects should answer to the most lovable and generous king, and quickly offer themselves, ready to follow his entire will. ... [T]hose who decided to offer themselves entirely to Him will not only submit themselves to the pain of labor but will also offer greater and more magnificent gifts after having rejected the rebellion of the flesh, the senses, love of self, and love of the world. (*SE* 94, 97)

Service to God goes hand-in-hand with religious commitment in many religious contexts, but the present comparison suggests that without a plurality of imaginative models, emphasis on servitude can lead to the neglect of other devotional modalities. Diana Eck writes that encountering the “many tastes of Krishna” expands her “capacity to see and understand the meaning of the incarnation in Christ”⁴⁹ by drawing out the rich imaginative relations she might cultivate with Christ as the anticipated one, the child, the healer, the sufferer, and the resurrected Lord. The many roles that one might take toward Krishna (parent, friend, servant, and lover) kindle the imagination and might prompt Christians in the Ignatian tradition to diversify their devotional sentiments as well.

The advantage of this comparative excursus may find particular application with devotees who are not the originally intended audience of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The authors of a feminist edition of the *Exercises* have pointed out “difficulties many women have found and continue to find in Ignatian spirituality and the Exercises,” including “uncongenial” or even “deadly” symbolism.⁵⁰ In the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, concerns about excessive humility or subservience could be overcome by cultivating a *sthayibhava* other than that of service as one’s primary devotional relationship. The feminist editors of the *Exercises* intimate that the text’s inherent adaptability makes room for a diversity of devotional roles: “When those giving the Exercises adapt them to each

individual, women will find their unique personalities, desires and competencies informing their experience of the Exercises.”⁵¹ Having encountered the Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana, Christians might, for example, be inspired to retrieve medieval Christian mystical traditions of reflection on the Song of Songs better to understand the *sakhi*’s erotic love for the divine. The embodied imagination of the new sensorium opens up rather than forecloses such options.

Conclusion

Returning to Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, I conclude that both the Gaudiya Vaishnava and Ignatian traditions meet an important criterion: they neither devolve into a crass sensualism, nor do they culminate in a radically unitive mysticism. For Balthasar, however, no theological aesthetics is complete unless it conforms to the suffering and death of Christ:

This form ... does not appear as something relatively unique, as might be said of the creations of the other great founders. Qualitatively set apart from them, the Christ-form appears absolutely unique; but, on the basis of its own particular form, the Christ-form relates to itself as the ultimate centre the relative uniqueness of all other forms and images of the world, whatever realm they derive from. This relatedness of all myths and religious conceptions ... to the centre of God’s Incarnation necessarily has two sides: it is fulfillment through judgment.⁵²

Balthasar’s insistence on the utter uniqueness and objectivity of the Christ form has been challenged on several fronts,⁵³ not the least of which is his “inattentiveness to the social and historical context of human life.”⁵⁴ This investigation has suggested that to take the senses and imagination seriously is to open oneself to the diverse forms that originate in diverse religious contexts, without necessarily abandoning important critical principles. Balthasar’s insistence on the centrality of the crucifixion rejects any lens that occludes the reality of ugliness and loss. Although the Ignatian tradition places the passion of Christ at the center of its piety, it also integrates dark and frightening circumstances into its diverse meditations such as the conditions of the nativity or the horrors of hell. The Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition further demonstrates that a fully embodied religious imagination can attend to the full range of spiritual experience without direct reference to the cross.

Hans Urs von Balthasar calls for a new sensorium that heightens powers of sense and imagination; comparison has yielded a vision of the new sensorium that is historically and culturally variable. Both bodily and abstract, the imagination is a strange liminal power that refuses to surrender to mind-body dualism. As we have seen, the senses, emotions, and imagination are co-present and not easily distinguished; one or the other comes to the fore only in the process of analysis. Yet it is imagination that calls human beings forth from the literally-given of the physical toward the something-more of the transcendent. It keeps us firmly grounded in the body, without a reductionist or aestheticizing view of human fulfillment.

Notes

1 For an elaboration of this issue, see Kevin Mongrain, “Von Balthasar’s Way from Doxology to Theology,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 60-63.

