HOLY SMOKE
CENSERS ACROSS CULTURES

EDITED BY
BEATE FRICKE

HIRMER
# HOLY SMOKE: CENSERS ACROSS CULTURES

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THE CENSER IN AND AFTER THE REFORMATION: AUTHORITY, REBELLION, TRANSGRESSION

Allison Stielau
The revolution in Christian thought and practice now known as the Reformation would have a major impact on the existence and use of censers in Western Christendom. To consider these changes, we might begin in a somewhat unexpected space and time: at the heart of the papacy, in the final decades of the fifteenth century. Between 1480 and 1482, Sandro Botticelli painted a fresco in the Sistine Chapel that depicted censers as they had never quite been seen before [Figure 1]. The subject was the Punishment of Korah, the Israelite who attempted with his followers to wrest priestly authority from Moses and Aaron and conduct sacrifices on their own.¹ When these rebels take up censers and burn incense, God punishes their blasphemy with fire, and all 250 are swallowed by the earth. Botticelli carefully costumed the Old Testament scene in the forms of Renaissance visual culture, a mix itself of classical and medieval references, in order to underscore the fresco’s primary message, which was the legitimacy of papal rule. Aaron’s headgear takes the shape of the papal tiara, implying that the pope’s unimpeachable authority is biblically sanctioned, and sending a warning to any who might attempt to test it.

While the hexagonal altar at center may be an imagined classical form, the censers exhibit both the basic shape and stylistic details of late Gothic microarchitectural thuribles, thus connecting biblical worship with contemporary liturgical practice. As Moses rebukes them with his rod, the rebels lose control of the censers they operate. The silver and gilt implements appear to attack their erstwhile handlers, becoming spiky, flame-filled grenades. This is not how censers ordinarily perform, either in practice or in Christian visual culture, where they appear as the often floating, celebratory instruments of angels, or the well-managed tools of acolytes performing the liturgy. Aaron and his son Eleazar, whose right to perform priestly ceremonies is divinely sanctioned, wield their implements with controlled energy.² The rebels’ censers, on the other hand, have become untethered and move through the air with wild abandon, as if the pent-up potential energy from hundreds of swung censers across the span of Christian imagery has been released in a whirlwind of clattering metal.

Botticelli’s fresco, along with its companions in the Sistine Chapel, was designed to defend a threatened papacy.³ Papal authority became even more threatened in the next century as Martin Luther and other reformers took aim at the decadence of the Roman Church and its exploitative hierarchies of power. Their attempts to decenter ecclesiastical control, to pry from Rome its command over Christian worship, could be mapped directly on to the Israelite rebels, especially for those inclined to view the reformers as heretics. Due to its role in the Counter-Reformation and specifically the conceptualization of the Church’s attitude to sacred images, the Sistine Chapel was a space in which the impact of reform was explicitly considered. The narrative reference to the unsanctioned use of censers and the portrayal of thuribles flying and in flames in Botticelli’s Korah resonates in complicated
Figure 1
Sandro Botticelli,
The Punishment of Korah, 1480–1482, fresco,
Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.
Photo: © Scala, Florence.
ways with the fundamental changes reformers would bring to the physical expression of Christian liturgy and private devotion in the sixteenth century. For Protestants, wresting control of priestly authority meant eliminating the censer entirely from Christian worship. Some actually used the example of Korah to make a case against the liturgical use of incense. The fate of the censers in Korah’s story was to be transformed into plates to cover the altar as “a sign and a memorial” of the Israelites’ rebellion. The reformers also found ways to reuse destroyed censers, though the melting down of precious metal church treasure (including reliquaries, monstrances, and excess chalices) in some communities in the sixteenth century was a means of destroying the memory of past ritual use as well as extracting value to serve new purposes.

When read against these historical realities the Punishment of Korah may not offer a straightforward parallel between the rebel Israelites and Protestant reformers, but it remains an instructive starting point for this chapter’s discussion of censers in and beyond the Reformation. Its diagramming of the power struggle pertaining to sanctioned and illegitimate devotional practice draws out some of the urgent debates about incense in this period. It also depicts the censer as a potentially unruly object, one that could resist control and even be weaponized, thus manifesting some of the danger that the censer held for reformers, which was not just physical but also moral and theological. Those perceived dangers informed both the elimination of the censer from Protestant contexts and its demonization in anti-Catholic propaganda.

The Reformation was not a monolithic event, which is why historians now often refer to it in the plural, as a set of related movements that unfolded over decades and even centuries. Protestant theology, ritual, and private devotion developed in a variety of strands initiated by influential early modern reformers, such as Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and Jean Calvin and informed by specific national and local contexts. While significant, these distinctions are not addressed in detail here, where a broad overview of the fate of censers in the wake of reform also offers an orientation to some of the major issues surrounding the use of incense in Reformation and post-Reformation Protestant and Catholic Christianity. The historical frame includes not just the momentous ruptures of the sixteenth century, but also their reverberations through the early twentieth century, as the thurible remained controversial in Protestant environments. The nineteenth-century reintroduction of liturgical censing in the Anglican church is considered at length for the passionate arguments it engendered, which revealed the ongoing relevance of incense to the marking of confessional identity. This episode also prompted some of the seminal early historical work on incense and censers that continues to condition scholarship on these topics. The shift in focus toward the historiographic leads into a discussion of the display, photographic representation, and interpretation of Christian censers in modern museums. Particular attention is paid there, as throughout this chapter, to the thurible’s chains, which were a foundational component of its visual interest as well as, I argue, its perceived danger and sensuality already before the end of the Middle Ages.

Sixteenth-century reform did not herald a “reformation” of the censer as it is understood to have done for Christian image-making. It generally brought the end to thurifying, certainly in a liturgical context. Examining
“Reformation censers” then, or censers in and after the Reformation, means looking at the survival and destruction, and thus the presence or absence, of preexisting medieval examples. These took the form of the metal thuribles in Botticelli’s fresco, a type that was commonly used in Western liturgy after the ninth century: a footed bowl covered with an openwork lid and manipulated by chains held together in an ornamented holder; often four to carry the vessel and a fifth to open the cover [Figure 2]. The thurifer lit and then placed incense on the coals in the base and lowered the lid, swinging the implement from the chain-holder’s ring to disseminate the smoke. In addition to these concrete survivals from the immediate past, the field of analysis must include the many representations of censers deployed in discussion and critique of incense that were produced in the course of the Reformation and its aftermath. For the most part these maintain as their point of reference the late medieval swung thurible. Although conservative in their development from early modernity onwards, the form of censers employed in Catholic liturgical use was not entirely static. This chapter concludes with a brief glance toward the post-medieval global spread of Catholicism to witness the way incense traditions outside of Europe transformed Christianthurifying. Seeking to move beyond a narrowly Protestant view of the censer after the Reformation, and keeping to the volume’s aim of examining censers cross-culturally, the conclusion is also included here to acknowledge that Protestant and Catholic identities are often produced in direct relation to one another.

PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVES ON CENSING AND INCENSE

In the last two decades, scholarship across disciplines has focused greater attention on the Reformation’s impact on both ritual practice and materializations of belief and confessional identity. These studies consider the changes wrought not only to the possibilities for Christian images and the decoration of churches, but also the structure of landscape and urban space, the appointment of the home, as well as the attire and personal possessions of individual believers. More recent investigations consider the effects of ritual change and material transformation on sensory experience, in church, in private devotional practice, and in daily life. Censers have not yet been the subject of concentrated analysis within these frameworks, although recent studies on the “reformation of olfaction” in England and Germany offer a crucial foundation for any discussion of the fate of censing in the break with Catholicism.

Typically, Protestant reform has been characterized as a rejection of sensual, material modes of worship in favor of the logocentric, whether reading, praying, or listening to sermons. The use of images, objects, sound and music, or multimedia performance was narrowed in order to limit the perceived dangers of deceit and material excess. This narrative had its origins in Protestant self-conceptualization and has been complicated more recently by historians of the Reformation, who have also worked to unpick different approaches to material religion among the various Protestant traditions. The major question early reformers brought to the sensual aspects of Christian liturgy revolved around the Eucharist as the focal point of the Mass. According to Catholic doctrine, the bread and wine were fundamentally transformed into the body and blood, or real presence, of Christ. For Protestant reformers, the lack of perceptible change in these elements at the
Figure 2
Unknown English silversmith,
The Ramsay Abbey Censer,
ca. 1325, gilt silver with plain silver chains, height (with chains):
64.3 cm, diameter 13.5 cm.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
consecration was problematic, and they developed new theorizations of the Mass that, while differing across denominations, generally moved away from the doctrine of transubstantiation. The nature of the central sacrament, which was entangled with profound questions about Christian materiality, divided not only Catholics from Protestants, but ultimately also Protestants among themselves.

