

ON "DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS" IN THE EARLY CHURCH

JOSEPH T. LIENHARD, S.J.

Marquette University

THE TERM "discernment" is used frequently—some might think too frequently—in contemporary spiritual theology. It is itself a biblical term and has a long and somewhat complex history. In modern usage it is found in three different phrases: "Ignatian discernment" or simply "discernment," "communal discernment," and "discernment of spirits."

The first has been studied by (among others) John C. Futrell. He writes that "there is no more central theme in Ignatian spirituality or, for that matter, in Christian spirituality itself than that of discernment."¹ He describes this discernment as a "conception, which involves choosing the way of the light of Christ instead of the way of the darkness of the Evil One and living out the consequences of this choice through discerning what specific decisions and actions are demanded to follow Christ here and now."² He later describes the goal of discernment as arriving "at the choice of authentic Christian response to the word of God in each concrete situation in life."³ As Futrell presents it, discernment is an act of choosing among morally good possible actions under the guidance of grace, and presupposes both the existence of divine providence and an obscurity in the manifestation of the divine will.

The second phrase is "communal discernment," defined by Jules J. Toner as "a process undertaken by a community as a community for the purpose of judging what God is calling that community to do."⁴ The term is apparently a recent one. The practice is generally traced by Jesuit authors to the "Deliberatio primorum patrum," a short account of deliberations conducted by Ignatius Loyola and others at Rome in 1539 which led to the formation of the Society of Jesus.⁵ The distinguishing charac-

¹ J. C. Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 2 (1970) 47. This article is used simply as one example of the treatment of this kind of discernment. See also his *Making an Apostolic Community of Love: The Role of the Superior according to St. Ignatius of Loyola* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970).

² Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment" 47.

³ *Ibid.* 51.

⁴ J. J. Toner, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 3 (1971) 124-25.

⁵ Original Latin text in *Monumenta Ignatiana, ser. 3^a, Constitutiones* 1 (Monumenta historica Societatis Iesu 63; Rome: Gregoriana, 1934) 1-7. There are several English translations: D. Maruca, "The Deliberation of Our First Fathers," *Woodstock Letters* 95 (1966) 325-33; Futrell, *Making an Apostolic Community* 188-94; and J. J. Toner, "The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*, Newly Translated with a Historical Introduction," *Studies in the Spirituality of*

teristic of communal discernment is that it is carried out by a group rather than by an individual.

The third phrase is "discernment of spirits." It is particularly important in works on the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola and on Jesuit spirituality. This term, first used by St. Paul (1 Cor 12:10), has appeared, disappeared, and reappeared in the history of spiritual theology. Interest in it has been high in recent years.⁶ My proposal is to study the use of this term and its development in the patristic era, where its roots are.

There are already two good historical surveys of discernment of spirits, one in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* and the other a recent article by Günther Switek.⁷ Both articles, however, presuppose a definition of "discernment of spirits" and survey instances of the phenomenon defined—beginning in one case (the *DSP*) with the Old Testament. What is presented here is different: it is a study of the term rather than the phenomenon, a kind of history of the exegesis of one biblical phrase. The point is to show how early Christian writers understood and used Paul's term, and particularly to point out variations in the way it was understood and the reasons for its disappearance. In this case, limiting the study to the patristic era is not arbitrary; in the history of the use of this term, one phase is completed in that era.

One other introductory point must be made. There can be no doubt that the term "discernment of spirits" would not have the importance it does if it had not been used by St. Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, in that section of the work usually called "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits."⁸ While this study will not deal with the sixteenth

Jesuits 6 (1974) 179–212. See also J. C. Futrell, "Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience," *ibid.* 4 (1972) 160–92, and L. Orsy, "Toward a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment," *ibid.* 5 (1973) 139–88. A. Böckmann, "Discretio im Sinn der Regel Benedikts und ihrer Tradition," *Erbe und Auftrag* 52 (1976) 362–73 (with bibliography), asks how the Jesuits' newly rediscovered communal discernment is related to the Benedictine tradition.

⁶ See, e.g., C. Lofy, "Finding God's Will through the Discernment of Spirits," *Review for Religious* 20 (1961) 276–81; N. P. Hurley, "St. Peter: A Case Study in Discernment of Spirits," *ibid.* 22 (1963) 193–202; D. L. Gelpi, *Discerning the Spirit* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966); M. Kyne, "Discernment of Spirits and Christian Growth," *Supplement to the Way* 6 (1968) 22–26; J. R. Sheets, "Profile of the Spirit: A Theology of Discernment of Spirits," *Review for Religious* 30 (1971) 363–76; J. Walsh, "The Discernment of Spirits," *Supplement to the Way* 16 (1972) 54–66; B. O'Leary, "The Discernment of Spirits in the Memoriale of Blessed Peter Favre," *ibid.* 35 (1979), the last with a valuable bibliography.

⁷ J. Guillet, G. Bardy, *et al.*, *Discernment of Spirits* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1970). The French original, "Discernement des esprits," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 3 (1957) 1222–91, has valuable bibliographies omitted in the translation. The author of the section on the Fathers is Gustave Bardy. See also G. Switek, "'Discretio spirituum.' Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Spiritualität," *TP* 47 (1972) 36–76.

⁸ In Ignatius' autograph the title at the head of the so-called rules for the first week does not mention "discernment of spirits"; it reads: "reglas para en alguna manera sentir y

century, the question of the relation between St. Ignatius' work and the patristic tradition is a natural one. Misguided legend had the *Spiritual Exercises* dictated to Ignatius by the Virgin Mary at Manresa,⁹ hardly the only attempt to give the writings of a saint a share in the authority of Scripture. More recent scholarship has attempted to investigate the written sources of Ignatius' work¹⁰ and also shown that Ignatius and the first generations of Jesuits were quite open to the early monastic tradition—interesting because of the importance of discernment of spirits in that tradition. During his convalescence at Loyola, for example, Ignatius read the *Flos sanctorum* of Diego de Voragine, which contains many excerpts from the early monastic literature,¹¹ and as a result conceived a great devotion to the Egyptian hermit St. Onuphrius.¹² Much later, when Ignatius was writing the constitutions of the Society of Jesus, Juan de Polanco, his secretary, supplied him with lists of excerpts from other rules, including monastic rules.¹³ And—admittedly somewhat later—the rules of the master of novices (promulgated in 1577) included a list of recommended spiritual authors, half of whom were from the patristic period, and most of those monks.¹⁴ There will be occasion to refer to this list again. The list had its influence; one effect was that the works of the sixth-century Greek spiritual writer Dorotheus of Gaza are far better known in the West than in the East, because they were discovered and used by the early Jesuits.¹⁵

cognoscer las varias mociones que en la ánima se causan." The title of the rules for the second week, however, does use the phrase "discreción de espíritus" (*Exercitia spiritualia Sancti Ignatii de Loyola* [Monumenta historica Societatis Iesu 57; Madrid: Successores Rivadeneyrae, 1919] 510, 528).

