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Hearing Difference in Calvin's Geneva: From Margins to Center

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This article puts hearing disability at the center of research on early Calvinism in Geneva, arguing that it allows us to observe the process by which new patterns of sensory communication were fashioned after the Reformation. The paper proposes to approach the Reformation as an epistemological shift that brought about a new moral definition of bodily conduct and sense perception, which constructed hearing differences afresh by determining what it meant to hear or listen properly. On the one hand, this article gives evidence against the ingrained historiographical notion that the deaf and hard of hearing were marginalized and generally excluded from salvation in the period; on the other, it calls into question the self-evidence of the category of deafness itself, which is never understood as a purely physical impairment in the Genevan primary sources, but as a diagnosis in which bodily difference and sociocultural practices cannot be easily separated.

PERNETE, WIDOW OF THE GENEVAN BOATMAN JEHAN DU NANT, was summoned to appear before the Genevan Consistory on Thursday, 19 October 1542 to answer questions concerning her supposedly poor attendance at church services and to demonstrate her knowledge of the tenets of the newly introduced doctrine. When asked about the last sermon she had attended, Pernetete stated that she had been present at Jean Calvin's Sunday preaching in the cathedral of Saint Pierre four days earlier.¹ When it came to the content of the sermon, however, Pernetete could

¹In November 1541, medieval Geneva's seven parishes were replaced by only three, formed around the temples of Saint Gervais, La Madeleine, and Saint Pierre; see *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs de Genève au Temps de Calvin*, vol. 1, 1546–1553: *Délibérations de la Compagnie, Ordonnances ecclésiastiques; Procès de Jérôme Bolsec*, ed. Jean-François Bergier and Robert M. Kingdon (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 5. Probably the best modern account of the initial phase of the Genevan Reformation is provided by William Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994). Liturgical and disciplinary transformation in post-Reformation Geneva is discussed in Robert Kingdon and Thomas Lambert, *Reforming Geneva: Discipline, Faith and Anger in Calvin's Geneva* (Geneva: Droz, 2012); Christian Grosse, *Les Rituels de la cène: Le culte eucharistique réformé à Genève (XVIe–XVIIe siècles)* (Geneva: Droz, 2008); and Thomas Lambert's unpublished dissertation on the first years of the Reformation in Geneva, "Preaching, Praying and Policing the Reform in Sixteenth-Century Geneva" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998). The transformation of the parish churches is dealt with by Christian Grosse, "Places of Sanctification: The Liturgical Sacrality of Genevan Reformed Churches,

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only remember that Calvin's words had been good; she could not remember any of the details of his speech, whether it was the topic of the sermon or the biblical passage he had commented upon. When it became clear that she could not answer any other questions posed by the presiding syndic, or possibly even by Calvin himself (who was present at the Consistory that day), she came up with a not entirely unfamiliar explanation for her ignorance: she had not profited from the sermons because she could not hear the preaching well enough, as "she is a little deaf" (*ung peu sorde*) and "does not understand what the preacher says" from the pulpit.²

To get a further impression of the general state of her religious knowledge, the Consistory gave Pernete the opportunity to recite two of the essential texts of the new vernacular worship: "the prayer" (i.e., the Lord's Prayer) and the Confession of Faith ("la confession"). Like most of the people summoned before the Genevan Consistory in the first years of its existence, Pernete found herself unable to say the Confession and could remember only a few words of the prayer. Dissatisfied with her poor performance, the Consistory tribunal agreed that she should frequent the sermons and draw better profit from them (that is, she was expected to learn to pray in her mother tongue), which she was to demonstrate at the Consistory one month later. In addition, Pernete was advised to participate in catechism lessons, where the basic principles of the reformed religion would be reintroduced to her.³

The case of Pernete du Nant is in many respects fairly typical of what can be found in the minutes of the weekly sessions of the Genevan Consistory, the most prominent reformed moral court of the mid-sixteenth century, after its

1535–1566," in *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*, ed. William Conster and Andrew Spicer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 60–80.

²*Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin*, vol. 1, 1542–1544, ed. Thomas A. Lambert and Isabella M. Watt (Geneva: Droz, 1996), 131. The Consistory registers for the time of John Calvin's ministry are available to scholars in the archives of the Etat d'Genève (AEG), where the Genevan primary sources have been also systematically restored and digitalized. Many of these, including the registers of the Consistory, can now be consulted online. For further information on the state of digitalization see the website of AEG, especially the project Adhëmar: <https://ge.ch/arvaegconsult/ws/consaeg/public/FICHE/AEGSearch>. The manuscripts of the Consistory registers have also been systematically transcribed from microfilms at the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary of Grand Rapids, MI, since 1987, and so far the registers from the institution's first fifteen years (1542–57) have been published, in eleven volumes, as *Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin* (Geneva: Droz, 1996–2017). General editors of the series have been Robert Kingdon, Wallace McDonald, and Lee Palmer Wandel, and the editing team included Thomas A. Lambert, Isabella M. Watt, and Jeffrey R. Watt.

³Pernete du Nant was not summoned before the Consistory in November as promised, but she appeared before the tribunal again in late December. Having shown little progress in her knowledge of the prayers, she was sent back to catechism classes. See *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:158 (28 December 1542).

establishment in 1542.⁴ One of the primary aims of the consistorial interrogations, which occupied a central position in the city's comprehensive surveillance system,⁵ was to find out whether the Genevans had understood and interiorized the information preached from the pulpit. The records that were taken down in the first years of the institution's existence are full of examples of people who, like Perneté, encountered considerable difficulties in adopting the new religious standards promoted by the Reformation. Even though the Consistory was established only at the end of the first Reformation decade in the city, most of those summoned before the tribunal were still not able to give an account of the tenets of their religion and did not remember the sermons they had attended. The people recorded in the registers know almost nothing about the recently introduced doctrines; they fail to retain virtually any details from the services (often including the names of the ministers and topics of their homilies); they do not remember the basic vernacular prayers despite these being repeatedly recited aloud in every

⁴In the course of the sixteenth century, most of the areas controlled by the recently established reformed churches experienced the emergence of a special kind of institution to oversee the religious discipline of their members. The Genevan Consistory occupies an exceptional place among these tribunals because of the scope, impact, and efficacy of its activities, as well as its particularly detailed and well-preserved registers. It is estimated that the Consistory summoned about 5 to 7 percent of the city's entire population every year, many of them repeatedly, to find out whether and how they embraced the new reformed principles. During the first two years of its existence, the Consistory summoned 843 people, of whom 142 were witnesses or plaintiffs (*Registres du Consistoire*, 1:xviii). It is estimated that the population of Geneva was between 9,000 and 11,000 at the time; see Alfred Parrenoud, *La population Genève du seizième au début du dix-neuvième siècle* (Geneva: Librairie A. Jullien, 1979), 37–41. For similar disciplinary institutions in other reformed territories see, Janine Estèbe and Bernard Volger, "La genèse d'une société protestante: Étude comparée de quelques registres consistoriaux languedociens et palatins vers 1600," *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 31 (1976): 362–88; Raymond A. Mentzer, "Disciplina nervus ecclesiae: The Calvinist Reform of Morals at Nîmes," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, no. 1 (1987): 89–116; Heinz Schilling and Klaus-Dieter Schreiber, *Die Kirchenratsprotokolle der reformierten Gemeinde Emden, 1557–1620*, 2 vols. (Cologne: Böhlau, 1982, 1992); and Philippe Chareyre and Raymond Mentzer, eds., "La mesure du fait religieux: L'approche méthodologique des registres consistoriaux," special issue, *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 153, no. 4 (2007).