As a multisensory spectacle—kinetic, olfactory, visually complex in the movement of metallic thurible and ephemeral smoke—censing would appear to be ripe for critique on the grounds of sensual exuberance. But because the liturgical use of incense, like other material aspects of traditional religion, did not directly impact reformers’ questions about the status, nature, and meaning of the Eucharist, it was often not a topic of specific concern. In his *Formula missae* of 1523, which proposed a reformed Eucharistic liturgy, Martin Luther famously declined to weigh in on the matter of incense and candles, declaring “the matter is free,” or open to interpretation.

In fact, censing had always been an aspect of the liturgy that varied by location and was sometimes entirely absent. When it was employed, it was used to consecrate altars, to bless materials and objects over the course of the Christian calendar, and to accompany processions outside the church on special feast days. Censing sacralized and purified the space around individual bodies and identified and honored high-ranking members of the priesthood. During the Mass itself, incense could be employed at several different points, to mark the priest’s entrance at the Introit, to cense the Gospel before it was read, or most commonly around the Offertory, when the Eucharistic wine and bread were prepared and placed on the altar.

Part of the ambiguity surrounding the censer and its appropriateness for Protestant worship rested on the fraught and often changing position of incense in Christian history and particularly its overlap with other religious traditions. Biblical sanction for the Christian use of incense was found throughout the Old Testament, in God’s commandment that offerings be made in Exodus and Leviticus, and in the Psalms. While Botticelli’s fresco of the Korah story comes down to the assertion of papal authority, it too engages with the biblical justification for censing in Christian liturgy. Unlike the sacrifice of meat, with its greasy residues and association with human hunger and feasting, incense was a burnt offering that left nothing behind. As an ephemeral medium moving from Earth to Heaven, the smoke of incense nicely symbolized prayer.

For Martin Luther and other reformers, however, the association of incense with Jewish sacrifice was problematic as they hoped to eliminate the sacrificial conceptualization of the Mass and the altar entirely: Christ’s sacrifice rendered all other forms unnecessary. Luther’s new version of the Mass excised the Offertory, which obviated the use of incense in that formerly sacrificial framework. Reformers could also turn to the Old Testament for passages that undermined the sacrificial use of incense, especially Isaiah 1:13: “Do not make vain offerings of food anymore. The incense is to me an abomination.” Erasmus of Rotterdam drew attention to this text already in 1501, along with discussion of the Epistle to the Hebrews, a book that was a particular focus for reformers because it articulated the legacy of Jewish devotional practice for Christianity. This critical view of incense as an “external ceremony of the Jews” required that later references to incense in the New Testament now be understood metaphorically, “as praise
and glorification of God through good works and prayer." Converting literal incense into an analogy for prayer became a common trope in Protestant texts.

Beyond the Bible’s discussion of incense in sacrificial practice, other justifications for censing had been articulated over the centuries or come into popular belief. Incense was used to perfume and fumigate the church and to purify sacred space. In other contexts it was thought to exorcise a person, space, or object of evil spirits. The overdetermined nature of censing along with its somewhat marginal and inconsistent role in Christian liturgy accounts for the regulatory silence surrounding its use after the Reformation. But despite a relative lack of discussion about incense on a doctrinal level, it nevertheless proved a target for anti-Catholic polemic in popular vernacular texts.

In addition to theological and cultural objections to incense, there were also practical concerns regarding cost, waste, and luxury that motivated some critiques. Imported by spice merchants, frankincense was an expensive commodity that would have been within the reach primarily of wealthy urban churches and monastic and royal institutions. Censers could be brass or bronze, but church inventories often claimed their censers were silver, indicating a potentially meaningful store of value. Many rural churches simply did not own a censer, making the use of incense unlikely. Because of their high financial value both incense and censer were vulnerable to reformers’ concerns about the sensuousness and material ostentation of the Mass. Their olfactory role raised additional issues. The difficulty posed by scents, as Dugan has noted, is the ambiguous position they take between the spiritual and the worldly. While pleasant smells had long been associated with holiness in the Christian tradition, the profane uses of perfumes, including their ability to mask putrid smells and their aphrodisiacal qualities, made them suspect. The potential association of incense with sex, sin, and luxury fit some Protestant reformers’ characterization of the Mass as the Whore of Babylon, who seduced Christians with her sensuous exterior.

Baum has argued that eliminating incense from the liturgy created “a desacralization of the sense of smell,” as reformers “abandoned the manipulation of smells” both in the sanctuary and outside of it. Part of this process involved the vilification of incense and its displacement onto Jews, Catholics, and Turks, the “Others” in Luther’s social thought. This rhetorical move operated not in the face of total erasure, but rather depended on a continued knowledge and memory of incense as it had operated in traditional worship and images of censers surviving in Protestant contexts may have provided the prompt, and perhaps a ghostly reminder, of the pre-Reformation sacred smellscape. For Lutherans who worshipped in shared space with Catholics (Simultankirche), incense lingered more literally, in the air and in church furnishings, meaning it continued to inform the sensory experience of sacred space and complicated the marking of confession al difference. The notion that the Reformation made “smell no longer theologically relevant” thus requires greater nuance. As Luisa Coscarelli-Larkin has shown, Lutherans, like Roman Catholics in German-speaking Europe, used prayer-beads strung with pomanders in private devotion and also associated sweet smells with prayer and holiness.
THE FATE OF CENSERS
IN THE WAKE OF REFORMATION

Shifts in liturgical practice and orientations to the accumulated treasure in churches and religious institutions as a result of the Protestant Reformations across Europe had significant consequences for the continued existence of censers, but these differed according to the local context and the valence of reform adopted. The practice of censing had varied widely, both geographically, and functionally within a given location. It did not necessarily cease immediately, but sometimes became restricted to specific functions outside of Protestant comment and critique, as a preparatory, perfuming medium rather than a liturgical one. Even churches that had retired their censers and excised thurification from their rituals might continue to purchase incense for the purpose of fumigation, as there was widespread belief in the medical benefits of incense and other sweet-smelling substances. Baum posits that the brass censers purchased in the 1580s for Nuremberg churches were meant to hold incense to counteract the plague.

Reformers were keen to eliminate censing done outside the church and related to what they viewed as superstitious beliefs that had grown in the late Middle Ages. This included the tradition of censing and blessing the marriage bed and marriage chamber. Protestants, according to Lyndal Roper, “affirmed their identity by rejecting such blessings.” Before the Reformation, post-partum women were sometimes censed during the rite known as churching, which restored them to sexual and social intercourse after the period of their confinement. In Protestant contexts, churching often remained a significant rite of passage, but without the incense and candles. Incense and chrism were also excised from the inauguration rites of a new church, primarily as a way to differentiate from Catholic practice.

The more urgent focus of reform when it came to incense, however, involved its use in the liturgy. As Susan Karant-Nunn has written, “Monstrances, pyxes and censers had their raison d’être in the sacrificial theology of the Mass. When this theology was banned, its implements became superfluous. This alone was justification enough to sell or melt down the utensil.” But as vasa non-sacra, those implements that did not immediately touch and contain the Eucharistic elements of wine and bread, censers were not the urgent target for elimination in the way that monstrances and, for their involvement with the cult of saints and the system of indulgences, reliquaries were. If there was no urgent need to extract their precious metal value, or indeed they were made of base metal, censers could remain stored away and eventually forgotten about, only to be sold off in later secularization campaigns when receptive audiences had developed who would acquire and save them as objects of historical and artistic interest. What Johann Michael Fritz called the “preserving power of Lutheranism” describes the abiding presence in Lutheran churches of ostensibly “Catholic” implements, which were retained because it was simpler or cheaper to leave or repurpose them. Lutheranism’s doctrinal middle ground meant there was no pressing impetus to purge such artifacts.

In England, where King Henry VIII mined the stores of religious houses for valuable assets, very little medieval sacred metalwork, including censers, survives. A few examples, like the Ramsey Abbey censer, may have been deliberately hidden, either to protect a valuable treasure or in hopes of...
of a return to future use [see Figure 2]. The abolition of rituals objectionable to reformers also sent censers into disuse. Until 1548 it had been the custom on Whitsun (Pentecost) at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, “for a great censer, emitting clouds of sweet smoke and sparks, to be swung from the roof [...] and for doves to be released, re-enacting the descent of the Holy Ghost on the Apostles.” Despite the cessation of its ritual, the monumental silver censer survived Henry’s reign, for it is listed in an inventory of 1552.

