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Religio. 2018, vol. 26, iss. 1, pp. [31]-48

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138364>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Sensing the Reformation: How Media-Historical Narratives Constrain the Study of Religious Change

ANNA KVÍČALOVÁ

The scholarly notion of the relationship between religion, media and the senses has long been grounded in the modern understanding of religion as a system of belief in which inner states of piety are superior to their external manifestations, and the content privileged over form. Although this notion has received substantial criticism for being historically modeled on a Western idea of religion influenced by its chiefly Protestant reduction to a set of propositions and beliefs grounded in the text of the Bible,¹ one of its implications has proven especially enduring: namely, the tendency to perceive material and performative aspects of a religion as secondary to its doctrines and texts. Despite a growing interest in seeking intersections between the study of religions, media studies and anthropology, Reformation historiography has long remained untouched by such tendencies. Even though media history initially brought a fresh and promising perspective to the study of religions, the influential “grand narratives” that were formulated in this context have been used to interpret Western religious history as a transition from one form of mediation to another or, to put it differently, to impose a simplistic binary framework on the study of religions (oral/written, sensual/spiritual, ritualistic and performative/intellectual), one which often carries and repeats the kind of dualist thinking that itself stems from religious rhetoric and strategies of othering.

1 For such a perspective, see most famously Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category”, in: id., *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1993, 27-54; Timothy Fitzgerald, “A Critique of ‘Religion’ as a Cross-Cultural Category”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9/2, 1997, 91-110; Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”, in: Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1998, 269-284, and Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997, 27-51. The conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that religion is not a phenomenon *sui generis*, but has a plurality of meanings and contents, and as such cannot be used as an explanatory concept. For the criticism of the notion of religion as being constituted by “beliefs” and, by extension, information transmittable by language, see also Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, trans. Heather MacLean – Catherine Porter, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2010.

In what follows, I will reflect on the emerging trend in Reformation historiography that puts a growing emphasis on the study of the senses. I will argue that a research focus on sensory experience and the materiality of religious communication in general can substantially enrich existing scholarship on the Reformation; however, in order to get a clear image of what was at stake in sixteenth-century religious upheavals and how religious change was achieved and experienced by its actors, we must closely inspect primary sources and substantially revise existing media-historical paradigms.

Examining the “de-sensualization” paradigm

In recent years, Reformation historians have increasingly abandoned the traditional account of the Reformation as a primarily doctrinal and political controversy, and attended more to its practices and religious experience.² This mirrors a more general trend in the study of religion that places a growing emphasis on material religious practices, without imagining them as secondary to beliefs and ideas.³ The “material turn” in the

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- 2 Attention to the ritual is represented perhaps most prominently by Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400-c. 1580*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1992; Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press 1997; Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany*, New York: Routledge 2007, and ead., *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany*, New York: Oxford University Press 2012, where she approaches the Reformation as a shift from what she calls “affective” piety to a more rationalized and disciplined mode of religious expression. For the view of the Reformation as a change in religious experience, emphasizing both continuities and discontinuities between Catholic and Protestant modes of piety, see Robert W. Scribner, “The Reformation, Popular Magic and the Disenchantment of the World”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23/3, 1997, 475-494; Alexandra Walsham, “The Reformation and ‘the Disenchantment of the World’ Reassessed”, *The Historical Journal* 51/2, 2008, 497-528, and Karin Maag – John D. Witvliet (eds.), *Worship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Change and Continuity in Religious Practice*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2004.
 - 3 For an integrated material approach to religion, see Birgit Meyer – Dick Houtman, “Material Religion – How Things Matter”, in: Dick Houtman – Birgit Meyer (eds.), *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, New York: Fordham University Press 2012, 1-23; David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1998, and id. (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, New York: Routledge 2010. In the introduction to the volume, Morgan argues for a material approach to belief, which he understands as “acting, feeling, intuiting, and imagining absorbed and practiced over time are signified by a proposition of belief” (David Morgan, “Introduction: The Matter of Belief”, in: id. (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, New York: Routledge 2010, 1-18: 5). See also Minna Opas – Anna Haapalainen (eds.), *Christianity and the Limits of Materiality*, London: Bloomsbury 2017.

humanities does not signal a unified or homogenous approach, but encompasses different strands of research in anthropology, art history, science studies, feminist theory, and the neurosciences. What most of these approaches have in common, however, is that they call into question what is sometimes labeled as a *representationalist* notion of culture, one that posits a hierarchical relationship between “reality” and its descriptions, representations, and – what is especially relevant for the present discussion – mediations.⁴ The focus on performance and various aspects of the materiality of cultural actions promises to offer a more complex and nuanced picture of the nature of historical practices, discourses and material phenomena, which are always informed by one another.⁵ In this vein of thought, media and mediation are no longer seen as something external to religion, but as an essential component that is not ontologically inferior or derived from meaning. Scholars such as Birgit Meyer and Hent de Vries propose to study religion and culture as mediation:⁶ by focusing on practices of material mediation, they argue, we can study the processes by which particular cultures or communities are made, performed, and changed.⁷ In this avenue of research, most attention has been paid to the

4 “Representationalism” that was associated with the previous “linguistic turn” in the study of culture received substantial criticism from poststructuralist, postcolonial critics, or feminists. A useful overview can be found in Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, *Signs* 28/3, 2003, 801-831.