⁹ See F. Dudon, *St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1949) 203–4.

¹⁰ See, e.g., H. Rahner, "Ignatius von Loyola und die asketische Tradition der Kirchenväter," *Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik* 17 (1942) 61–77; idem, *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola: An Account of Its Historical Development* (Westminster: Newman, 1953); idem, *Ignatius the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 32–52; and H. Bacht, "Early Monastic Elements in Ignatian Spirituality: Toward Clarifying Some Fundamental Concepts of the Exercises," in *Ignatius of Loyola: His Personality and Spiritual Heritage*, ed. by F. Wulf (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977) 200–236.

¹¹ Dudon, *Ignatius* 42.

¹² Onuphrius is a legendary solitary who lived naked but was covered by his long hair and beard. See Bacht, "Early Monastic Elements" (n. 10) 203; P. Leturia, "El influjo de San Onofre en San Ignacio a base de un texto inédito de Nadal," *Manresa* 2 (1926) 224–38; J. M. Sauget, "Onofrio," *Bibliotheca sanctorum* 9 (1967) 1187–97; and C. A. Williams, *Oriental Affinities of the Legend of the Hairy Anchorite* (2 vols.; Urbana: Univ. of Illinois, 1925–26).

¹³ Dudon, *Ignatius* 287–88, with references to the surviving documents.

¹⁴ W. V. Bangert, *A History of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1972) 54. The list of recommended authors is printed in *Institutum Societatis Iesu* 3 (Florence: A. S. S. Conceptione, 1893) 121–22.

¹⁵ See D. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) 140. On Dorotheus see J. M. Szymusiak and J. Leroy, "Dorothee," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 3 (1957) 1651–64, and L. Régnault, "Monachisme oriental et spiritualité Ignatienne: L'Influence de s. Dorothee

THE NEW TESTAMENT TERMS

The term "discernment of spirits" is found once in the Bible, at 1 Cor 12:10. Paul is writing there about "spiritual gifts" (*ta pneumatika*).¹⁶ He lists nine examples of these: the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the ability to distinguish between spirits (*diakriseis pneumatōn*), various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (12:8-10). Paul makes three points concerning this variety of gifts: they have a single source ("the same Spirit," "the same Lord," "the same God who inspires them all in every one," "all these are inspired by one and the same Spirit" [vv. 5-6, 10]); their end is "the common good" (v. 7); and their cause is "inspiration" (*energein* [vv. 6, 11]).¹⁷

A few other passages from the New Testament are sometimes joined with 1 Cor 12:10 when reference is made to discernment of spirits. They are: "disputes over opinions" (*diakriseis dialogismōn* [Rom. 14:1], which is echoed in the *diakrisis logismōn* of later spiritual writers); "the word of God . . . discerning (*kritikos*) the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12); "to distinguish good from evil" (*pros diakrisin kalou te kai kakou* [Heb 5:14]); and "test the spirits" (*dokimazate ta pneumata* [1 Jn 4:1]).

The Vulgate, along with a number of Fathers who cite 1 Cor 12:10, has "discretio spirituum" as the translation of Paul's phrase,¹⁸ but there are also several other Latin forms. The oldest Latin witness, Tertullian, has "distinctio spirituum."¹⁹ "Separatio spirituum" is found a few times.²⁰

sur les écrivains de la Compagnie de Jésus," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 33 (1957) 141-49.

¹⁶ Here and throughout the RSV is cited.

¹⁷ For a survey of recent exegesis, see G. Dautzenberg, *Urchristliche Prophetie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975). For pagan and Jewish parallels, see idem, "Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund der *diakrisis pneumatōn*," *BZ N. F.* 15 (1971) 93-104. Dautzenberg reports E. Lerle, *Diakrisis pneumatōn bei Paulus* (diss. Heidelberg 1947). G. Therrien, *Le discernement dans les écrits pauliniens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1973), deals with *dokimazein*; pp. 54-60 treat discernment of spirits in 1 Jn 4:1-6.

¹⁸ Cf. *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam uersionem*, ed. B. Fischer et al. 2 (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969) 1782; Novatian, *De trinitate* 29, 10 (CChr 4, 70 Dekkers); Hilary of Poitiers, *De trinitate* 8, 29 (PL 10, 257B); Ambrosiaster, *In epistulas sancti Pauli* at 1 Cor 12:10 (CSEL 81/2, 134 Vogels); Pelagius, *Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul*, ed. A. Souter (TextsS 9, 2; Cambridge: University Press, 1926) 196; Ambrose, *De spiritu sancto* 2, 12, 139 (CSEL 79, 141 Faller); Jerome, *Commentariorum in Esaiam libri* 2, 3, 3 (CChr 73, 46 Adriaen); *Ep.* 120, 9 (CSEL 55, 493 Hilberg); *In Ieremiam prophetam* 5, 68, 6 (CChr 74, 287 Reiter); Rufinus of Aquileia, *De benedictionibus patriarcharum* 2, 26 (CChr 20, 222 Simonetti); Fulgentius of Ruspe, *De ueritate praedestinationis et gratiae* 2, 46, 23 (CChr 91A, 497 Fraipont). Ps.-Vigilius of Thapsis, *Contra Varimadum Arianum* 2, 19, 98 (CChr 90, 100 Schwank), has "discretio spiritus."

¹⁹ *Aduersus Marcionem* 5, 8, 8 (CChr 1, 687 Kroymann).

²⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *De trinitate* 2, 34 (PL 10, 74A); Eusebius of Vercelli, *De trinitate* 7, 12 (CChr 9, 95 Bulhart); and H. J. Frede, ed., *Ein neuer Paulustext und Kommentar* (Vetus

Augustine, along with some of his disciples and fellow Africans, consistently has "diiudicatio spirituum."²¹

PATRISTIC COMMENTARIES ON FIRST CORINTHIANS

Commentaries in the proper sense, and continuous sets of homilies on 1 Corinthians, begin to appear in the fourth century. While they do not contain an abundance of material on 1 Cor 12:10, they do show several ways in which Paul's phrase was understood outside the circles of monastic spirituality.