Thus, even in contexts that experienced radical reshaping of the Church’s material landscape and forms of worship, like the Swiss cantons influenced by Huldrych Zwingli, the outright destruction of censers was not inevitable. In the years in which large collections of ecclesiastical plate, including censers, were gathered from Swiss churches for liquidation, the treasury of Basel cathedral remained intact. During the iconoclasm of February 1529, which saw numerous altarpieces and other images destroyed, the treasure lay undisturbed in its sacristy cupboard (“whether by oversight or out of preternatural deference”) and was subsequently secured behind window bars and an iron door, where it survived until it was sold off in the nineteenth century. Through its inventories and now dispersed objects, this collection gives important insight into a major cathedral treasury effectively frozen in time in the late 1520s. It held multiple silver censers produced centuries apart that bear evidence of wear and repair and hint at practices of censing on the eve of the Reformation [see Figure 19].

The functional specificity of censers made them difficult to convert to new ecclesiastical purposes, which was possible for other objects like pyxes and, sometimes, even monstrances. Unlike vestments that could be cut up and repurposed or an altarpiece that might be broken down into its painted panels, the censer did not easily become an object of practical use or ornament. This is likely because its ritual function was so specific and undisguisable. Its chains facilitating swinging made it particularly inappropriate for contemporary perfuming outside the church. Later in the sixteenth century, incense burners inspired by eastern forms began to enter elite German collections, but these were always static vessels, some large enough to exist almost as furniture, and they seem to have been owned primarily by Catholic princes, for whom incense even in the secular realm may have been more acceptable.

Where censers and incense were banished from ecclesiastical use, they gained a new, or renewed, existence in metaphor. Through this conversion process, the physical character of thuribles and sweet-smelling smoke came to signify abstract, non-physical concepts. Martin Luther himself evolved from a traditional understanding of incense as the material instantiation of prayer, to asserting prayer was superior to incense, and finally to the belief, articulated in 1544, that prayer is “the true incense of Christians”: “take hold of the censer with me, that is, seize hold upon prayer,” he wrote. Puritan writers in seventeenth-century England continued in this vein, figuring the Gospel itself as incense, and the devotion rightly offered to God as exquisite perfume. “[R]ather than disappearing entirely,” as Sophie Reed explains, incense “took on a complex figurative life: this represented both [...] regret at the sensory depredations symbolized by its loss, and excitement at the opportunities for metaphorical expression thereby created.” She notes as well that the “rhetorical persistence” of incense in Protestant texts “hints also at the way in which its translation to the figurative realm keeps alive
the possibility of its ritual reinstitution.”60 At the same time, non-metaphorical references to incense frequently appeared in English theatrical performances in this period, part of an ongoing debate about the legitimacy of its use in Christian devotional practice. In such pieces, incense was commonly displaced onto a pagan context, which could either serve to explain its appropriate use or cast it as idolatrous.61

Beyond its capabilities as a transcendent vehicle between Earth and Heaven, smoke also symbolized ephemerality. “For my days vanish like smoke” laments the sufferer in Psalm 102. Elsewhere in the Bible, the heretics who worship silver idols “will be like smoke escaping through a window.”62 As the censer and its perfumed smoke was excluded from its traditional liturgical role in Protestant frameworks, it found its way into the developing genre of vanitas images, where incense burners produced clouds of smoke whose perfume and visual presence symbolized the epitome of transience and also retained the vestige of association with rituals for the dead: a doubly effective memento mori. In these images, the incense vessel is usually an open-mouthed vase, vaguely but non-specifically ancient.63 This distancing from the identifiably Christian form of the thurible deracinated the censer and allowed it to become a new symbol for contemplation in the still life imagery of Calvinist contexts like the Dutch Republic.

THE CENSER IN ANTI-CATHOLIC PROPAGANDA
As one of the most distinctive and easily identifiable components of Catholic material culture, the censer received special emphasis in Protestant propaganda. Other forms of ecclesiastical metalwork, like chalices, were still allowed to serve the modified form of Protestant ritual in many contexts.64 More personal devotional objects, notably prayer beads, could also be confessionally ambiguous.65 But the censer was associated most directly with forms of ritual practice that Protestants eliminated. Susan Juster has identified altars and incense as “two of the most recognizable ‘papist’ icons in the Protestant polemical arsenal.”66 But when it came to visual portrayals, incense usually needed a container to signify, and the censer was the preferred choice. Although never the most plentiful object type stored for ritual use, censers had a life and a visibility beyond the confines of the sanctuary because they were used in processions and benedictions and thus entered urban, rural, and even domestic spaces. They were also visually resonant, capable of assuming myriad shapes, with their chains and energetic movement, and the clouds of smoke that could be rendered as a small whisper of gray or a graphic billow. In visual representation they thus served as a “smoking gun” for Catholic practices, an easily recognizable sign that could allude to much more than what was pictured within a given scene.

Some anti-Catholic broadsheets criticized specific ritual uses of incense, like the censing of the dead in funeral processions.67 But more commonly the censer’s objectional liturgical uses were implied through its form alone. It appears prominently amongst collections of paraphernalia coded Catholic in Protestant propaganda across media throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both in use and as a deactivated object amongst a catalogue of other items meant to be read as the superfluous and corrupting “stuff” of traditional worship. On a stoneware tankard lampooning the pope, for example, a tree is hung with a variety of Catholic objects—monstrances, a situla, a chalice—and, perhaps most naturally due to its chains,
a censer. Christ digs at the base of this tree and a lettered tablet captures his destructive intention: The weeds I will root out and throw in the fire.\textsuperscript{68} A tree similarly bearing the strange fruit of Catholic material culture had appeared in earlier propagandistic prints.\textsuperscript{69}

Accreting these objects into piles or haphazard collections was meant to undermine the special status they held within enacted rituals. In Adriaen van de Venne’s 1614 painted allegory \textit{Fishing for Souls}, which dramatizes the competition between Catholic and Protestant churches in the divided Netherlands, austere Calvinists bait converts with texts while their more colorful Catholic counterparts net souls with help from a variety of captivating objects including floating crucifixes and papal bulls; the boat they steer is balanced on one end with a glittering monstrance and on the other with a smoking censer [Figures 3–4].\textsuperscript{70}

The censer also appeared in scenes of iconoclasm, desacralization, and plunder. A condensed illustration of Edward VI’s Protestant reforms in the virulently anti-Catholic \textit{Acts and Monuments} (1570), shows “The Papistes packing away theyr Paltry,” which includes candlesticks, croziers, and a large, ornate censer swung from one man’s wrist, as if some sort of monstrous jewel [Figure 5].\textsuperscript{71} The word “paltry” at this moment conveyed utmost disdain; before it gained the sense of trivialization it has today, it was a synonym for rubbish.\textsuperscript{72} Still, a common strategy of Protestant critique was to reduce the significance of liturgical implements by equating them with superficial, insubstantial ornaments, rendering the resonant implements of Catholic devotion into simple “toys.”\textsuperscript{73}

The fragrant smoke emitted by the censer was often flipped satirically and instead associated with the repellent smells of excrement and filth. Lucas Cranach’s image of the pope riding a sow, which plays on the antisemitic trope of the \textit{Judensau}, places a steaming, odiferous pile of dung in the pontiff’s hands [Figure 6]. According to a contemporary riddle, its scent entices the sow to run rather than attack the rider.\textsuperscript{74} But the way the fumes are visualized recalls the curling plumes of incense smoke as they are portrayed in contemporary woodcuts. Here, it is as if the perfume that might ordinarily precede and envelope the pope while in procession has been replaced by the powerful fumes of pig shit.\textsuperscript{75} A similar inversion appears in Peter Flötner’s woodcut of a decade earlier, depicting a procession of friars and nuns [Figure 7].\textsuperscript{76} The censer swung energetically by a corpulent priest at the head of the procession does not produce smoke as an honorific, cleansing the path for those that follow in its wake; instead it heralds the entry of a pig into the church that is meant to be consecrated [Figure 8].\textsuperscript{77} The censer, along with the situla and asperger behind it, anchor the scene in Catholic ritual, allowing us to recognize the inversions it proposes. While the incense might serve to mask the procession’s bad “pagan” smells—evoked by piles of cooked meat and tankards of alcohol—the telltale curls of smoke recall the bodily effluvia of snot and vomit emitted from other figures in the scene, thus completing the conversion of incense from enticing to repulsive. Such polemical images visualize the denigration of a social group by associating its members with foul odor, a rhetorical tool used by both Protestants and Catholics against each other.\textsuperscript{78}

Another strategy for making the censer and its clouds of perfumed smoke alien to Christian devotion was to assert or reassert its association with other religious worship, including Muslim, Jewish, and pagan devotion,
Figure 3
Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, Fishing for Souls, 1614, oil on panel, 98.5 cm × 187.8 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Figure 4
Detail of Figure 3.
Figure 5

Figure 6
Figure 7
Peter Flötner, Satirical Print Showing Procession of Friars and Nuns, ca. 1540, woodcut, 11.9 × 57.1 cm. Photo: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, UK.