5 A specific notion of performance is developed by John T. Mitchell as part of his criticism of the representationalist notions of culture: performance, he argues, has a *mimetic*, not imitative relationship to reality and, consequently, media do not carry meanings, but “create relationships”. Mitchell refers to an “ontological turn” in anthropology, which allows researchers to combine sensory, performative and cognitive perspectives in the study of religion, without assuming a single universal nature that underpins human thinking and actions. See John T. Mitchell, “Ontology, Mimesis, and Divine Intervention: Understanding Catholic Visionaries”, in: John P. Mitchell – Michael Bull (eds.), *Ritual, Performance, and the Senses*, London – New York: Bloomsbury 2015, 11-30.

6 See Hent De Vries, “In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Religious Studies”, in: Hent de Vries – Samuel Weber (eds.), *Religion and Media*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2001, 3-42; Jeremy Stolow, “Religion and/as Media”, *Theory, Culture and Society* 22/4, 2005, 119-145; Birgit Meyer, “From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms and Styles of Binding”, in: ead. (ed.) *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion and the Senses*, New York: Palgrave 2009, 1-28.

7 Birgit Meyer coined the term “aesthetic formations” to designate the practices, values, ideas, and objects that both emerge and are sustained through sharing media (B. Meyer, “From Imagined Communities...”, 6-11.)

inspections of visual cultures and modes of representation: hence the term “pictorial turn” is sometimes evoked in the study of religions.⁸

Although Reformation historiography has turned its attention to religious experience, its approach to the study of the ritual was long embedded in the representationalist and highly logocentric view of the ritual as something that needs to be “read” and interpreted with respect to its pre-existing meaning. At the same time, the study of religion and mediation in the early modern period has been strongly influenced by the now classic association of the Reformation with the “Gutenberg Revolution”, linking Protestantism to the history of the printed page and visual techniques of representation in general.⁹ Another important strand is Walter Ong’s and Jack Goody’s accounts of Western history as the transition from an oral to a predominantly literate culture.¹⁰ The scholarly narrative of the hegemony of vision in Western science and epistemology¹¹ has become entwined

8 For an overview of the “pictorial turn”, see Birgit Meyer, “Picturing the Invisible: Visual Culture and the Study of Religion”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27/4-5, 2015, 333-360.

9 See most importantly Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983; Marshal McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1962, or id., *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: Sphere Books 1964. For more nuanced studies of the book during the Reformation, see Rodolphe Peter – Bernard Roussel (eds.), “Le livre de la Réforme”, *Revue française d’histoire du livre* 50/1, 1986 (monothematic issue); Jean-François Gilmont (ed.), *The Reformation and the Book*, Aldershot: Ashgate 1998.

10 The so-called “literacy thesis” posits a causal link between the development of reading and writing and the evolution of logic and rational thinking in Western culture, in which visual methods of communication and knowledge production finally triumphed over oral and aural ones in the pre-modern period. See especially Jack Goody – Ian Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5/3, 1963, 304-345; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London: Routledge 1988; id., *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1958, and id., *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1967. See also M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy... For a concise criticism of the literacy thesis, see John Halverson, “Goody and the Implosion of the Literacy Thesis”, Man 27/2, 1992, 301-317. For the notion of a feedback loop between oral and literate forms of communication, see, e.g., Adam Fox, Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700, New York: Oxford University Press 2000; Daniel Woolf, “Memory and Historical Culture in Early Modern England”, Journal of the Canadian Historical Association 2/1, 1991, 283-308.*

11 The connection between vision, knowledge and ontology is discussed in David M. E. Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1993. For the embeddedness of objectivity in “visual and legible” and centrality of vision to empiricism, see Loraine Daston – Peter Galison (eds.), *Objectivity*, New York: Zone Books 2007, or Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2001. The gradual dominance of reading and writing in academia, where “academic charisma” was in-

with the Weberian notion of modernity, imagining the sixteenth-century Reformation as a transition from the oral, sensual, and performative religious culture of the Middle Ages to sober, intellectual and individualized modes of religiosity characterized by text-based religious communication.¹² The fact that even the most radical branches of Protestantism, such as Calvinism, took shape around their own sensory programs has not yet been widely recognized, which owes partly to a still inadequate interrogation of the “de-sensualization” paradigm in the study of the Reformation.

Sensory anthropology as a separate field of inquiry has grown rapidly over the last twenty years and has significantly contributed to historicizing human sensation on the grounds that sensory perception is always to some extent historically constructed and shaped by various social, political, and cultural forces.¹³ Vision remains the best studied of the senses, but audi-

creasingly manufactured by written expertise instead of the traditional oral disputation is examined in William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Researched University*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2007. But see also the contrary argument about the growing uncertainty of vision in Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007. In contrast to the Western notions of vision-based objectivity, Steven Feld has coined the term “acoustemology” (acoustic epistemology) to describe how the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea relied primarily on the sense of hearing in determining objective “truths” about their environment; see most importantly Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1982, and id., “Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Places Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea”, in: Steven Feld – Keith H. Basso (eds.), *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press 1996, 91-135.