⁵Most importantly, acoustic surveillance in the church was supported by a new arrangement of the interior, the system of city dizaniers who were to supervise religious discipline in different city quarters, practices of horizontal disciplining and observation in schools and in the streets, various practices of self-disciplining, a new politics of sound production and manipulation, and, later on, regular visits to churchgoers. For the church leaders' idea of disciplined life in Geneva, see "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 56–72, and Bergier and Kingdon, *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs*, 1:14–21. For school discipline see, "L'ordre estably en l'escole de Geneve par noz magnifiques et tres honnerez seigneurs syndiques et conseil de ceste cité de Geneve veu et passé en Conseil le Lundy Vingt Neufz de May 1559," in *Le Livre de Recteur de l'académie de Genève: 1559–1878*, ed. Suzanne Stelling-Michauld and Sven Stelling-Michauld (Geneva: Droz, 1959), 1:68–69. For the Company of Pastors and the role of the ministers in the city's surveillance system, see Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 182–221.

church service; and they complain that they cannot follow the preaching, either on account of its incomprehensibility, because they cannot hear it well enough, or because they have problems concentrating on the spoken instruction for long stretches of time. It seems, and this is the argument of the present article, that the inability of many people to benefit from the religious instruction that was delivered to them in church stemmed from the novel model of lay participation in the worship, in which the sensorium was exercised in a substantially different way from that of the Catholic service. To be able to receive the necessary religious knowledge, the ears of the Genevans had to be trained to listen silently and attentively to spoken instruction, a requirement that many found very difficult to fulfill.

This paper will pay close attention to those Genevans who, like Pernete du Nant, explicitly complained of their deafness or hardness of hearing before the Consistory tribunal, and to the policies that were subsequently directed at them. In the context of the Genevan Reformation, hearing disability is often best understood not as a medical diagnosis, but as a culturally and socially negotiated category whose boundaries are not clear-cut. Two interconnected models of deafness as they appear in the Genevan primary sources will be the focus: congenital deafness as discussed by the Company of Pastors, and hearing difficulty as found in the registers of the Consistory.

HOW TO APPROACH HEARING PROBLEMS

The Calvinist Reformation in Geneva can usefully be regarded as a broader epistemological shift that located spiritual meaning in the realm of language, most visibly represented by the vernacular sermon, instead of in the physical world or its parts. Despite the centrality of the scriptures in Protestant literalism, it was the ear more than any other sense organ that occupied a privileged position in the Calvinist religious epistemology, where faith was believed to come through hearing and the divine voice was imagined to sound through the world, speaking “plainly in the Gospel” and, by extension, through its ministers.⁶ In recent years, Reformation historians have increasingly attended to the practices

⁶Calvin’s commentary on John 12:29, in *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 5:41–42. See also the commentary on 2 Thessalonians 2:10, in Torrance and Torrance, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 8:407; or the idea of “sonorous faith” in 1 Thessalonians 1:8, in *ibid*, 338–39. On the idea that hearing is similar to believing, see *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2.6 on 1:548. When the reformers argued for an inseparable link between hearing, preaching, and faith, they most commonly referred to St. Paul’s idea that “faith is by hearing and hearing is by the Word of God” in his Epistle to the Romans 10:17 (see the whole passage, Romans 10:14–17, in *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1590 Version*, ed. Lloyd Eason Berry and William Whittingham [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969]).

and religious experience of Protestantism, as opposed to its doctrinal issues.⁷ As part of this larger trend, scholars such as Robert Kingdon, Thomas Lambert, or Christian Grosse have approached the Genevan Reformation from the perspective of the transformation of worship, concluding that the reformed liturgy employed a different “set of senses” than the medieval Mass. They point out that during Mass, the whole sensorium, especially the sense of vision, was exercised, whereas the Reformation discarded Catholic visual imagery and placed unprecedented emphasis on sermon delivery and reception.⁸ Kingdon and Lambert’s work on the registers of the Genevan Consistory interpreted the problems experienced by many people in grasping the reformed doctrine as arising from an inability to follow oral discourse in the church and to receive religious instruction by listening to a preaching minister.⁹ But despite (rightly, I believe) indicating the transformation of listening experience in the church, these studies do not take the argument any further. What kinds of problems did the Genevans have in hearing the sermons? Did they not understand the words, did they fail to pay attention, or did they make no effort to remember what they heard? What were the new listening standards, and how exactly were they produced and put into practice? The role of the senses is recognized in this research, but has not been addressed systematically. In particular, the Genevan Reformation and the new forms of religious communication it implemented have never been studied specifically through the lens of the cultural history of the senses, and the role of

⁷The focus on the ritual is represented perhaps most prominently by Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Karant-Nunn approaches the Reformation as a shift from “affective” piety to a more rationalized and disciplined mode of religious expression. For the view of the Reformation as a change of religious experience, emphasizing both continuities and discontinuities between Catholic and Protestant modes of piety, see Robert W. Scribner, “The Reformation, Popular Magic and the Disenchantment of the World,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1997): 475–94; Alexandra Walsham, “The Reformation and ‘The Disenchantment of the World’ Reassessed,” *Historical Journal* 51 (2008): 497–528; and Karin Maag and John D. Witvliet, eds., *Worship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Change and Continuity in Religious Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

⁸The transformation of worship is dealt with especially in Robert Kingdon “The Genevan Revolution in Public Worship,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 20 (1999): 264–80, and Kingdon, “Worship in Geneva before and after the Reformation,” in Maag and Witvliet, *Worship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 41–60. See also Lambert, “Preaching, Praying and Policing,” 156–480, esp. pts. 3 and 4; Kingdon and Lambert, *Reforming Geneva*, 38–41; and Grosse, *Les Rituels de la cène*.

⁹Kingdon and Lambert’s main evidence to support this argument comes from the records from the first few years of the existence of the Genevan Consistory, where many people are accused of keeping up practices associated with the old faith, such as “muttering” private prayers or “hiding” in quiet corners of the church during the worship instead of paying attention to the sermon. The argument is most explicitly formulated in Kingdon, “Worship in Geneva,” but see also Lambert’s “Preaching, Praying and Policing,” 359–67, 408–28.

a shifting sensory economy in the process of fashioning the religious reformation has not been examined in greater detail.

The sensory dimension of the sixteenth-century religious upheavals has thus received only limited scholarly attention, and of the studies that tackle hearing, the majority deal with English Protestant worship and preaching.¹⁰ The topic of deafness (that is, the loss or inadequacy of the sensory capacity that was now most highly valued in religious terms) has been largely neglected, and to my knowledge no study of deafness or hardness of hearing in the Reformation context has been written.¹¹ Here, in contrast, I take the topic of hearing difference as a point of departure to study both Calvinist discourses around the senses and the ways that the sensorium was exercised in day-to-day practice. In order to explore some of the facets of the Calvinist auditory culture in Geneva, I propose to ask the following questions: What was the place of deafness and hearing disability in the new system of the distribution of spiritual knowledge? And, perhaps even more importantly, what fell under the rubric of deafness in mid-sixteenth-century Geneva?

