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Listening and Knowledge in Reformation Europe (1500–1650): Workshop Report

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The study of religion and media in early modern Europe has been shaped by two interrelated narratives: “ocularcentrism”, which posits a causal link between the sixteenth-century Reformation and the proliferation of the printed book, and the “de-sensualization” paradigm rooted in the Weberian notion of the disenchantment of the magical, ritualistic and sensuous world of medieval Christianity and its replacement with sober, intellectual, and individual modes of religiosity. Media and religious historians have often stressed the essential role of the “Gutenberg revolution” and visual technologies of communication, while historians of science have repeatedly shown how the invention of early modern optical instruments, such as the telescope or microscope, contributed to the dominance of the eye as an epistemic organ in scientific observation. Without questioning the importance of vision in general, the aim of the workshop “Listening and Knowledge in Reformation Europe (1500–1650)”, held at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin in May 2015, was to initiate a more intensive interdisciplinary consideration of the role of sound and hearing in sixteenth-century Europe.

The workshop was organized in the framework of the Max Planck research project “Disciplining the Sense of Hearing: Auditory Practices in Sixteenth-Century Geneva”, which investigates the sensory economy and practices of auditory communication in early Calvinism.¹ Taking the religious Reformation as a point of departure, the workshop brought together prominent scholars from different disciplines in order to set up a broader discussion of the epistemic function of hearing in different contexts and fields of action such as architectural acoustics, natural philosophy, sermon listening, memory studies, bodily disciplining, and musical listening. In the six papers (by Matthew Milner, Anna Kvíčalová, Jan-Friedrich Missfelder, Bruce Smith, Jacomien Prins, and Penelope Gouk), sound and auditory perception were approached both as epistemic tools, consciously used to obtain or advance specific knowledge, and as objects of philosophical and scientific investigation. The objective of the papers was to examine how performative and speculative knowledge of the auditory was located within a network of specific social and disciplinary practices, patterns of individual behaviour, and configurations of objects of material culture.

Despite the historiographical narrative of the hegemony of vision that gives primacy to the eye in Western epistemology and media communication, research

¹ The research project is carried out by the author of this paper, who was also an organizer of the workshop. The project is part of the Max Planck research group “Epistemes of Modern Acoustics”.

on the relationship between human sensory perception and knowledge in early modern Europe has recently shifted from the preoccupation with visual/textual means of communication and observation towards more nuanced approaches emphasizing the complexity of interactions between the visual and oral/aural means of knowledge transmission. However, although Reformation historians have recently paid growing attention to the study of practices and experience, the sensory dimension of the Reformation has remained almost completely neglected as an object of scholarly interest. By focusing both on discourses around the senses and on the ways in which the sensorium was exercised in day-to-day practice, this workshop's contributions approached "the auditory" not only as a reflection of particular social historical contexts, but also as an indispensable tool in those contexts' fabrication.

The reciprocal influence between a new sensory economy and the reformed ecclesiastical hierarchy was demonstrated, for example, in Missfelder's study of the Zwinglian Reformation in Zurich, where reformed soundscapes were ordered in such a way as to express the new religious order. Emphasizing the continuities with the pre-Reformation church, Milner investigated some specific strategies and acoustic technologies employed to manage sound and its experience in the late medieval English parish church, where church buildings were tuned to specific religious needs, prioritizing certain sounds and aural relationships over others. The new centrality of spoken instruction in the reformed communities often required significant changes in people's listening and learning habits. Thus, in Calvinist Geneva, the new ideal of attentive listening was so different from the past experience that a substantial part of the city's population found themselves suffering from some kind of hearing disability when it came to the reception of the sermon. In the Genevan primary sources, hearing disability is therefore often best understood not as a medical diagnosis, but as a culturally and socially negotiated category whose boundaries are not clear-cut (Kvíčalová).

The Protestant attentiveness to the auditory – discussed in the morning programme of the workshop – was mirrored by investigations into the nature of sound and hearing in a wider European context. In the period under scrutiny, various kinds of knowledge were believed to be accessible only through hearing: apart from religious knowledge, which the Reformation located in the realm of audible language, they included knowledge of particular processes in the natural world that escaped visual observation. This famously applies to Francis Bacon's proposal for a natural history of sound and music, in which attentive listening was seen as an indispensable mode of acquiring knowledge about, and understanding of, the natural world (Gouk).

The heightened interest in the epistemic function of the senses that accompanied the sixteenth century's religious upheavals clearly converges with larger trends within European intellectual debates and practices of the time. It remains difficult to pinpoint the exact relationship between the Reformation and the contemporary shifts in understanding of the nature and status of human sensory experience. What is certain, however, is that direct experience acquired through the senses gradually began to play an important role in many different contexts and fields of action, ranging from religious epistemology and natural philosophy to architectural acoustics, musical theory and practice, mnemonics, physiology,

and media communication. An excellent example of the growing significance of sense experience, on the one hand, and the still prevailing authority of the ancient textual tradition, on the other, are theories of sound and auditory perception proposed by Girolamo Cardano (Prins). Cardano's case demonstrates very well the fluidity of categories such as natural/supernatural or religious/scientific, and cuts across the existing historiographical notions of religious Reformation and scientific revolution.

For the study of religion, media and knowledge, the workshop challenged some major historiographical narratives and opened up alternative perspectives on the study of the sixteenth century's modes of communication. Whether some of these will find their way into the field of religious studies, and into Reformation history in particular, remains to be seen in the coming years and publications.