Greek commentaries are dominated by the tradition of Antioch. The oldest extant commentary on 1 Corinthians is the series of forty-four homilies by John Chrysostom (344/54-407) which he delivered while a presbyter at Antioch. In the twenty-ninth homily,²² on 1 Corinthians 12, Chrysostom begins by stating that the chapter is obscure; but the obscurity, he says, is due to the fact that he and his hearers are ignorant of what once took place (in Corinth) and now no longer does—a historical approach which is typical of Antiochene exegesis. Chrysostom twice discusses the phrase "discernment of spirits." In the first place, he explains that Corinth was, in Paul's time, heavily addicted to Greek customs, so that soothsayers abounded. For this reason Corinthian Christians received discernment of spirits, "so as to discern and know who is speaking by a clean spirit and who by an unclean."²³ In the second place, Chrysostom writes: "What is 'discernings of spirits'? It is knowing who is a spiritual man [*pneumatikos*] and who is not; who is a prophet and who a deceiver,"²⁴ and explains that Paul wanted prophecy to be respected (referring to 1 Thess 5:20-21), but that false prophets abounded at that time. For Chrysostom, therefore, discernment of spirits was a gift whereby a Christian could identify the kind of spirit that spoke through a man (soothsayer, prophet or deceiver—i.e., false prophet) and also distinguish

Latina, suppl. 8; Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 149. "Separatio spirituum" was also the reading adopted by P. Sabatier for his reconstruction of the "uetus itala"; see his *Bibliorum sacrorum latinae uersiones antiquae seu Vetus Itala* 3 (Rheims, 1743) 702.

²¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 13, 18, 23 (CSEL 33, 362 Knöll); *Contra Faustum* 21, 8 (CSEL 25, 577 Zycha); *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* 16, 20 (CSEL 41, 655 Zycha); *De diuersis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* 2, 1, 8 (CChr 44, 71 Mutzenbecher); *De trinitate* 3, 8, 18; 5, 13, 14 (CChr 50, 145, 211 Mountain); *Enarrationes in psalmos* 135, 8; 143, 3 (CChr 40, 1962, 2075 Dekkers-Fraipont); *Tractatus in Iohannem* 14, 10 (CChr 36, 148 Willems); Prosper Tiro of Aquitaine, *Expositio psalms* 143, 1 (CChr 68A, 188 Callens), a work which draws heavily on Augustine; Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Ep. 5* to Eugippius, 4 (CChr 91, 237 Fraipont); Ps.-Vigilius of Thapsis, *Contra Varimadum Arianum* 2, 6, 78 (CChr 90, 87 Schwank); Ps.-Augustine, *Testimonia de patre et filio et spiritu sancto* 3, 13 (CChr 90, 230 Schwank). Cerealis of Castellum Ripense in Mauretania has "iudicatio spirituum": *Contra Maximinum Arianum* 14 (PL 58, 763D).

²² Greek in PG 61, 239-50; there is an English translation by C. M. Marriott, revised by T. W. Chambers, in NPNF, 1st ser., Vol. 12 (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 168-75.

²³ *Homiliae in epistolam primam ad Corinthios* 29 (PG 61, 240).

²⁴ *Ibid.* (PG 61, 245).

different kinds of persons, those who are spiritual from those who are not.

Theodoret of Cyrrihus (ca. 393–ca. 458), who, like Chrysostom, was trained in Antioch, has a similar explanation. He wrote: "Since at that time there were seers who deceived men, to some was given this grace by the divine Spirit, so as to discern those who were possessed by a hostile spirit."²⁵ Like Chrysostom, Theodoret asks what discernment of spirits meant, or could have meant, for Corinthian Christians of Paul's time. He associates soothsaying with demons and interprets discernment of spirits as a gift which enables the recipient to recognize these spirits. There is no effort to distinguish between the person and the spirit which speaks through him.

After Chrysostom and Theodoret, Greek commentators (at least through the eleventh century) simply repeat or rephrase these two.²⁶

The Latin commentators took a different turn. There are three commentaries extant from the late fourth or early fifth centuries. One is an anonymous commentary on the letters of St. Paul and on Hebrews which was only recently published. It was probably written between 396 and 405 in Aquileia. When he comes to 1 Corinthians 12, the author is principally interested in its Trinitarian implications. Concerning "separatio spirituum," as his text reads, he says: "in order that he may understand whether a spirit is from God or from the devil."²⁷ Pelagius (better known as Augustine's opponent than as an exegete), who wrote his commentary before 410, has: "in order that one may understand with what sort of spirit someone comes or speaks."²⁸ Since neither states who is meant by "he" or "one," they are not particularly illuminating.

The case is different with the Ambrosiaster, the unknown author of a commentary on the thirteen Pauline letters which, until the sixteenth century, was considered to be the work of St. Ambrose. The commentary was composed in Rome in the time of Pope Damasus (366–384). The Ambrosiaster's remark is simple enough: "in order that he might understand and judge what is said, whether it is of a holy spirit or a worldly one."²⁹ But throughout the section he takes St. Paul's list of spiritual gifts as being meant for the clergy. At 1 Cor 12:4, commenting on the phrase

²⁵ *Interpretationes in Pauli epistulas* at 1 Cor 12:10 (PG 82, 325A). Here and throughout, except where noted, translations are the author's.

²⁶ Cyril of Alexandria (PG 74, 888C) adds nothing. John Damascene (PG 95, 665C) copies out Chrysostom verbatim. The commentary attributed (falsely) to Oecumenius of Tricca (PG 118, 817D–820A) and that of Theophylact of Bulgaria (PG 124, 713B) are a rephrasing of Chrysostom and Theodoret.

²⁷ "Ut intellegat utrum ex deo sit spiritus an ex diabolo" (Frede, *Paulustext* 149).

²⁸ "Ut quali quis spiritu ueniat uel loquatur, intellegat" (Pelagius, *Expositions* 196).

²⁹ "Ut intellegat et iudicet, quod dicatur, an spiritus sancti sit an mundani" (Ambrosiaster, *In epistulas sancti Pauli* at 1 Cor 12:10 [CSEL 81/2, 134]).

“differences of graces” (“diuisiones gratiarum”), he writes: “A man put in a rank of ecclesiastical office has a grace, of whatever sort it is, that is not his own but belongs to his rank through the efficacy of the Holy Spirit,” and a few lines later: “The divisions of graces are not given to offices in the Church by human merit.”³⁰ Unlike the Greek commentators, therefore, the Ambrosiaster assumes that the graces in Paul’s list are given by God to contemporaries, and specifically to those who hold office in the Church. For the Ambrosiaster, the “discerner of spirits” is the cleric, and he is so *ex officio*; the gift of discernment of spirits is, in scholastic terms, *gratia gratis data*.³¹

Later Latin commentators, at least through the ninth century, repeat variations of these three authors.³²

The School of Antioch, therefore, interpreted discernment of spirits as a gift needed and given in Corinth in the first century; its purpose was to enable someone to distinguish the kind of spirit that spoke through a person or to distinguish between spiritual and unspiritual persons. The gift was not the possession of any particular class of Christians, nor of all Christians; nor is any attempt made to say whether it exists in the Church at the time the commentator is writing. The dominant Latin tradition, rooted in the Ambrosiaster, interprets discernment of spirits as a grace of office given to clerics. The anonymous commentator and Pelagius speak of “understanding”; the Ambrosiaster speaks rather of “understanding and judging.” Further, the Ambrosiaster’s cleric judges “what is said,” and the criterion has an ascetical overtone, since the undesirable spirit is “worldly.”³³ None of the ancient commentators suggests that discernment of spirits is a function to be exercised by all Christians.

