SENSING THE SACRED IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN CULTURE

Edited by Robin Macdonald, Emilie K. M. Murphy, and Elizabeth L. Swann
This volume traces transformations in attitudes toward, ideas about, and experiences of religion and the senses in the medieval and early modern period. Broad in temporal and geographical scope, it challenges traditional notions of periodisation, highlighting continuities as well as change. Rather than focusing on individual senses, the volume’s organisation emphasises the multisensoriality and embodied nature of religious practices and experiences, refusing easy distinctions between asceticism and excess. The senses were not passive, but rather active and reactive, responding to and initiating change. As the contributions in this collection demonstrate, in the pre-modern era, sensing the sacred was a complex, vexed, and constantly evolving process, shaped by individuals, environment, and religious change. The volume will be essential reading not only for scholars of religion and the senses, but for anyone interested in histories of medieval and early modern bodies, material culture, affects, and affect theory.

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Introduction: sensing the sacred

Robin Macdonald, Emilie K. M. Murphy, and Elizabeth L. Swann

[God’s] adoration is exprest by offices and sensible words; for it is man that beleeveth and praieth... I could hardly be made beleev that the sight of our Crucifixes and pictures of that pittiful torment, that the ornaments and ceremonious motions in our Churches, that the voyces accomodated and suted to our devotions, and this stirring of our senses, doth not greatly inflame the peoples soules with a religious passion of wonderous beneficiall good.

Writing in the aftermath of the European Reformations, Montaigne’s insistence on the efficacy of devotional art, ecclesiastical ceremony, song, and ‘sensible words’, for rousing the souls of the people to a state of ‘religious passion’ stands both as a response to the recent waves of reformist iconoclasm in France and further afield, and as a recuperation of the senses in an essay characterised by extreme skepticism about their epistemological value. For the devout Catholic Montaigne, the impossibility of certain human knowledge – including sensory knowledge – leads to a fideistic conviction that religious belief must be founded not in the workings of the human intellect, but in faith alone. Whilst Montaigne dismisses the evidentiary utility of the senses as a form of proof he retains a role for them in worship: ‘the stirring of our senses’, he implies, serves as a means of inciting the forms of pious affect that are at the root of true faith.

Montaigne’s careful but vehement defence of the importance of sensory experience to the cultivation of religious devotion is at once exceptional – a product of Montaigne’s brilliant, idiosyncratic mind – and entirely typical of a period which was profoundly concerned with the relationship between the physical life of the body, and the spiritual life of the soul. This was the case across denominational divides; given here in the translation by John Florio – a Protestant Italian religious refugee who made England his adopted home – Montaigne’s words attest to the transnational and cross-confessional currency of such concerns. As the essays collected in this volume show, Protestant reformers of various stripes and the ‘papists’ they excoriated were equally concerned with negotiating – in their
different ways – a place for sensation in the practice of religion. Montaigne’s acknowledgement that ‘it is man that believeth and praieth’, for example, gestures towards the Calvinist doctrine of accommodation, according to which God clothes spiritual mysteries in physical form as a concession to human weakness.3

For medieval and early modern men and women, faith was characterised as much by embodied experience as by abstract theological dispute. As the theologian and religious historian David Morgan argues, sensation is integral to religious belief: ‘belief happens as touching and seeing, hearing and tasting’. According to Morgan, whereas in the twenty-first century religious belief is usually conceived of as assent to propositional statements such as ‘God exists’, historically religious belief has been as much a matter of ‘embodied forms of practice’ as of ‘the profession of creeds’.4 Literary scholars, too, have recognised the intensely physical, passionate nature of faith in the early modern period, illuminating the ways in which physicality and spirituality, and ethics and affect, are entwined in the period’s medical and devotional discourses.5

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge a tendency for medieval and early modern people to express an intense distrust of the senses and the pleasures they offer. The notion that the senses lead the believer away from God by encouraging indulgence in the sinful pleasures of the flesh is ubiquitous in the Western Christian tradition. In order to combat this perceived threat to spiritual integrity, a strong strand of asceticism developed, exemplified by the Church Fathers including Origen, St Jerome, and John Chrysostom, and which remained in play throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Thomas More, for example, famously wore a hair shirt under his luxurious clothes, and was said to practice other forms of self-mortification.6 Whilst Protestant reformers denounced the extremes of asceticism, associating physical self-mortification with monastic hypocrisy and nugatory works, many retained a profound suspicion of sensory pleasure. The senses, then, were profoundly equivocal: both intrinsic to the experience of faith, and spiritually hazardous. As the English poet and devotional writer Richard Brathwaite put it, invoking Augustine, in his 1620 *Essaies upon the five senses*, the senses were ‘windowes which open to all unbounded libertie’, unobjectionable in themselves, but capable either of ‘weale or woe: happy if rightly tempered; sinister, if without limit’.7

