

INTRODUCTION

CLARE COPELAND & JAN MACHIELSEN

In his *Cautio Criminalis* (1631–32) the German Jesuit and witchcraft sceptic Friedrich Spee recalled—or invented—a discussion between an unnamed prince and an anonymous clergyman.¹ Over dinner the prince confessed his fear “that the master of a thousand arts [the devil] deceives his lackeys [the witches]” and that innocent men and women were denounced for attending the witches’ sabbath who had not, in fact, been there. It was a scruple which the clergyman, “with the instantly shrill and excessive zeal of those who usually do not philosophize more than four feet from their heater,” dismissed. God would never permit the devil to assume the image of an innocent woman or man at the sabbath: a prince could proceed safely. This was the answer that the prince had hoped for, but for the priest his assurances rebounded in a way he had not foreseen. “Truly,” the prince informed the priest, “I regret your fate, for you have condemned yourself out of your own mouth in a capital crime [. . . for] no less than fifteen witches confessed that they saw you at their sabbaths.” We may be inclined to think that Spee fabricated the story in order to impart a bigger truth—he did not deem it necessary “to identify the place and people” involved—but it was Scripture that taught the Jesuit that his view was at least possible: if “the devil can transform himself into an angel in order to ruin souls [. . .] Why can he not transform himself into an innocent person so that he may ruin her body?”

The biblical basis for Spee’s argument was 2 Corinthians 11:14: “And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.”² Yet this warning, issued by the apostle Paul, invites two dis-

¹ Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld, *Cautio Criminalis, or a Book on Witch Trials*, trans. Marcus Hellyer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 196–97.

² This and subsequent translations in this introduction come from the Authorised King James Version.

tinct, and in many ways contrary, readings. On one level, this is a warning about a possible discrepancy between truth and appearance: what *appears* true is not necessarily true. The “angel of light” became a code word for deception and a well-worn literary trope at that. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, Mr Wickham, “who, but three months before, had been almost an angel of light,” ultimately revealed himself to be a man of poor moral standing, “the wickedest young man in the world.”³ Paul’s warning invites scepticism, calling on Christians to question the veracity and authenticity of what they perceive. But how were they to discern true content from the label on the box, especially when the two might be diametrically opposed and yet appear the same? In this reading, 2 Corinthians recalls the injunction of 1 John 4:1—“believe not every spirit”—and this is one of the references with which Thomas Aquinas glossed the passage.⁴

Early modern Christians engaged in the discernment of spirits with the understanding that there was more than one possible answer. From the outset, such discernment involved a degree of scepticism which complicates narratives about the chronological disenchantment of the world. With the possibility of doubt and deception in mind, it is hardly surprising that 2 Cor. 11:14 came to be seen as part of an assault on the reliability of the senses. The Spanish physician Juan Huarte de San Juan (1529–88), for instance, identified Satan’s transfiguration as “works of the [corrupted] imagination.”⁵ Commenting on the same passage, one mid-sixteenth-century English Protestant observed that the devil “captivates our senses so fond and phantastical that we doubt not to deme the day to be nighte.”⁶ As Stuart Clark shows in this volume, depicting this

³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ch. 48.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Super II epistolam B. Pauli ad Corinthios lectura* ch. 11, lectio 3, para. 407, <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/c2c.html> (University of Navarre).

⁵ Juan Huarte de San Juan, *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* (Baeça, 1594), fol. 190v. “todas estas propiedades, bien se entiende que son obras de la ymaginativa.” Huarte goes on to outline how a “temperamento muy caliente” disturbed both the imagination and begot the three main vices of pride, gluttony and “luxuria,” again in reference to Paul: “For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly.” (Romans 16:18)

⁶ Edmund Becke, *A Brefe Confutacion of this Most Detestable, Anabaptistical Opinion, that Christ dyd not take Hys Flesh of the Blessed Vyr gyn Mary nor Any Corporal Substaunce of Her Body* (London, 1550), fol. 2r.

problem of vision in *visual* terms presented an insoluble conundrum for Renaissance artists.⁷

