

Faith of the senses: Christianity in five objects

by [S. Brent Plate](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue

Devout people in many religious traditions often denigrate material goods, suggesting that the object of devotion is beyond what can be seen, felt, and heard. Yet a look at religious history, including Christian history, reveals a deep-seated, perennial love for things. Objects large and small, valuable and worthless, are part of the tradition from the beginning, creating memories and meanings for the Christians who pray and worship, love and share, make pilgrimage and make music. An account of Christian history is incomplete if it ignores material things.

My aim here is to tell a story of Christian life in five objects, with frequent reference to the human body that connects and corresponds with these objects. This history does not pretend to be comprehensive, nor is it a “greatest hits” of Christian material history. It does aim to reorient our gaze and to help us understand faith as derived from rudimentary experiences and lived, embodied practices.

## 1. Stone of Anointing, Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem



Photo by Matthew Roth

The pilgrims come, often on battered knees, to kiss, weep, and pray over the large stone slab at the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Stone of Anointing is known as the place where Joseph of Arimathea prepared Jesus’ body for burial. While the current stone dates only from 1810, when it was installed after a devastating fire, the power of place endows it with an eternal energy. For many pilgrims, this is the most holy place of Christianity, the site of Jesus’ death, entombment, and resurrection.

While the historical setting of the stone clearly lends it power, something inherent in the solid substance itself makes it a natural conduit for sacred energy. Perhaps it is the ubiquity of stones in human life, their pragmatic functions as tools, weapons,

and markers as well as their durability and relative immutability, that has prompted us to bestow certain ones with spiritual power.

Japanese Buddhists put stones at the center of their temple gardens; the Black Stone stands at the southeast corner of the Kaaba in Mecca, the axis mundi of Islam; and a little more than a stone's throw from the Stone of Anointing is the Dome of the Rock, standing over the Foundation Stone, the setting for the ancient Holy of Holies of the Israelite temple. Stones link us to people and events across the years and draw us to them from thousands of miles away.

An Eritrean refugee named Teame Tesfamichae came to pray at the Stone of Anointing and touch his forehead against the hard surface. "I have no words to express what it means for me to pray here," he told Judith Sudilovsky, a reporter for Catholic News Service in 2012. "More than anything, I feel the one who died here for me." Here the touch of an object, a physical connection with a place, compresses time and evokes a feeling of connection beyond words.

The devout bring their personal crucifixes, icons, and Bibles to the stone. The sacred energy is distributed from object to object and carried home. The stone is slick, worn smooth from thousands upon thousands of fingers caressing its surface—touches that connect the faithful with the life and death of Jesus.

Stone is used globally as a medium for remembering what has come before. Many of us keep stones on our shelves that were taken from some meaningful place and serve as a souvenir. Humans feel connections with stones; they fondle them, touch them, kiss them, and tell stories by them.

## **2. Kebaro (drum), Aksum Museum in Aksum, Ethiopia**



The first beating of the *Homo sapiens* heart occurred almost 200,000 years ago along the Omo River in the southwestern portion of what is now Ethiopia. That country is one of the world's oldest Christian nations. Before the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire, King Ezana was converted to Christianity, and he made it the religion of his kingdom, then known as Aksum and centered north of present-day Addis Ababa. Eighteen hundred years later, Christianity is still professed by close to two-thirds of the people.

The pulse of the liturgy in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is maintained by the kebaro, a large, double-sided kettle drum. Typically stored in the treasure house of the church, the kebaro is used only on Sundays and feast days. It is played by debtaras, musicians who stand in long lines. Their drumming is accompanied by chants, the jangling of sistrums, and the unified pounding of prayer sticks on the ground.

Debtaras trace their roots back to St. Yared, a sixth-century musician credited with creating the sacred music tradition of Ethiopia. Debtara training is extensive, beginning around age five. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the kebaro is that it has been regarded as a symbol of Christ himself. The drum and its sounds signal the presence of the Word of God. The Word is heard, just as 1 John 1 testifies: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard . . . concerning the word of life."