This collection covers an era of dramatic social, political, economic and technological change, and extreme religious turmoil. It traces transformations in attitudes to, ideas about, and experiences of the senses from eleventh-century debates about the real presence in continental Europe to late seventeenth-century missionaries proselytising in North America. As Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler have recently suggested, such ‘periods of profound cultural change’ ensure that sensory experiences ‘rise to the surface of observable historical reality’.8 Indeed, in past decades
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much scholarship on the religious upheavals of the Reformations has
described transitions between different forms of faith as characterised, in
part, by sensory transformations. The shift from (medieval) Catholicism
to (early modern) Protestantism has often been depicted as a move from a
sensuous to a relatively austere form of religious faith. As the senses in this
period were closely connected to the passions and affects (Thomas Wright,
for example, famously described the ‘amitie betwixt the passions and sense’
in his 1601 treatise *The passions of the minde in general*) this putative shift
is simultaneously described as a move away from an emotionally-charged,
participatory form of religion, towards an intellectualised, individualised
religion of the book.9

As numerous scholars have shown, the religious world of medieval
Europe was profoundly material and sensory: Catholicism nurtured a
vibrant culture of visual art, music, and architecture, and worship engaged
the senses of smell (through the use of incense), touch (through practices
such as kissing the pax board), and even taste (through the Eucharistic
ritual).10 According to revisionist historians such as Margaret Aston and
Eamon Duffy, the Reformation were motivated in part by an iconoclastic
distrust of such sensory abundance, resulting in the violent destruction of
a richly affective form of worship and its replacement by an austere,
intellectualised form of faith.11 The endurance of this narrative in more
recent work on religion and the senses is evident in Marcia Hall’s intro-
duction to the recent collection *The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation
Church*. In promoting the use of the senses (through visual imagery) to
inspire religious devotion, Hall argues, ‘Catholics recognized that emotion
was a tool that Protestants renounced and that it could therefore be used
effectively to woo the lapsed back to the Catholic fold’.12

Other scholars have presented reformist attitudes not as an outright
rejection of the senses and affects, but rather as a change in emphasis. The
Protestant suspicion of visual images, this argument runs, was compensated
by a simultaneous (Lutheran) elevation of the status of audition, which
drew on St Paul’s insistence that ‘faith cometh by hearing’ (particularly
the hearing of sermons).13 Others highlight continuities between traditional
and reformist approaches to the senses. Matthew Milner, for example,
argues that ‘reformers were still governed by traditional assumptions on
sensory propriety and sensory theory’.14 Simultaneously, there has been a
move to explore the importance of the ‘lower’ senses of smell, touch, and
taste to medieval and early modern piety. As Milner points out, ‘sixteenth-
century religion was more than eyes and ears; it was a full, synaesthetic
experience’.15

In this volume, we build on the approach of scholars such as Milner,
both in challenging the tendency to impose artificial divisions between
the ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ senses, and in highlighting stability – as well as
ruptures – in the role of the senses in medieval and early modern reli-
gion. In matters of religion, as elsewhere, scholars must resist constructing
an easy antithesis between sensory abnegation and sensuous excess, and correspondingly between intellect and affect. As Richard Newhauser’s and Joe Moshenska’s essays variously suggest, severe asceticism and luxurious sensuality are not the only options available to the believer who wishes to regulate his or her senses for devotional ends. Neither do these two alternatives always have an adversarial relation. For medieval and early modern men and women alike, sensory pleasure and sensory self-denial existed in an ever-shifting dynamic, in some cases enhancing as well as diminishing the other, and mediated by the virtue of temperance. Similarly, the division of the human sensorium into the five clearly distinguished, hierarchically organised senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch has been historically influential. A tendency to replicate this division in recent scholarship, however, has obscured both the complexity of sensory taxonomies in the period, and the complex, synaesthetic imbrications of the senses in the realm of human experience. Rather than focusing on hierarchies of the senses, the organisation of this volume stresses both collaborative and antagonistic interactions of the senses. Our collective emphasis on the multi-sensorial nature of embodied religious practices demonstrates the ways sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformers engaged with, exploited, and transformed the prominence of corporeal experience in the Catholic tradition, as well as the ways that they challenged it. In refusing to distinguish artificially between the senses – which often worked in tandem – and in rejecting a simplistic dichotomy between sensory and affective excess on the one hand, and intellectualised sensory asceticism on the other, we are able to present a more complex picture of the Reformations as characterised both by change and continuity.

