Clare Copeland and Jan Machielsen (eds.)


There is no denying the centrality of the discernment of spirits in Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. It was, for him and in general, a practice of comprehending and experiencing God’s actions within the soul. As such, it was a precondition for Election, as much as it was the state of being constantly attentive to God’s movements within the self. It was also a doctrine, a philosophical investigation, and a probative quasi-inquisitorial mechanism. Justifiably, then, the discernment of spirits has attracted much attention over the last twenty years, during which time theologians and scholars have revived interest in this practice. Suffice it to mention the important works of Wendy Love Anderson, Nancy Caciola, Dyan Elliott, Cornelius Roth, and Susan Schreiner. Jesuit theologians who addressed the topic included Jules J. Toner and Hugo Rahner. This work has now been augmented by a collection of original articles that further widens the scope of this important historical investigation.

Copeland and Machielsen organized a conference at Oxford in 2011 that brought together scholars of discernment of spirits in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as students of early modern philosophy. This collection is comprised of articles that were first presented at this conference. It demonstrates the degree to which the discernment of spirits was a key component of early modern Europe’s struggles with, and conflicts over, the human ability to experience the divine, the reliability of encounters with the divine and the demonic, the trustworthiness of the senses and other types of evidence, and the epistemological question of what is potentially knowable.

As such, the discernment of spirits is a prism through which many of the major concerns and polemics that shaped early modern thought and practice can be viewed. It is useful, however, to note that the term discernment of spirits connotes a number of overlapping concerns. Discernment of possessing spirits (whether demonic or divine), for example, involved a possessed individual (usually a woman) and the concentric cycles of discerners surrounding her, presided over by a representative of the authorities, be it an exorcist, a confessor, or a mother superior. An altogether different dynamic was operative when a spiritual director instructed a spiritually-inclined person in how to discern hardly-felt godly movements within the soul, and different again was the self-discernment of these movements once the trainee had completed his or her training and was exposed directly to the ceaseless, miniscule interactions between God and the soul.
As devout individuals, but also as spiritual directors, confessors, exorcists, and practitioners and promoters of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Jesuits participated in all of these forms of discernment, and as theologians they contributed to the elucidation of its doctrine and to its institutionalization. I will concentrate on the articles in this important collection that shed new light on Jesuit involvement with the discernment of spirits. But since *Angels of Light?* contributes to a wide variety of early modern concerns, let me mention briefly some other articles. In a fascinating piece that could be viewed as an extension of his acclaimed *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750*, Euan Cameron reviews debates over the reliability of angels and demons. He reminds us that while the Reformation challenged most Catholics’ assumptions concerning the activities of preternatural agents in the world, popular culture refused to abandon them. Furthermore, reformers never doubted the existence of the devil, demons, angels (including guardian angels), and witches. The simplistic model of a transition from a Catholic superstitious universe to rational and materialistic Protestant and later secular modernities is simply inaccurate. Rational metaphysics were already common in the medieval period, and the realms of *mira* and *miracula* narrowed during the later Middle Ages. The Protestant Reformation brought chaos: the restraint that late medieval scholasticism had tried to impose collapsed with the disintegration of a unified theology. In its stead, debates over ontology, Scriptural authority, rites, and evidence multiplied. Among them voices of rationalist skeptics grew louder, but what was new in the seventeenth century, according to Cameron, was not so much rational thinking itself as the growing number of people claiming that their mode of thinking was novel.

Laura Sangha further details the debate over angels in late seventeenth-century England, while R.J. Scott and Anthony Ossa-Richardson discuss two of the new skeptical voices: the Cambridge Platonists and René Descartes. The Jesuits, as mentioned, contributed in numerous ways to the debates concerning spirits and the preternatural. In their introduction, Copeland and Machielsen are correct to point out that false doctrine, too, had to be discerned. Melchior Cano, the Dominican Spanish theologian who led an attack on the orthodoxy of the Jesuits in the 1540s, used the traditional language of discernment of spirits, and especially St. Paul’s warning that Satan himself is transformed unto an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14) to discredit Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* and to argue that they were used by the devil to lead believers astray. It was partly due to his attacks on their beliefs that the tension between experience and authority shaped early modern Jesuit spirituality, much as it did the desert fathers, religious orders in the later Middle Ages, and Protestant reformers.
Writing about Teresa of Ávila’s and John of the Cross’s experiences of, and warnings against, the danger of visions, Colin Thompson reminds us that Teresa’s confessors were Jesuits and that she was shaped by the order’s early spirituality: the same spirituality that Cano attacked and that later Jesuits had to fine-tune in order to distance themselves from accusations of Alumbradism. Teresa, in turn, shaped the spirituality and ecstasies of the Florentine Carmelite nun Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi, whose experiences in the 1580s are the topic of Clare Copeland’s article. De’ Pazzi’s ecstasies were investigated by Jesuit fathers, who reassured her of their divine origins. Crucial to de’ Pazzi’s success was the way in which her immediate audience of fellow nuns embraced her experiences as divine, but Copeland’s careful reading of the marginalia left on the manuscripts by Virgilio Cepari, rector of the Florentine Jesuit college who examined the records of the ecstasies, raises the intriguing possibility that de’ Pazzi also benefited from the unscrupulous manner of Cepari’s inattentive skimming of the text. Had he read it more carefully, Copeland suggests, he might have noticed de’ Pazzi’s unscriptural sojourn in a cistern in Pilate’s house, a vision that delayed her beatification once other theologians noticed it and doubted its plausibility.

Jan Machielsen addresses a very different type of discernment, namely the Jesuits’ investment in producing new and more reliable editions of saints’ lives, the Acta Sanctorum—the huge project that was begun by the Flemish Jesuit Jean Bolland in the seventeenth century, and which now includes sixty-eight volumes with the lives of 6,200 saints. Bolland was inspired by a previous Jesuit hagiographer, Heribert Rosweyde and his 1607 Fasti Sanctorum. The latter, in fact, continued a Jesuit tradition of recording the order’s founding fathers’ lives, a tradition that began with manuscript descriptions of Loyola’s life that circulated among Jesuits and were collected by Pedro de Ribadeneyra in the last quarter of the sixteenth century.

Throughout these enterprises, debates over the reliability of recorded events, what Machielsen calls textual discernment, and attempts to discern their meaning were taking place. Jesuit hagiographers attempted to establish “truth” while at the same time creating useful polemics against Protestant disparagement of much of the recorded evidence. In his careful analysis, Machielsen traces this history of Jesuit textual discernment and highlights the connection between Rosweyde and another famous Jesuit discerner, Martin Delrio, whose Disquisitionum magicarum (Leuven, 1599-1600) was one of the more important early modern compilations on witchcraft and the discernment of revenant and evil spirits.

In his afterword to this wide-ranging collection, Stuart Clark is right to call discernment “one of the principal investigatory idioms of the age” (283).
investigators were members of the clergy as well as lay people, males and females, and they discerned visions, apparitions, revelations, texts, ecstasies, miracles, dreams, and personal comportment. At stake were the meaning of truth and human cognitive and perceptual access to it, but the epistemological challenge was greater than the doctrines and practices of discernment could bear. Discernment remained a charism, a divine gift, while sight, both through the eyes of the body and the eyes of the mind, remained unreliable, as were all the other senses.

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