The existing historiography of hearing difference in early modern Europe focuses almost exclusively on congenital deafness, that is, on people who were born deaf and mute, in contrast to deafness or hardness of hearing that occurs

¹⁰See Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), and Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. chap. 2, which deals with new techniques of manipulating people's auditory perception and the new listening requirements placed upon the church audience after the Reformation. Interesting case studies dealing with the senses are Jennifer R. McDermott, "The Melodie of Heaven: Sermonizing the Open Ear in Early Modern England," in *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 177–97; Jacob M. Baum, "From Incense to Idolatry: The Reformation of Olfaction in Late Medieval German Ritual," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 44, no. 2 (2013): 323–44; Philip Hahn, "Sensing Sacred Space: Ulm Minster, the Reformation, and Parishioners' Sensory Perception, c. 1470 to 1640," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 105, no. 1 (2014): 55–91; and, more generally, Brian Crockett, "'Holy Cozenage' and the Renaissance Cult of the Ear," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, no. 1 (1993): 47–56. Though not concerned primarily with religious contexts, Bruce Smith, *The Acoustic World in Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), remains one of the best accounts of the early modern English auditory culture. A comprehensive overview of the cultural history of the senses is provided by Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹¹Although it does not focus exclusively on deafness, a noteworthy article on Luther's views on physical disabilities is M. Miles, "Martin Luther and Childhood Disability in 16th Century Germany: What Did He Write? What Did He Say?" *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 5, no. 4 (2001): 5–36. A link between Luther's theology of the cross and disability is made by Stefan Heuser, "The Human Condition as Seen from the Cross: Luther and Disability," in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 184–215; Deborah B. Creamer, "John Calvin and Disability," in Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 216–50, discusses selected treatises by Calvin, concluding from these what his view on disability might have been like. The texts selected are, however, neither confronted with actual disciplinary, religious, or political practice in Geneva, nor studied against the background of contemporary views on disability or sensory perception.

after the acquisition of language.¹² The majority of studies of deafness begin in the seventeenth century, a time when the teaching of “deaf-mute”¹³ children gradually moved from mainly religious or familial contexts to a broader secular environment, where it was later systematized and institutionalized.¹⁴ The few studies that address the topic prior to the seventeenth century tend to focus on the prehistories of deaf children's education, most commonly associated with a Spanish monk, Pedro Ponce de León, and on the use of sign language and finger alphabets in the medieval monastic life.¹⁵

This article departs from these studies on deafness in two respects. First, it is not primarily interested in congenitally deaf children and the means of their education, but in the education (or, in the case of post-Reformation Geneva, *re-education*) of adults who seem to have suffered from some kind of hearing difficulties. Second, even though some historical studies of deafness address both physical and cultural dimensions of the phenomenon, they do not

¹²The distinction between people who were born deaf and those who became deaf later in life (who were deaf *ex accidente*) was reflected in their legal status: only the latter were believed to be capable of rational thought and thus recognized as persons at law. See Kenneth W. Hodgson, *The Deaf and Their Problems: A Study in Special Education* (London: Watts & Co., 1953), 59–86, and Susan Plann, *A Silent Minority: Deaf Education in Spain, 1550–1835* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 13–35. Apart for this legal distinction, no studies have systematically dealt with deafness and hardness of hearing that occurs later in life, not only as the result of an accident but also caused by old age or changed social or cultural requirements.

¹³The term “deaf-mute” corresponds to the French noun *sourd-muet*, which was current at the time. I follow the differentiation between the terms “deaf” (sourd) and “deaf-mute” (*sourd-muet*) as it appears in my primary sources.

¹⁴The most celebrated teacher of the deaf in the seventeenth century was probably Juan Pablo Bonet, who combined the use of signs and gestures with memorization of the printed alphabet. There had long been a tendency to teach only those who were socially and economically important; this also applies to the first attempts to teach the deaf children of noblemen to speak, made by Pedro Ponce de León in the sixteenth century (see n12 above). On deaf education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Hodgson, *The Deaf and Their Problems*, 87–150; James R. Knowlson, “The Idea of Gesture as a Universal Language in the 17th and 18th Centuries,” *Journal for the History of Ideas* 26, no. 4 (1965): 495–508; Sophia Rosenfeld, “Deaf Men on Trial: Language and Deviancy in Late Eighteenth-Century France,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21, no. 2 (1997): 157–75; and Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language, and the Senses—A Philosophical History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999).

¹⁵On Ponce de León, see especially Plann, *Silent Minority*, 13–36. On sign language, see Lois Bragg, “Visual-Kinetic Communication in Europe Before 1600: A Survey of Sign Lexicons and Finger Alphabets Prior to the Rise of Deaf Education,” *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 2, no. 1 (1997): 1–25; Alexis Karacostas, ed., *Le Pouvoir des Signes, ouvrage édité à l'occasion de l'exposition commémorant le bicentenaire de l'Institut national des jeunes sourds de Paris, Chapelle de la Sorbonne, Paris, 13 décembre 1989–22 janvier 1990* (Paris: INJS de Paris, 1989); or an interesting study on the signing system developed by deaf people at the Turkish Ottoman court by M. Miles, “Signing in the Seraglio: Mutes, Dwarfs and Gestures at the Ottoman Court, 1500–1700,” *Disability & Society* 15 (2000): 115–34. Medieval conceptions of deafness are discussed in Aude de Saint Loup, “Images of the Deaf in Medieval Western Europe,” in *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and Their Sign Languages*, ed. Renate Fisher and Harlan Lane (Hamburg: Signum, 1993): 379–403.

generally contest the boundaries of the category itself, but limit their constructivist approach solely to the notion of disability.¹⁶ The “social model” in disability studies has long recognized the key role of society in producing disability,¹⁷ which is understood as a sociocultural construction imposed upon people with physical impairments. This approach rests on the perceived dichotomy between impairment, that is, a physical defect, and disability, that is, a socially negotiated diagnosis. Even though attentiveness to the sociocultural dimension of disability helps to historically contextualize the study of deafness, the present article does not follow the binary distinction between the medical (physical, natural) on the one hand and the social (discursive, cultural, or religious) on the other. Instead, it asks how different medical, philosophical, religious, and social notions of the human body came together in the articulation of hearing difference in Calvinist Geneva.

This paper, therefore, does not necessarily see deafness as a physical impairment that, in the context of specific social and cultural practices, is defined as a disability, but rather calls into question the notion of impairment itself as a stable and self-explanatory entity, for if the social context is in need of explanation, so is the bodily difference.¹⁸ In other words, I not only acknowledge the existence

¹⁶Typically, such studies recognize that the status of disabled people is culturally negotiated; yet deafness tends to be perceived as a given anatomical condition that is merely treated differently in different sociocultural contexts. Such an approach is also adopted by Irina Metzler in her otherwise highly insightful work on the social construction of disability in medieval Europe, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairments* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 10, where she distinguishes between disability as an emic category, and impairment as a universal etic one, existing independently of cultural context and values. For a similar treatment of disability, see Colin Barnes, Geof Mercer, and Tom Shakespeare, *Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York: Random House, 1984); Harry G. Lang, *Silence of the Spheres: The Deaf Experience in the History of Science* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1994); Plann, *Silent Minority*; Herbert C. Covey, *Social Perceptions of People with Disabilities* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1998); Jan Branson and Don Miller, *Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as Disabled* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002); and Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

¹⁷On the social model of disability, arguing against normalizing practices of medical discourse, see Michael Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); or Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare, *Exploring Disability*.

¹⁸A similar point, especially with respect to the social dimension of disability, is made by Michael Schillmeier, *Rethinking Disability: Bodies, Senses, and Things* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Borrowing from the constructivist approach of actor-network theory, Schillmeier criticizes the binary opposition between society and nature upon which the social model of disability rests, and points out that disability cannot be explained by “the social,” which in itself is in need of explanation. He defines disability as “complex sets of heterogeneous practices that (re-)associate bodies, material objects, and technologies with sensory practices,” claiming that “neither the body or bodily impairment, nor society refer to fixed domains of reality” (Schillmeier, *Rethinking*, 114, 127). The strong binary opposition between impairment and disability was also criticized by Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell in *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

of different cultural approaches to people with hearing impairments, but also investigate the parameters of the categories of deafness and hardness of hearing themselves. These are interpreted as results of the interplay between the physical body and its social environment, the latter in this case most clearly represented by the newly constructed religious norms.

DEAD AND MUTE *de nature*

In the documents of the Genevan public institutions, deafness is explicitly discussed in two contexts. First, we encounter the category in the recurring debate about the status of “deaf-mutes” in the spiritual and, by extension, civil community as recorded in the minutes of the meetings of the Company of Pastors.¹⁹ Second, the term “deaf” is occasionally used by Genevans who are summoned before the Consistory, where they use it to describe the problems they have when listening to the preaching in the church.