The ambivalence of the senses – their dual status as agents of sanctity and iniquity – in medieval and early modern Western Christianity was further complicated by a widespread distinction between the physical senses and the spiritual senses, which originated with the Church Fathers and remained influential throughout the period in question here. As Paul Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley’s edited collection The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity has shown, the precise nature of the spiritual senses, and their relation to the physical senses, is complex and variable: the tradition is modified and transformed as it is developed in the works of key authors such as Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa. Broadly speaking, however, the spiritual senses can be conceived of as analogous to the physical senses, but with two crucial differences: firstly, they are immaterial, and belong not to the body but to the spirit, soul, heart, or intellect, and secondly, they are capable of apprehending the divine. As such, the spiritual senses offered a form of perception supposedly purged of the physical body’s sinful and self-indulgent appetites. In practice, however, a clear distinction between the physical and spiritual senses was difficult to maintain. For Brathwaite, they existed in a zero-sum relation: ‘though the eye of my bodie allude to
the eye of my soule’, he writes, ‘yet is the eye of my soule darkned by the eye of my bodie’. Therefore the believer ought to cultivate the spiritual senses by regulating or denying the physical senses. For others, the physical and spiritual senses were more closely entwined, and existed as analogues, or on a continuum. Joseph Hall, for instance, writing in his 1679 Contemplations upon the remarkable passages in the life of the holy Jesus, explained that ‘those two parts whereof we consist (the bodily, the spiritual) do in a sort partake of each other’. For Hall, the physical and spiritual senses are inextricable.

Whilst the essays collected in this volume discuss the relation between the physical and spiritual senses at a number of points, the collective intention (pace Gavrilyuk and Coakley) is not to pin down or define the various permutations of this tradition. Rather, the contributions here seek to explore convergences between theories about the spiritual and physical senses and a range of other religious preoccupations, including (among other things) the formation of confessional identities, the construction of sacred space, and the nature of virtue. As we see in Subha Mukherji’s essay, the distinction between the physical and spiritual senses casts considerable light on debates about the evidentiary value of the senses as a route to religious knowledge, including the experience of the divine.

In order to examine the ways learned ideas about the senses intersected with issues of urgent personal devotional concerns, Mukherji turns to the evidence provided by literature. It is frequently noted as a historical-epigraphical obstacle that evidence of sensory experience is hard to attain: sensation is inherently personal and ephemeral, and therefore elusive. The present, moreover, cannot be taken as a reliable guide to the past: as anthropologists and historians agree, sensation is culturally and historically specific, and embodied practices and experiences can vary dramatically according to context. In response to this perceived paucity of evidence, historians have tended to turn to prescriptive sources associated with elite intellectual cultures, such as medical and theological treatises, in order to understand the senses. As John Arnold argues in his contribution here, however, this is insufficient if we are to achieve a fuller understanding of the ‘lived’ practice of religion: faith as it is embedded in a wide range of material, intellectual, and social contexts. As such, and as this volume attests, scholars must be prepared to explore unfamiliar and heterogeneous sources – including the literary – if they are to have any chance of recapturing the rich and diverse sensory world of medieval and early modern religious devotion.

The essays in this volume are highly interdisciplinary in approach, and draw on a wide variety of manuscript and printed source materials. Sources include drama, poetry, and imaginative prose, as well as religious polemic and homily, psychological, medical, and didactic texts, personal and public epistles, and music. This broad range is significant, for it testifies simultaneously to the challenges and opportunities offered by sensory
In expanding the scope of enquiry in this way, the essays in this collection uncover a conception of religious experience as fundamentally dynamic and transactional. Taken collectively, they emphasise processes of sensing, rather than the senses as a reified object of investigation, thereby configuring sensation not merely as receptive, but as a potent agent of change.