- 12 This is an approach typical of traditional Reformation historiography. See, e.g., Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1971; Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986, but also Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, especially Chapters 1 and 2; E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars...*; E. Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe...*; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998; Richard van Dülmen, “The Reformation and the Modern Age”, in: Scott C. Dixon (ed.), *The German Reformation: The Essential Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell 1999, 196-219, and S. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling...*
- 13 For sensory history in general, see most importantly Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, New York: Routledge 1993; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, New York: Routledge 1993; Nadia C. Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Memory and Perception as Material Culture in Modernity*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1994; Michel Serres, *Les cinq sens*, Paris: Hachette 1999; David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 2003; id. (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press

tory history has received sustained scholarly attention as well, both within and outside the now well-established field of “sound studies”.¹⁴ Even though the relationship between religiosity and the senses is explored in a growing number of studies,¹⁵ the topic of sound and religion has – apart from the study of liturgical music – not yet attracted significant scholarly attention.¹⁶

1991, and id. (ed.), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg 2005; Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2007, and a six-volume series of *A Cultural History of the Senses* (Constance Classen – Jerry P. Toner – Anne C. Vila – Richard G. Newhauser – David Howes – Herman Roodenburg [eds.], *A Cultural History of the Senses*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing 2014).

- 14 The history of listening long focused mainly on the object of listening, not on the hearing subjects, whose auditory experience was long believed to be stable throughout history. A different approach was adopted in James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1995, and later in Nikolaus Bacht (ed.), “Listening: Interdisciplinary Perspectives”, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135, 2010 (monothematic issue), or Jan-Friedrich Missfelder, “Period Ear: Perspektiven einer Klanggeschichte der Neuzeit”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 38, 2012, 21–47. For the cultural history of hearing and the ear, see Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past...*, 41–58, and id. (ed.), *Hearing History: A Reader*, Athens: University of Georgia Press 2004; Veit Erlmann (ed.), *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, Oxford: Berg 2004, and id., *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality*, New York: Zone Books 2010. A pioneering work on historical attitudes to hearing is Charles Burnett – Michael Fend – Penelope Gouk (eds.), *The Second Sense: Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgement from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, London: The Warburg Institute – University of London 1991. Bruce Smith, *The Acoustic World in Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999, remains one of the best accounts of the early modern English auditory culture. For “sound studies” in general, see Jonathan Sterne (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge 2012, or Trevor Pinch – Karin Bijsterveld (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013.
- 15 See especially Wietse de Boer – Christine Göttler (eds.), *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden: Brill 2013; Paul L. Gavryluk – Sarah Oakley (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012; Stephen G. Nichols – Andreas Kablitz – Alison Calhoun (eds.), *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames*, Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press 2008, but also Daniela Hacke – Paul Musselwhite (eds.), *Empire of the Senses: Sensory Practices of Colonialism in Early America*, Leiden: Brill 2017. See also chapters on religion and the senses in the individual volumes of C. Classen et al. (eds.), *A Cultural History of the Senses...* For Christian conceptions of vision and hearing, see also David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press 1992.
- 16 Even in the study of church music, however, the listening audience still remains a relatively marginal topic of scholarly interest. Important recent studies on music and singing in the Reformation are Daniel Trocmé-Latter, *The Singing of the Strasbourg Protestants, 1523–1541*, Farnham: Ashgate 2015, and Alexander J. Fisher, *Music, Piety, and Propaganda: The Soundscape of Counter-Reformation Bavaria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014. For religion and sound/listening in general, see espe-

As far as the history of the Reformation is concerned, its relationship with sensory history has been complicated by two coexisting and connected assumptions: whereas media historians saw the Reformation, and the specific techniques of engagement with text that developed around it, as a cornerstone of modern visual culture, historians of religion often emphasized its de-sensualization of liturgy and focused on the sermon and Bible reading. In both cases, the study of mediation was often narrowed down to reading and homiletics. A more nuanced study of the role of mediation in sixteenth-century religious change was pioneered by historian Robert Scribner, who systematically investigated a variety of media technologies and communication channels through which the Reformation was appropriated by “ordinary people”. Although he argued for the paramount importance of sermon listening in learning about the new confessions, his work remained influenced by the notion of the Reformation as being associated with the rise of visual observation in modernity.¹⁷ The perceived inclination to emphasize the role of vision in the period’s religious transformations reflects a well-established scholarly tendency to associate seeing with modernity and objectivity. This goes back to the work of scholars such as Lucien Febvre and Michel Foucault, who linked seventeenth-century developments in optics and geometry to the modern primacy of vision (Febvre), and argued for the association of “gaze” with power in the eighteenth-century politics of surveillance (Foucault).¹⁸ The nature of the

cially Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, London: Macmillan 1999; Leigh E. Schmidt’s excellent study on religion and science in early modern America – Leigh E. Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2000; Charles Hirschkind, “Hearing Modernity: Egypt, Islam and the Pious Ear”, in: Veit Erlmann (ed.), *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, Oxford: Berg 2004, 131-151, and id., *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, New York: Columbia Press 2006; Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism*, New York – London: New York University Press 2013; Carol Harrison, *The Art of Listening in the Early Church*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013. For religious sounds in the early modern city soundscapes, see David Garrioch, “Sounds of the City: The Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns”, *Urban History* 30/1, 2003, 5-25.