ORIGEN

Both Gustave Bardy (who wrote the chapter on the Fathers in the article in the *DSP*) and Günther Switek begin their treatment of discernment of spirits among the Fathers with the Apostolic Fathers, and in

³⁰ *Ibid.* at 12:4, 6 (CSEL 81/2, 133). He mentions office in the Church again in his comments on vv. 7 and 11.

³¹ *Sum. theol.* 1-2, q. 111, a. 1; cf. a. 4.

³² The commentary attributed to Primasius of Hadrumetum is a reworking of Pelagius’ commentary by the school of Cassiodorus and was written ca. 575 (text in PL 68, 415-686). It has: “with what sort of spirit a man comes, or which spirit suggests something to be done, the good or the bad” (PL 68, 536C). The first phrase is copied from Pelagius, the second is original. Rabanus Maurus (776 or 784-856) copies out the Ambrosiaster (PL 112, 108C); Sedulius Scotus (9th c.) adapts the second phrase from Ps.-Primasius and writes: “in order that each one may know whether or not what the spirit suggests should be done” (PL 103, 152D-153A).

³³ On the asceticizing use of *mundanus* in the vocabulary of the baptismal renunciation, see J. T. Lienhard, *Paulinus of Nola and Early Western Monasticism* (Cologne-Bonn: Hanstein, 1977) 44-45.

particular with the teaching on the Two Ways found in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Didache*, and the *Epistle of Barnabas*. But none of these documents uses the term "discernment of spirits" or refers to the subjective side of the Two Ways, that is, the process of choosing between the two. The first Christian writer to discuss this process explicitly is Origen (ca. 185–254). In a frequently cited opinion, M. Viller stated that the whole biblical teaching on discernment of spirits could be assembled from a few chapters of Origen's work *On First Principles* (*Peri archōn, De principiis*).³⁴ In this work, written shortly before 230,³⁵ Origen produced what has been called, rightly or wrongly, the first systematic theology.³⁶ The greater part of the third book deals with the freedom of the will and the question of evil, as Origen tries to defend human freedom against the Gnostics' denial of it. In the third chapter of that book, Origen treats the triple wisdom of 1 Cor 2:6–7, contrasting the wisdom "of this world" and the wisdom "of the rulers of this world" with "God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God foreordained before the worlds unto our glory."³⁷ Origen concedes the existence of good and evil spirits among "the rulers of this world," and their ability to influence men. He continues:

From this we learn to discern clearly when the soul is moved by the presence of a spirit of the better kind, namely, when it suffers no mental disturbance or aberration whatsoever as a result of the immediate inspiration and does not lose the free judgment of the will. Such, for example, were the prophets and apostles, who attended upon the divine oracles without any mental disturbance.³⁸

Origen here introduces the doctrine of discernment of spirits. The good spirit is recognized by the fact that the soul's tranquility is undisturbed and its freedom is respected.

About a decade later, while preaching at Caesarea on the Hexateuch, Origen returned to the topic of discernment. In the third homily on

³⁴ M. Viller and K. Rahner, *Ascese und Mystik in der Väterzeit: Ein Abriss* (Freiburg: Herder, 1939) 75.

³⁵ The chronology is that of P. Nautin, *Origène: Sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977) 370. On discernment in Origen, see also F. Marty, "Le discernement des esprits dans le Peri archōn d'Origène," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 34 (1958) 253–74; and on his asceticism and mysticism more generally, W. Völker, *Das Vollkommenheitsideal des Origenes: Eine Untersuchung zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit und zu den Anfängen christlicher Mystik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1931), and S. T. Bettencourt, *Doctrina ascetica Origenis, seu quid docuerit de ratione animae humanae cum daemonibus* (Vatican City: Libreria Vaticana, 1945).

³⁶ See M. Grabmann, *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode* 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1909) 76–85.

³⁷ *De principiis* 3, 3, 1. This work is preserved whole only in the Latin translation of Rufinus of Aquileia; this was edited by G. Koetschau in GCS 22 = Origenes 5, here p. 256. The work is cited in the translation by G. W. Butterworth, *Origen, On First Principles* (repr. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973), here p. 223.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 3, 3, 4 (GCS 22, 261; Butterworth tr. 227).

Exodus,³⁹ he reaches Exod 4:12, where the Lord says to Moses: "It is I who will open your mouth and teach you what you should say." Origen reasons that if it is sometimes God who opens a man's mouth, it can also be, at other times, the devil. He continues:

I conclude from this that it is no small grace to recognize a mouth which the devil opens. It is not possible to discern a mouth and words of this sort without the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the divisions of spiritual graces, there is also added this: that to certain men is given discernment of spirits ["discretio spirituum"]. The grace, therefore, by which a spirit is discerned is spiritual, as the apostle says in another place: "test the spirits to see if they are from God" [1 Jn 4:1].⁴⁰

Origen here affirms strongly and clearly that discernment of spirits is a gift of the Holy Spirit and that a man cannot distinguish between spirits without this grace. He expresses the same idea in the twenty-seventh homily on Numbers, a breath-taking tour de force interpreting Num 33: 1-49, which enumerates the Hebrews' forty-two stopping places in the desert. Since, Origen reasons, Christ's descent involved forty-two generations (Mt 2:17), man's return to God must also involve that number of steps. There were forty-two stopping places in the journey to the Promised Land; and the names of these stopping places contain, mysteriously hidden, a revelation of the way back to God.⁴¹ The eighth stopping place is the wilderness of Sin (Num 33:11), which Origen takes as meaning both "bramble bush" and "temptation." The bramble bush, he says, is an example of a vision, such as Moses', but a vision can involve temptation. "Sometimes an angel of wickedness disguises himself as an angel of light [cf. 2 Cor 11:14]," he writes; the soul is progressing "when it comes to the place where it begins to distinguish between visions." Origen concludes: "That is why, as well, one of the spiritual gifts, given by the Holy Spirit, is mentioned as 'the ability to distinguish between spirits' ['discretio spirituum']."⁴²

In his commentary on the Canticle, written ca. 245, when he is discussing the verse "catch us the little foxes" (Cant 2:15), Origen understands the foxes to be evil thoughts that have been put into the soul by the

³⁹ Critical text ed. W. A. Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufins Übersetzung* 1 (GCS 29 = Origenes 6).

