CHAPTER ONE

ANGELS, DEMONS, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN: SPIRITUAL BEINGS IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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In the pre-modern world, spiritual creatures were widely, if not universally, believed to exist. However, people in the past seem to have felt the same uncertainty and ambiguity in meeting them as would be felt about mysterious apparitions or presences at any time and place. An apparition might be an illusion; it might be a manifestation of a malevolent intelligence; it might be a sign or messenger from God. It might also—as far as one can uncover the assumptions of vernacular beliefs—be a visitation from one of many kinds of intelligent but not human beings, whose existence was presupposed in regional traditions of storytelling and ritual. The impressions formed by the alleged presence of spirits were essentially transient, unstable, and ambiguous. Therefore, even within any one reasonably consistent layer of belief about such creatures, it was necessary to work out by some means or other what each appearance, manifestation, or message might represent. This exercise amounted to “discerning” the true nature of a spirit. Discernment of spirits became, in the religious thought of the Middle Ages, both an ecclesiastical procedure and a personal gift or charism.¹

However, the belief-systems of the Middle Ages contained multiple interlocking layers of doctrine, with the result that “discerning” spirits acquired a secondary, didactic character. Typically, a pastoral theologian or more educated priest would claim to “discern” that an apparition previously thought to be benign or morally neutral might be, after all, an illusion or snare of the devil. In such circum-

stances the act of “discernment” rather resembled cultural control. The Church discerned that a particular kind of creature could not exist in the way in which traditional lore assumed. Therefore stories about it had to be fitted into or assimilated to the theologically approved dualistic structure of angels and demons (and usually, in case of even the least ambiguity, to the latter). This process constituted not so much “discernment” as the obligatory reinterpretation of experiences previously understood according to another set of assumptions. Theologians throughout the Middle Ages, but especially in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, expended much energy on two related tasks. One involved the sorting out of the physical, metaphysical, and ethical properties of spiritual beings or “separated intelligences” on the plane of pure abstraction. The other challenged pastoral theologians to apply their theories to the received and reported phenomena. Those phenomena included not only the beliefs revealed by pastoral investigations in the localities, but also stories, myths, and legends of spiritual creatures and bizarre apparitions, about which literary culture—including high culture—at the end of the Middle Ages offered abundant and confusing documentation.

In the sixteenth century, beliefs about spirits came in for the same intense scrutiny and debate as every other aspect of religion. On the face of it, there was no immediate need for ideas about spiritual creatures to undergo any great transformation in the wake of the Reformation. By and large, until the mid-seventeenth century the prevailing assumptions about the metaphysics of invisible spiritual beings remained the same as they had been for several centuries. However, in important ways the Reformation inflicted what one might term collateral damage on beliefs about the spirit realm. A fuller idea of God’s providential control over every aspect of existence reduced the need for, or explanatory usefulness of, quasi-autonomous spiritual intelligences. A more economical attitude

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2 See note 39 below for the rhetoric of Alphonsus de Spina to this effect.

3 As was done by Thomas Aquinas in Summa Theologica I q. 44 and following; also in his Summa contra gentiles 2:46–50, and his Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis passim.