Figure 8
Detail of Figure 7.
either in the idolatrous historical past or the exotic, geographically distant present.79 The scene of Solomon worshiping the idol, which had been popular in Northern Europe in the sixteenth century, began in the seventeenth century to depict more elaborately the sacrifices surrounding Solomon’s devotion, including both the burning of animal flesh and incense. The subject opened up a Protestant angle on the practice of censing, framing it as pagan and idolatrous. In some of these scenes painted by artists working in the Calvinist Dutch Republic, the king himself dramatically wields a censer [Figure 9]. This gesture highlights his active participation in image worship, and thus the extent of his rejection of God. As Solomon was understood to be led into idolatry by his wives and concubines, or more specifically the Queen of Sheba, layered into such portrayals is also the coding of perfumed veneration as dangerously Other, both feminine and foreign.

Protestant polemic often used representations of historical pagan or contemporary non-Christian worship as a “stand-in for Catholic idolatry,” and censing could operate as a signifier for this replacement.80 The rhetorical complexity of censing viewed cross-culturally is exemplified by the so-called “Idol of Calicut,” an image of Hindu religious practice that derived from a sixteenth-century Italian travel narrative.81 Illustrating this text in 1515, the German artist Jörg Breu translated its description of the venerated image into a European Christian visual language [Figure 10]. A metal sculpture that the text described as a monstrous devil consuming souls was wreathed in smoke dispensed by a medieval thurible swung from chains, while Breu gave the attendant the garb and crescent headplate of an ancient Jewish priest, a combination of dress and instrument deriving from contemporary illustrations of the Old Testament. While scholars have framed this woodcut as the artist’s attempt to build “analogical bridges between Indian culture and his own,” its potential to operate as a searing condemnation of non-European religions is undeniable.82 The “Idol of Calicut” was also conducive to anti-Catholic satire, which explains its popularity in Northern Europe during the Reformation.83 In the later sixteenth century the humanist Pierre Boaistuau revived Breu’s pre-Reformation iconography for a manuscript with which he hoped to secure the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I’s patronage [Figure 11].84 Now the tiara worn by the Calicut “devil” is an overt satirical jab at the papacy and the thurifers wear European dress, thus conflating the Catholic practice of censing with idolatry. When Boaistuau later published his Histoires prodigieuses for a wider audience in his native France, the anti-Catholic messaging of this image was toned down in part by appointing the thurifers with turbans. The costume change allowed their censing, though it employed recognizably Christian thuribles, to be culturally distanced and displaced onto “the safer figure of the Ottoman Turk.”85

Incense was also placed in scenes of magic and demonic ritual. In the sixteenth century, ancient pagan and demonic uses of perfumed smoke were more usually depicted in association with static, open vessels, as opposed to the closed vessel hung or swung from chains.86 They appear set before idols and sometimes even held by them, an origin point for spectacular, billowing smoke.87 In a 1523 letter to the dean of Zurich’s Great Minster, Albrecht Dürer included a drawing of apes cavorting in a circle around a footed incense burner at its center and becoming intoxicated from the smoke.88 This image played on contemporaneous portrayals of Morris dancers and female witches, whose attribute became the cauldron, another static, smoking vessel, in
THE CENSER IN AND AFTER THE REFORMATION: AUTHORITY, REBELLION, TRANSGRESSION

Figure 9
Jacob Hogers, The Idolatry of King Solomon (detail), ca. 1635–1655, oil on canvas, 124 × 197 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
Figure 10
Jörg Breu, The Idol of Calicut, woodcut illustration to Ludovico di Varthema, Die Ritterlich und lobwirdig rayß des gestrengen und über all ander weyt erfarnen ritter und Lanifarers herren Ludowico vartomans von Bolonia... (Augsburg, 1515), fol. i ii recto. Photograph courtesy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Rar 894.
Figure 11
precisely this period. In this same letter, Dürer sent his greetings to the reformer Huldrych Zwingli, by then a canon and preacher in the minster. In writings produced also in 1523, Zwingli forcefully rejected the use of incense because it lacked scriptural justification and was associated too closely with Jewish sacrificial practice. He considered it idolatrous. Under his influence, incense would be eliminated from church services along with myriad other elements, including the use of music and precious metal plate.

The standing open vessel was not definitively coded pagan, however. Woodcut illustrations to Martin Luther’s translation of the New Testament give Apostles and angels large open smoking vessels, which visually relate to contemporary depictions of the incense altar from the Old Testament Books of Moses. In the early sixteenth century, such depictions were becoming increasingly antiquarian, attempting to capture the tabernacle and its altars and implements as the text described and with an imagination of the ancient past, rather than with reference to anachronistic Christian detail. And yet, the forms that censers take in Old Testament and New Testament illustrations in reformed Bibles do not settle easily into coherent groupings.

THE CENSER AS REBELLIOUS OBJECT

The Reformation’s impact on the use of incense has primarily been treated through the sensory frame of olfaction. The disappearance or downplaying of the censer in Protestant ritual is thus explained by its telos: the problem was not the object itself, but rather the function that it served. If the olfactory medium of incense was eliminated, then there was no need for the very functionally specific container that held and disseminated it, especially if that container might be liquidated to produce funds for other uses. But in their concentration on incense and smell, these analyses do not consider the censer itself as a particularly sensual object, one that had been at times a troubling presence in the century leading up to the Reformation. Part of the censer’s sensual character was its connection to physical danger, as a container for hot coals, and as an object capable of powerful movement through its structural combination of heavy pendant attached to chains. The thurifer’s handling of these inherent risks was an exercise in disciplined control. But late medieval visual and textual sources captured censers testing that control and highlighted the ways in which the thurible could be both physically and metaphorically rebellious.

Their function as fire-carriers made censers the origin point of violent destruction in biblical imagery and their role in sacrificial ritual made them an enticement to devotional error. In the Pentateuch, in addition to the story of Korah, there is the related episode involving Abihu and Nadab,
Figure 12
Erhard Altdorfer, woodcut illustration of the incense altar described in Exodus, from De Biblie vth der vthlegginge Doctoris Martini Luthers yn dyth diadesche vlitich vthgesettet / mit sundergen vnderrichtingen / alse men seen mach (Lübeck, 1533).
Figure 13
Detail of Eleazar, Abihu and Nadab, colored woodcut, from the Weltchronik of Hartmann Schedel (Nuremberg, 1493).

Linen moonshain
Aaron

Yusmar

Nadab

Nadab
two of Aaron’s sons who “each took a pan and put fire therein and put incense upon it and brought such a strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them,” and they are burned to death in punishment. The passage has been notoriously difficult to interpret, turning precisely on why God punishes these ordained priests and why their sacrifice, and in particular their use of incense, was condemned. Some reformers would find in this story a warning about improper devotional practice. But even before the Reformation, the subject appealed to artists and reading audiences, appearing in illuminated Bibles. Later, some of the major German artists of the sixteenth century, among them Hans Holbein, Hans Baldung, and Erhard Schön, included this subject in series of woodcut Bible illustrations. In these scenes, it is God who renders the censers dangerous, but there is also fascination and play here with the thurible’s unique ability to be spectacularly weaponized, spurting flames, spewing great clouds of smoke, even knocking grown men flat. An illustration in Hartmann Schedel’s Weltchronik of 1493 shows the four sons of Aaron connected to him through the twining tendrils of their family tree [Figure 13]. Eleazar swings a golden censer out horizontally towards Nadab and Abihu, who despair as flames stretch across the page to lick at the edges of their persons. This depiction entangles the Korah story’s greater attention to incense burners, and the role played therein by Eleazar, with the anecdote of Nadab’s and Abihu’s transgression. It implies that their destruction comes by means of the censer wielded by their brother, rather than the fire emanating from God. The angular lines emerging from the thurible’s Gothic tracery have replaced the rounded whirls usually employed to indicate smoke and the wafting odor of incense. The substitution of flames for pleasant fumes exposes the censer’s potential for danger.