⁴⁰ *Homiliae in Exodum* 3, 2 (GCS 29, 163). Didymus the Blind (313-398), a disciple of Origen, also associates 1 Jn 4:1 with 1 Cor 12:10. In a fragment on 1 Jn, he writes: "it is in fact necessary to have that spiritual gift, that is, the gift of the Holy Spirit, which has been called discernment of spirits [*diakrisis pneumatōn*], so that we may have the knowledge to test [*dokimazein*] the spirits, so as to trust the one and resist the other" (PG 39, 1794B-C).

⁴¹ *Homiliae in Numeros* 27; critical text ed. W. A. Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufins Übersetzung* 2 (GCS 30 = Origenes 7). An English translation of Homily 27 by R. A. Greer is now available in the volume *Origen* (New York: Paulist-Newman, 1979) 245-69.

⁴² *Homiliae in Numeros* 27, 11 (GCS 30, 271-72), cited in Greer tr. 261.

demons; the holy angels catch the evil thoughts and drive them away. He writes:

Their catching of the bad thoughts consists in their suggesting to the mind that these thoughts come not from God but from the Evil One, and in imparting to the soul the power to discern the spirits ["discretio spirituum"], so that she may understand which thought is according to God and which thought is from the devil.⁴³

In summary: Origen has a distinctive place in his theological system for a doctrine of the discernment of spirits. Free choice was an essential part of that system. For Origen, both good and evil spirits try to influence man. Man is not naturally capable of distinguishing with certainty between these kinds of spirits; to do so requires a spiritual grace or gift, discernment of spirits. The possession of this gift is a sign of progress in the return to God. Finally, Origen also suggests a criterion for discernment, namely, the fact that a good spirit leaves the mind calm and the will free.

ATHANASIUS' LIFE OF ANTONY

The importance of Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* for the history of spirituality can hardly be overestimated. Athanasius probably wrote the work in 357, the year after Antony's death; if so, he wrote it during his third exile (356-361), when he was in hiding among the Egyptian monks. The introduction and conclusion imply that it was written for a group of monks in a place where monasticism was only recently established, monks who had asked Athanasius for this work; they were probably Westerners. In any case, two Latin translations were soon made, and the translations became the basis of the Latin vocabulary of spirituality.⁴⁴ Augustine, in

⁴³ *Commentary on the Canticle* 4(3), 15, tr. R. P. Lawson, *Origen, The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies* (ACW 26; New York: Newman, 1957) 255. Critical text ed. W. A. Baehrens, *Homilien zu Samuel I, zum Hohelied und zu den Propheten: Kommentar zum Hohelied in Rufins und Hieronymus' Übersetzungen* (GCS 33 = Origenes 8) 236.

⁴⁴ Greek text in PG 26, 837-976, where the Latin translation of Evagrius of Antioch is also printed. The older Latin translation was edited by H. Hoppenbrouwers, *La plus ancienne version latine de la vie de s. Antoine par s. Athanase* (Latinitas christianorum primaeva 14; Nijmegen: Dekker & van de Vegt, 1960). There are two recent English translations: one by R. T. Meyer, *The Life of St. Antony* (ACW 10; Westminster: Newman, 1950), with valuable notes, the other by M. E. Keenan, *Early Christian Biographies* (FC 15; New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952) 133-216. L. Th. A. Lorie, *Spiritual Terminology in the Latin Translations of the Vita Antonii* (Latinitas christianorum primaeva 11; Nijmegen: Dekker & van de Vegt, 1955), is an important study of the Latin vocabulary of spirituality. H. Dörries, "Die Vita Antonii als Geschichtsquelle," in his *Wort und Stunde* 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 145-224, compares the *vita* with other ancient material on Antony. See also the essays in *Antonius Magnus Eremita, 356-1956: Studia ad antiquum monachismum spectantia*, ed. B. Steidle (Studia Anselmiana 38; Rome: Orbis Catholicus, 1956). Sulpicius Severus wrote (in 397) the life of St. Martin of Tours to provide Westerners with their own Antony.

the *Confessions*, recounts an example of the effect which the *Vita Antonii* had: two young men who read it were immediately converted to the monastic life.⁴⁵

The *Life of Antony* treats discernment of spirits more thoroughly than any other patristic writing, and the enormous influence which the *Life* had makes it all the more significant.

Almost one third of the *Vita* consists of an exhortation delivered by Antony to an assembled crowd of monks (ch. 16–43), and the discernment of spirits is its principal subject. This is indicated by Athanasius' comment at the end of the exhortation: "All were persuaded to despise the snares of the devil, and everyone marveled at the grace which the Lord had given to Antony for the discernment of spirits."⁴⁶

The place of this exhortation in Antony's life, as Athanasius portrays it, is important. According to the *Vita*, Antony was converted to the ascetical life at the age of eighteen or twenty (ch. 2). For fifteen years he lived in solitude near his village (ch. 3); then, at the age of thirty-five, he went to a cemetery and spent some time there shut up in a tomb. From there he went further out into the desert, to "the mountain" (ch. 11), where he lived in a deserted fort (ch. 12) for twenty years (ch. 14). During that time many came to the mountain, but Antony seldom showed himself. Finally his acquaintances broke down the door to his cell, and Antony emerged. The passage (ch. 14) is striking; Athanasius writes: "He came forth as from some shrine, like one who had been initiated in the sacred mysteries, and filled with the spirit of God." The thirty-five years of strenuous asceticism have had their effect, and Antony is now transformed and ready to guide others. It is at this point that Athanasius places his great exhortation.

Athanasius, in ch. 22, puts these key words into Antony's discourse:

A man has need of much prayer and self-discipline that he may receive from the Spirit the gift of discerning spirits and be able to know their characteristics—which of them are less evil, which more; what is the nature of the special pursuit of each of them, and how each of them is overcome and cast out.

In the following chapters Antony proposes a series of principles for recognizing the work of demons. If a monk is making progress, they will tempt him first with evil thoughts and with vain fear (ch. 23). If this does not succeed, they awaken the monk for prayers, urge him to great asceticism, and—in a memorable image—"they even pretend to play the harp and to sing, and they recite passages from the Scriptures" (ch. 25). The point of this is to drive the monk to excess, so that he will despair of

⁴⁵ *Confessions* 8, 6, 14; for the influence of Antony on Augustine, see 8, 12, 29.

⁴⁶ Ch. 44. Keenan's translation (n. 44 above) is cited throughout. Athanasius' term here is *charis eis tēn diakrisin tōn pneumatōn*, elsewhere (ch. 22, 38, 88) *charisma diakriseōs pneumatōn*.

asceticism and desert the solitary life. The demons' ability to predict the future apparently impressed many and was particularly dangerous. Antony takes care to explain that it is due only to their ability to travel quickly: for example, if they predict a flooding of the Nile, it is because they have observed heavy rains in Ethiopia and then rush back to Egypt (ch. 32).