Yet 2 Cor. 11:14—and Spee’s use of it—also invites a second reading. While discernment by its very nature involved a degree of scepticism, Paul’s words also reminded Christians of the terrifying power of the devil who, as Aquinas warned, could show himself “to be either an angel of God or sometimes Christ.”⁸ By urging the Christians of Corinth to beware of demonic deceptions, Paul was also reminding them of the devil’s abilities. Read in this way, the passage becomes an assertion of the devil’s *pseudo*-omnipotence. In his *Daemonologie* (1597), King James VI of Scotland referred to the passage when discussing the raising of the Prophet Samuel by the Witch of Endor, an event which for Protestants, in the absence of purgatory, had to involve both divine permission and a demonic disguise. As James wrote, “that the Diuel is permitted at som-times to put himself in the liknes of the Saintes, it is plaine in the Scriptures, where it is said, that Sathan can transforme himselfe into an Angell of light.”⁹ Paul’s warning meant that the devil could appear not only in the likeness of an angel but could masquerade in all shapes and sizes. Friedrich Spee’s discussion of the witches’ sabbath reflected both readings of Paul: the Jesuit induced scepticism by questioning the reliability of the senses and hence the feasibility of the successful prosecution of witches, but he did so by further extending the realm of the demonic.

The very existence of Paul’s warning added to the conundrum for it meant that no believer could claim ignorance as an excuse for seduction by devils and heretics.¹⁰ But if Paul’s words served to

⁷ On concerns about the accuracy of the senses, see also Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007).

⁸ Aquinas, *Super II epistolam B. Pauli ad Corinthios lectura* ch. 11, lectio 3, para. 406. “ostendens se esse vel Angelum Dei, vel aliquando Christum.”

⁹ James VI and I, *Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue, diuided into Three Bookes* (Edinburgh, 1597), 4. Heinrich Bullinger also cited 2 Cor. 11:14 in connection to the raising of Samuel in sermon 49 of his *Sermonum decades quinque*, translated into English as Heinrich Bullinger, *Fiftie Godlie and Learned Sermons diuided into Five Decades* (London, 1577), 733.

¹⁰ This point is made in relation to 2 Cor. 11:14 by Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes sacrae theologiae* (Basle, 1564), 615 who also gives the example of Eve’s temptation in the garden of Eden. The passage is also marshalled to make the same point (in relation to ignorance of demons as opposed to heretics) in Petrus Binsfeld, *Tractatus de confessionibus maleficorum et sagarum*, 2nd ed. (Trier, 1591), 65. The point

remind Christians of the devil's power, commentators were nevertheless aware of the power of God. Discernment was vital precisely because it held up the possibility of unveiling divine truths as well as demonic deception. The injunction to "believe not every spirit" might have appeared to be a simple call for scepticism, but the purpose of testing such spirits was to see "whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1) as much as from any other source. There was acute awareness that divine messages might be transmitted by a variety of forms: Christ, angels, the saints (to name but a few). It was precisely because God *did* reveal himself in visions and dreams—as seen on numerous occasions in the Bible—that discerning the origin of any of these phenomena was of such concern.

Not surprisingly, the matter became one of special urgency and concern during the period of the European Reformations, when claims to religious truth were invariably contested. Yet, in approaching the discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*) both Catholics and Protestants built upon the work of their medieval forebears. The subject had been of considerable concern to theologians during the papal schism (1378–1417) when they faced a situation of institutional uncertainty which female mystics in particular sought to resolve.¹¹ The theologian Jean Gerson (1363–1429) was clearly aware of both demonic deceptions and divine interventions when he pondered what to do with claims of revelations.¹² "If we immediately deny everything or ridicule the matter or accuse the person," he wrote, "we will seem to weaken the authority of divine revelation, which is just as powerful now as it once was." Moreover, to suggest that all revelations and prophecies were illusions would scandalize believers and thus, he concluded, "we are obliged to find a middle way."¹³ It is precisely this charting of a middle way that occupies the present collection of essays.

of ignorance of Christian doctrine in general not being an excuse for Christians is, of course, a common one.

¹¹ Dyan Elliott, "Seeing Double: John Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits, and Joan of Arc," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 1 (2002): 26–54.