The hazards posed by burning incense had shaped the formal development of censers in the medieval church. Early Christian censers were often open hanging vessels, suspended from chains; the move to cover the bowl and contain the coals acknowledged the threat inherent in live sparks. But the cover also facilitated the increased energy and thus more damaging impact the thurible could make if it were swung. And it is the kinetic energy of the swinging censer, dependent on its lengthy chains, that rendered it more capable of damaging and being damaged. Metalwork specialists have noted the particular vulnerability of censers to physical deterioration, as evidenced by the frequency with which they had to be repaired or replaced. They experienced greater daily strain than liturgical implements that stood on the altar or were passed by hand. As Margret Ribbert put it: “swung rhythmically on long chains, censers were predestined for minor damage.” Such minor but meaningful damage is evoked in this line from a 1517 English inventory, whose seven recorded censers each had some form of impairment: “Item a sencer of silver […] Defectif in the cheyne / Item brused in the foote Lackynge vj [six] pynnacles and a greate rynge.” The specific locations of damage, in the chain and on the foot and pinnacles, reveal how the swinging of the thurible made it vulnerable to wear and breakage specifically at points most likely to experience tension and collision.

As an olfactory medium, incense is understood to constitute and transcend boundaries, but its container is also capable of transgressing physical confines. It was their chains that rendered censers not just dangerous and endangered, but, by extending the thurifer’s reach far beyond a human arm span, capable of crossing and even violating boundaries. The Weltchronik
Figure 14
Unknown English sculptor, panel depicting the Trinity (detail), second half of the 15th century, carved, painted and gilded alabaster, 58.9 × 24.4 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
image makes this possibility clear, as Eleazar scorches his rebellious brothers from a distance. But there could be a sexual element to the extensional capabilities of the censer as well. A literary fragment occasionally presented as evidence of the association of sacred incense, already at the turn of the fifteenth century, with the earthly and sexual is instructive. In Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* the parish clerk Absolon, whocourts the carpenter’s wife Alison, is characterized as teasing and sexually eager:

This Absolon, that jolly was and gay,  
Went with a censer on the holy days,  
Censing the wives of the parish eagerly,  
And many a lovely look on them he cast,  
And especially on this carpenter’s wife:  
To look on her he thought a merry life.

Matthew Milner uses this passage to discuss censing the congregation, a practice that was not mentioned in prescriptive liturgical rubrics but may have served to cover the human and associated animal smells that would otherwise make church services unpleasant. Chaucer’s lines attend, however, not to scent, but rather to the specific movement of the thurifer. In this memorable scene of flirtation Absolon pumps the censer into the physical space of the parish wives, extending by means of the chain his body to theirs, so that “censing” takes on a distinctly sexual, perhaps even specifically phallic and coital, undertone. Absolon’s enthusiastic censing is not an extraneous detail of this ill-fated love affair, moreover, but something like its fulcrum, for it is through this action that he comes to look more closely at and desire Alison.

The superhuman reach of the swung censer received emphasis in visual culture from the Middle Ages onward; it was often used to create ephemeral architectural framing in figural scenes. The angels’ censers in fifteenth-century English alabaster panels depicting the Trinity, for example, often form an arch around God the Father’s crowned head [Figure 14]. At a larger scale and in concrete, as opposed to fictive, architecture, angels with a thurible at the apex of its pendular arc perfectly fill the triangular space of a spandrel on either side of an arch. Some depictions of censers also registered the potential for more chaotic movement, which could highlight the emotive expression of the thurible as it fulfilled its celebratory function. But it could also hint at the censer’s potential resistance to human control. The slack and flying chains in Botticelli’s Sistine Chapel fresco elucidate the rebelliousness of censers that cannot be held in check by their illegitimate handlers.

Portrayals of the Mass of St. Gregory produced in Germany and the Low Countries in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries occasionally included a censer in the ritual scene whose unusual positioning suggested the object’s potential instability. A pronounced example of this iconographical detail appears in a panel now in Bruges [Figure 15]. As Christ manifests, flanked by the instruments of the Passion, above the chalice and paten on the altar, an attendant swings a censer so that it is highlighted in profile against the white altar cloth. In this tight space the censer does not follow a graceful arc but is instead flipped up with slack chains, its cover slightly open, as if it has just been jerked back and is about to experience one of the events of stress or damage we know to have been quite common.
The significance of this gymnastic movement is difficult to pin down, but it is certainly more than just an anecdotal elaboration of the ritual event and its "ecclesiastical pomp." It may be intended to punctuate the climactic moment of this subject, when the Man of Sorrows appears to assert the real presence of the Eucharist. The narrative structure of the censer’s pendular movement, which leads to and away from an apical point of stasis, could effectively emphasize the mystical change that occurred instantaneously within the miracle of transubstantiation. But in this case the censer calls attention to itself and to its movement because it behaves so strangely, as if defying the laws of physics that usually govern the practice of thurifying. The “alternative physics” endorsed by the artist here makes the censer’s floating position in the air feel even more fleeting and precarious. It further highlights the potentially unruly, even anarchic, quality of the censer’s movement at the end of its chains, suggesting how it might strain at and test the human subject’s ability to control it.

The visual and aural effects created by the censer’s vigorous movement were not the sensory basis for thurifying’s rejection in the early Reformation. Nevertheless, a pervasive discomfort around censers’ dynamic motion developed in England, which can be deduced from the way English Protestants attempted to avoid it. For example, when some pre-Reformation practices were revived during the so-called Anglican Counter-Reformation, the swinging and processing of censers was studiously avoided. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes’s choice of a “static censer” for the table of his private chapel—what is referred to as the still use of incense—was likely designed to deflect any appearance of practicing “popish customs.” In addition to simply asserting a distinction from Catholic practice, abstaining from the swung censer also made it impossible to engage in the action of censing images and people, which was a point of particular concern for reformers because it putatively bordered so closely on idolatry.

In England an injunction in 1547 required all images that had been “censed” to be destroyed. Later, in the nineteenth century, when the use of the thurible again became a hotly debated issue within Anglicanism, the ecclesiologist Alexander Beresford Hope captured the threat that Roman Catholic thurifying posed to Anglican, for which we could read “English,” identity: “the outward aspect of the unreformed rite of incense […] is one which, with the perpetual unrest of its swinging censers, is peculiarly liable to irritate staid and undemonstrative English worshippers.” Censing was simply too emotive and disordered. Disputes about the traditional use of the thurible and its apparently tumultuous movement continued to shape Anglican worship. In 1917, a correspondent for The Church Times complained that a bishop in Australia required “the server to swing the censer imperceptibly with his back to the people,” an instruction the writer found “ridiculous and impossible to follow.”

There is something suppressed in the anti-Ritualist objections to swinging that deserves further scrutiny, for it appears to come not just from a doctrinal position, but from a more deep-seated revulsion. What Dominic Janes has called the “voyeuristic Protestant gaze” in Victorian England transformed the imagined tools of public and private Catholic devotion into the equivalent of “kinky sex toys”—he notes the “perfumed rods” for sale in a well-known Punch cartoon mocking the use of incense by Ritualists. But censers, the primary tool for perfuming Catholic worship, arguably already exhibited an element of kink for conservative Anglican observers, for they
Figure 15
Unknown Flemish painter,
The Mass of St Gregory the Great, early 15th century,
Oil on panel. Photo: Alamy/ Groeningemuseum, Bruges.
share with scourges and cat-o'-nine-tails—those horrifying, and titillating, specters of the Protestant imagination—some of the same physical capabilities, notably the extensional swing and acceleration of the chain, with its threat of bodily violence.121

REFORMATION AND RITUALISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Debates about incense in nineteenth-century England were more than a distant echo of the Reformation, for they constituted a meaningful working through of the Anglican Church’s break with Rome in the sixteenth century and produced research foundational to the historical study of incense and of reformed liturgies.122 They highlight the significance that censing continued to hold in the construction of confessional identity, whether it was considered a crucial aspect of worship or absolutely anathema. Because of the changing religious affiliations of its monarchs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England had a somewhat checkered history with respect to the use of incense in church. In addition to a brief period in the seventeenth century when, controversially, incense was reintroduced in a limited capacity, censers continued to be employed in the private chapels of recusants and the London embassies of Catholic nations.123 But for the most part censers had been alienated from English worship, until the nineteenth century, when Catholicism was decriminalized and the Ritualism movement within Anglicanism began to revive some pre-Reformation church decorations and “ceremonies,” including Eucharistic vestments, altar and processional lights, and the liturgical use of incense.124