2 Balthasar is not opposed to the mysticism that is part of the ordinary experience of faith, which is “an ever deeper awareness and experience both of the presence within him of God’s being and of the depth of the divine truth, goodness, and beauty in the mystery of God.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, edited by J. Fessio S. J. and J. Riches, translated by E. Leiva-Merikakis, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 166. There are various degrees of apophatic mysticism, but Balthasar worries that the more extreme varieties teeter dangerously on the brink of the absolute dissolution of all form through immersion in the Godhead. For him, the Christ-form is the archetype and norm for all genuine religious experience; this form should not be transcended as appears to be the case in Meister Eckhart and others. See Louis Dupré, “Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Aesthetic Form,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 312-13.

3 For a fine summary of the second problem in Balthasar, see Stephen Fields, S.J., “Balthasar and Rahner on the Spiritual Senses,” *Theological Studies* 57, no. 2 (2006): 224-41.

4 The interpreter should resist the medieval Christian temptation to intellectualize the spiritual senses in contrast with the five physical senses: “Spiritual senses, in the sense of Christian mysticism, presuppose devout bodily senses which are capable of undergoing Christian transformation” (Balthasar, 378). In Balthasar’s reading of Origen, “the five individual sensory senses are but the fall and scattering into the material of an original and richly abundant capacity to perceive God and divine things. ... the material state as a whole remains a good likeness and an indicator for the upward-striving spirit; and in Christ ... the lower sensibility unqualifiedly points the way to the heavenly sensibility” (Balthasar, 369).

5 Balthasar, 365.

6 Balthasar, 249.

7 Balthasar, 406.

8 The work of Frank Clooney, a Jesuit whose scholarly and religious imagination finds inspiration in the encounter with Hinduism, is an excellent example of fruitful comparative reading. See, for example, Francis Xavier Clooney, S.J., *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

9 Because Sanskrit diacritics are rarely helpful for non-specialist readers, I have omitted them in this article.

10 David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), 41-43.

11 Haberman’s *Acting as a Way of Salvation* provides an excellent study of this practice. For an overview of GaudiyaVaishnavism as a whole (also known as the Caitanya Sampradaya or Bengal Vaishnavism), see S. K. De, *The Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961).

12 Unless otherwise noted, the translations from Sanskrit of the *BRS* are my own. Citations from the commentaries are from the Maharaj translation: Sri Rupa Gosvami [*sic*], *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhuh*, translated by Swami B. H. Bon Maharaj (Vrindaban, U.P.: Institute of Oriental Philosophy, 1965).

13 See Maharaj, xxv-xxvi and Haberman, 31-35. Maharaj counts twelve *sthayibhavas*: five primary (the modes of love) and seven secondary (the remaining *rasas*). Haberman calls the five primary modes *bhakti-rasas* and subsumes them under a single *sthayibhava* of love (33).

14 For a thorough exposition of the relation of aesthetics to spirituality in traditional Indian theory, see J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan, *Aesthetic Rapture* (Poona: Deccan College, 1970).

15 *Atha Prema—Samyanmasrntasvanto Mamatvatisayankitah / Bhavah Sa Eva Sandratma Budhah Prema Nigadyate.*

16 See Maharaj, xxix-xxxviii and Haberman, 51-57. Rupa Goswamin alludes only briefly to the divisions of *prema bhakti* in *BRS*, as he treats them more fully in another text, the *Ujjvalanilamani*.

17 *Bhukti-Mukti-Sprha Yavat Pisaci Hrdi Vartate / Tavadbhakti-sukhasyatra Kathamabhyudayo Bhavet.* To be sure, this polemical shorthand glosses over important distinctions that would be made by defenders of *bhukti* and *mukti* as human ends. As in the Christian apophatic tradition, different Hindu schools and thinkers emphasize different degrees of mystical union.

18 Maharaj, 303.

19 *Atah Sri-Krishna-Namadi Na Bhaved Grahyamindriyaih / Sevnmukhe Hi Jihvadau Svayameva Sphuratyadah.*

20 Maharaj, xxix.

21 Maharaj, xxix.

22 Maharaj, 235.

23 *Avirbhuya-Manovrttau Brajanti Tatsvarupatam / Svayam Prakasarupapi Bhasamana Prakasyavat / Vastutah Svayamasvada-Svarupaiva Ratistvasau / Krshnadi-Karmakasvada-Hetutvam Pratipadyate.*

24 Maharaj, 335.

25 Commentary on *BRS* 1.4 in Maharaj, 14.

26 Maharaj, 85.

27 *Bhaktirasamrtasindhau Caratah Paribhuta-Kalajalabhiyah / Bhakta-Makaranasilita Mukti-Nadikannamasami* (Maharaj translation).