¹² Gerson, for example, opens his treatise *De distinctione verarum revelationum a falsis* (On Distinguishing True from False Revelations, 1402) with the prophecy received by Zechariah concerning the name of his son John (Luke 1:13). Gerson asks how we can know that this was "an angelic act rather than a diabolical illusion." Gerson, *Early Works*, trans. and intro. Brian McGuire (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 335.

¹³ Gerson, *Early Works*, 337.

Gerson stands as a giant in the field of *discretio* and his three treatises on the subject remained important long after the confessional rupture of the sixteenth century. Already in his first treatise, *De distinctione verarum revelationum a falsis* (On Distinguishing True from False Revelations, 1402), Gerson turned to the attacks of heretics to add weight to the importance of discernment: “As the true expression of religion comes under attack through heretics’ sophistical and false arguments, so too lying angels try to abrogate the authority of true and holy revelations through sophistical deeds and the trickery of magicians.”¹⁴ For Gerson, writing at the turn of the fifteenth century and in the context of the papal schism, the fame and renown of women visionaries such as Bridget of Sweden (1303–73) and Catherine of Siena (1347–80) was particularly troubling in the light of their claims to speak about papal politics.¹⁵ But the warning not to believe all appearances provided a useful weapon against opponents to any position or set of beliefs, for if the devil could disguise himself then what appeared to be God’s will might, in fact, turn out to be the exact opposite. As Dyan Elliott has shown, Gerson’s scepticism about the prophecies of Bridget of Sweden marred his later attempt to vindicate Joan of Arc against her Anglo-Burgundian critics; the theologian’s own language could be, and was, employed against him.¹⁶

In light of the lively medieval discussion of the discernment of spirits it is hardly surprising that it has been seen foremost as a Catholic concept and concern. The ten essays collected in this volume, however, testify to the importance of *discretio spirituum* to Catholics and Protestants alike.¹⁷ As Euan Cameron shows, the onset of the Reformation saw the reconfiguration of angelic beings rather than their demise. Within the post-Reformation religious landscape, Paul’s warning invited both Protestants and Catholics to integrate

¹⁴ Gerson, *Early Works*, 335.

¹⁵ In this volume we have refrained from using the title “saint” when the status of the person was still contended and official sainthood was thus just one possible—and typically unlikely—outcome that was only granted after a person’s death. Such an approach also suits the multi-confessional scope of the contributions that follow.

¹⁶ Elliott, “Seeing Double,” esp. 47–50.

¹⁷ For a recent discussion of discernment as a shared concern for Catholics and Protestants, see Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), esp. 261–321.

the existence of rival confessions within their worldviews by attributing them to demonic wiles and temptations. For those believing that the Last Days might be drawing near the importance of discerning spirits and identifying false prophets was especially urgent. The evangelists Mark and Matthew had both pointed specifically to the appearance of “false Christs” and “false prophets” at this time who would, if it were possible, even deceive the elect (Mark 13:22; Matthew 24:24). According to the book of Revelation, as the Last Days approached, Satan would be liberated from his “prison” and would go out to deceive all the nations (Revelation 20:7–8). The identification of false prophets and visionaries was therefore read by some as a sign that the end was nigh and added to their (post-Reformation) millenarian fervour.

For the Catholic Church, the discernment of saints was foremost, but by no means exclusively, an institutional concern. Visionary experience was certainly not a requirement for official sainthood. Indeed, one Catholic visionary of this period, Teresa of Avila (1515–82), warned that “there are many holy persons who have never received one of these favours [mystical gifts]; and others who receive them but are not holy.”¹⁸ The Catholic criteria for sainthood were virtuous lives and miracles *after* death, always to be approved posthumously. And yet, the saintly reputations of individuals clearly were influenced by claims to extraordinary supernatural experiences. Tightening definitions of holiness was an important part of the bureaucratic reforms that characterised the Church of Rome in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A principal concern was the over-hasty identification of saints by devotees—whilst they were alive or only shortly after they had died—before the authorities had had a chance to assess (and approve) their saintliness.¹⁹ The unofficial holy reputations of would-be-saints were often prompted by claims to receive visions. Accordingly, the discernment of spirits was not only a topic of interest for the Congregation of Rites which investigated canonization processes; it was also a concern for the

¹⁸ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 6.9.16. Teresa’s comment might have been influenced by Jesus’s reminder to the apostle Thomas in the gospel of John: “Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

¹⁹ On reforms to the canonization process, see Simon Ditchfield, “Tridentine Worship and the Cults of Saints,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Reform and Expansion, 1500–1660*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 201–24.