As regards the former use, the group of people in question were *sourd et muet de nature*, which implies people suffering from congenital deafness and muteness. The records do not specify whether the discussion concerns exclusively adult churchgoers or also echoes a more general debate on the integration of deaf or deaf-mute children into the religious community. It is clear, however, that the main concern of the ministers was to determine whether these people were able to apprehend the general meaning of the Holy Communion and demonstrate their comprehension to others. People who suffered from congenital deafness or muteness were not directly subject to consistorial discipline, and there is no evidence of a deaf-mute person appearing before the Consistory in the first decade of its existence. It was not until 1573 that, following precedents set by Calvin, the Company of Pastors decided that deaf-mute people could receive Communion if they showed their desire (*montre désir*) to do so and lived *chrestienement*, that is, if their behavior complied with the contemporary religious standards.²⁰ The decision resembled the resolution adopted by the French Reformed churches at the synod of Verteuil in 1567, which stated that if deaf-mute people who live in accordance with the common religious principles demonstrate by their outward gestures (*signes ou gestes & témoignages*) that they have “faith, piety, and

2005), which proposes a “cultural model” of disability that would “theorize the interactional space between embodiment and social ideology” (7).

¹⁹All the Genevan ministers, both urban and those from the village parishes, were organized in the Company of Pastors, which would meet every Friday to discuss scripture and other church-related matters. For a comprehensive study of the first seven decades of its existence, see Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*.

²⁰Bergier and Kingdon, *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs*, 3:105.

religion” (la Foi, la piété & religion), they can be allowed to receive the Lord’s Supper.²¹

Despite the centrality of preaching and sermon listening in Calvinist religious epistemology, the resolutions allowing deaf people to participate in the Communion, that is, to become full members of the spiritual community, suggest that a more sophisticated image of the Calvinist politics of sense perception is required. Even though the sense of hearing played a key role in the new order of communication, it was believed that hearing and speaking could be at least partly substituted by signs and bodily gestures. People who could not hear religious instruction in the church and lacked the faculty of speech could still acquire the spiritual knowledge necessary for their salvation, and their outward conformity and disciplined behavior was considered a sufficient condition for allowing them to take part in public religious life. On the necessity of preaching for salvation, Calvin argued that

where the apostle [Paul] makes hearing the beginning of faith he is describing only the ordinary arrangement and dispensation of the Lord which he commonly uses in calling his people—not, indeed, prescribing for him an unvarying rule so that he may use no other way. He has certainly used such another way in calling many, giving them true knowledge of himself by inward means, that is, by the illumination of the Spirit apart from the medium of preaching.²²

Hearing and speaking were essential for building and maintaining the ideal, disciplined church, but they were not a necessary prerequisite for an individual’s communication with God, which required only inner speech and conscience. In private prayer, according to Calvin, the tongue is not even necessary and the inner affection of the heart is sufficient.²³

In contrast, the outward performance of one’s religious conformity was of paramount importance in the first years after the Reformation, when communal

²¹On the matter of a deaf and mute person’s participation in the Communion, the synod of Verteuil decided that “he can be admitted as long as the Church, by long observing his regular life, can see that he really has the faith and that he truly knows about God” (il pourra y être admis, lorsque par une longue expérience de sa vie régulière, l’Eglise pourra appercevoir qu’il aura la foi, & qu’il sera vraiment enseigné de Dieu), *Actes Ecclesiastiques et Civils de Tous les Synodes Nationaux des Eglises Reformées de France en II Volumes*, ed. Jean Aymon (The Hague, 1710), article 36, 1:76. Despite the close similarities between the French and the Genevan position in this matter, there is no direct evidence that the Company of Pastors was aware of the resolution from Verteuil, which itself had no force in Geneva. It is very possible that the Genevan authorities knew about the resolution, given that there were many cultural and religious ties between Geneva and the French reformed communities at that time. Even if they did not, however, the resolution from Verteuil supports the argument that the reformed churches developed a specific stance on deaf-mute people, according to their ability to hear the preaching could be replaced by signs and gestures and by pious way of life.

²²Battles, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16.19 on 2:1342.

²³On private and silent prayers, see the commentary on Matthew 26:39, in Torrance and Torrance, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 3:38; or the commentary on Isaiah 38:2, in John

and individual identity was believed to be both expressed and constructed through public worship and in different language-mediated situations.²⁴ As the deaf-mute could not receive standard religious education and were not able to give voice to their inner thoughts, for a long time their position in the new religious system was difficult to determine. Acknowledging the capacity of the deaf to receive at least some kind of instruction, and especially to understand the significance of worship and express their desire to take part through signs and gestures, strikingly demonstrates that the acquisition of language together with the ability to make speech sounds was only one (though a crucial) means of becoming a valid member of the spiritual community. The signs used by deaf-mute people to communicate with the outside world were not yet standardized at the time, and we have to assume that the decision on whether an individual deaf-mute person would be allowed to participate in the Communion was usually a matter of a long-term observation of his or her outward behavior, as is also suggested by the resolutions mentioned above.

A similar stance towards the deaf was taken by Martin Luther. In 1519, in his commentary on Galatians, and then again in his treatise on the Holy Mass (1520), Luther problematizes the radical Pauline notion that religious faith comes exclusively through the sense of hearing. Referring to St. Jerome, he claims that physical dysfunction of the ear is not an issue because “to the Word of God nothing is deaf if only the inward ‘ears’ are willing to hear.”²⁵ Luther not only advocated the view that the “rational” deaf person should be allowed to receive Communion, but, similarly to Philip Melancthon, he gave practical examples of rational deaf people he had encountered in his life.²⁶ The often-repeated view that the deaf were generally excluded from salvation until lip reading was “discovered” in the late sixteenth century²⁷ requires a serious reconsideration. In fact, as early as

Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh, 1852), 3:154–55.

²⁴See Calvin's comments on the importance of communal hearing of the Word, and the association of hearing with believing, in Battles, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.2.6 on 1:548–49.

²⁵*Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia / Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–76), 27:247–9 (hereafter LW).

²⁶“They deserve the same thing that we do. Therefore if they are rational and can show by indubitable signs that they desire it in true Christian devotion, as I have often seen, we should leave the Holy Spirit what is his work and not refuse him what he demands” (LW 35:110). For examples of deaf people understanding and taking part in the Communion, see LW 38:108–9; for similar references in the work of Philipp Melancthon, see the discussion in Miles, “Martin Luther and Childhood Disability,” 20.

²⁷This has been most recently stated by Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 55, who refers to Knowlson's, “Idea of Gesture,” 499. The view that the deaf-mute were generally treated as monsters with no civil or religious rights in medieval and premodern Europe appears in the writings of the Enlightenment thinkers, most notably in Abbé de l'Épée, *Institution des sourds et muets, par la voie des signes méthodiques; ouvrage qui contient le projet d'une langue universelle, par l'entremise des signes assujettis à une méthode* (Paris, 1776), 3. Lip reading was probably first systematically used in education by Juan Pablo Bonet in the first half of the seventeenth century (Plann, *Silent Minority*, 36–67).

1198, Pope Innocent III recognized the right of the deaf not only to take part in the Supper, but also to marry, for unlike the mad, they were believed to be capable of understanding. This decision then repeatedly appeared in the manuals of Catholic confessional practice, most notably in the *Summa angelica* of 1511.²⁸ Even though it was probably not applied with great consistency,²⁹ it indicates a more complex attitude towards the deaf in European religious history than simple rejection.