One passage on distinguishing good from evil spirits is particularly worth noting: Athanasius has Antony say that a vision of the holy ones is not agitated but occurs quietly and gently, so that the soul is filled with joy, gladness, and confidence (ch. 35). The assault of the evil one is noisy and is followed immediately by "apprehension of soul, confusion and disorder of thought, dejection, hatred toward ascetics, spiritual sloth, affliction, the memory of one's family, and fear of death" (ch. 36). No one familiar with St. Ignatius' rules for the discernment of spirits can read ch. 35-37 of the *Vita Antonii* and not notice the frequent parallels.

Antony's instructions, as Athanasius presents his life, are based on his own experience. In Athanasius' narrative, Antony was tempted in many different ways during his thirty-five years in the desert. When he was living outside the village (that is, in the first stage of his ascetical life), the devil first tried to drive him away from his dedication with thoughts of possessions, money, power, family, and food (ch. 5); when this failed, he appeared as a black boy and tried to win Antony's confidence (ch. 6).⁴⁷ When he is living in the tombs, Antony is first beaten almost to death by demons and then threatened with visions of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, serpents, asps, scorpions, and wolves (ch. 8-9)—a scene that was later much favored by religious painters.⁴⁸ On his way to the mountain Antony is tempted with visions of silver and gold lying in the sand (ch. 11-12). Antony's favorite weapon is the sign of the cross⁴⁹ or a verse from the Psalms (ch. 13). At the end of his discourse Antony explicitly narrates a series of episodes from his encounters with demons (ch. 39-41).

The understanding of discernment of spirits in the *Vita Antonii* presupposes a vivid belief in demons, one shared by all the ancients, pagan, Jewish, and Christian. Peter Brown, writing about another North African,

⁴⁷ On this curious figure, see B. Steidle, "Der 'schwarze kleine Knabe' in der alten Mönchserzählung: Beitrag zu St. Gregor, Dial. 2, 4," *Benediktinische Monatsschrift* 34 (1958) 339-50.

⁴⁸ See E. Sauser, "Antonius," *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* 5 (1973) 205-17, with several illustrations, including that from the altar of Isenheim, now in the museum of Colmar (Alsace), which depicts a remarkable collection of monsters torturing Antony.

⁴⁹ On the use of the sign of the cross, see the exhaustive work of F. J. Dölger, "Beiträge zur Geschichte des Kreuzzeichens," *JAC* 1 (1958) 5-20; 2 (1959) 15-29; 3 (1960) 5-16; 4 (1961) 5-17; 5 (1962) 5-22; 6 (1963) 7-34; 7 (1964) 5-38; 8/9 (1965/66) 7-52; 10 (1967) 7-29. The use of the sign of the cross made with the hand to bless another person or thing or ward off evil is already attested in the second half of the second century; see *ibid.* 1 (1958) 12.

puts it well: "Moreover, Augustine grew up in an age where men thought that they shared the physical world with malevolent demons. They felt this quite as intensely as we feel the presence of myriads of dangerous bacteria."⁵⁰

There is a notable difference between Origen's understanding of discernment of spirits and that in the *Vita Antonii*. For Origen, discernment was a gift which enabled its recipient to distinguish between good and evil spirits. For Athanasius in the *Vita*, although he mentions good spirits once or twice, discernment is essentially concerned with the various kinds of evil spirits, their distinguishing characteristics, and the proper remedy against each.

In summary: Athanasius, in the *Vita Antonii*, always refers to discernment of spirits as a grace or gift. It is only after thirty-five years of asceticism and personal struggle that Antony, transformed and restored,⁵¹ gives his discourse on discernment. Antony's discourse is an extended treatment of discernment of spirits, and the phrase occurs at three key places: when Antony begins to speak of demons (ch. 22), at the conclusion of the general principles he provides (ch. 38), and in the sentences with which Athanasius describes the crowd's reaction to Antony's discourse (ch. 44). The *Vita Antonii* is more a treatise on the monastic ideal than a biography of Antony the Hermit; and Athanasius makes the gift of discernment of spirits a crucial part of Antony's role as founder and leader of eremitism.⁵²

⁵⁰ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967) 41. See also S. Stoffels, "Die Angriffe der Dämonen auf den Einsiedler Antonius," *TGI* 2 (1910) 721-32, 809-30; L. Keimer, "L'Horreur des Egyptiens pour les démons du désert," *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Egypte* 26 (1943-44) 135-37; N. H. Baynes, "St. Antony and the Demons," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 40 (1954) 7-10; M. J. Granero, "San Antonio el Grande y los demonios," *Manresa* 27 (1955) 195-230; and J. Daniélou, "Les démons de l'air dans la vie d'Antoine," in *Antonius Magnus Eremita* 136-47.

⁵¹ Keenan, in a footnote to her translation (p. 148), states that Athanasius sees Antony in "the state in which Adam and Eve were created." This is true, so long as it is understood in an Eastern, and not in the Western, Augustinian sense. Athanasius wrote that Antony was *en tō kata physin hestōs* (ch. 14; PG 26, 865A). The point is the restoration of the divine *eikōn* rather than the reversal of original sin. See W. J. Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man according to Cyril of Alexandria* (Studies in Christian Antiquity 14; Woodstock: Woodstock College Press, 1957) esp. 35-37.

⁵² H. Rahner, in *Ignatius the Theologian*, tabulates the vocabulary common to the Latin translation of the *Vita Antonii* and Ignatius' rules for the discernment of spirits. Discernment of spirits is also mentioned several times in the seven letters by Antony which are generally accepted as authentic. They are lost in Coptic but preserved in Latin (PG 40, 977-1000) and Georgian (ed. G. Garitte, CSCO 148, 149). There is a good English translation by D. J. Chitty, *The Letters of St Antony the Great* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1975). See, in that translation, *Epp.* 3 (p. 9) and 6 (pp. 18, 23). Apart from the *Vita Antonii*, Athanasius does not use the expression *diakrisis pneumatōn*; the closest he comes is *charis tou diakrinein ta pneumatika*, in *Ad episcopos Aegypti et Libyae* 4 (PG 25, 548A).

GREEK MONASTIC LITERATURE AFTER ATHANASIOS

Somewhat surprisingly, the use of the term "discernment of spirits" declines quickly in Greek monastic literature after the *Vita Antonii*.

The older sense is still found in the anonymous first Greek life of Pachomius (died 346), traditionally the founder of cenobitism.⁵³ There a demon appears to Pachomius and pretends to be Christ; the *vita* continues: "and, since the saint possessed the discernment of the spirit (*diakrīsis tou pneumatōs*) so as to distinguish evil spirits from holy ones, as it is written," he reflects to himself that in a vision of holy spirits one's consciousness is absorbed entirely by the holiness of the vision, whereas he, as he sees the vision, is thinking and reasoning. He concludes that he is being deceived by a demon.⁵⁴ Here the gift is still that of distinguishing evil spirits from good, as it was for Origen. The norm—whether one is totally absorbed by the vision or has doubts—is new.