The furor this revival caused permeated several spheres of public life. Punch published an “A.B.C. for Youthful Anglicans” that pointed directly to the censer’s role in the Ritualist debates: “T is the Thurible, whose very smell / Incenses the people, and makes them rebel.”125 The pun turns ambiguously on two meanings of the verb incense: the rarer, early modern sense of kindling passion and the more familiar modern sense of enraged.126 These lines frame censing once again as an act of rebellion and cast the seductive power of incense almost as a kind of illicit stimulant. At the same time, they capture the heated backlash against censing. Why was it considered so transgressive and why did it prompt such defensive anger? A number of anxieties were layered into the resistance to Ritualism, among them a xenophobic fear of Catholicism and of non-traditional sexual identities.127

Scholarship on Anglo-Catholicism has acknowledged the “emotional and aesthetic satisfactions” that made it “particularly attractive to members of a stigmatized sexual minority.”128 But the association of Ritualism with queer sub-cultures is also confounded by the vehement prejudices of nineteenth-century Anglicanism. Patrick O’Malley has identified “the deep cultural link in the evangelical imagination between religious ‘absurdities’ (including here all the physical motion of the Catholic liturgy) and the violation of gender and sexual norms.”129 The images of beautiful young men holding censers and other ecclesiastical implements that Simeon Solomon painted in the 1860s speak to this problematic convergence.130 His watercolor Two Acolytes, Censing, Pentecost (1863) takes as its subject the sensual experience of the liturgy, including the church’s neo-medieval furnishings, its stained glass, candlelight and lilies, and the smoking censer as it swings between the two splendidly dressed youths who lean their heads toward

HOLY SMOKE: CENSERS ACROSS CULTURES
CHAPTER VIII
each other, focused on a point outside the picture [Figure 16]. Here was the multi-sensory, expressive mode of worship that Ritualists and others who shared an aesthetic appreciation for elements of religious ceremony craved. But the image’s depiction of “High Church” elements, its absence of recognizable narrative content, and the undefined connection between the acolytes would make it a provocation to those who associated Ritualism with heresy and sexual deviance. Given England’s pervasive history of antisemitism, Solomon’s Orthodox Jewish background further complicated the reception of this portrayal of Christianthurifying. In 1873 and 1874 he was arrested and convicted for the criminal offense of sodomy. Read retrospectively, this ending to the artist’s career risks narrowing the interpretation of his Ritualist-inspired scenes to modern notions of sexual orientation and identity and simplifying the physically and spiritually entangled transgressions they capture. 

Although only a small proportion of churches had reintroduced incense, it nevertheless prompted a crisis within English society more broadly as the question arose over who had the authority to regulate liturgical practice in the Anglican Church. A parliamentary inquiry in 1867 led in 1874 to the controversial Public Worship Regulation Act, which was explicitly designed to curb Ritualism and created a secular court to hear cases of “unlawful” rites and ceremonies. Trials proceeded and a few priests were even imprisoned as a result. The matter was still not settled within the Church, however, and in 1899 the Anglican archbishops met at Lambeth Palace to hear evidence and make a final ruling “on the lawfulness of the liturgical use of incense and the carrying of lights in procession.”

It was this context of urgent debate, with legal, political, and material consequences, that spurred so much writing on incense in this period, including E. G. Cuthbert F. Atchley’s History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship (1909), which remains a foundational anglophone text. Atchley’s book was published with the support of the Alcuin Club, which aimed at restoring ecclesiastical ceremony according to correct historical precedent in the Church of England. It was the most comprehensive of a group of texts on incense written to inform the Ritualist debates. Henry Westall’s The Case for Incense, which encompassed the set of legal arguments and documentary evidence he and other experts presented in 1899 at Lambeth Palace, had a decidedly pro-Ritualist bent. 

The legality of the ceremonial use of incense turned on the “Ornaments Rubric,” a single line in the Book of Common Prayer that restricted church ornaments to those in use in the period between January 1548 and January 1549, during the reign of Edward VI. This line made the English Reformation newly present in the lives of Anglican worshipers and spurred intensive historical research and analysis that subjected primary texts from the Reformation to detailed, even sometimes philological, public discussion. For anti-Ritualists, the matter was settled: the Reformation in England had eliminated the use of incense. But Westall and others believed there had never been an explicit prohibition. In particular they argued that the lack of discussion of incense in the Book of Common Prayer constituted tacit permission for its use rather than outright abolition. They cited the survival of censers in church treasuries, including Elizabeth I’s chapel, and the preservation of instructions for consecrating censers as further evidence for the continued acceptance of incense for liturgical use.
Figure 16
Simeon Solomon, Two Acolytes Censing, Pentecost, 1863, Bodycolor on paper mounted on canvas, 40.3 × 34.8 cm. Photo: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, UK / Bridgeman Images.
Westall had appeared at Lambeth Palace as the Vicar of St. Cuthbert’s Philbeach Gardens, a Gothic Revival church in southwest London with definitively High Anglican practices and close association with the leaders of the liturgical revival movement. Because of its use of candles, incense, and reservation of the sacrament, St. Cuthbert’s was an explicit target of anti-Ritualist surveillance and protest, particularly by the radical campaigner John Kensit. In April 1898 a nineteen-year-old follower of Kensit’s attended Easter Sunday service there and, according to court testimony, “when the procession was close to the Defendant, he stepped out and caught hold of the thurifer who carried the incense, which might have been attended with danger if the charcoal had been scattered over the people. The Defendant called out, ‘I can’t stand this any longer. I must stop this Romanist nonsense.’ He was removed from the church and handed over to the police.”

In addition to explicitly highlighting the perceived danger of censing, including the precarity of the thurible and its hot coals, this anecdote demonstrates the passionate feeling on the anti-Ritualist side and the lengths to which some were willing to go to impede censing in Anglican churches.

The Lambeth Opinion of 1899 held that the use of incense was not legal in the Church of England and clergy were requested to discontinue its use outside of non-liturgical perfuming purposes. Many priests and congregations found it difficult to come to terms with this guidance and relinquished unwillingly a practice that had in some churches been in place for decades. Some also chafed at having to submit to archiepiscopal authority, a feeling pithily captured by the Bishop of Chester: “We are thankful that the angels and archangels can still swing the censer, because they indeed are beyond the jurisdiction of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York.”

The palpable disappointment displayed by congregations in response to the Lambeth Opinion testifies to the importance that incense had come to play in their conception of Anglican devotion. In one parish it was the blind congregants in particular who regretted the loss of incense, an anecdote that sheds light on the experience of disability in the Church and perhaps begs further consideration of the ways in which histories of sensory religion are framed around assumptions of able-bodiedness. Did visually impaired worshipers experience the Reformation’s elimination of incense in the sixteenth century similarly to those in this modern English parish?

In 1906 a Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline noted that incense was still being used ceremonially in about 20 percent of surveyed churches. Its report recommended loosening the regulation of public worship. From this point forward, the ceremonial use of incense was less of a flashpoint issue. But installed in St. Cuthbert’s is a prodigious testament to the passions surrounding the use of incense at the end of the nineteenth century. Though long planned, the towering carved reredos was not completed until 1913–1914. Conceived by Ernest Geldart, a trained architect and Anglican priest who submitted historical evidence to the Lambeth Palace hearing, this altarpiece is a spectacular defense of incense in visual and material form [Figure 17]. Its iconographical program includes scenes capturing biblical justification for the ceremonial elements of both incense and processional lights, all framing the central panel of Christ in Glory surrounded by censing angels and a banner with a quotation from Malachi: “In every place shall incense be offered unto my name, and a pure offering.” Geldart later quipped that the real credit for the altarpiece went to the anti-Ritualist
Figure 17
Ernest Geldart (design), Gilbert Boulton (execution), Reredos depicting The Worship of the Incarnate Son of God with Incense and Lights (detail), 1913–1914, St Cuthbert's Church, Philbeach Gardens, London. Photo by Diliff via Wikipedia.
campaigner John Kensit and Archbishop Temple, whose judgment suppressed the ceremonial use of both incense and lights. Given the immediate context of its conception around the Lambeth Palace hearing in 1899, the altar-piece stands as a bold rebuke to archiepiscopal authority and a subversive monument to Ritualist rebellion.