In particular, essays by Christopher Woolgar, Emilie Murphy, and Erin Lambert examine how sacred objects and spaces are constituted through sensory interaction, developing a new notion of holiness as a process, occurring at the experiential intersection of subject and object.

Other essays in this collection follow their protagonists as they traverse confessional and experiential boundaries via the internal and external borders of Europe. Whilst the focus is predominantly on European cultures of sensing, we also consider encounters in the Americas. Although European colonisers attempted to impose their own sensory and religious perspectives and regimes on Indigenous cultures, these cultures inevitably also reciprocally influenced the ways in which Europeans perceived and experienced their own bodies and surroundings.

This could also be the case for armchair travellers, as Robin Macdonald’s essay contends. Macdonald’s focus on the materiality of birch bark letters that missionaries sent to friends, relatives, and colleagues back home highlights the extent to which texts themselves are material entities, and reading is an embodied, sensory activity.

Words and materiality, Macdonald argues, work together to create meanings. Macdonald’s essay, and this volume as a whole, participates in, but also departs from, a series of recent cross-disciplinary ‘turns’ to (variously) the body, the visual, and material culture in medieval and early modern studies. Such turns have been enormously productive, but they have also been hindered by a tendency to oppose a concrete world of things to an abstract realm of words. Such a tendency goes against the grain of recent scholarship on the senses and early modern literature, which has emphasised the ability of certain modes of rhetorical language and literary form to encapsulate and precipitate sensory experience. For Holly Dugan, for example, ‘metaphors can function as a historical archive of sensation’, whilst Erika T. Lin argues the embodied and material performance dynamics of early modern theatre correspond to the sensory paradigms of religious ritual.

Building on such work, a number of contributors here – such as Abigail Shinn, Subha Mukherji, Bronwyn Wallace, and Elizabeth Swann – investigate the extent to which language is itself a sensory phenomenon, with the capacity to open a vista onto the experiential worlds of the past.

I: Prescription and practice

The essays in the opening section of this volume examine relationships between prescriptive and proscriptive literature on the senses, and sensory
religious practices in the medieval period. The methodological and
historiographical problems for investigating the sensory experiences of the
medieval laity are foregrounded by John Arnold, who questions the utility
of elite, learned medical sources for understanding ordinary men and
women’s sensory experience. Instead, Arnold suggests, scholars must
attend to moments where the senses are addressed implicitly, in sources
which invoke embodiment and affect more broadly. In particular, Arnold
draws attention to the relationship between sensory metaphor, used
to communicate experiences, and more essential claims about sensory
knowledge (for instance, the contention that sin may literally enter
through the senses). Citing examples from miracle stories, Arnold argues
that the tension between sensory metaphors, the spiritual senses, and
material reality remains ‘productively unresolved’ in narrative.

The second and third essays in this volume respond to Arnold’s appeal
to scholars to investigate a broader range of sensuous material, and to
attend to the experiences of lay women and men. Richard Newhauser
explores an instance of elite theory disseminated to the laity in the form
of highly influential compendia on the vices and virtues by the Dominican
priest and pastoral theologian William Peraldus. Newhauser’s close
reading of these significant, and yet understudied works offers an analysis
of the ways in which devotional texts communicated knowledge about,
and shaped experience of, the senses. In particular, he focuses on the role
of high medieval pastoral theology in guiding and directing the senses of
parishioners, and in so doing challenges the popular assumption that the
repression of sensory pleasures was unanimously endorsed in the Middle
Ages. For Peraldus, the ‘correct’ use of the senses could even be virtuous.
Sacred contexts could be created through sensory perception, and (if
performed with self-restraint) everyday activities such as eating and
drinking could become imbued with devotional meaning. Therefore,
Newhauser argues, it is temperance – not ascesis or denial – that should
be viewed as central to the ethics of the senses in the medieval moral
tradition.

