

[Royal on Matthew Milner, 'The Senses and the English Reformation'](#)

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Matthew Milner. *The Senses and the English Reformation*. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History Series. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. 430 pp. \$124.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-6642-4.

Reviewed by Susan Royal (Durham University) **Published on** H-Albion (February, 2013)
Commissioned by Siobhan M. Talbott

Matthew Milner's ambitious and wide-ranging monograph traces sensory perception during the religious upheavals of the English Reformation. His goal is to reevaluate the long-standing paradigm of Reformation history that maintains that reformers, whose rejection of pre-Reformation piety with all its sensual attractions, aspired to build "a religion that was austere, internalized and, above all, intellectual" (p. 2). Milner's narrative, in line with other recent assessments of the English Reformation, stresses continuity over discontinuity. His central claim is that religious reform was in fact shaped by the persistence of late medieval sensory culture that recognized the power of the senses for fostering virtue and avoiding vice. His analysis of this reform focuses squarely on liturgy, asking not what ritual *said* but what it *did* to participants.

Milner points out, quite rightly, that the scholarship on this topic has inherited "protestant" views of late medieval sensuality, and to redress this, the first half of the book is devoted to a deep analysis of the senses and sensual experiences of worship prior to the Reformation. Chapter 1 lays out late medieval theories of sensing, explaining the usurpation of Augustinian principles by the revival of Aristotelian thought, articulated chiefly by Thomas Aquinas. Milner explains the way sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch affected the components of tripartite anthropology, the body, spirit, and soul. From here, chapter 2 details the ways in which these theories influenced religious life in fifteenth-century England, describing the potential benefits and dangers of the senses, and the need to govern them properly. Chapter 3 offers a rich and engaging analysis of the pre-Reformation liturgical context, from liturgical and paraliturgical texts to the sensual experience of the parish church itself, showing that liturgical life was shaped by aesthetic contexts. The liturgy is the focus of the next chapter, and here Milner details the role that the senses played in the sacramental life of the church, with particular emphasis on the mass.

In the second half of the book, Milner turns to the upheavals of the sixteenth century and the role that sensation played in reformers' empirical reassessment of traditional piety. He begins chapter 5 with an examination of the Renaissance rationalization of sense experiences, detailing the critique of medieval epistemological hierarchies and important debates on the nature of the soul that saw a shift from the tripartite anthropology of body, spirit, and soul to a dualist model of body and mind. Turning to England, Milner demonstrates the persistence of Aristotelian sensory theories in Tudor thought, and locates the senses as a contentious battleground for early evangelical and conservative theologies. Chapter 6 focuses mainly on the 1530s and 1540s, showing how Henry VIII and his officials exploited perceptive language and morality to affirm the Royal Supremacy. It also examines how reformers grappled with their position on sensual affectivity: while it was easy to reject aspects

of traditional piety, it was much harder to describe how English churchgoers were supposed to connect sensibly with newly reformed practices. Here Milner weaves the senses into early doctrinal debates over justification and sanctification that would not be resolved until late in Elizabeth's reign. Moving from theoretical wrangling to religion in practice during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI, chapter 7 chronicles the transition from recognizing abuse and misuse of traditional religion to its complete rejection as misrepresentation and deceit, with iconoclasm as the antidote. Milner also traces how parishioners were taught to replace traditional Eucharistic piety with spiritual communion, arguing that this in fact offered an even more sensuous experience of the sacred. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to logocentric emphasis of Edwardian religious culture and the tension between sensing the book as a holy object and comprehending it. Chapter 8 explores the complex debates among conformists and nonconformists about sensing during worship in Elizabethan England. While smell, taste, and touch were important, the senses of hearing and sight emerge as the focus of real contention. Milner argues that divisions between conformists and nonconformists concerning extemporaneous prayer, set readings, and even preaching were firmly rooted in concerns about hearing practices, and that the vestment controversy and arguments over the sign of the cross at baptism were connected to tensions about sight. Sitting somewhat awkwardly among all of these debates were those evangelicals receptive to the notion of *adiaphora*, "a category of religious experience indifferent to salvation but also to sensation," which Milner claims was important because it was another source of conflict between conformists and nonconformists (p. 290).

This work has many strengths, not least an expansive variety of primary sources ranging from late medieval scientific treatises to Elizabethan devotional tracts. Milner helpfully emphasizes and explains the varieties of pre-Reformation religious worship and does the same for the Tudor church, leaving us with a composite picture that is probably closer to reality than that which has been portrayed by some other studies. Milner details the engrossing traditions of the two most sensory scriptural characters, Eve and Thomas, and keeps his readers mindful of their legacy in the Reformation. He also illuminates how sensory concerns shaped important ideas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; for instance, heresy is "sensual deviance" and tyranny is "sensory misrule" (pp. 188-189, 217). But the work has limitations as well: such a tight focus on liturgical change precludes understandings of the senses in domestic piety or more private spaces, and it also leaves readers wondering how the smells, sights, and sounds of the many martyrs affected English men and women. Readers interested in Mary's reign will be disappointed: a paragraph full of potential on Marian liturgical aesthetics is left unexplored.

This is no holiday paperback. Milner's jargon-heavy prose combined with a complex topic can make for hard work at times, but it is worth it. This study provides a valuable contribution to the history of Reformation liturgical change and opens up many areas of future study.

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