- 17 Scribner made an explicit connection between what he called a “theological gaze” and the advance of optics and linear perspective in the period. See Robert Scribner, “Popular Piety and Modes of Visual Perception in Late-Medieval and Reformation Germany”, *Journal of Religious History* 15/4, 1989, 448-469; id., *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981; id., *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany (1400-1800)*, London: The Hambleton Press 1987, and id., *Religion and Culture in Germany, 1400-1800*, Leiden: Brill 2000.
- 18 Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1982; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Pantheon

relationship between knowledge and visibility in the early modern period is now being increasingly debated in the history of science as recent studies underline the importance of other senses, especially hearing, in historical practices of knowledge production.¹⁹

In the last few years, the sensory dimensions of sixteenth-century upheavals have slowly begun to spark scholarly interest, and the conflicts of the Reformation have increasingly been perceived as a convenient point of departure for observing habits that would otherwise be difficult to detect. This is not to say that the senses were not occasional objects of scholarly interest before the emergence of sensory anthropology; the cultural historical approach to sensory perception, however, systematically attends not only to discourses on, or depictions of, the senses, but also recognizes the complexity of sensory experience and its role in the articulation of religious life. Although book-length studies on the topic are still largely missing, it is already possible to talk about an emerging trend in the study of the Reformation.²⁰ A number of articles have now been published that deal with different senses and specific aspects of their uses in religious practice; their general tendency is to pay attention (also) to senses other

1977. The idea of the dominance of the visual in modernity served as a touchstone for later studies by Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1990, or Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1994.

- 19 Foucault's interpretation of Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon, Or the Inspection House* (1787), has been successfully challenged by Leigh Eric Schmidt and others, who pointed out a crucial role of eavesdropping and giving orders by means of "conversation tubes" that occupy an important place in Bentham's vision of surveillance (see L. E. Schmidt, *Hearing Things...*, 117-119). For the relationship between science and music in the seventeenth century, see Benjamin Wardhaugh, *Music, Experiment and Mathematics in England, 1653-1705*, Farnham: Ashgate 2008, or Penelope Gouk, *Music, Science and Natural Magic in Seventeenth-Century England*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1999. See also current research projects of Viktoria Tkaczyk at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin.
- 20 Notable exceptions in the English context are Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation*, Farnham: Ashgate 2011, who attends to contemporary discourses on sense perception and shows that specific uses of the senses marked the difference between pious religious practice on the one hand, and superstition and idolatry on the other, and Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590-1640*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, especially Chapter 2, which deals with new techniques of manipulating people's auditory perception and the new listening requirements placed upon the church audience after the Reformation. Sensory experience in the German Reformation is explored in Jacob M. Baum's dissertation – Jacob M. Baum, *Sensory Perception, Religious Ritual and Reformation in Germany, 1428-1564* [manuscript of a Ph.D. dissertation], Urbana, IL: University of Illinois 2013, which is now forthcoming with the University of Illinois Press as Jacob M. Baum, *Reformation of the Senses: Religious Continuity and Change in Germany, ca. 1400-1600* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press).

than vision and to acknowledge the complex nature of human perception and media communication in which individual senses cannot be easily separated from one another.²¹ Even though historians no longer attend primarily to hierarchies of the senses and are losing interest in sensory periodization, we are only beginning to grasp the full potential of sensory history in reconstructing sixteenth-century religious change. A focus not only on discourse on the senses, but also on the ways that the sensorium was exercised in day-to-day practice, will enable us to study the Reformation as a lived experience. In the remaining part of this essay, I will discuss the benefits of such an approach on a few examples from my research of the topic of Calvin's Geneva.

The Case of Calvin's Geneva

Early Calvinism has a reputation as a sober, intellectual confession that – perhaps more thoroughly than the other branches of Protestantism – condemned all forms of materiality and sensuality in worship. Historical evidence seems to support such a view: much of the Genevan church furnishing was destroyed during the swift iconoclastic storms of the mid-sixteenth

21 Interesting case studies dealing with the senses are Jennifer R. McDermott, "The Melodie of Heaven: Sermonizing the Open Ear in Early Modern England", in: Wietse de Boer – Christine Göttler (eds.), *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden: Brill 2013, 177-200; Jan-Friedrich Missfelder, "Akustische Reformation: Lübeck 1529", *Historische Anthropologie: Kultur – Gesellschaft – Alltag* 20, 2012, 108-121; id., "Reformatiorische Soundscapes", in: Dirk Syndram (ed.), *Luther und die Fürsten: Selbstdarstellung und Selbstverständnis des Herrschers im Zeitalter der Reformation*, Dresden: Sandstein Kommunikation 2015, 85-91, and his other works on sound and music in Zurich; Jacob M. Baum, "From Incense to Idolatry: The Reformation of Olfaction in Late Medieval German Ritual", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 44/2, 2013, 323-344; Philip Hahn, "Sensing Sacred Space: Ulm Minster, the Reformation, and Parishioners' Sensory Perception, c. 1470 to 1640", *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 105, 2014, 55-91; id., "The Emperor's Boot, or: Perceiving Public Rituals in the Urban Reformation", *German History* 35/1, 2017, 362-380, and his overview, id., "Nur 'die augen, jnn die ohren' stecken?", *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 68, 2017, 503-519; Markus Friedrich, "Das Hör-Reich und das Sehe-Reich: Zur Bewertung des Sehens bei Luther und im frühneuzeitlichen Protestantismus", in: Gabriele Wimböck – Karin Leonhard – Markus Friedrich (eds.), *Evidentia: Reichweiten visueller Wahrnehmung in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin: Lit Verlag 2007, 453-479; Laura Feitzyer Brown, "Brawling in Church: Noise and the Rhetoric of Lay Behavior in Early Modern England", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 34/4, 2003, 955-972, and ead., "Slippery Listening: Anxious Clergy and Lay Listeners Power in Early Modern England", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 47/1, 2016, 3-23, or, more generally, Brian Crockett, "'Holy Cozenage' and the Renaissance Cult of the Ear", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 24/1, 1993, 47-56. See also studies by John Craig, Christopher Marsh, or Alec Ryrie in Natalie Mears – Alec Ryrie (eds.), *Worship and the Parish Church in Early Modern Britain*, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing 2013.