Like Newhauser, Christopher Woolgar draws attention to the positive
aspects of the senses in the Western medieval religious tradition. Using
sources including monastic customaries and records from church councils
and synods, Woolgar considers the material ways in which ‘things’ were
made holy, exploring how the ‘physical process of sensing’ could con-
secrate objects or individuals. For instance, it was through the physical
act of speaking the words of the liturgy (rather than the meaning of the
words) that the bread and wine were transformed. Once objects became
holy they could confer sacrality through other forms of physical contact,
including seeing, touching, and kissing relics. There were, however, also
grave concerns, particularly from the episcopacy, over the ways holiness
might become lost, or polluted, through contact with the ‘profane’. As
Woolgar demonstrates, whilst theologians might debate the nature of
holiness or the process of transubstantiation in intellectual terms, ordinary
men and women were more interested in the practical, prophylactic, and salutary benefits of physical contact with holy objects.

II: Concord and conversion

Woolgar’s focus on corporeal conversion and moments of liminal transition leads us into the second section of the volume. Moving forward to the early modern period, essays from Joe Moshenska and Abigail Shinn focus on the role of the senses in narratives of conversion in an age of extreme confessional disruption. Whilst acknowledging the conflicts and ruptures associated with conversion, Moshenska and Shinn also attend to moments of dialogue, concord, and constancy across confessional boundaries.

Through an analysis of the writings of Sir Kenelm Digby, Joe Moshenska discusses the neglected phenomenon of ‘double conversion’. Digby, who was raised a Protestant, converted to Roman Catholicism before returning the Protestant faith. Since Christian tradition held that conversion was irrevocable, those who recanted (Digby included) risked accusations of insincerity. Moshenska’s essay examines the ways in which Digby’s writings responded to this risk. Digby’s epistemological and theological interest in the senses, coupled with his constant re-writing of his life experiences, Moshenska argues, were intimately linked: indeed, Digby’s writings can be viewed as a form of ‘sensory autobiography’. In particular, Moshenska shows how Digby made use of the senses in his writing in order to assert continuities between his ‘past and present sensing selves’, thus challenging ideas of rupture traditionally associated with conversion. Though transformed by his religious experiences, he remained fundamentally unchanged. Moshenska leaves the reader with a final question, one which recurs throughout this volume: are the senses sites of purely subjective, individual experience, or can sensory experience be made communicable to others? Digby, Moshenska argues, insisted both to be the case.

Abigail Shinn’s essay similarly complicates traditional understandings of early modern conversion narratives through an examination of the senses, and addresses the question of the communicability of individual sensory experiences. Shinn draws on a broad variety of Catholic and Protestant writings from seventeenth-century England and North America, a period in which conversion narratives flourished. While scholars often stress the antagonistic nature of conversion narratives, Shinn argues, the senses provided a significant ‘cross-confessional trope’, which provided a ‘locus of spiritual transformation’. Although traditional historiography emphasises Protestant rejection of the senses, Shinn demonstrates that many characterised conversion in sensory terms. Conversely, although it might be tempting to exclusively associate Protestants with the ‘distancing effects’ of metaphor, Catholic converts also used figurative language. Sensory language, Shinn asserts, is thus employed by both Catholics and
Protestants in order to connect spiritual change with bodily metamorphosis. The language of the senses, moreover, is a powerful tool through which individual bodily experience can make visible to others that which is traditionally unseen, namely interior spiritual experience. The senses and sensory language, Shinn concludes, complicate and can even erase boundaries between the figurative and the corporeal.

III: Exile and encounter

Boundaries are key to the essays in the third section of this volume, which are united through the investigation of travel and encounter. Erin Lambert, Emilie Murphy, and Robin Macdonald all draw attention to the ways in which sensory experiences could shape, as well as traverse, boundaries – both geographical, as people moved through foreign lands, and imaginative, as individuals blurred the boundaries between bodies and texts. In so doing, all three authors explore how sensory experiences and sensuous actions played an active part in creating and shaping devotional spaces, places, and practices.

Lambert and Murphy demonstrate how attending to sound can enrich our understanding of two very different forms of exilic experience. Lambert investigates how Dutch reformed émigrés employed psalmody and liturgical gestures in order to create, and orient themselves within, particular places – notably, Austin Friars in London. Lambert reveals how hearing could prompt an embodied response from listeners, as demonstrated by the young refugee from the Low Countries who wept upon his arrival in Strasbourg when he heard fellow exiles singing in his own vernacular. Communal psalm-singing for those establishing Stranger churches during the reign of Edward VI also formed a vital way for exiles to carve out a place for themselves in London. Portable psalters were material marks of identity that were carried with individuals, and were sung from as they moved through the world, the object providing a sense of place as much as the act of psalm-singing itself. (There are significant parallels here with Robin Macdonald’s essay, where the sensuous experience of objects, such as birch bark letters, provided the recipients with a physical reminder of the place of the text’s origin.) Psalmody, Lambert reveals, united multifarious experiences of exile and for some anticipated a future home in heaven for the pious, figuring the entire earth itself as an exilic space.

