

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Religion below the surface: an experience of the senses

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After spending a week at a Religious Diversity Leadership Workshop at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, I left with a new appreciation for the ways the world's religions express their spirituality and values — especially through engaging all five senses. The Eastern religious houses of worship we visited, including Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Sikh temples, encapsulated this beautifully. Here are a few short examples of how the religions of India use all five senses in worship and practice.

SIGHT

Upon arrival at Hindu temples,



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visitors are greeted with vibrant color and bright decorations that surround the muratis (images of God). Hinduism is centered on

darsan, which takes sight to mean something beyond the colors; it is the experience of seeing the divine image and, in turn, being seen by the divine image. This is considered the essential personal practice of worshipping the divine.

HEARING

Music and chanting are powerful tools for spirituality. In the Sikh Gurdwara, part of the worship ceremony is music provided

by members of the community, singing hymns from their scripture — the Guru Granth Sahib. Additionally, in Hinduism, chanting is said to be a purifying and cathartic practice, both for the person performing the chant and the person hearing it.

TASTE

Sharing food is a unifying act and is an important element of Sikhism through prashad and langar. Upon leaving the sanctuary, the worshipper or guest is offered a handful of a sweet rice-like food called prashad, which is considered the grace of the Guru. Following the visit is a communal meal shared by Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, called a langar. Eating together represents the equality and oneness of human-

kind and is the Sikh expression of hospitality.

SMELL

The smell of a temple is integral to the spiritual experience. When we arrived at a Buddhist temple for a meditation practice, incense was lit to mark our presence in a sacred space. Further, in the Hindu and Jain temples we toured, the smell of the oil lamp offerings signified the full engagement of self in worship.

TOUCH

In Indian, and especially Hindu culture, there is a tradition called pranam, which is a ritual of touching the feet of elders and teachers as a sign of respect, reverence and humility.

Other forms of pranam include kneeling and placing your forehead to the ground, as well as bowing with your hands folded and touching your chest.

Religion is about more than just scripture or doctrine — it's about how these are expressed, both humanly and divinely. This overview does not come close to capturing the depth of worship through the senses or the traditions of the religions, so I encourage readers to experience this for themselves. By focusing on engaging all five senses, people can better understand other traditions' experiences while strengthening their own. After all, religion is not just meant to be heard; it is meant to be felt.

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