Holy Office as it sought to silence and control dubious visionaries. Even after death, the Holy Office maintained an interest in the canonization of saints in terms of censoring devotional cults lacking official approval.²⁰ For both Catholics and Protestants, the discernment of holiness was further complicated because divine visions were not a straightforward sign of sanctity, nor were demonic assaults a sure sign of a lack of holiness, as the model of Saint Anthony of Egypt indicated.

Although rejecting the cult of saints, Protestants had martyrs, heroes, and even visionaries of their own whose actions were worthy of study, recollection, and second-hand discernment. Many Protestants retained a place for wonders. The laity in particular only reluctantly embraced the doctrine that miracles had ceased with the Early Church.²¹ Like Catholics, Protestants heeded Paul's warning against false outward appearances but often applied it to the superstitious ceremonies of the Catholic Church, many of which were linked to public devotions and liturgies. The Danish theologian Niels Hemmingsen (1513–1600), for instance, warned in relation to 2 Cor. 11:14 of the devil's countenance "when he giveth superstition a counterfaite face of holinesse: when he dealeth in this wise, then he lieth in waite craftilie to catch us. To them therefore, which are not furnished with the whole armour of God, the diuell is more terrible, furious, violent, and prevailing."²² George Abbot (1562–1633), an Oxford theologian and later archbishop of Canterbury, preached at the university church of St Mary the Virgin that "ceremonies and the shew which is outward, do not ever import verity of religion" because "hypocrites and dissemblers [...] in outward and externall

²⁰ Miguel Gotor, *I beati del papa: Santità, inquisizione, e obbedienza in età moderna* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 2002).

²¹ See Philip Soergel, *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), esp 31–32. Soergel's work builds on that of D. P. Walker, especially "The Cessation of Miracles," in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen Debus (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library; London: Associated University Presses, 1988), 111–24. Walker argues that the doctrine of the "cessation of miracles" was formulated in answer to both Catholic use of miracles as signs of divine favour, and Reformed extremists claiming miracle-working powers. For England, highlighting the continuation of miracles in popular culture, see also Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006).

²² Niels Hemmingsen, *The Epistle of the Blessed Apostle Saint Paule* (London, 1580), 223.

points of religion, can go as farre as the faithfull, or the best child of God.”²³

Thus the warning of 2 Cor. 11:14 encompassed not only false visions and prophecies but false doctrine as well, and as such, it could bolster the criticisms of Catholics and Protestants alike. Erasmus used the passage to denounce Luther’s “paradoxes” in a letter to the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli;²⁴ Philipp Melancthon deployed it against Henry VIII’s conservative Six Articles.²⁵ Calvin employed it in the preface to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (first ed., 1536) in which he rejected the (false) miracles which Catholics attributed to their saints, and which they demanded from their Protestant opponents as a sign of divine approval.²⁶ And among Catholics, the Polish cardinal Stanisław Hozjusz (1504–79) applied the concept to the problem of heresy, warning the faithful of “heretics transformed into angels of light” who mis-explained Scripture.²⁷

Such highly polemical use of Paul’s passage suited the context in which the apostle had first warned of the devil’s minions: “Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness.” (2 Cor. 11:15) And it was in the light of the devil’s human followers that Paul was also understood. As Aquinas noted, in a passage already cited in part,

just as true apostles are sent by God and formed (*informantur*) by him, so Satan, who is their leader and encourager, transforms (*transformat*) himself into an angel of light, showing himself to be either an angel of God or sometimes Christ. It is therefore not very surprising, if his

²³ George Abbot, *An Exposition upon the Prophet Ionah contained in Certaine Sermons preached in S. Maries Church in Oxford* (London, 1600), 170 (Lecture 8).