In contrast to commonly held views, the Protestant approach to people with cognitive or sensory disabilities certainly went far beyond their condemnation as creatures possessed by Satan.³⁰ As far as their ontological status is concerned, Calvin repeatedly pointed out that they were indeed human beings, no more sinful than others; the cause of blindness, for example, should not be sought in sin, as “when the causes of afflictions are hidden, our curiosity must be restrained so that we may neither injure God nor be malicious to our brethren.”³¹ According to the same logic, one should “spare the deaf, for ... it is gross brutality to increase the ills of those whom our natural sense impels us to relieve, and who are already troubled more than enough.”³² Here, sensory differences such as deafness, muteness, blindness, or speech disorders are interpreted as an integral part of God’s creation, in which a bodily defect does not lessen the perfection of God, but manifests it.

Now this perfection is not perceptible in every individual thing, for even vermin are God’s creatures; and amongst men some are blind, some lame, some deaf, and others mutilated in one of their members.... Yet we plainly see that it is foolish and misplaced to bring forward such questions as these as objections to the perfection of God ... inasmuch as the

²⁸Angelus de Clavasio, *Summa Angelica de casibus conscientiae* (Venice, 1511), fol. 253.

²⁹The fact that deaf people were, at least in some German areas, theoretically expected to be allowed to participate in the sacrament is indirectly confirmed by Luther himself, who strongly argued against the practice of priests secretly giving unblessed wafers to deaf people (LW 35:110).

³⁰For this view, see David L. Braddlock and Susan L. Parish, “An Institutional History of Disability,” in *Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 11–69, esp. 21. Braddlock and Parish refer to the view advocated in earlier studies by David M. Colón, “Martin Luther, the Devil and the Teufelchen: Attitudes toward Mentally Retarded Children in Sixteenth-Century Germany,” *Proceedings of the PMR Conference 14* (1989): 75–84, and Leo Kanner, *History of the Care and Study of the Mentally Retarded* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1964), who claim that both Calvin and Luther believed disabled people were created by Satan.

³¹Commentary on John 9:1–5 in Torrance and Torrance, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 5:16.

³²Commentary on Leviticus 19:14, in John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham (Edinburgh, 1854), 3:24.

very *defects* and blemishes of our bodies tend to this object, that God's glory may be made manifest.³³

It is generally accepted that the sixteenth century saw a shift in the perception of people with hearing impairments, whose capacity for rational thinking was gradually acknowledged.³⁴ Different accounts of deaf people who showed unmistakable signs of comprehension and intelligence appeared throughout the sixteenth century; it was Leonardo da Vinci who observed that some deaf-mutes could understand the speech of others by watching the movements of their lips.³⁵ In *De inventione dialectica*,³⁶ Rudolph Agricola (1443–85) gave an account of a deaf-mute man who had learned to read and communicate his thoughts to others, and the idea that reading and writing can function as a substitute for hearing and speaking was also expressed by Girolamo Cardano.³⁷ Probably the most celebrated sixteenth-century teacher of the deaf was Pedro Ponce de León, who famously challenged the generally held opinion that deaf people were ineducable when he taught the deaf children of noblemen not only to read and write, but also to speak.³⁸ The view that rational thought was not necessarily dependent upon hearing and speaking appears in different written genres of the time and, as we have seen, was also reflected in practical resolutions adopted by different religious communities.

The instances of deafness discussed so far appear to have concerned mostly those people who could not communicate by means of speech sounds, but had to rely solely on the use of bodily gestures and signs. Similarly, the resolutions of the Company of Pastors and the synod of Verteuil refer to people who were *sourd et muet de nature*. When approaching such cases of hearing disability, which seem

³³Commentary on Deuteronomy 32:4, in Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 4:338–39. In this respect, Calvin's views on physical impairments partly echo those of Augustine, who argues that all God's creations, including monsters, are essentially good and not excluded from Salvation and that God's work may be displayed through impairments. For the discussion and extracts from primary sources, see Brian Brock, "Augustine's Hierarchies of Human Wholeness and Their Healing," in Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 65–100.

³⁴See Plann, *Silent Minority*; Covey, *Social Perceptions*; Branson and Miller, *Damned for Their Difference*; and Miles, "Martin Luther and Childhood Disability."

³⁵"I once saw in Florence a man who had become deaf who could not understand you if you spoke to him loudly, while if you spoke softly without letting the voice utter any sound he understood you merely from the movement of the lips." Cited in Louis M. DiCarlo, *The Deaf* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 14.

³⁶Rodolphi Phrisii Agricolae (1443–85), *De inventione dialectica* (1521, 1557), cited in Ruth E. Bender, *The Conquest of Deafness* (Cleveland, OH: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1970), 32.

³⁷In *De utilitate ex adversis capienda* (Basel, 1561), Cardano (1502–76) opened up the possibility of teaching the deaf person to read and write because, he believed, written ideas could be connected without the intervention of sounds. See the discussion in Hodgson, *The Deaf*, 80, and Plann, *Silent Minority*, 19–20.

³⁸Plann, *Silent Minority*, 13–36.

so close to our modern understanding of deafness as a physical impairment,³⁹ it should be borne in mind that the sixteenth century's notions of deafness were not unified, and their relationship to the physiological or medical understanding of hearing and the human body in general was indirect at best.

From the medical and anatomical point of view, contemporary knowledge of the nature of hearing and the structure of the ear was rather limited.⁴⁰ Andreas Vesalius, the first anatomist to dissect the ear in animals, remarks in book 7 of *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1543) that he still finds the functioning of the ear very obscure, and expresses his amazement at the authors who write about auditory perception without having "even the most superficial acquaintance with the actual organ."⁴¹ A famous Renaissance discovery that contributed to knowledge of the inner ear is ascribed to Bartolomeo Eustachio, who was allegedly the first to describe the aural "Eustachian" tube in 1564.⁴² In her study of English sermons on hearing at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, Elizabeth McDermott proposes an interesting hypothesis regarding the relationship between medical and religious conceptions of the acoustic "openness" of the ear. She argues that after Eustachio's discovery of the aural tube, the rhetorical style of preaching about the openness of the ear changed: more than ever before, the ear was now considered a literal passageway to the heart. Whereas medical science perceived the ear's permeability as potentially dangerous,⁴³ in a religious context such openness was welcomed. Borrowing from medical language, the preachers prescribed "remedies" for distractions in church that might

³⁹Mara Mills defines deaf-mutes as those who from early age were not able to hear the frequency range of human voice. But the hearing loss that is classified as deafness changed with the development of hearing aids and electronic amplification. Today, "those with a 56–70 dB hearing loss in the speech frequency range are considered to have only 'moderately severe impairment'"; Mara Mills, "Deafness," in *Keywords in Sound: Toward a Conceptual Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Saka-keeney and David Novak (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 45.

⁴⁰An overview of medical and anatomical knowledge in the period can be found in Andrew Wear, "Medicine in Early Modern Europe," in *The Western Medical Tradition: 800 BC to AD 1800*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 215–362, and Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 163–245. The status of sensory experience in Protestant anatomy is examined in Andrew Cunningham, "Protestant Anatomy," in *Religious Confessions and the Sciences in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Jürgen Helm and Anette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 45–50. Anatomical and physiological understanding of deafness in the Middle Ages is discussed in Saint Loup, "Images of the Deaf," 382–403. On the anatomy of the ear, see Jorge E. Hachmeister, "An Abbreviated History of the Ear: From Renaissance to Present," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 76 (2003): 81–86.

⁴¹Andreas Vesalius, *On the Fabric of the Human Body*, vol. 5, *Book VI: The Heart and Associated Organs; Book VII: The Brain: The Organ of Hearing*, trans. William F. Richardson (Novato, CA: Norman, 2009), bk. 7, chap. 15, p. 236.

⁴²Hachmeister, "Abbreviated History," 81–82; Edward D. McCoull, "Evolution of Eustachian Tube Surgery," *The Laryngoscope* 121 (2001): 661–62; and McDermott, "Melodie of Heaven," 177–200.

