INTRODUCTION:
THE SACRED AND THE SENSES IN AN AGE OF REFORM

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The notion of the sacred has been fundamental to the development of comparative religion as a distinct field of study. The numinous, as Rudolf Otto analyzed it in Das Heilige (1917), was an autonomous sphere of the human experience and, as such, the essential common denominator of all religion. Criticizing rationalist theologies of his day as too narrow, Otto was open to anthropological studies that included ‘primitive’ religions within their purview, but he was equally adamant in rejecting approaches he deemed reductionist, be they psychological or sociological. The numinous, then, was an experience sui generis directed at an object external to the self; non-rational, it was an affective state provoked by a mysterium tremendum.¹

One may or may not accept Otto’s axiom of irreducibility – clearly, since his day, the charge of reductionism has been a regular companion of the anthropological, sociological, psychological, and cultural-historical approaches that have enriched our understanding of religious phenomena. Regardless of one’s position in this matter, however, Otto’s analysis was both innovative and marred by a peculiar blind spot. On the one hand, he opened up for consideration the embodied nature of religious experience, and its ‘awesome’ affective powers. On the other hand, one can only be baffled (even when keeping in mind Otto’s roots in Lutheran theology) by his assumption that the apprehension of the numinous bypassed ordinary sense experience and instead relied on something he was to call the ‘sensus numinis’.² Today, almost a century after Otto’s seminal book

² He traced this concept back to Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760): see Otto R., “Zinzendorf als Entdecker des Sensus Numinis”, in idem, Das Gefühl des Überweltlichen (Sensus numinis) (Munich: 1932) 4–10. In contrast, he dismissed as endowed with ‘a certain naïveté’ (‘fast naiv’) William James’s characterization of the religious experience as ‘a perception of what we may call “something there”, more deep and more general than any of the
appeared, there is no question but that this stance is untenable. Scholars have come to recognize that religious experience is overwhelmingly mediated by sensory discourses and practices. Accordingly, in recent years the study of religious phenomena has increasingly moved from established social-, cultural-, and religious-historical approaches to the analysis of the sensory – as well as affective – dimensions of religion.

The early-modern European world is a privileged observatory for the study of these dimensions. The complex conglomerate of liturgical, pious, and spiritual practices we call late medieval Christianity was characterized by intense if often problematic forms of engagement with the material world. It was precisely this engagement that during the Reformation became subject to violent disputes over the relations between the secular

