

Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, eds. *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*.

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The past few years have witnessed an increasing interest in the theme of sensation in art and cultural studies. This topic, inaugurated by anthropologists decades ago, has at last reached the study of early modern history and prompted articles, monographs, exhibitions, workshops, seminars, and conferences. Thus, the present volume, which collects seventeen papers delivered in various conference sessions and workshops, stands out as a footprint of current scholarship as well as a gateway to further research. The papers occupying 487 printed pages are arranged in six parts: “Pathways to the Divine: Vision” as well as “The Lower Senses,” and “Senses and Affect”; “The Senses Contested”; “Sensory Environments”; and “Senses, Science and the Sacred.”

The volume should perhaps be more accurately titled *Christianity and the Senses* rather than *Religion and the Senses*, since there is no mention of Judaism, a European religion, surely, with a very distinct relationship to the senses. Nevertheless the

theme of religion and the senses rightly stands in opposition to the early twentieth-century assumption that sensation is irrelevant to the study of religious experience. Indeed late medieval and early modern Christianity, centered on the multisensory image of a suffering god, simply could not exist without the ability to experience, represent, and imagine sensation. Furthermore the years 1400–1700 are not only a time of transition in the field of religion, from medieval to Reformation and Baroque piety, they are also the swan song of the pre-Cartesian world dominated by Aristotelian faculty psychology, itself based on the assumption that there is nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses. Indeed these early modern years are, among other things, characterized by scientific discoveries and inventions that extended the power of the senses and destroyed previous assumptions about their anatomy and functioning. Several papers discuss such interactions between scientific definitions and sensory experience. In fact the volume concludes with a contribution by Sven Dupré examining how Kepler's reevaluation of optics did affect and threaten the physiological foundations of the practice of prayer and meditation. As a whole the volume provides a rich and textured overview of the sensory world of early modern Christianity, covering topics such as responses to representations of sensation; the business of amber prayer beads; music, preaching, and auditory perception; debates on taste and sensory paradise; and sensory environments from urban spaces to religious theme parks.

While some authors use categories of thought borrowed from twentieth-century philosophy without fear of sounding anachronistic, it is quite surprising that there is no mention of present-day conceptions of sensation. Even medical textbooks do not think anymore in terms of five senses. While discarded Aristotelian categories may well have provided the terms by which early modern Europeans wrote about and responded to sensory perception, they nevertheless perceived the world with a biological equipment similar to ours. Indeed the ability of the mind to imagine sensory experience, so central to the reception of medieval and early modern imagery, is now handled by neuroscience under the heading of mirror neurons.

Equally problematic is the predictable emphasis on vision present not only in the first part of the volume, but throughout various contributions. These seem oblivious that for Aristotle the eye only perceives color, while the perception of images is a multisensory affair mediated by common sense, a faculty made up by the philosopher and his commentators to account for the familiar fact that we never perceive through a single sense but through several.

But this is merely the legacy of many years of opticocentric history, an approach that the present volume nevertheless undermines by proposing a history taking its documentary sources from all channels of perception. This is indeed the best feature of this publication that links the conception, representation, and manipulation of sensory perceptions with all human activities. It confirms that sensation is not only a possible subject of investigation but an integral part of the fabric of history.

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