UNCHAINED: CENSERS IN THE MODERN MUSEUM

Cuthbert Atchley was known as a “British Museum ritualist,” a term that characterized an approach to modern Anglican devotion so rigorously antiquarian that it seemed fossilized to those who sought inspiration from the contemporary Roman Rite and the freedom to imagine what the English Church might have become “had it not been for the atrophying effect of Protestantism.” The association of Protestantism with the museum as a particular kind of institution is worth considering in more general terms, for it posits a shared project of deactivating and making strange the most animated forms of Catholic material culture, relegating them to the secular realm of historical inquiry and aesthetic analysis, rather than the sacred context of worship familiar through lived experience. In England in the mid-nineteenth century, the liturgical use of incense had fallen out to such a degree that one can find numerous examples of an inability, whether feigned or genuine, to recognize and understand the function of thuribles and their associated implements. The fact that Anglicans were buying censers in Europe as “curiosities” in the nineteenth century shows just how alien, even ethnographic, these objects had become, with a destination more appropriate in the British Museum than in a Sunday service.

As art historical research relies so heavily on the museum, and on media produced therein, it is important to ask what the censer became as a collected, musealized, and photographed object beginning in the nineteenth century. A photograph from the early twentieth century suggests some of the methodological frames created by these contexts [Figure 18]. The medieval bronze censer has been placed into a white space, a setting that prompts formal analysis of the metalwork as object, as opposed to an implement performing its particular function. The image captures details of the censer’s bronze, including patches of roughness and patina. It emphasizes the play of black and white as its voids open views into the dark interior and through to the indiscernible surface behind. The framing and positioning of the censer and the elimination of any further distractions in the background uncannily renders the perforations in the gable into a helmed face, with wide eyes and mouth and depressed round nose.

With all of the visual and material information that the photograph makes available to study, it is easy to overlook the absence of one feature central to medieval thuribles: the chains. What would ordinarily have been threaded through the apertures on the censer’s four sides and attached to the loop on the pinnacle of the lid and taken up space in the rest of the image is missing. Of course, there are many explanations for missing chains, including their susceptibility to damage and loss over time. But the absence in this photograph allows us to reflect on the significance of the chain to the censer and to the censer’s reception as artwork and artifact.

Removable, interchangeable, and formed of repetitive components, the thurible’s chains are not usually the site of virtuosic metalworking skill,
Figure 18
Photograph of 14th-century Rhenish bronze censer, ca. 1916–1923. Photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.
which is why they rarely receive much detail in design drawings. Alongside his detailed instructions for producing a raised and a cast censer in his twelfth-century treatise *De diversis artibus*, Theophilus did include a chapter on the censer’s chains, though this section has received less scholarly attention because it is not rich in iconographical detail like the chapters that precede it. He describes how the smith should draw wire for the links, ensure the resulting chain is of consistent thickness, and then attach five lengths of chain to the thurible’s body and to the “lily” by which it will be swung from the ring, being careful to keep the censer well balanced. Though the text does not mention the significance of the task, in determining the length of the chains, the smith was establishing the thurifer’s embodied liturgical performance, including how far the censer would extend from the body and its physical manageability in pendular movement.

While unnecessary to depict for the purposes of metalwork design and execution, the censer’s chains were what most interested artists tasked with capturing the practice of censing. They offered a means to diagram and make visceral the thurible’s movement and its auditory and olfactory effects and to explore the thurifer’s bodily relationship to the implement. Tim Ingold has written that chains are “articulated from rigid elements or links, and retain their connections even when tension is released. Yet they have no memory of their formation.” This means that their identical units have not been fundamentally changed by their interlinking and could be extricated with no impact on the remaining components. Nor, as they collapse together or extend, will the links bear any trace, or “memory,” of the shapes the chain assumes. Formally dynamic and ever-changing, chains thus contrast with the body of the censer itself, whose profile and volume are firmly defined and permanent.

In their malleability and “memorylessness” chains present a particular challenge to the portrayal of the censer in repose. They can be trained into artful shapes or left in a confusing tangle that obscures the censer’s form. Medieval and early modern artists of various media engaged with the potential for formal play in the thurible’s chains. In modern photographic representation and in museum display, the chains remain a problem that must be addressed, whether they are pulled away from or laid around the censer, or excised entirely. The thurible’s chains are determinative of the photograph’s (as well as the vitrine’s) format and dimensions, whether a squat rectangle or a long vertical. There is also the issue of whether to show the mechanism by which the censer’s chain is hung; museum photography from the nineteenth century to the present records a variety of solutions, from securing the ring with an invisible thread so it appears to float in space, to using a gloved crooked finger to hold the chain up.

The challenge that the combination of solid thurible and flexible chain presents for display and photography is more than just an aesthetic museological issue. The treatment of the chain has implications for the interpretive framing of the censer. As we have seen, the chain provides the means by which the censer operates liturgically and in Christian visual culture, creating the swinging dispersal of perfumed smoke. In medieval theology, they also acquired symbolic resonances. The chains are the component of the censer that renders it most unstable and, in Catholic-phobic contexts in and after the Reformation, most threatening. The removal or
downplaying of the chain deprograms the object, distancing it from human physical and ritual use and allowing it to be consumed as a kind of relic of past devotional practice. This view of the censer may appear to be simply secular or—trained on typologies of the object—art historical, but we should recognize that it also shares something of the Protestant outlook familiar from anti-Catholic critique of sensual worship, what Baum has called “the sober, intellectual gaze of the Protestant subject.” More recent museum installations attempt to return a sense of dynamism to the censer by positioning the object as if it is in motion, tipping up its foot and allowing its chains to strain and slacken sympathetically. Such positioning cannot convey the full ephemeral sensual experience of the censer, but even a slight disturbance to its static stance provides a visual cue to the missing auditory and olfactory expressions of the swung thurible.

CONCLUSION:
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE GLOBAL SPREAD OF CATHOLICISM

Focusing on changes wrought by the Reformation can distort the broader view of Christian devotion by implying an end to certain practices that, quite to the contrary, maintain a vibrant role into the present. Nor is it accurate to portray Catholic ritual, in contrast to the many shifts in Protestant theology and practice, as unchanging over the centuries. To avoid both such pitfalls, this chapter on the Reformation’s impact on censing returns to where it began with Botticelli’s Korah, to another group of eager thurifers in Rome. There, every October, a procession takes place that is dominated by incense smoke. The censers producing these fragrant clouds are not swung by acolytes accompanying richly dressed priests. Instead they are standing incense burners held by women of Italy’s Peruvian community, who cleanse the path of a venerated image of Christ as it moves through the streets.

For European Catholics, the form and basic function of the censer did not change radically over the ensuing centuries. Like other ecclesiastical plate, it evolved stylistically with current fashion, taking on Baroque linearity and Rococo swirls in turn, followed by historiast revival styles and eventually the Art Deco forms of the twentieth century. With mass production and new industrial metalworking techniques, a wide variety of censers in bronze, brass, and even silver plate became available alongside the increasingly expensive prospect of a piece specially commissioned from an expert metalsmith.

The use and look of censers was nevertheless impacted by the global spread of Catholicism. In early modernity, they were part of the equipment that traveled with colonizing priests so that the Mass could be performed on missions abroad. Eventually the form of censing implements, and even the ingredients of incense, were influenced in certain parts of the world by existing local traditions. As Jeffrey Collins and Meredith Martin have shown, naviculae (boat-shaped incense containers) took on the style and resonances of these new contexts, and because of their ship-shape, played up associations with the trade routes that made people and goods mobile in this period.