century; the Genevan religious moral court – the Consistory – exercised unprecedented power over the population, which was now required not only to *be present* at worship, but also to *actively participate* by listening to vernacular sermons; churchgoers should no longer wander around the church, look at the statues and paintings, drip their fingers in holy water, clutch their rosaries, smell the incense, or listen to Latin chants and prayers; in contrast, they were expected to sit still in the pews and listen to and remember the *information* that was being preached from the pulpit. It appears that the Weberian thesis of the “disenchantment” and “de-sensualization” of the magical and mysterious world of medieval Christianity and its replacement by the abstract, cerebral faith of Protestantism was correct.²² Except that it was not, or at least not quite.

In the past few years, I have closely examined Genevan primary sources – above all, the registers of the Consistory, which consist of the minutes from weekly interrogations of churchgoers, who were repeatedly asked what they remembered from the church services and *how* they lived according to the reformed principles.²³ Most of the people recorded in the

22 On the disenchantment thesis, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1958, and id., *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff, London: Meuthen 1963, 171, 175; see also Hans H. Gerth – Charles Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press 1946, Chapter 5, esp. 139 and 155. For discussion of disenchantment, see Hans G. Kippenberg, “The Great Process of Disenchantment”, in: id., *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2002, 155-174. Arguing against linear narratives of disenchantment and secularization, Alexandra Walsham has put forward the idea of cycles of sacralization and desacralization in European history by investigating what she calls a partial “re-enchantment” of the world in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see A. Walsham, “The Reformation and ‘the Disenchantment of the World’...”.

23 See Anna Kvičalová, “Hearing Difference in Calvin’s Geneva: From Margins to Center”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 49/1, 2018, 24-47; ead., *Disciplining the Sense of Hearing: Auditory Practices in 16th Century Calvinist Geneva* [manuscript of a Ph.D. dissertation], Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin 2017 (the book manuscript is under contract with Palgrave MacMillan and is forthcoming as *Listening and Knowledge in Reformation Europe: Hearing, Speaking and Remembering in Calvin’s Geneva* [London – New York: Palgrave MacMillan]). The Consistory registers for the time of John Calvin’s ministry are available to scholars in the archives of the Etat d’Genève, where Genevan primary sources have also been systematically restored and digitized. Many of these, including the registers of the Consistory, can now be consulted online. For further information on the state of digitization, see the website of A.E.G., especially the project “Adhémar”: <<https://ge.ch/arvaegconsult/ws/consaeg/public/FICHE/AEGSearch>>. Since 1987, the manuscripts of the Consistory registers have also been systematically transcribed from microfilm at the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies at Calvin College and the Calvin Theological Seminary of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and so far the registers from the institution’s first fifteen years (1542-1557) have been published in twelve volumes as *Registres du Consistoire de Genève au*

Consistorial archives encountered considerable difficulty in adopting the new religious standards promoted by the Reformation: they failed to retain virtually any details from the services (often not even the names of the ministers or the topics of the homilies); they did not remember the basic vernacular prayers despite these being repeated during every church service; and they complained that they could not follow the preaching, either on account of its incomprehensibility, because they could not hear it well enough, or because they had problems concentrating on spoken instruction for long stretches of time. Many churchgoers continued to practice the rituals associated with the Catholic faith and found it difficult to understand why behavior that used to be considered most pious was now found to be superficial and even despicable. Let me now illustrate some of these problems on two examples from the registers of the Consistory.

Françoise Loup, also called *La Drobliere*, first appeared before the Consistory on Thursday, 10 August 1542. The records inform us that Françoise, widow of a local butcher, was summoned on account of her supposedly poor attendance at church services, as well as her reportedly frequent swearing and blaspheming. *Drobliere* was quick to assure the Consistory that she liked the Reformed sermons much better than she had ever liked the Catholic Mass (abolished in the city seven years earlier),²⁴ and that she went to hear the preaching twice a week. In spite of her proclaimed religious zeal, however, the credibility of her testimony was somewhat undermined by the fact that she was unable to say almost anything about the sermon she had attended the day before. She could not recall a single detail from the service, neither the topic of the homily nor the Bible passage commented on by the preacher. Moreover, when she was asked to demonstrate her knowledge of the Lord's Prayer and the Confession of Faith in her mother tongue, it was soon discovered that she was not capable of reciting any of the texts, except to repeat them after the pastor at church or say the Pater Noster in Latin. Françoise Loup was instructed to learn the prayers and pay better attention to the preaching, but when the Consistory summoned her again one week later, she showed no progress at all, nor had she made any noticeable advance after another six weeks. When she appeared before the Consistory again on 16 November, three months after her first visit, the following was recorded:

temps de Calvin, Geneva: Librairie Droz 1996-2016. The general editors of the series have included Robert Kingdon, Wallace McDonald, and Lee Palmer Wandel, with individual volumes co-edited by Thomas A. Lambert, Isabella M. Watt, and Jeffrey T. Watt.