⁴³For this argument, see Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

prevent the Word of God from reaching one's ears, or characterized themselves as spiritual doctors. Improved understanding of the functioning of the ear may, therefore, have intensified the Protestant rhetoric of the interconnection between heart, belief, and hearing.

Although such anatomical discoveries had not yet been made or published in mid-sixteenth-century Calvinist Geneva, and the nature of medical and physiological knowledge of deafness and hearing among Genevan religious leaders remains hard to determine,⁴⁴ a similar kind of rhetoric can be observed in Calvin's writings and sermons composed between the 1540s and early 1560s. Interestingly enough, this concerns not only figurative language and medical metaphors,⁴⁵ but also a perceived distinction between deafness that is natural or inborn and entails a corporeal defect, and deafness caused by the work of the devil. Calvin differentiates between those who are deaf or dumb "from natural causes" and those who are deprived of their faculties partly by Satan having taken possession of their tongue and ears. In his discussion of Matthew 12:22, where a blind and dumb person is cured by Jesus, Calvin observed "many are blind and dumb from natural causes. But this man seems to have gone blind and been deprived of the use of speech without anything being wrong with his optical nerves or the shape of his tongue."⁴⁶ Elsewhere, he reflects on the case of a man whose "weakness of his brain and nerves made him liable to epilepsy," so that when Satan took possession of his ears and tongue, the man was left "deaf and dumb."⁴⁷ Here it appears that sensory disabilities might result from some sort of physical damage to one's brain, nerves, or sensory organs, but that such damage is, at the same time, closely intertwined with the workings of demonic forces. As for the nature of aural perception, Calvin writes that the sound of the voice can be heard by the ear only when it is "naturally adapted for hearing"; in this respect, he refers to a "power of hearing," which enables one to perceive sounds, and "the

⁴⁴It can be assumed that Calvin had some knowledge of the ancient views of sound and hearing, such as those of Aristotle or the Stoics, and occasionally he makes references to Hippocratic medicine as represented by Galen. Calvin's limited knowledge of medicine seems to have been directly influenced by Benedict Textor, who established his medical practice in Geneva in 1543 and soon thereafter became Calvin's highly esteemed personal physician. Davis A. Young, *John Calvin and the Natural World* (New York: University Press of America, 2007), 147; see also Benoit Textor, *De la maniere de preferuer de la Pestilence & d'en guerrire, selon les bons* (Lyon, 1551). The only medical works dealing (even marginally) with hearing problems that Calvin probably read are Paul of Aegina's, *Epitome Medicae Libri Septem*, a seven-volume encyclopedia of ancient medical knowledge, which recommends injecting or blowing different natural substances into the ear in cases of deafness. Paul of Aegina, *Seven Books of Paulus Aegineta*, trans. Francis Adams (London, 1847).

⁴⁵Such figurative uses of terms such as remedy, cure, or disease can be found in different parts of Calvin's work, for example his commentary on John 9:1-5, in Torrance and Torrance, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 5:16.

⁴⁶Commentary on Matthew 12:22, Torrance and Torrance, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 2:39.

⁴⁷Commentary on Matthew 17:17, Torrance and Torrance, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 2:207.

faculty of hearing,” which is “naturally implanted” in the ear. Though Calvin’s description of aural perception is not especially refined, it is obvious from his writings that he believed deafness to be located in the ear, where “a mutual correspondence between speaking and hearing” rested.⁴⁸

As for the ear’s permeability, metaphors of closedness and openness are also rather common in Calvin’s *Commentaries*. They evoke the metaphorical or corporeal deafness of people whose closed or blocked ears must be pierced, cleansed, or opened by God so that they will be able to receive spiritual knowledge.⁴⁹ But the permeability of the organ of hearing is considered in both positive and negative terms. Citing St. Bernard on the subject, Calvin observed “the door of salvation is opened to us when we receive the gospel today with our ears, even as death was then admitted by those same windows when they were opened to Satan.”⁵⁰ Evidently, advances in anatomical knowledge of the ear did not have a profound impact on the Calvinist rhetoric of auditory perception and spiritual knowledge, which already took shape in the mid-sixteenth century.

In summary, at least three distinct, although interconnected, concepts of deafness can be identified in the discourse of Calvin’s writings: natural (often inborn) deafness, entailing a crucial corporeal dimension (a defect); deafness caused by demonic possession; and a figurative deafness that signals insufficiency in the reception of spiritual knowledge. Studying the resolution on the deaf-mute adopted by the Company of Pastors against this background, it becomes clear that notions of hearing disability were not modelled on a medical or physiological concept of deafness. They were fashioned in the framework of contemporary discourses on the human body, cutting across categories such as natural/supernatural or religious/scientific. The fluidity of the category of deafness is perhaps best observable in cases such as that of Pernet du Nant, mentioned in the introduction to this article, in which Genevans summoned before the Consistory complained of hearing problems experienced when listening to the preaching.

REPORTING BAD HEARING

The Calvinist decision to allow some deaf-mute people to take part in Holy Communion arose not only from the recognition of their capacity for rational thought, but also from a strong Calvinist notion of the disciplined church, in which the purity and righteousness of the community as a whole took precedence over the morality of its individual members. The goal of early Calvinist church discipline was therefore not primarily to punish individual members of

⁴⁸Commentary on Leviticus 14:10, Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 2:26–27.

⁴⁹See the commentary on Matthew 11:15, Torrance and Torrance, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 2:8; or the commentary on Isaiah 29:18, Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 2:332.

⁵⁰Battles, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.1.4 on 1:246.

the community when they deviated from the religious norm, but to correct their behavior so that sin would be expunged from the community as a whole. Accordingly, the imagined spiritual community did not aim to exclude or marginalize those who suffered from specific disabilities, but strove to adapt to them and integrate them into the system. What was peculiar to religious reform in mid-sixteenth-century Geneva, however, was that a substantial part of the city's population deviated from the newly defined standards of religious behavior in the first years after the Reformation, and many of them found themselves suffering from some kind of hearing disability when it came to the reception of the sermon.

Thus, another context in which the term "deaf" (sourd) occurs in Geneva are the consistorial registers, where people like Pernete du Nant use it to explain their religious ignorance. Here, deafness is equated with hardness of hearing or with poor comprehension of the preaching in general. The Genevans who describe themselves as being deaf do not seem to suffer from a complete physiological deafness, which would prevent them from hearing the frequency range of the human voice altogether.⁵¹ On the contrary, the term is used to specify the kind of difficulty these people had in receiving the preaching they heard in the church. The capacity to hear the human voice still remained the main point of reference in determining one's hearing competency, but such a "diagnosis" was highly dependent on the context in which the hearing was performed. The cases that were brought before the Consistory refer exclusively to people's inability to perform the ideal attentive listening, an inability to receive (i.e., hear) a certain kind of information (i.e., religious instruction) under specific circumstances (i.e., in the church service) in such a way that they would be able to commit it to memory.

Difficulties in remembering the new religious instruction affected the majority of Genevans in the first post-Reformation years. I argue that this stemmed from a novel model of sermon reception, combining an unprecedented level of auditory attention on the part of the church audience with comprehension of the information preached from the pulpit and, especially, the requirement to store it in one's memory and recall it when summoned before the Consistory. Strikingly, despite its tradition in the predominantly oral culture of the Middle Ages, the Genevan community was far from proficient in oral learning and rote memorization. To give just one example, when the Reformation was taking root in the city, many Genevans could only recite their prayers phonetically in Latin, which was sometimes highly corrupted or incomprehensible, and were unable either to explain the meaning of the prayers or to translate them roughly into French.⁵²

⁵¹See Mills, "Deafness," 45.