Over the years some Christians have been opposed to drums. Fundamentalist preachers in the United States who condemn rock 'n' roll's raunchy lyrics often cite the sound of the drum as particularly egregious. Such preachers are extending a critique lodged by many missionaries, who sought to eliminate the use of "heathen" drums. One striking example comes from the Sami people of Lapland, who call their time before Christians arrived "drum time" and the time afterward "the time when one had to hide the drums."

### **3. Gold censer, adorned with 60 jewels—ca. third century, location unknown**

The medieval *Liber Pontificalis* (*Book of the Popes*), which offers biographical details of church leaders in the early centuries of Christianity, includes extensive

descriptions of gifts that Emperor Constantine donated to the church. Constantine built the original basilica of St. Peter in Rome and filled it with precious objects—silver pitchers and chalices, bronze candelabras, and an enormous gold cross, among other items. The *Liber Pontificalis* tells of a gold censer given for “ornament” which weighed 15 pounds and was “adorned on every side with jewels, 60 in number.” The object was most likely plundered during one of the Gothic sacks of Rome, and its location is unknown today.

That Constantine’s censer was listed as an ornament offers a clue to understanding its early use. As Christianity emerged from its pagan and Jewish roots, its leaders renounced the use of incense. Burning sacrifices offered a “pleasing odor to the Lord,” according to Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus, but St. John Chrysostom tried to counter such anthropomorphic tendencies, declaring, “God has no nostrils.” The influential theologian Origen, writing in the third century, suggested that one clear way to distinguish Christians from pagans was by the burning of incense. Jesus Christ, Origen claimed, will “defend us from the earth-spirits intent on lust, and blood, and sacrificial odors, and strange sounds, and other sensual things.” A censer might serve as an ornament, but in the early years of the church it was not given a place in Christian worship as it was among Jews or pagans.

As Christianity began to create its own unique identity, certain symbolic objects and actions were to be left behind. New religious movements and reformations often bring with them a purging of sensual-ritual activities, claiming to aspire to something higher, by which is meant something more invisible.

But however much leaders insist that God cares about the inner life and a contrite heart, people remain sensually motivated beings. The very fact that early church leaders had to continually speak out against the use of incense implies that the practice continued among Christians. And Christians continued to tell the story of the three precious gifts given to the Christ child—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—two of which were meant to be burned to provide a pleasing aroma.

#### **4. Low-gluten altar bread, Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, Clyde, Missouri**



For Roman Catholics, wheat bread and alcoholic wine are the approved ingredients of the Eucharist, and there is to be no substitute—no

gluten-free bread, no alcohol-free wine. In 1995, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, writing as prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, defended this stance and stated, “Given the centrality of the celebration of the Eucharist in the life of the priest, candidates for the priesthood who are affected by celiac disease or suffer from alcoholism or similar conditions may not be admitted to holy orders.”

Nonetheless, practice has proved more pliable. The Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration have become the global suppliers of bread for Catholics who suffer from gluten intolerance. The community began in 1874 when a small group of women left Switzerland and came to the United States, founding a monastery in Clyde, Missouri, that ministered to German immigrants. The sisters taught school, ran an orphanage, and started a farm. In 1910 they began to make altar breads and are now one of the world’s largest religious producers of such breads.

In 2003, the sisters began making low-gluten wafers, and they have since been overwhelmed by the demand. In conjunction with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops they came up with a recipe that uses a wheat starch with most of the gluten removed. It is still made with wheat only and thus fulfills the Roman Catholic requirement, but the gluten content is less than .01 percent, making it safe for most people who suffer from celiac disease.

In 2007 the worldwide Anglican Communion studied the need to use a substitute for wheat bread and alcoholic wine in parts of the world where Christians do not have access to these substances. The Anglican report reconfirmed that using wheat bread and alcoholic wine is best but said the final decision on practice should be made at the local level.