²⁴ Erasmus to Huldrych Zwingli, Basel 31 August [1523] (Letter 1384). Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1356 to 1534*, in *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1974–), vol. 10 (1992), trans. R. A. B. Mynors and Alexander Dalzell, 80–85, here 81.

²⁵ “The Copie of Melancthons Epistle Sent to King Henry, against the Cruel Act of the VI. Articles,” in *Actes and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable, happenyng in the Church with an Vniuersall History of the Same*, ed. John Foxe, vol. 2 (London, 1583), 1172–76, here 1173.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, preface, sec. 3. “These miracles, they [the Catholics] say, are done neither by idols, nor by magicians, nor by false prophets, but by the saints. As if we did not understand that to ‘disguise himself as an angel of light’ is the craft of Satan!”

²⁷ Stanisław Hozjusz, *De expresso Dei verbo, libellus, his temporibus accommodatissimus*, in *Opera omnia* (Antwerp, 1571), 313–31, here 315. See the marginal gloss “Haeretici in Angelos lucis transfigurati.”

ministers, certainly fictitiously, transform themselves into ministers of justice, that is, they simulate being just.²⁸

Given its suitability for polemical purposes, 2 Cor. 11:14 unsurprisingly proved to be both stabilising and destabilising for all sides. Satan's splendid transfiguration was a useful, defensive weapon, a tool for demonizing the seemingly good. Even in the Reformed tradition, where the only mark of accuracy that a vision could possess was its congruence with Scripture, the potential for deception and falsehood voiced by Paul had unsettling implications.²⁹ The uncertainty about outward signs which Paul's warning invited—and which Hemmingsen and Abbot both embraced in their condemnation of superstition—could also powerfully bolster criticisms of the doctrine of double predestination. When an anonymous English “Anabaptist” denounced the resulting unknowability of salvation, he argued that the elect and reprobate would be indistinguishable in public view: marks of salvation, he contended, were publicly evident, for “God never doeth transforme himself into an Angell of darkness.”³⁰ In answer, the Scottish reformer John Knox conceded that “sometimes the reprobate do beautifully shyne in the eyes of men for a space, as exemples be evident.”³¹ Nevertheless, he argued that the distinction between the elect and reprobate was sufficiently evident: from election comes faith, and from faith, good works which offer testimony to others. Knox wondered at his opponent's attempt to label 2 Cor. 11:14 as a (specious) proof for the doctrine of

²⁸ Aquinas, *Super II epistolam B. Pauli ad Corinthios lectura* cap. 11, l. 3, para. 406. “sicut veri apostoli mittuntur a Deo et informantur ab ipso, sic *Satanas transformat se in Angelum lucis*, qui est dux et incentor eorum, ostendens se esse vel Angelum Dei, vel aliquando Christum. Non est ergo mirum neque magnum si ministri eius, scilicet pseudo, transformant se in ministros iustitiae, id est simulant se esse iustos.”

²⁹ See Calvin, *Institutes* Lix.2. “Lest Satan should insinuate himself under his name, he [God] wishes us to recognise him by the image which he has stamped on the Scriptures. The author of the Scriptures cannot vary, and change his likeness.”

³⁰ John Knox, *An Answer to a Great Number of Blasphemous Cauillations written by an Anabaptist* ([Geneva], 1560), 191. The manuscript in question, possibly written by Robert Cooche, a former friend of Knox's, was published as part of the reformer's refutation. Knox wrote *An Answer* while in exile in Geneva in 1558. The work, his longest, was printed there after his departure. See Jane E. A. Dawson, “Knox, John (c. 1514–1572),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004–), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15781>, sec. “The Implications of Predestination.”