24 The Genevan City Council banned the Mass in Geneva on 10 August 1535 – that is, seven years to the day before Françoise Loup was interrogated by the Consistory.

Summoned because of the words she says and cannot say the Confession or the prayer ... And she was at the sermon yesterday and does not know what the preacher said, and has not retained the words ... and she knows well that she has a poor head and does not know how to pray to God except for in the manner her father and mother taught her and cannot say it otherwise ... and says that she is a good Christian and that it is too late to teach her Pater.²⁵

Françoise clearly performed as poorly as at the first hearing. She complained that she had a “poor head” (*maulvayse teste*) and that it was too late to teach her anything, since there was little chance she would ever learn how to pray in a fashion different from that taught her by her parents.²⁶

The Consistory records show a clear correlation between people’s inability to remember the preaching or to learn the prayers and their perseverance in Catholic practices such as *barbotement* (that is, muttering one’s prayers in quiet corners of the church),²⁷ reciting the rosary, or strolling around the temple during the preaching. Disciplining people’s ability to pay attention during worship was therefore one of the main challenges facing the new regime. It is significant that problems with sermon reception and remembrance were often associated with hearing difficulties: the people recorded complained that they could not hear the preaching either on account of its inaudibility or incomprehensibility, or because they themselves suffered from hearing problems. It was by no means unusual for people to describe themselves as being “deaf”, “a little deaf”, “hard” or “dull” of hearing, although these cases clearly do not refer to physiological deafness, but rather signal people’s inability to hear, understand, or remember the preaching.²⁸

25 “*C’est présenté a cause des parolles qu’elle ditz et ne scet dire la confession, lly l’orayson ... Et fust hier au sermon et ne scet que le predicant az ditz, et n’a pas retenu les parolles ... et le scet bien qu’elle az maulvayse teste et ne sceroyt prier Dieu sinon en la maniere que son pere et mere luy ont appris et ne sceroyt dire aultrement ... et ditz qu’elle est bonne crestienne et qu’il est trop tard pour luy enseigner le Pater*” (Thomas A. Lambert – Isabella M. Watt [eds.], *Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin I: 1542-1544*, Geneva: Librairie Droz 1996, 138, author’s translation).

26 For Françoise Loup’s records in the Consistory registers, see T. A. Lambert – I. M. Watt (eds.), *Registres du Consistoire... I...*, 100, 105, 118, 138 (August 10 and 17, September 21, and November 16, 1542).

27 The term *barbotement* frequently appears in Calvin’s *Institutes* as well as in his sermons and is used to characterize the alleged formalism of Roman worship in which, as Calvin argues, people mindlessly repeat their prayers without knowing their real meaning. The use of the term in Calvin’s sermons is traced in Edmond Huguet, *Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle*, Paris: Edouard Champion 1925, 484.

28 A certain Guygonaz Bocard, for example, stated that even though she had attended a service earlier that day, and had already gone to the church three times that week, she had no idea what the minister had preached because she was “deaf” (T. A. Lambert – I. M. Watt [eds.], *Registres du Consistoire... I...*, 99 [August 10, 1542]). Similarly, Pernette du Nant, explained that she did not profit from the sermons because she could

The person who was most frequently interrogated by the Consistory in the first two years of its existence was a Genevan pack-saddle maker (*bastier*) and innkeeper Jacques Emyn. Jacques was notoriously bad at learning the tenets of the new religion and had to be summoned eight times before he was able to recite the prayer and the Confession of faith without making major mistakes. During that time, he was repeatedly advised to attend sermons as often as he could (“*tous les jours ou plus souvent*”) and sit closer to the pulpit (“*venir aupres dela chayre*”) during preaching so that he could hear the words better (“*myeux entendre la Parolle de Dieu*”) and benefit from them more effectively. This, in the view of the Consistory, would help him acquire sufficient knowledge to receive Holy Communion, which he was temporarily denied. In addition, he was commanded to go to catechism lessons, and find himself a private teacher to instruct him in religious matters and teach him how to pray; in spite of all this effort, however, it took him more than a year to acquire at least the most elementary religious knowledge.²⁹

It seems that for ordinary Genevans, religious revolution consisted not primarily in theological and doctrinal differences, but in novel forms of religious worship that demanded radically new forms of both mental and bodily participation from churchgoers. In my work on Geneva, I have shown that the inability of many people to benefit from the religious instruction delivered to them in church stemmed from a transformation in the manner of lay participation in the worship, specifically one in which the sensorium was exercised in a way substantially different from that of the Catholic service. In order to receive the necessary religious knowledge, the ears of the Genevans had to be trained to listen silently and attentively to spoken instruction – a requirement that many found very difficult to fulfill.

not hear the preaching well enough, as she was a “little deaf” (*ung peu sorde*) and did not understand what the preacher said from the pulpit (*ibid.*, 131 [October 9, 1542]). For a detailed study of deafness and hardness of hearing in Calvinist Geneva, see A. Kvalova, “Hearing Difference...”.