Similarly focusing on auditory experience, Emilie Murphy explores the significance of musical sounds within English Catholic convents and seminaries founded in the Spanish Habsburg territories. Murphy attends to the uneasy reconciliation within the institutions of the positive and negative attributes of music. On the one hand, music was thought to effect physical and emotional changes in listeners, and held great power for the stirring up of devotion. Simultaneously, however, concerns over
its improper use included anxieties over the voices of nuns triggering improper male fantasies about their singing bodies. Embodied responses to melodic sounds also facilitated connections to the divine, as Murphy shows in an analysis of the two poems written on the subject of bells by the English Catholic exile Richard Verstegan. By exploring the acoustic activities and boundaries of the convents and seminaries, Murphy challenges previous scholarship that has viewed these institutions in exile as unproblematically ‘English’. She highlights the variety of cultural influences present, and the institutions’ incorporation into local and international networks of piety. Musical performances, Murphy argues, formed part of a process of fashioning and communicating forms of identity. Communities were forged through the singing of harmonious music, which allowed English Catholics to locate themselves imaginatively and physically among their co-religionists on the continent and in England.

Connections between those at home and abroad are also vital to the final essay in this section. Robin Macdonald examines letters sent by missionaries – both men and women – from the French colony of New France to the metropole. Macdonald focuses on the materiality of letters, and in particular the ways in which form could elicit sensory responses from readers. Close attention is paid to two letters written on birch bark, rare survivals of a fragile material often used by missionaries. Missionary writings such as the Jesuits’ Relations usually portray birch bark as a material used for writing in times of necessity (as a result of paper shortages or capture by hostile forces). Conversely, Macdonald argues that it was used deliberately – even when paper was available – owing to its particular sensory connotations. A letter’s meaning, she further contends, could also be informed by the body of its bearer, blurring distinctions between bodies and texts. Indeed, whilst scholars have argued for the importance of embodied practices of reading and writing, little attention has been paid to the bodies of those who carried letters. Materiality, Macdonald concludes, had important implications for the storage and categorisation of sources, a point which scholars should attend to in order fully appreciate sources’ meanings. Complementing Shinn’s essay, which describes the senses as ‘a powerful conversionary force’ on the mission terrain, Macdonald stresses the probative function of the senses in demonstrating – to French readers of missionary relations – the apparent successes of the New France mission. All three essays in this section fulfil John Arnold’s call for significant attention to be paid to embodiment and affect, a subject which is also taken up in the last section of the volume.

IV: Figuration and feeling

The final essays in this volume, from Bronwyn Wallace, Subha Mukherji, and Elizabeth Swann, are united by an interest both in the ways in which early modern authors responded to key ‘sense’ moments in scripture in their own works, and in the ways that such authors forged intimate
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links between devotional affects and literary forms. All are concerned, in varying ways, with a central tension in the relation between religion and the senses. On the one hand, faith is often described in terms which are vividly experiential, sensuous (or even sensual), and passionate. On the other hand, a long tradition in Christian thought defines faith as belief **beyond** the scope of sensory evidence; from this perspective, to require sensory proof is to reveal oneself as weak and wavering in faith. In all three essays, moreover, the resources of rhetoric and poetics are taken as instrumental not only in articulating, but also in probing and interrogating this fundamental tension.

Wallace’s essay brings queer theory to bear on Southwell’s interpretation, in his 1591 poem *Mary Magdalen’s Funeral Tears*, of John 20’s account of Mary Magdalen’s encounter with the risen Christ. For Southwell, Mary’s (frustrated) desire to touch Christ is simultaneously an expression of her faith (it is an outgrowth of her love of the divine), and an ‘error of faith’ (it is an over-investment in the corporeal). In his dilation on the encounter, Wallace argues, Southwell arrests the forward thrust of narrative temporality, opening up a space for the elaboration of Mary’s passionate longing for the body of Christ. Southwell’s exegetical-cum-poetic method shares with Mary an investment in the affective and erotic charge of deferral and delay. Scriptural collation, in particular, emerges both as a hermeneutical method, and as a means of ‘suturing’ the wound of Christ’s prohibition of touch by bringing different scriptural moments into contact, thereby reconciling the figurative (spiritual) and literal (physical) meanings of the text.