In Uganda, during the years of Idi Amin’s ruthless reign, when it was difficult to obtain wine and bread, Anglicans used banana juice or Coca-Cola in place of wine and biscuits for bread. During the height of the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba, churches on the island began to brew a kind of wine made of honey, fruit, and grain. In war-torn Sudan, bread has often been unavailable and so cassava is used. There are accounts of Polynesians using coconut and of Hawaiians using poi instead of bread. Ethnic East Asian Protestant churches in Los Angeles have used rice for communion—not because they can’t find bread but because that’s what was used in their members’ homeland, in places where bread does not have comparable symbolic powers.

## 5. Tattoo photo collage, Flatirons Community Church, Lafayette, Colorado

In a vast,

repurposed Walmart located between Denver and Boulder, Flatirons Community Church throbs with a \$2 million audiovisual system that cranks out U2, Foo Fighters, and Led Zeppelin cover songs performed by a live band. Earplugs are available at the entrance. Since it began 20 years ago in a high school auditorium, Flatirons has become one of the largest congregations in Colorado, with over 15,000 people attending four services on any given weekend.



Part of the emerging church movement, Flatirons is a long way from the fundamentalism of the 20th century. This church does not proclaim a Christ against culture, to use H. Richard Niebuhr's terms, but a Christ of culture who seeks to transform it. Among other trends, the emerging church is marked by progressive social attitudes and a resurgence of the arts: visual representations of all kinds dominate meeting spaces and worship services.

The expansive open lobby at Flatirons displays a wall-sized photo collage made from hundreds of small images of individual tattoos. Closeups of Celtic crosses on biceps are portrayed next to death dates etched into skin; a Chi-Rho appears on a back near an alpha and omega tattooed on a leg. Collectively the images morph into a large, five-paneled image of a muscular man's shoulders, shirtless, heavily inked, and flexing.

The art project came about in 2007, when the church hosted a sermon series with the title "Flatirons Ink," taking off from reality television shows like *Miami Ink* and *LA Ink*. Believing that "everyone's got a story, everyone's been marked," the organizers encouraged those with tattoos to get their marks photographed and to record their stories.

Tattoos might be seen as a new fashion in the faith, but the history of Christianity shows otherwise. *Tattoo*, the term most commonly used for permanent body markings in the modern West, comes from a Polynesian word, and such markings have been found in cultures around the world for several millennia. In the ancient Mediterranean world they were known by the Greek term *stigma* (plural, *stigmata*), a word that in contemporary times carries the negative connotations of the original. A stigma was an indelible body mark, painfully applied with needles or brands, which showed the downgraded social status of the person—slaves and criminals were distinguished this way. Certain Christians adopted the stigma as a way to show their commitment to be a “slave to God.” Later deemed heretical, the fourth-century Montanists used crosses as a stigma on their bodies, while persecuted Coptic Christians tattooed crosses on their inner arms as a sign of faithfulness. Ethiopian Christians even today sometimes have a cross tattooed on their forehead to display their faith. For almost two millennia, tattoos have visually and bodily marked faith. Flatirons Church is reviving an ancient tradition.

Though my choice of these five objects is somewhat arbitrary, each relates to the use of one of the five senses—touching, hearing, smelling, tasting, or seeing. Which is also to say that the history of Christianity is also a history of the senses. In book ten of the *Confessions*, St. Augustine refers to his “knowledge” of God and tells of “a certain kind of light and sound and fragrance and food and embrace in loving my God.” Augustine’s God is multisensual.

Most of us will probably not have such an intense, singular, all-encompassing experience of God. Yet each of us has chewed a delightful morsel of food, smelled an irresistible flower, touched a smoothed stone that tingled the fingers, heard music that sent shivers down the spine, or seen an image that made us stop and weep. When we recognize the depths of our own sensual body and our shimmering material world, we begin to realize the depths of the body of Christ, a body with sense organs.

*This article is adapted from S. Brent Plate's book A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses, published by Beacon Press.*