29 Nevertheless, the extent to which he actually grasped the reformed worship is somewhat doubtful, since at the same time he was still accused of “superstition” and admitted that he had kept Lent, which was at odds with the reformed principles. For Jacques Emyn’s interrogations, see T. A. Lambert – I. M. Watt (eds.), *Registres du Consistoire... I...*, 8, 18, 22, 64, 102, 110, 150, 210 (February 23, March 23 and 30, May 17, August 17, September 7, December 19, 1542, and March 29, 1543).

Sensory Reformation

I would like to argue that not only Genevan Calvinism, but also the Reformation in general was deeply grounded in and informed by sensory perception. It not only profoundly affected the ways people exercised their sensorium; the senses and the manner in which they were used and disciplined were an indispensable tool to achieve religious change in the first place. It is not therefore sufficient to pay attention to theological notions and discussions of the senses; it is important to investigate the broader area in which sensory mediation was exercised. To appreciate the complex roles different forms of materiality played in the Reformation, it is essential to investigate actual practices in individual historical communities, which were often very different from Protestant self-representations. In order to understand what was at stake in introducing the medium of the vernacular sermon into Protestant communities, we should investigate not only the parameters of the genre itself and the printed homilies, but also especially the ways in which the sermon interacted with the modes of mediation already established in the communities' religious life and education.

This makes it particularly important to adopt a critical approach to the traditional account of the Reformation as a radical rupture, which asserts a profound discontinuity in religious belief and practice.³⁰ The language of discontinuity was part of the rhetorical vocabulary of the Reformation period, where it served largely religious or political purposes. Its role should not be overstated, even in the case of religious sensing.³¹ This becomes perhaps most apparent in the rigidly dichotomizing language that the Protestants employed to delineate the Catholic "other", which contrasted formalism, superficiality, and sensuality with the supposed sincerity, spirituality, and rationality of the reformed present.³² When assessing

30 Perceptive criticism of the notion of the Reformation as a radical rupture with medieval religious practice is offered by Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, New York: Oxford University Press 1999. For a balanced approach emphasizing both continuities and discontinuities in different Protestant communities across Europe, see K. Maag, *Change and Continuity...*

31 To be sure, the Protestant reformers stressed discontinuity only in the sense of their break with what they regarded as corrupt Catholic practice; otherwise the Reformation aimed not for "newness" but, quite the contrary, for the restoration of the unspoiled principles of the original Church.

32 An interesting comparison here is the work of Charles Hirschkind, who describes how the same rhetoric was used to demarcate the modern Islamic state from more traditional religious practices in nineteenth-century Egypt, see C. Hirschkind, "Hearing Modernity...". On the use of dichotomizing language and sharp contrasts between past and present in converting native inhabitants of Papua New Guinea, see Bambi B. Schieffelin, "Marking Time: The Dichotomizing Discourse of Multiple Temporalities", *Current Anthropology* 43, 2002, 5-17.

the role of the senses in Calvinism, in other words, it is important not to be seduced by the Reformation self-narrative that denounced sensuality and emotion in favor of the abstract, intellectual, and doctrinal aspects of worship. In fact, not only did bodily gestures and affections occupy an important place in Protestant theologies, but practical implementations of the reformed notions of attentive perception required the participation of the whole body and in many respects demanded quite a radical reeducation of the sensory involvement of the church audience.³³ The religious routines of people like Jacques Emyn were transformed not simply by exposing them to preaching, but by integrating them into a new comprehensive system of religious instruction in which auditory attention and recall of the spoken word were aided by various institutional, motivational, and material props, including, among others, the transformation of churches and their acoustics, new speaking techniques on the part of clergymen, the regular monitoring of churchgoers by the Consistory, and the reformation of schooling.³⁴

The wider disentanglement from the Catholic past was carried out on an intellectual, a rhetorical, and a perceptual/material level, and was characterized by a gradual negotiation of the new system of meaning through a fundamental transformation of the religious sensory environment. As far as Calvin's Geneva is concerned, in the new regime of managing the senses, auditory perception was assigned a prominent role in the process of verbal or metaphorical and performative distancing from the past. The

33 Calvinism's emphasis on the outward gesture and ritual is often ignored by Reformation scholars. They tend to emphasize Protestant literalism and inward affection, which is pictured as being inherently opposed to Catholic ritualism and sensuality. Peter Harrison, for example, argues in favor of the centrality of doctrinal differences and intellectualism sparked by the Confessional conflicts, see Peter Harrison, "'Science' and 'Religion': Constructing the Boundaries", *The Journal of Religion* 86, 2006, 81-106. Typically, when assessing the role of the senses in Christianity, authors tend to focus on the theological discourse on the hierarchy of the senses, which is often mistaken for the practical functioning of sense perception in specific historical contexts. See, e.g., Carol Harrison's *The Art of Listening in the Early Church*, where she argues for the priority of listening in the formation of early Christian culture, which appeared in the context of an ancient Hellenistic culture "where the ratio of the senses was weighted towards the visual" (C. Harrison, *The Art of Listening...*, 29).