⁵²See the cases of François Mermiez, who despite regularly attending the sermons could only say his Pater, the Ave Maria and the Creed in Latin in an unintelligible manner (*Registres du Consistoire*, 1:36 [13 April 1542]), or a weaver from Bassy, Amed Servex, who was able to recite the Ave Maria, Pater, and the Benedicte in Latin, but did not understand the meaning of the words (*Registres du Consistoire*, 1:277 [22 November 1543]).

It is significant that in all the cases recorded in the Consistory registers, hearing difficulty is associated with poor memory of the sermons and prayers. For example, when a certain Mayaz Cherrier was summoned before the Consistory in April 1542, it was discovered that she could not recite the Creed and did not remember the Sunday preaching as she “did not hear it well, because she is a little deaf”; similarly, Guygonaz Bocard stated that even though she had attended a service earlier that day, and had already gone to the church three times that week, she had no idea what the minister had preached because she was “deaf.”⁵³ In some cases, it is difficult to determine whether the alleged hearing difficulty reflected an actual problem or if it was used merely as an excuse for the lack of religious knowledge. For example, a market woman named Catherine, when accused of keeping some of the old Catholic rituals and neglecting her church attendance, explained that even if she had gone to hear the preaching, she would not have been able to profit from it, as she was deaf.⁵⁴ In such cases, deafness seems to be measured on a continuum; people are reported to be “deaf,” “a little deaf,” “hard” or “dull of hearing,” but never deaf to such an extent that they would not be able to hear the questions posed by the members of the Consistory. Obviously, the alleged deafness was at least partly given by the context and concerned mainly temporary deafness occurring in church at the time of preaching.

This is not to suggest that the hearing difficulties reported by the Consistory’s respondents were not real; it simply means that hearing requirements in the church were different or greater than in other areas where a person’s ears were employed. The kind or extent of hearing that had been perfectly acceptable in pre-Reformation worship was now deemed insufficient, and a great number of Genevans suddenly found themselves unable to comply with the new religious norms governing sensory perception. Some kind of hearing disability (in the sense of sermon reception) now affected not a very limited group of people but, on the contrary, the majority of the population of post-Reformation Geneva, who deviated from the standard that was now promoted as normative. It is significant that the references to deafness and hardness of hearing in the Genevan primary sources appear almost exclusively in the first half of the 1540s; they are virtually absent from the Consistorial records in the second half of the decade and in the 1550s. This supports the argument that the source of the listening problems was the novelty of the Reformation model of sensory participation in worship. Hearing had to be exercised in a different way than in the past, but the majority of people eventually became accustomed to this, especially after the painstaking disciplinary efforts of the Consistory and changes in the physical environment of the churches. Even though many Genevans continued to perform badly before the Consistory in the 1550s (they either did not remember the prayers or were

⁵³For Mayaz Cherrier, see *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:33 (6 April 1542), and for Guygonaz Bocard, see *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:99 (10 August 1542).

⁵⁴For Catherine of Molard, see *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:182 (15 February 1543).

accused of keeping Catholic rituals), their religious ignorance is no longer explicitly associated with hearing problems in the records.⁵⁵ This shows a contrast with the earlier post-Reformation years, when deafness, hardness of hearing, forgetfulness, inattention, and lack of intelligence are not necessarily separate categories. The terms are used as an instrument for singling out those people who have most signally failed to profit from religious education.

The underlying characteristic of this otherwise heterogeneous group of individuals is that their access to religious knowledge is in some way complicated, given that throughout Calvin's work, the term "deaf" is used not only with reference to one's physical condition, but also figuratively, to denote people who are obstinate, ignorant, or stupid, that is, deaf to spiritual knowledge. On the one hand, this illustrates the centrality of hearing in Calvinist epistemology; on the other, it shows that deaf people were not necessarily perceived as stupid, but rather those who lacked understanding or determination, or who could not learn easily, were called "deaf." This was mirrored in Consistorial practice, where all those who did not profit from religious instruction, whether that was due to their intellectual capacities, old age, or hardness of hearing, received the same kind of treatment: they were sent to catechism lessons together with young children; were constantly monitored and had their progress repeatedly examined before a committee; and in some cases were seated closer to the pulpit so as to have better acoustic access to the preaching, regardless of whether they reported any hearing problems.⁵⁶

The perceived close association between hearing difference, bad memory, and intelligence is very apparent in the example of an infamous Genevan pack-saddle maker (bastier) and innkeeper Jacques Emyn, one of the most frequently interrogated people in the first years of the Genevan Consistory.⁵⁷ Jacques, who

⁵⁵In later years, hearing problems in church were discussed mainly with reference to the audibility of the minister's voice, which was sometimes considered too weak for preaching either in the Cathedral of St. Pierre (the largest worship space in Geneva) or in the city more generally (see the cases of Abel Poupin, summarized in *Registres du Consistoire*, 6:3n2, and *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs*, 1:150, and Claude Baduel and Mathieu Granjean, in *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs*, 2:66–67, 70–71, 75–77). In general, the number of completely ignorant people appearing before the Consistory decreased dramatically during the first decade of regular interrogations of churchgoers, and the Genevans were less frequently summoned for not complying with the reformed standards of worship. For example, whereas the accusation of *barbotement* (whispering one's private prayers instead of paying attention to the preaching in the church) was relatively common before 1545, it almost disappeared during the subsequent ten years (for exceptions, see the wife of Ballon, in *Registres du Consistoire*, 2:230–31 [27 May 1546], or Jehan Blanc, in *Registres du Consistoire*, 6:181 [8 October 1551]).

⁵⁶Robert Kingdon does not specify his evidence for the assertion that the seating in the front benches was reserved explicitly for "those who were hard of hearing" (Kingdon, "Genevan Revolution," 270; the argument does not appear again in the later version of Kingdon's text, "Worship in Geneva").

⁵⁷See *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:8, 18, 22, 64, 102, 110, 150, 210 (23 February, 23 and 30 March, 17 May, 17 August, 7 September, 19 December 1542, and 29 March 1543).

was summoned eight times in the course of one year before he was finally able to recite the Confession of Faith without making major mistakes, was repeatedly advised to attend sermons as often as he could, go to catechism lessons, or find himself a private teacher to instruct him in religious matters and teach him how to pray. Though there is no evidence that he ever explicitly complained of difficulties in hearing the preaching, the Consistory nevertheless commanded him not only to go to the sermons every day, but also to sit closer to the pulpit during preaching so that he could hear the words better and benefit from them more effectively. This would help him acquire sufficient knowledge to receive Holy Communion, which he was temporarily denied. “The advice of the Consistory is ... that he go every day or more often to the preaching in order to profit from it better. And that he is to come closer to the pulpit to hear the Word of God better and that he will be denied Holy Communion unless he acquits himself otherwise.”⁵⁸

Seating in the front benches was reserved not only for members of the congregation who appeared to be slow learners or could not hear the instruction from distant corners of the church, but also for those who were too lax in learning or had too little interest in improving their knowledge of religious principles. Such was the case of Claude Tapponier, notorious for his attachment to the Roman church, whose knowledge improved so greatly during the four months when he was directed to sit closer to the pulpit that he was subsequently readmitted to the Holy Supper.⁵⁹ The interiors of the Genevan temples were gradually adapted to the new word-centered form of worship between 1543 and 1547. Apart from purifying the interiors and removing all kinds of visual distractions, this involved changes such as installing pews in the form of an amphitheater, placing the pulpit in the best acoustic location within the church, or removing gravestones and covering the ground with flooring instead.⁶⁰ The purpose of these changes was to provide the best possible listening conditions for all participants in the service, as well as to enforce and monitor disciplined behavior

⁵⁸“Le Consistoyre est de l’advis ... qu’il vienne tous les jours ou plus souvent a la predication pour myeulx profiter. Et qu’on les faces venir aupres dela chayre pour myeulx entendre la Parolle de Dieu et qu’on luy refuse de recevoir le sainte Cene s’il ne se acquite aultrement”; *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:22 (30 March 1542), author’s translation.