A change is evident in the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, written by an unknown author ca. 400. Its literary form is the account of a journey: a little group sets out from Jerusalem and visits the monastic settlements in Egypt. The short chapters describe the two dozen or so ascetics whom they meet.⁵⁵ In the chapter on Pityrion, the third successor of Antony, the author praises Pityrion's gifts and writes:

he discoursed especially about the discernment of spirits (*peri tēs pneumatōn diakriseōs*), saying that there are certain demons which accompany our passions (*pathē*) and often turn our characters to evil. "Children," he said to us, "whoever wishes to drive out the demons, must first conquer his passions. For whichever passion he masters, he also drives out its demon."⁵⁶

⁵³ The biographical literature on Pachomius is abundant and complex. The five *vitae* in Greek were edited by F. Halkin, *Sancti Pachomii vitae graecae* (Subsidia hagiographica 19; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1932). Other ancient lives: H. van Cranenburgh, *La vie latine de saint Pachôme* (Subsidia hagiographica 46; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1969); and L. Th. Lefort, *Les vies coptes de saint Pachôme et ses premiers successeurs* (Bibliotheca Museon 16; Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1943) in French translation. The first Greek life is available in a French translation with an extensive and valuable introduction: A.-J. Festugière, *Les moines d'Orient 4/2: La première vie grecque de saint Pachôme* (Paris: Cerf, 1965), and more recently in English: A. Athanassakis, *The Life of Pachomius* (Missoula: Scholars, 1975).

⁵⁴ S. *Pachomii vita prima* 87 (Halkin 58). The author has "discernment of the spirit" in the singular, but Festugière, *La première vie* 204, translates—probably correctly—"discernement des esprits." Since the Greek of the *vita* is in many ways peculiar, this is not necessarily a new idiom. On the Greek see Festugière's introduction.

⁵⁵ Critical edition with a French translation by A.-J. Festugière, *Historia monachorum in Aegypto: Edition critique du texte grec et traduction annotée* (Subsidia hagiographica 53; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971). German translation with useful notes by S. Frank, *Mönche im frühchristlichen Ägypten* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1967). Rufinus translated the work into Latin in 404; text in PL 21, 387–462. Partial translation of Rufinus' version by H. Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1957) 45–57.

⁵⁶ Pityrion (15), 2–3 (Festugière, *Hist. mon.* 110).

Several things are worth noting. Like Athanasius' Antony, Pityrion takes "spirits" as referring to evil spirits. But these are no longer the demons of the desert, but rather the passions—or at least it is the passion that is experienced, and Pityrion teaches that a demon stands behind it. As an example, he adds: "Once you have conquered gluttony, you also drive out its demon." Discernment is no longer called a gift or a grace; in fact, it has begun to lose its importance. The important thing is no longer discernment of spirits or of demons, but of passions. This shift is symptomatic of a change in the understanding of discernment of spirits, and this relatively early text is an important piece of evidence for the beginning of that change.

One further example will show the result of the change. Palladius, bishop of Helenopolis (died before 431), in his *Lausiaca History* (written ca. 420) says of the ascetic Evagrius that after fifteen years of asceticism "he was deemed worthy of the gift of knowledge and wisdom and the discernment of spirits [*diakrisis pneumatōn*]."⁵⁷ Here discernment of spirits is simply one in a series of *charismata* which Evagrius was given.

THE TRANSITION

After the early fifth century, the term "discernment of spirits" is increasingly rare in Greek patristic literature, whereas the terms *diakrisis* (alone) and *diakrisis logismōn*, "discernment of evil thoughts," become more frequent. In a well-researched article that is frequently cited,⁵⁸ Ildelfons Widmann studied the history of the term *diakrisis* and concluded that the use of *diakrisis* alone to designate the gift of discernment arose near the end of the fourth century.⁵⁹ When he asks about the source of this usage, he states that "it seems improbable that the concept of *diakrisis* grew from that of *diakrisis pneumatōn*, at least not in the sense in which *pneumata* = personal spirits."⁶⁰ But his conclusion is questionable. The phrase *diakrisis pneumatōn* fell out of common usage at the time when *diakrisis* alone became frequent. But the passage quoted above from the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* shows the tendency to equate "spirits" with "passions." And in the *Lausiaca History*, discern-

⁵⁷ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 38 (Evagrius) 10. Critical text by C. Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius* (TextsS 6/1-2; Cambridge: University Press, 1898. 1904), here 2, 120. English translation with notes by R. T. Meyer, *The Lausiaca History* (ACW 34; Westminster: Newman, 1965); this translation (p. 113) is cited here. Palladius, who died as bishop of Helenopolis sometime before 431, lived for eleven years as a monk in Egypt. The *Historia Lausiaca*, named for the courtier Lausus to whom it was dedicated, describes the lives and teachings of Egyptian ascetics. The Evagrius mentioned here is Evagrius Ponticus, who was Palladius' teacher and perhaps the most important theoretician of Eastern monasticism; on him see below.

⁵⁸ I. Widmann, "Discretio (*diakrisis*): Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte," *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktiner-Ordens und seiner Zweige* 58 (1940) 21-28.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 27.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 25.

ment of spirits appears as one gift alongside wisdom and knowledge. It seems more probable than Widmann wanted to admit that once the "spirits" of "discernment of spirits" were depersonalized and made symbols of the capital sins (*logismoi*)—as was the case—the phrase was clipped and "discernment" was free to become the name of a virtue, or even of a knack.

THE APOPTHHEGMATA PATRUM

There is no better example of this kind of usage in monastic literature than the *Apophthegmata patrum*. In the latter half of the fifth century an unknown editor gathered and published in Greek a well-known collection of the apophthegms or sayings of the desert fathers, often called the alphabetical collection. This consists of about a thousand short narratives, each under the name of an Egyptian ascetic, and usually with a direct quotation or a bit of dialogue, teaching some truth about the ascetical life. The apophthegmata are filled with vivid detail, local color, lively repartee, humor, and practical wisdom.⁶¹ Derwas Chitty has astutely called the apophthegmata "a corpus of 'case-law' of the desert."⁶²

Others have already noticed with surprise that the term *diakrisis pneumatōn* is entirely absent from the *Apophthegmata*.⁶³ But the term *diakrisis* and its cognates are found in a number of the sayings.⁶⁴

⁶¹ The apophthegmata exist in many collections. The principal Greek collection is the alphabetical collection (organized by the name of the abba quoted), printed in an inadequate edition in PG 65, 61–400. This collection was translated with supplementary material by B. Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (London: Mobery, 1975). She has also translated the Greek anonymous series, as *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: The 'Apophthegmata patrum' (The Anonymous Series)* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG, 1975). The Syriac collection was edited by W. Budge, *The Wit and Wisdom of the Christian Fathers of Egypt* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1934) and translated by him as *Stories of the Holy Fathers* (ibid. 1934). Selections from the Latin version are translated by Waddell in *Desert Fathers* 62–155 and by T. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (London: Sheldon, 1974). For scholarly research, the most important works on the apophthegmata are W. Bousset, *Apophthegmata: Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), and J.-C. Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata patrum* (Subsidia hagiographica 36; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1962).