28 Donna M. Wulff, *Drama as a Mode of Religious Realization: The Vidagdhamādhava of Rūpa Gosvāmin* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 175.

29 Maharaj, 313.

30 Haberman, 83.

31 Maharaj, 323.

32 Balthasar, 373-78.

33 When Ignatius' intentions to live and minister in the Holy Land were thwarted, he resorted to mental recreation of the place through meditation. See *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, translated by Pierre Wolff (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1997), xv.

34 Citations from the *Spiritual Exercises* (*SE*) follow the official numbering of paragraphs. Unless otherwise noted, translations are from the Wolff translation.

35 I must note an important theological difference between these two traditions regarding the use of images in worship. Whereas Ignatius stipulates a symbolic interpretation in which images "are rightly worthy of veneration for what they represent" (*SE* 360), temple Hinduism maintains a closer link between the image (*murti*) and the deity. Once the image is installed in the temple, the deity properly resides in that image and is most (although not exclusively) accessible there. It is an act of grace wherein the formless God takes form for the sake of worshippers. Caring for temple images is an act of the utmost care and devotion. See Haberman, 135-137.

36 *SE* 352 in *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Father Elder Mullan, S.J. (New York: P.J. Kennedy and Sons, 1914), 189.

37 See Balthasar's interpretation, 412, and David A. Salomon, "Forging a New Identity: Narcissism and Imagination in the Mysticism of Ignatius Loyola," *Christianity and Literature* 47, no. 2 (1998): 208.

38 Balthasar, 374.

39 Further areas of inquiry include social, institutional, and theological applications of these texts in their communal settings and questions about degrees of institutional authority, the accommodation of difference within a discipline, and relative emphases upon community or individuality. In addition, theologies of incarnation and avatar have different implications for thinking about the relation of the human and the divine. For instance, Hindu traditions about the avatars often attribute Vishnu's human or animal appearance to a graced illusion rather than a "two nature" system like that of traditional Christology.

40 Salomon counts at least fifteen such usages in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Salomon, 207.

41 Haberman, 124.

42 Haberman, 126.

43 Mullan's translation, 4.

44 In his discussion of the role of music in Christian formation, Saliers proposes that synaesthesia might best account for how the senses factor into a healthy spirituality: "Synaesthesia is required for spiritual maturation. If we only take in the literal surface of what we hear in text and song, the awakening of the deeper dimensions of reality and of the soul are prevented. When the singing and the hearing allow us to 'taste and see,' we come to 'hear' more. The soul is awakened to a humanity stretched more deeply before the mystery and the glory of God." In "Sound Spirituality: On the Formative Expressive Power of Music for Christian Spirituality," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 8, no. 1 (2000): 5.

45 Balthasar, 378. See his full discussion of Ignatius on 373-378.

46 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), X.6.

47 Balthasar, 278.

48 Mukundadasa Goswamin's commentary on *BRS* 2.286 describes the process of spiritual maturation as "the process of dissolving the thirst for amorous desire in the Arms of the Beloved into the absolute pleasures of the Beloved only with complete self-effacement of self-pleasures on the part of the Gopis, which is the quality of pure Prema." The *gopis* (the cowherd women who are Krishna's lovers) transform their actions into pure service through the prayer that their attention toward Krishna will be pleasing to him. Maharaj, 291-292.

49 Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 99.

50 Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 3.

51 Dyckman et al., *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed*, 10.

52 Balthasar, 507. For more on Balthasar's stance on non-Christian religions, see Raymond Gawronski, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter Between East and West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995). Because it is beyond the scope of the present article to develop a full theology of religions that would account for the overlap between Hindu and Christian deployments of the senses, I would refer the reader to James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

53 See, for example, Dupré, 316-17.

54 Susan Ross, "Women, Beauty, and Justice: Moving Beyond von Balthasar," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2005): 92.