³¹ Knox, *An Answer*, 203.

predestination, adding that “I, for my owne part do protest before ye Lord Iesus, that I neuer did so understand that place of ye Apostle.”³²

The idea of the devil appearing as an angel of light was a powerful tool within confessional conflicts of all types. For the Spanish theologian Melchor or Melchior Cano (1509–60), 2 Cor. 11:14 provided ammunition for his criticism of the Society of Jesus, the *Spiritual Exercises*, and the personal holiness of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), whom he believed to be falsely claiming to receive visions.³³ Susan Schreiner has explored how Cano moved beyond matters of individual holiness to question the Society as a whole. The Dominican friar argued that the Jesuits only *appeared* to be involved in good works (preaching, almsgiving, etc.). Cano claimed that the devil used the *Spiritual Exercises* to lead astray Jesuits and non-Jesuits alike by encouraging anyone to believe that they were contemplatives. Thus Paul’s warning not only inspired ferocious theological debate and the censure of some would-be visionaries, but also contributed to public struggles between individuals and groups of believers belonging to the same religious community. Discernment could not only be used to censure and condemn; it empowered sceptics and believers alike.

Four major themes emerge from the essays collected in this volume that together make a fresh argument for the importance of discernment to the history of early modern Europe. These themes build on, and enter into a dialogue with, Moshe Sluhovsky’s *Believe Not Every Spirit* (2007).³⁴ In his masterful contribution to the history of discernment Sluhovsky stresses the connections between developments in mysticism, exorcism, and discernment techniques in early modern Catholicism. The first aim of the contributions to this volume has been to link discernment to an even wider range of issues. True, discernment was first and foremost a matter for

³² Knox, *An Answer*, 204.

³³ Terence O’Reilly, ed., “Melchor Cano’s ‘Censura y parecer contra el Instituto de los Padres Jesuitas’: A Transcription of the British Library Manuscript,” in *From Ignatius of Loyola to John of the Cross*, ed. Terence O’Reilly (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), ch. 5, 11–22 (page numbering refers to ch. 5 alone). Note the references to 2 Cor. 11:14 on 12 and 16. For the discussion that follows, see Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise*, 272–74.

³⁴ Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, & Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

visionaries: Catholics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross (explored by Colin Thompson), or a prophet such as the Lutheran Paul Felgenhauer (studied by Leigh Penman). But the possibility of deception meant that the concept of discernment had much wider significance. Anthony Ossa-Richardson shows that for the Reformed theologian Gijsbert Voet or Voetius, wrong *discretio spirituum* was a code for the Cartesian privileging of “private reason” over Scripture, whereas right *discretio spirituum* (as granted to the evangelists) had created Scripture in the first place. Victoria Van Hying demonstrates in her study of a convent of Benedictine nuns in Cambrai that concerns about discernment could colour debates about a cleric’s power and influence, and raise doubts about the methods of prayer taught not just to individuals but to whole communities. Meanwhile, as Jan Machielsen and Stuart Clark both argue, the discernment of spirits was an issue of vital importance for hagiographers and visual artists (or rather, visual hagiographers) who, although far removed from the original experiences of any visionaries, were nevertheless called on to interpret them “second-hand.” Whereas scholars have hitherto centred their discussion of discernment on the claims of visionaries or the possessed, the essays included here call for a fresh interpretation of discernment that places it amongst bigger questions concerning the relationship between authority and religious experience on both the individual and communal level.

Secondly, Moshe Sluhovsky has made a compelling case for the study of discerning spirits as a collaborative process in which an exorcist or confessor worked with a spiritually inclined woman to construct a narrative of divine grace or (much more frequently) demonic possession.³⁵ This volume seeks to apply this understanding of *discretio* as a communal process more widely. The examples outlined above suggest that discernment was of public interest to Christians of all persuasions in the struggle to claim the authority to interpret Scripture and define holiness. In particular, we suggest that debate and disagreement should not be seen solely in negative terms. Beliefs and concerns relating to *discretio spirituum* were kept alive when they might otherwise have fallen dormant by fractious (intra-) confessional debates of the sort briefly outlined above.

³⁵ Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, esp. 8.

The contested nature of the discernment of spirits—the fact that virtually every debate involved adherents as well as opponents—reinforced points of view. Victoria Van Hynning, in her chapter on Augustine Baker, suggests that Baker’s prayer methods may not have become as popular had they not been contested. A similar argument can be made for the philosophical controversies of the later seventeenth century. Anthony Ossa-Richardson argues that Cartesian philosophy focused renewed attention on the issue of discernment of spirits among Descartes’s opponents. And as Laura Sangha explores in her chapter, Hobbesian materialism did not settle old debates but brought them back to life. Interest in the discernment of spirits continued to flourish in part because it was fed by, and attempted to settle, other debates.