34 Probably as a result of such activities, the number of people who complained of their poor comprehension of preaching, or who were unable to recall any details from the sermons dropped quite sharply during the 1540s: whereas between 1542 and 1544 most of the people interrogated by the Consistory did not remember the sermons and prayers and routinely complained of bad hearing or comprehension, people's religious ignorance was no longer explicitly associated with hearing problems in records from the late 1540s and the 1550s. In the Consistory registers from 1552, I counted only three people who had significant difficulty in remembering the prayer and the Confession. For more details, see A. Kvičalová, *Disciplining the Sense of Hearing...*, 135-144.

use of visual aids in worship and in the communication of religious knowledge was now considered not only dangerous but also futile, because in the new religious epistemology, objects of the natural world – unlike words – were no longer believed to have the ability to signify and convey a spiritual message. They became mute. This does not, however, imply that the silencing of the material world would eventually lead to what Walter Ong has called “the devocalization of the universe”³⁵ and, as a consequence, to a transition from the predominantly oral and aural society of pre-modern Europe to a culture characterized by print and literacy. When we look more closely at Genevan religious life after the Reformation, it becomes clear that the reality was far more complex: in spite of increasing levels of general literacy and the proliferation of printed books,³⁶ sixteenth-century Geneva experienced anything but a decline in verbal religious instruction. New textual aids – such as the numbering of the verses of the Bible and a new, user-friendly graphic typeface – were pioneered by Genevan printers in the mid-sixteenth century, but reading was generally subordinate to listening, and similar navigational tools were developed to make it easier for the church audience to follow the spoken sermon.³⁷ Similarly, it was usually not reading but hearing issues that were discussed by the Consistory, placing people suffering from hearing difficulties at the heart of the comprehensive system of religious disciplining.

As far as sensory experience is concerned, it is, of course, hardly possible to separate the sense of hearing from other human senses, or to determine which of them was more important or significant. To divide complex

35 W. Ong, *Presence of the Word...*, 72.

36 Printing experienced a major revival in Reformed Geneva. By 1563 there were as many as thirty-four authorized printers in the city. See A. Kvičalová, *Disciplining the Sense of Hearing...*, 120-122. See also Elizabeth Armstrong, *Robert Estienne, Royal Printer: A Historical Study of the Elder Stephanus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1954; Peter Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible”, in: Jennifer Andersen – Elizabeth Sauer (eds.), *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2002, 42-72, or Jean-François Gilmont, “La fabrication du livre dans la Genève de Calvin”, in: Jean-Daniel Candaux – Bernard Lescaze (eds.), *Cinq siècles d'imprimerie genevoise*, Geneva: Société d'histoire et d'archéologie 1980, 89-96.

37 Versification and the numbering of chapters appeared in Robert Estienne's bible editions from the early 1550s, which also served as a model for the 1560 English translation of the Geneva Bible, which was the first to apply numerical ordering in English. The new features included also marginal notes, italicized words, indications of different readings, tables of contents, and summaries at the beginnings of chapters. See E. Armstrong, *Robert Estienne...*, 226, 228, 239, 294-308; P. Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls...”, 71-72; Basil Hall, “The Genevan Version of the English Bible: Its Aims and Achievements”, in: W. Peter Stephens (ed.), *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church: Essays in Honour of James Atkinson*, London: Bloomsbury 1995, 124-149, or J.-F. Gilmont, “La Fabrication du Livre...”.

synaesthetic experience into categories of vision, hearing, touch, and so on, is always partly a reflection of our modern assumptions about the early modern sensory management of the world.³⁸ If we abandon the notion of a hierarchy of the senses, however, it can still be claimed that the sensory dimension of communication experienced some notable changes in the first years after the Reformation, and that in the new communicational order, certain auditory, mnemonic, and speech practices acquired a new significance.

If we want to grasp the complexity of sixteenth-century religious change, the history of the senses offers a vital perspective that enables us to consider various socio-cultural, theological, and material aspects together: it promises to reveal important information about the way individual cultures and religions are constructed, negotiated, and experienced without leaving out some of their most important actors: objects, media, and the human body. In this respect, traditional narratives of the inevitable connection between the Reformation and the printing press, or Protestantism and reason do not necessarily provide useful tools for such an endeavor.

38 For a brief discussion of the synaesthetic nature of early modern sensory experience, see M. Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation...*, 1-7, and Béatrice Caseau, "The Senses in Religion: Liturgy, Devotion, and Deprivation", in: Richard G. Newhauser (ed.), *Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, London – New York: Bloomsbury 2016, 89-110: 91. A call for a multisensory history of human perception can be found in P. Hahn, "Sensing Sacred Space...", 88.



SUMMARY

Sensing the Reformation: How Media-Historical Narratives Constrain the Study of Religious Change

The paper argues that media and sensory history can substantially enrich existing scholarship on the Reformation by adding an important material dimension to the study of the confessional conflicts of the period. It claims that the role of the shifting sensory economy in the process of fabricating new religious communities has not been adequately scrutinized so far, and that the study of media and the senses in the Reformation has long been shaped by media-historical narratives of “disenchantment” and “de-sensualization”, which are themselves products of Protestant anti-Catholic rhetoric and strategies of self-representation. Some of the aspects of the relationship between the Reformation and sensory perception are illustrated on a case study from sixteenth-century Calvinist Geneva. A detailed description of the state of research on the topic is provided throughout the paper.

Keywords: Reformation; Calvinism; sensory experience; hearing; vision; media; de-sensualization.

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