⁵⁹Claude Tapponier in *Registres du Consistoire*, 5:175–76 (14 August 1550).

⁶⁰The most detailed eyewitness account of the new organization of the church interior in mid-sixteenth-century Geneva is attributed to a French Franciscan Antoine Cathelan, who visited the city in 1550s and described not only the reformed worship, but also installation of the benches in the temple, position of the pulpit, and seating order during the worship; see Antoine Cathelan, *Pas-sevent Parisien: Respondant à Pasquin Romain de la vie de ceux qui sont allez demourer à Genève, et se dissent vivre selon le reformation de l’Évangelie: faict en forme de Dialogue* (Paris, 1556). See also Christian Grosse, “Places of Sanctification: The Liturgical Sacrality of Genevan Reformed Churches 1535–1566,” in *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 60–80, or Waldemar Deonna, “Le mobilier de la cathédrale Saint-Pierre à Genève,” *Genava* 28 (1950): 52–128.

during worship. Cases such as that of Claude Taponnier well demonstrate this multiplicity of reasons behind the novel arrangement of the worship space, where the interests of acoustics and surveillance went hand in hand. Another example is the seating of school children in the pews near the pulpit: on the one hand, this was intended to improve their access to the preaching, on the other, it enabled their teachers to watch over them more effectively and prevent them from engaging in any potentially distracting activities.⁶¹

Different kinds of disabilities with respect to sermon reception were grouped together in the requirement to attend Sunday catechism lessons. The lessons, compulsory for people who performed badly before the Consistory and for children and servants,⁶² were based on the method of rote learning combined with humanist dialogue, which exercised the participants' auditory memory beyond the scope of the regular church service.⁶³ In the Consistory registers, people sent to catechism lessons are also routinely advised to attend sermons more often and listen to the preaching. This frequently concerns people with allegedly poor intellectual capacities, such as Robert Breysson, another packsaddle maker, who because of his "poverty of understanding" was ordered to attend sermons every day until he finally learned the Creed and to go to catechism classes for a year.⁶⁴ Similarly, Tevena Guillermet demonstrated such a deep ignorance of the reformed worship that, because of her old age and "imbecility," she was advised to obtain additional instruction not only at the Sunday lessons, but also

⁶¹For the praxis of teachers watching over their students in church, see the statutes of the Genevan Academy in "L'ordre estably en l'escole de Geneve par noz magnificques et tres honnoretz seigneurs et conseil de ceste cité de Geneve... 1559," in Suzanne Stelling-Michaud, *Le Livre de Recteur de l'académie de Geneve* (Geneva: Droz, 1959), esp. 1:65, 68–69.

⁶²See *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:58 (4 May 1542); *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs*, 1:11; or *Les Sources du droit du Canton de Genève*, ed. Émile Rivoire and Victor Van Berchem (Aarau: H. R. Sauerländer, 1930), 841.2, p. 2:501.

⁶³The basic text that was used in the lessons was Calvin's Catechism, the first version of which was published in French in 1537 in Geneva. In 1542, it was replaced by a new more elaborate version, which had soon acquired a dominant position in the francophone communities. Its fifty-five lessons, covering 373 questions, were to be studied during twelve weeks, taking place every Sunday at noon in the churches of Saint Pierre, La Madaleine, and Saint Gervais. Regardless of the topic of the particular session, the minister always opened and closed the lesson by having the participants recite the Our Father, the Creed or the Ten Commandments. See "Le Catéchisme de l'Eglise de Genève," in *Confessions et catéchismes de la foi réformée*, ed. Oliver Fatio (Geneva: Labor at Fides, 2005), 25–110, and *Les Sources du droit*, 794, p. 2:381.

⁶⁴See records of his visits at the Consistory in *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:8, 18, 31, 91, 109 (23 February, 23 March, 6 April, 20 July, and 5 September 1542). For similar cases, see Jean Bornand, who did not retain any words from the service except a prayer, which he said backwards, *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:101, 124, 156, 200, 252 (17 August, 5 October, and 28 December 1542; 10 March and 30 August 1543); Mamad Buctin in *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:101 (17 August 1542); and Claude Monet, *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:371, 374 (27 and 29 May 1544), who complained of their own "thick heads" (*grosse teste*); or François Loup, who doubted that she could learn anything any more, *Registres du Consistoire*, 1:100, 105, 118, 138, 171 (10 and 17 August, 21 September, and 16 November 1542; 28 January 1543).

privately from a minister. Bad memory and advanced age were common reasons for attending catechism. That, however, did not always bring about the desired results. This was the case for Tevena, who, despite being summoned several times between 1551 and 1557, never managed to learn the French prayers.⁶⁵

A range of different kinds of hearing and memory problems, then, were believed to be partly resolvable on the one hand by systematically monitoring, educating, and disciplining sensory perception, supported by the novel arrangement of the worship space and supervised by the disciplinary apparatus of the church. At the same time, bad memory or learning difficulties were sometimes thought to be corrigible by improving the spatial and acoustic conditions of listening, for example by creating greater proximity between listener and speaker.

The various instances of hearing differences as they appear in the registers of the Consistory show very clearly that neither hearing disability nor deafness can be adequately interpreted in the framework of modern medical and physiological discourse. Approaching deafness as a bodily impairment that was treated in a specific way in the context of post-Reformation Geneva would distort our understanding of the historical phenomenon of deafness and prevent us from drawing a more nuanced picture of the early Calvinist politics of sense perception. As I have shown, deafness and hardness of hearing were not only regarded differently after the Reformation, but also defined and constructed afresh by introducing new rules for the auditory communication of religious knowledge and standards of listening. Hearing difference was associated with bad reception of preaching and, by extension, of religious instruction in general, and as such it was grouped together with whole range of other learning difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Despite the Reformation often being associated with the centrality of hearing and spoken religious instruction, the topic of deafness has received only marginal scholarly attention in this context. That is perhaps most striking in the case of Calvinism, one of the most radical examples of the implementation of the reformed ideas in terms of discarding visual images and Catholic ways of sensing in general. Yet as this article has shown, hearing difference is a useful point of departure for the study of the Calvinist revolution in Geneva in two respects. First, attending to the position of the deaf and hard of hearing in the new system of distribution of religious knowledge deepens and revises our understanding of the role of hearing and speaking in Calvinist epistemology, and challenges some ingrained historiographical notions of religion and disability in sixteenth-century Europe. Second, exploring the parameters of the category of deafness brings us to the heart of the process by which new norms of behavior and communication were fashioned after the Reformation. Especially as regards this

⁶⁵*Registres du Consistoire*, 6:104 (21 May 21, 1551), and 8:238 (4 January 1554).

second aspect, hearing difference may be interpreted as resulting from an interplay between the physical body and its social environment: deafness stands for a wide range of hearing disabilities and is often indistinguishable from characteristics such as forgetfulness, inattention, or lack of intelligence.

It is significant that in Calvin's Geneva people who suffered from some kind of hearing disability (that is, who could not perform the ideal attentive listening) were not marginalized but, on the contrary, placed at the center of religious discipline. It could be argued that in the first post-Reformation years, hearing difficulties in terms of listening to sermons affected a substantial number of Genevans, whose listening habits had to be systematically trained and reeducated. In a sense, therefore, hearing difference functioned as a defining aspect of the Genevan auditory culture. Not only did the new religious sensory environment help to redefine what it meant to hear the preaching properly, but the difficulties experienced by many people in receiving the spoken sermon had a profound effect on the shape of the whole sensory culture, with its elaborate system of disciplinary control that gradually emerged in reaction to the population's unsatisfactory response to religious education. In summary, the study of hearing difference reveals much about the nature of the sixteenth-century confessional and disciplinary transformations, which entailed a crucial sensory dimension. ♣



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