Thirdly and crucially, the contributions that follow stress that although discernment was considered difficult, it was not thought impossible. Given how vast the problems surrounding *discretio spirituum* were this may seem counterintuitive. Thomas Aquinas, in his gloss on 2 Cor. 11:14, had pointed out “that Satan sometimes transforms himself visibly, as he did to Saint Martin [of Tours] so that he could deceive him, and in that way he deceived many. But the discernment of spirits, which God especially granted to Saint Anthony, is effective and necessary against this.”³⁶ The inclusion of a saint among the deceived is an ominous sign. Moreover, as Stuart Clark shows, the example of St Anthony as the most able of discerners was far from reassuring. Anthony’s skill at discernment was “necessary” to avoid being deceived as “many” had been; yet this skill was conferred specially by God, and how others might obtain it remained tantalisingly unclear. Anthony’s example also pointed out that resistance to demonic assaults and temptations could be a compelling mark of sanctity. Aquinas, following Paul (2 Cor. 11:15, “whose end shall be according to their works”), only advised his reader that a demon’s work would always lead to evil, even if it might pretend to good ends at the beginning.³⁷ Aquinas provided an unsettling exam-

³⁶ Aquinas, *Super II epistolam B. Pauli ad Corinthios lectura* cap. 11, l. 3, para. 407. “Notandum autem est, quod Satanas transfiguratur se aliquando visibiliter, sicut beato Martino, ut deciperet eum, et hoc modo multos decepit. Sed ad hoc valet et necessaria est discretio spirituum, quam specialiter Deus contulit beato Antonio.”

³⁷ 1 John 4:3. “Every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.”

ple to illustrate this point: an unnamed monk who was committed to never leaving his cell was inspired “invisibilter” (invisibly) by the devil to go to church and receive communion. This seemingly innocuous act was, on the contrary, the first step on a slippery slope to perdition.³⁸

Given the superficial similarities of the demonic and the divine—different in all *but* appearances—how were Christians of the early modern period to discern truth from falsehood? Sluhovsky has emphasized the extreme difficulties involved in the discernment of spirits for early modern Catholics, attributing a trend towards the “criminalization” of “simulated sanctity” to “admissions of failure” on the part of Catholic theologians who were frustrated by “trying, hope against hope, to stabilize an experience that was beyond their control.”³⁹ The impossibility of discerning visions according to their (divine or demonic) content focused the attention of exorcists and confessors on the moral standing of their recipients. The subsequent negative view of visionary experience was fed by their misogyny. This volume shows that the focus on the morality of visionaries was not exclusively a Catholic concern, as Leigh Penman explores the self-chastisement of Paul Felgenhauer, a failed Lutheran prophet; and R. J. Scott demonstrates a similar emphasis in the writings of the Cambridge Platonists.

At the same time, we cannot ignore that visions *were* successfully discerned and authenticated across a wide range of situations. The late sixteenth century saw Catholics reconfigure exorcism into a means of spiritual interrogation, but it also witnessed the first canonization of a saint for sixty-three years.⁴⁰ Any theoretical impossibility, then, did not unduly influence practice: signs of holiness could always be challenged, but this did not mean that they always were. On one level, the discernment of spirits was literally

³⁸ Aquinas, *Super II epistolam B. Pauli ad Corinthios lectura* cap. 11, l. 3, para. 407.

³⁹ Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, 191. On simulated sanctity, see in particular Gabriella Zarri, ed., *Finzione e santità tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1991), esp. 9–36; and Anne Jacobson Schutte, *Aspiring Saints: Pretense of Holiness, Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice, 1618–1750* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001).

