Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler (eds.)

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Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe explores discourses about the senses as well as the sensorial experiences of early modern religious subjects. This fine edited collection will be of interest to all historians of early modern religion. Art historians and specialists in the histories of England, Italy, and the Netherlands, as well as those interested in Jesuit spirituality, will find important material covered in this collection but there is ample food for thought for all scholars of the period and perhaps even for historians of other periods, as the essays provide good methodological examples of approaches to writing a history of the senses.

Wieste de Boer and Christine Göttler open the book with a very useful introduction that situates the new interest in writing history of the senses as a methodological challenge: sensory experience is not often mentioned in our sources, or, when the senses are noted, the references appear either in poetry or in the terms defined by philosophical inquiry: that is, in predominately Aristotelian categories. Luckily, as the editors point out, in this era of religious reform and scientific innovation (and colonial expansion, I would add), many early-modern understandings of proper sensorial expression were subject to contestation and thus made explicit in a wide variety of sources from the period. The book is divided into thematic sections. The first two are devoted to “Pathways to the Divine”: the first examines “vision” while the second takes up the “lower senses.” The third section is titled “Senses and Affects” and pays attention to emotional expression. The fourth section is titled “The Senses Contested” and relates to debates about the senses. The fifth, “Sensory Environments” pays attention to space and place. The sixth section, “Senses, Science, and the Sacred” looks to the overlap of emerging science and experience of the sacred.

The authors in this collection use case-studies to delve into the categories and contexts in which the senses were key aspects of early modern spiritual life. By the end of the volume, we see religion as fully embodied, that is, a lived experience. Sensorial experience was key not only to perception and meaning-making, but also to the communication of religious ideals. Here we see the senses as useful to those attempting to deepen their spirituality, but also as a dangerous provocation if not managed or bridled in contemporary discourse. This tension informed a crucial question for many religious leaders: how to bring another person to the proper spiritual experience. And for the religious practitioner: how could one discern that his experience was in keeping with...
God's will? The authors of the essays take up various strategies to read carefully for sensory data, either paying close attention to the deployment of these categories in context and/or extrapolating beyond the standard categorical usage to evoke sensorial experience in church, street, home, and the growing phenomenon of centers for spiritual recreation.

Many subthemes emerge and space does not allow me to comment upon each of the essays, but in what follows I will signal one of the most important thematic threads woven throughout the collection. Sensory perception in a lived religious context can best be described a process of discernment. We can understand the nature of this process as both cognitive and spiritual. The progression toward a moment of understanding might be short or long: Alfred Acres demonstrates that “to see” was a temporal process that took place in the moments in which one stood in front of a painting. How long would it take to notice the reflection of the cross glimmering in a vase? One could see with bodily eyes as well as with the eyes of faith. Similarly, Joseph Imorde argues that momentary “taste” of the sweetness of Christ on the palate of the heart required a schooling of the senses, as a religious subject must discern the meaning, and categorize the nature, of the gift of spiritual tears. Although divided into categories—sight, touch, taste, etc.—what we take away from these essays is that the nature of perception was such that the senses worked in tandem: Rachel King describes how the amber beads of the rosary called to the eye but softened under the touch and emitted a fragrance that evoked the state of prayer long after the beads had been put aside. Barbara Baert illustrates how the desire to touch the resurrected Christ, as well as the command to refrain from doing so—noli me tangere—was depicted artistically as a response to the call of his voice but, notably, the scene is represented in an oil painting in which Mary Magdalene looks into the eyes of the viewer.

Sensorial experiences are simultaneously of the moment and bound to ritual, and, ultimately, the ability to savor the divine was highly cultivated. The essays demonstrate that theology, habit, and improvisation are the tangled threads of sensorial religious experiences intended both to delight and instruct. As the authors demonstrate so well, the senses resonate with and, in fact, bleed into one another. Additionally, the senses also break down the barrier between inner and outer self. Walter Melion quotes Augustine to translate perceptual fluidity into Christian terms: “For it is not the body that perceives, but the soul by means of the body; and the soul uses the body as a sort of messenger in order to form within itself the object that is called to its attention from the outside world” (99-100). Jennifer Rae McDermott’s essay on sermons in England pays attention to hearing as just such a synaesthetic event—and the ear itself (and the newly discovered Eustachian tube in particular) as a