Like Wallace, Mukherji is interested in the dynamic interplay between the immediacy of sense experience, and sensation that is deferred or denied. Mukherji is also deeply concerned with the relationship between literary form and religious faith, arguing that early modern drama is a neglected source for uncovering a ‘lost’ period in the long theological tradition of the spiritual senses. As in several essays within this volume, St Thomas plays an important role. Doubting Thomas’s initial reluctance to believe in the truth of the resurrection stands for wavering faith: it is an inability to believe despite the sensory evidence available to him. This relation between tactile proof and faith, Mukherji shows, is also central to *The Winter’s Tale*. In the course of the play, Mukherji argues, Leontes is taught to believe regardless of – or even against – sensory evidence. Leontes’s reward for achieving this state of faith, however, is the sensory fulfilment offered by the apparent resurrection of his living, breathing wife. Mukherji interprets this irony as signalling the play’s engagement with the theology of accommodation, according to which divine mysteries are made perceptible to our limited human capacities through divine generosity. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, this dynamic takes on a different aspect, as Bottom’s account of his dream articulates a comedic version of the relation between sensation and faith.
In the final essay in this volume, Elizabeth Swann explores many of the issues raised by Wallace and Mukherji from a different perspective. Instead of examining the value and dangers of the human senses as a means of knowing the divine, Swann asks to what extent God himself can be said to sense humankind. Swann identifies a pervasive reformist tradition according to which early modern authors conceived of human virtue and vice in sensory terms. This tradition is concerned with God the father rather than with the incarnate son, and focuses heavily on the traditionally ‘lower’ senses of smell, touch, and taste. For early modern men and women, the experience of being perceived by God is equivalent to the experience of grace. For George Herbert, Swann argues, poetry plays an important role in maintaining the vital sensory relationship between humankind and God. Whilst early modern authors placed a high value on God’s senses, however, the notion of an embodied deity was also potentially idolatrous. Swann argues that whereas reformist iconoclasm has conventionally been seen as a reaction against the sensuality of Catholic devotion, it was equally motivated by horror at the notion of an unfeeling God. Ending with the example of the Huguenot Guillaume Du Bartas’s creation poem *The Divine weekes and works*, Swann shows how by focusing on ekphrastic descriptions of Adam’s sense organs, Du Bartas redeems poetic imagery from such charges of idolatry.

For Montaigne – to return to the example with which this introduction opened – the ‘stirring of our senses’ enflamed religious passions. Ranging across a diverse spectrum of sources, the essays in this volume illuminate the complex, heterogeneous relations between religious faith, embodiment, and affect in medieval and early modern culture. While the senses were often conceived of as passive receptors for ecclesiastical or divine instruction, processes of sensing were also responsive and transformative, acting on and helping to shape specific practices and environments. In a period of immense social, economic, political, and religious upheaval, the ways in which people experienced religious faith – how they sensed the sacred – altered enormously. Our understanding of these changes, however, must be counterbalanced by an awareness and sensitivity towards the ways in which people used sensory experience as a site of resistance to, or a means of intervention in, broader historical developments. The experience of sensing the sacred could entail awe, submission, and humility. Moreover, individuals and communities used their senses actively to determine what counted as holy, to create particular kinds of sacred environment, to form and maintain a ‘sense’ of communal and confessional identity, and to forge personal connections with the divine.

Notes

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2 On Montaigne’s ‘skeptical fideism’, see Terence Penelhum, God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), chapter 2. For an alternative view, see Manuel Bermúdez Vázquez, The Skepticism of Michel de Montaigne (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), International Archives of the History of Ideas 24, especially 87–90.


5 See, inter alia, Michael Schoenfeldt, Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially chapters 2 and 5; Brian Cummings and Freya Sierhuis, ed., Passions and Subjectivity in Early Modern Culture (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), especially the chapters in Part IV: Religion, Devotion, and Theology.


7 Richard Brathwaite, Essays upon the five senses (London, 1620), A3r.


9 Thomas Wright, The passions of the minde (London, 1601), B7r.