⁴⁰ This salient detail was the starting point for Peter Burke, “How to Become a Counter-Reformation Saint,” reprinted in *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings*, ed. David M. Luebke (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 129–42. It is, however, important to note that the papacy recognized fourteen non-universal cults between 1524 and 1588. See, in particular, Ditchfield, “Tridentine Worship,” 207.

definitional. It was a charism, a special, individual gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:10), given to some (like Anthony) and not to others. Yet, as the contributions to this volume show, it would be wrong to project the definitional impossibility of discernment onto the source material. The belief that discernment was a special gift coexisted with a sense that there were indeed ways to “test” influences (1 John 4:2–3). Discerning the claims of visionaries was always a public process, subject to the forming of communal consensus. Early modern Christians could draw on a vast arsenal of authorities—Scripture, prelates, Church Fathers, learned theologians, signs and miracles, and experiential knowledge—in order to discern. Even if arguments could not be definitive, alternative voices (such as the English Anabaptist criticising predestination, or Melchor Cano attacking the *Spiritual Exercises*) could be silenced. In multi-confessional Europe assent never needed to be universal, and as already noted, criticism from opponents could even be empowering.

This brings us to the fourth and final theme stressed in this volume. By their very nature, visions were an individual experience, but their discernment was of a wider significance. As Sluhovsky has shown convincingly, cases of mass possession amongst Catholic Europe’s female religious invited discernment not only by the (divinely or demonically) possessed nuns themselves but by an arsenal of exorcists and theologians.⁴¹ This wider communal involvement was the norm, not the exception. Indeed, visionary experiences would not have come down to us had they remained private. Whilst the recipients of visions were themselves called upon to discern the origins of their own experiences, wider bodies of believers were also engaged in discernment, struggling to classify, report, and depict the experiences of others. As Colin Thompson shows, however certain Teresa of Avila herself felt about the origins of her experiences, she nevertheless desperately sought a confessor who would understand her and felt greatly troubled by those who were convinced she was deluded. The process of discernment, then, is best understood as a social and communal one. The idea that visions invited public scrutiny needs no argument. Visions and visionaries could pose a challenge to authority, not least because the danger of false visions was that a person might deceive many.

⁴¹ Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, 259.

But it is easy to lose track of the fact that, among all the concern and anxiety about false or diabolical experiences, true revelations might nourish and instruct a whole community. The question *Cui bono?*—What was at stake?—clearly brings out the theological difficulties involved in the act of discernment, but it does so at the risk of ignoring the personal stake that bystanders and participants had in correct discernment.⁴² Divine gifts and the holy reputations they fostered could also be shared with others; they allowed others to participate in the divine. It is with this in mind that Clare Copeland explores the visionary experiences of Maria Maddelena de' Pazzi (1566–1607) recorded in detail by her fellow nuns who discerned their meaning, observed her countenance and sought her holiness. Their transfer of Maria Maddelena's visions and sanctity onto paper—and assuming responsibility for any mistakes—played an important role in authenticating their sister's experiences. Similarly, Jan Machielsen shows how the imitative aspect of the cult of saints offered a group of Jesuit hagiographers the possibility of participating in the sanctity of their objects of study. The textual nature of their source material meant that discernment was no longer a pressing concern. Instead, the truth of their sources became an act of faith and any dubious facts were dismissed as inconvenient, scribal interpolations, the product of textual corruptions.

The fact that visions needed to be authenticated within the public domain made them a resource that could be shared and could be contested. The wide-ranging essays in this volume present a compelling new case for the importance of discernment as a point of contact and a point of dispute between the many different groups of believers that comprised Reformation Europe. Discernment, as a personal pursuit and as a collective one, was inexorably linked to the identification of sanctity, both “real” and “false”. For Catholics this stretched far beyond the scope of official canonization process-

⁴² Nancy Caciola and Moshe Sluhovsky, “Spiritual Physiologies: The Discernment of Spirits in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–48, here 19. As Moshe Sluhovsky has shown elsewhere, even the discernment of demonic possession could be of positive value for the person possessed and the exorcists guiding her. To be deemed worthy of attack constituted a mark of holiness. See Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, 233–64. But the same, of course, is equally true for revelations of divine origin.

es as believers also embraced, rejected and reshaped the identities of would-be and existing saints. Protestants too were keen to identify particularly holy people or prophets, even if they were not then treated as miraculous intercessors, and this likewise involved discerning the truth of a person's deeds and motives. Despite differences in terminology and in the belief in what those in heaven could do for those on earth, discernment played an essential role within both Catholic and Protestant attempts at identifying and bolstering holiness.