In what Collins and Martin call the “global republic of sacred goods,” censers too took on local styles and modified functions. In the Viceroyalty of Peru, for example, new vessel-shapes combined the functional requirements of incense-burning with the forms of indigenous flora and fauna. Produced by local silversmiths, such sahumadores or incensarios were likely based on
Figure 19
Unknown Basel silversmith, censer, before 1477, silver, raised and cast, height (with chains): 89.4 cm, diameter 14.6 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917.
Figure 20
Women thurifers (sahumadoras) of Lima censing the procession of the Lord of Miracles, October 18, 1982. Photo by Darío Médico / El Comercio.
Asian precedents, but took specifically Andean forms, such as fruit, or local animals like armadillo, deer, turkeys, or the Peruvian gray dove.169 Unlike typical Roman Catholic censers, these vessels were not designed to be swung by chains, but were instead stabilized on a tray. While many were employed in purifying and perfuming domestic space, their use was not only secular; they can be seen in the hands of elegantly attired *sahumadoras* in paintings of nineteenth-century processions and church interiors.170

To this day a charitable sorority of women in Lima shares the task of censing during the procession of an image that miraculously survived early modern earthquakes [Figure 20].171 The fragrant mixture burned includes *palo santo* and *copal*, the native tree resin that had been employed by Indigenous peoples of the Americas, as well as conventional gum incense.172 This longstanding devotional tradition subverts some of the expectations around the use of incense in European Catholic practice, not least through the non-typical form of the hand-held, static censer. Whereas the labor of formal liturgical and processional censing is ordinarily performed by male deacons, acolytes, and priests, here in the lay context of a popular Christian festival, the role is exclusively female. This mode of censing ritual, now enacted by the Peruvian diaspora in Italy, weaves together Afro-Peruvian image devotion, elements of Catholic liturgical practice, indigenous olfactory materials, and a specifically Andean form of censer, thus witnessing the complex legacies of the colonial past.173 It is yet another instance in which censing becomes a site of, if not exactly transgression, than at least a pushing of the boundary around what constitutes the accepted form of material worship.

* * *

The story of censers after the Reformation is multi-stranded. Rendered superfluous by new conceptualizations of the liturgy, in Protestant communities censers were pointedly destroyed, sold, or preserved and simply forgotten about. Or they remained to serve non-ceremonial purposes. They also came to metonymize what Protestants considered to be the most decadent and doctrinally unacceptable aspects of Catholic worship, and thereby featured prominently in textual and visual propaganda. For Catholics and other Christians, the censer continues to play an important role in liturgy to this day and, while it may have changed stylistically over the centuries, the basic form facilitating its ceremonial functions remained the same. Nevertheless, as the Christian censer moved across the globe during the colonial period, it was sometimes shaped anew by local traditions. Nor were reformed views of incense permanent. Even where it had been entirely discontinued, incense could still be reexamined and even reintroduced, as the case of Ritualism in the Anglican Church demonstrates. The ensuing debates in nineteenth-century England indicate that incense and the tools used to facilitate its use were burdened by many layers of associations, as indeed they had been in the sixteenth century. Censers were not simply objects made, discarded, and musealized, but also powerful symbols and metaphors that operated as well in the immaterial worlds of imaginaries across the confessional spectrum.
ENDNOTES

1 I thank Beate Frick, Joanne Luginbühl, and Zuzumrad byasova in Bern for encouraging this essay into being. The text has benefitted from several generous readers, including Emily Floyd, Caitlin Müller, and Rösli Watson. I owe a particular debt to Dr. Ayla Lepine for sharing both her ecclesiastical expertise and her art historical knowledge of nineteenth-century England at an early stage. The extensive comments and suggestions offered by three anonymous reviewers helped improve the text significantly, saving me from more than a few errors and infelicities. Those that remain are my own. Num 16:1–40.

2 Lewine 1990, 35.

3 Smith 2014.

4 Baum 2013, 338 n. 94.

5 See for example the censing angel on the wall of the south transept in Westminster Abbey, sculpted in the 1250s.

6 This topic awaits more comprehensive analysis, but examples include Adrian Isenbrandt’s Mass of St. Gregory (ca. 1500–1550) on panel (69.PB.11) and a manuscript illumination from the workshop of Gerard Horenbout from around 1500, Ms Ludwig IX 17 (83.ML.13), fol. 102v, both at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.


8 See the chapter “Censing God” in Dugan 2011, 28.

9 Despite, in its typical mode of simplified devotion, early Protestant vernacular propaganda utilized prayer-beads as legible signifiers of Catholic heresy (a practice that contrasted with the Lutheran emphasis on the Word). Coscarelli-Larkin 2020, 15–18.

10 Juster 2016, 18.

11 Between Heaven and Earth, see Caseau 1996, 340–41.


13 유배, location 3339–44.

14 Atchley reads this passage as a document of late medieval practice. Atchley 1909, 263–64; Milner 2011, location 3273.

15 See for example the censing angel on the plate of the south transept in Westminster. Ayla Lepine, this podcast concerns a particularly technical of Ritualist censing, in which the Thurifer faces east and allows the censer to “move by its own force” without the interference of the arm or wrist, the personal communion, January 27, 2023. Still, the existence of this display of ritual skillfulness high-lights the significance of swung movement, whatever exuberant or rigorously controlled, to the discourse on censing in the Anglican Church.

16 Janes 2013, 587.

17 On the post-Reformation re-framing of flagellant practices, see Largier 2007, 175–218. The physical similarity of the scourge’s flexible thongs to the censer’s chains and the related forms of gesture and movement both objects afford observable in medieval representations of the Passion and the arma Christi.

18 Thus Jane’s phrasing, “Victorian Reforma...” Mr. Punch’s A.B.C.” 1871; On Punch’s campaign against Ritualism, including “Ritualism” broadly understood, see Reed 1996; Janes 2009.

19 Though with a new orientation to Christ as opposed to the Marian focus of the rosary, Coscarelli-Larkin 2020, 31–32. See also Christ 2013, 152–3.

20 Baum 2013, 332–33.

21 This emphasis on the practical uses of incense signals a return to the functions of purification and health that had made incense popular in Christian ritual from the beginning, as Béatrice Carreau (2007) observes.

22 Baum 2013, 163–65.


24 For example, see the fifteenth-century illustration by Diebold Lauber in Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Cgm. 1101, fol. 122r. Available online at https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb00092281-page-26.

25 Eleazar is tasked with rescuing the censers from the fire that destroyed the rebels. Num 16:1–40.


27 Omar 1957, 90.


29 Hope 1908, 72.


32 Chaucer, lines 3339–44.

33 Atchley reads this passage as a document of late medieval practice. Atchley 1909, 263–64; Milner 2011, location 3273.

34 Baum 2013, 172–73.

35 See the section entitled “Reformation Churching” in ibid., location 1784 and following.


38 Karan-Nunn 1997, location 1770.

39 See the section entitled “Reformation Churching” in ibid., location 1784 and following.

40 Baum 2014, 84.

41 On vasa sacra et non sacra, see Braun 1932.


43 Fritz 1997.

44 Ziska 2007.


46 Oman 1957, 90.


48 Husband 2001a, 26.

49 Riberb 2001; Husband 200th.

50 Seydert 2002; Reinarz 2013, 57; Bauman 2013, 340–41.

51 On the secular reuse of ecclesiastical materials about recusant plate when libraries were inaccessible during the pandemic.

52 Bynum 2006, 220.

53 On the theology of the Mass of Sts. Gregory, see Bynum, 2006; Romes and Gormans, 2006; Meier 2006.

54 Sanmartin 1884.

55 Castati and Cavagnera, 2000; 2009.

56 Oman 1957, 249.

57 Baum 2019, 264; Dugan 2011, 28.


59 Beresford Hope 1874, 241.

60 My emphasis. “The Church Abroad” 1917, 529. According to Ayla Lepine, this podcast concerns a particularly technical of Ritualist censing, in which the Thurifer faces east and allows the censer to “move by its own force” without the interference of the arm or wrist, the personal communion, January 27, 2023. Still, the existence of this display of ritual skillfulness highlights the significance of swung movement, whatever exuberant or rigorously controlled, to the discourse on censing in the Anglican Church.

61 Janes 2013, 687.

62 On the post-Reformation re-framing of flagellant practices, see Largier 2007, 175–218. The physical similarity of the scourge’s flexible thongs to the censer’s chains and the related forms of gesture and movement both objects afford observable in medieval representations of the Passion and the arma Christi.

63 Thus Jane’s phrasing, “Victorian Reforma...” Mr. Punch’s A.B.C.” 1871; On Punch’s campaign against Ritualism, including “Ritualism” broadly understood, see Reed 1996; Janes 2009.

64 Parry 2008; Murdoch 2008, 79. I thank Tessa Murdoch for her sharing materials about recusant plate when libraries were inaccessible during the pandemic.

65 Anson 1966, 207. I use “Ritualism” broadly here to encompass the groups advocating a return to pre-Reformation devotional practices in the long eighteenth century, though other terms are often used. For more on Ritualism within the Anglican Church, see Reed 1898, 1899.

66 “Mr. Punch’s A.B.C.” 1871; On Punch’s campaign against Ritualism, including further commentary on incense, see Horrocks 2013.


On Solomon's portrayal of censing, see Bradstreet's text before this chapter went to press.