⁶² Chitty, *Desert a City* 131.

⁶³ So Widmann, "Discretio" 25, and Fr. Dingjan, "La discrétion dans les apophthegmes des Pères," *Angelicum* 39 (1962) 406 n. 13. The latter article is a good summary of the material on discernment in the apophthegmata. See also J.-C. Guy, "Les apophthegmata patrum," in *Théologie de la vie monastique* (Théologie 49; Paris: Aubier, 1961) 73–83. On p. 75 he observes that instead of the authority of a rule, the Egyptian ascetics had the authority of a word from an elder; and it is in this atmosphere that the vast body of apophthegmata grew.

⁶⁴ *Diakrisis* in Antony 8; Agathon 5; Eulogius (*diakrisis tōn logismōn*); John the Dwarf 7, 34; Nicon; Poemen 35, 52, 60, 170; Syncletica 17; *diakritikos* in Mios 2; Abba of Rome 1; *diakrinein* in Poemen 32; Syncletica 15.

In several of the apophthegmata, "discernment" occurs in lists of virtues or qualities. Poemen 35,⁶⁵ for example, lists vigilance, self-knowledge and discernment as the guides of the soul; Poemen 60 lists poverty, suffering and discernment as "works" (*praxeis*) which are signs of the Lord's presence, and the Old Testament figure Daniel as the symbol of discernment. John the Dwarf 34 includes discernment in a long list of virtues. But other sayings stress the unique importance of discernment. One of the most significant is Antony 8, which reads in full: "He also said, 'Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God.'"⁶⁶ Another group is characterized by a narrative in which an abba does something unexpected and the younger monks are scandalized; but he then explains why he acted as he did, and the apophthegm ends by stating that they were amazed at his discernment. In Agathon 5, for example, Agathon allows some younger monks, who are trying to make him lose his temper, to call him a fornicator, a proud man, and one who talks nonsense, but objects when they call him a heretic. When he explains that insults are good for the soul but heresy is separation from God, they are astonished at his discernment. In John the Dwarf 7, the subject (portrayed as a young layman) allows a venerable old priest to serve him something to drink. He is the only one in the group to allow the priest to serve him; when asked why he allows it, he answers "so that he [the priest] also might gain his reward and not be grieved." The others are edified by his discernment. In a different vein, in Poemen 170, only the esteemed abba Poemen abstains from meat at a meal given by a Christian friend. He was expected to eat it out of charity and humility, but refused it lest others use his action to excuse their own laxity; again the result is wonder at his discernment.

In the *Apophthegmata patrum*, then, discernment is, in some sayings, one of the monk's virtues or tools; in others it is the one virtue or ability which enables the others to flourish. But further, discernment is also a kind of superior insight, an ability to see beyond single rules and practices and comprehend the total effect of an action; this is clear especially from the last three sayings mentioned. Discernment is the ability to comprehend the spirit of the rule rather than the letter, and functions in the *Apophthegmata* as *epikeia* does in later moral theology.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ The apophthegmata of the alphabetical collection are indicated by the name of the abba or amma and the number of the saying under his or her name.

⁶⁶ Cf. Poemen 52, a saying attributed to Antony's successor Ammonas, and Syncletica 17. The quotations are all from B. Ward's translation (n. 61 above). For similar sayings from the Greek anonymous series see also Dingjan, "La discrétion" 408 and n. 21 there.

⁶⁷ K. Heussi, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1936) 232, wrote: "What is discernment? The acute discrimination by which the monk grasps the differing circumstances of different situations in order to adapt his behavior accordingly." Widmann, "Discretio" 24, says more epigrammatically "it is overcoming the schematic."

EVAGRIUS PONTICUS AND DIADOCHUS OF PHOTICE

The most significant theoretician of monasticism in the East is Evagrius Ponticus (346–399), who had been a successful preacher in Constantinople but in 382 went to the Egyptian desert for the sake of his salvation and lived there until his death. He was posthumously condemned for Origenism at the fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II in 553) and his works were dispersed. They have only recently been recovered, either in translations or from false attribution.⁶⁸ One of Evagrius' most important treatises is the *Praktikos* in one hundred short chapters. It is significant here because, although it never uses the term "discernment" (*diakrisis*), it refers to demons in sixty-seven of the hundred chapters.⁶⁹ Yet Evagrius' demons are not the imaginative, if somewhat obtuse, personalities whom Antony bests, but colorless personifications of the eight capital sins (gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride).⁷⁰ Evagrius offers much wise advice for combatting these vices but does not mention a charism of discernment of spirits.

It was a disciple of Evagrius who came closest to writing a formal treatise on discernment, namely, Bishop Diadochus of Photice in Epirus (on the west coast of Greece). He lived in the middle of the fifth century and wrote several short works, the most important of which is one called variously *One Hundred Gnostic Chapters* or *A Hundred Chapters on Spiritual Perfection*; in some manuscripts, however, the title is *Practical Chapters on Knowledge and Spiritual Discernment*.⁷¹

Consideration of Diadochus is complicated by the unsolved question of his relation to Messalianism. According to ancient sources, Messalianism

⁶⁸ For a list of his works, see M. Geerard, *Clavis patrum graecorum* 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1974) §2430–82. There is a good edition of his *Praktikos* by A. Guillaumont and C. Guillaumont, *Traité pratique ou Le moine* (SC 170, 171; Paris: Cerf, 1971), and an English translation of this by J. E. Bamberger, with an extensive and valuable introduction, *The Praktikos; Chapters on Prayer* (Cistercian Studies 4; Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1970). See also Switek, "Discretio spirituum" 48–50.

⁶⁹ The count is by Bamberger, *Praktikos* 4.

⁷⁰ *Praktikos* 6 (Bamberger 17). Evagrius' eight capital vices are taken over by John Cassian, who has an extended treatment of them (*De institutis coenobiorum* 5–12), and reduced to the seven deadly sins by Gregory the Great (*Moralia in Iob* 31, 45). See L. Wrzol, "Die Hauptsündenlehre des Johannes Cassianus und ihre historischen Quellen," *Divus Thomas*, 3rd ser. 1 (1923) 385–404; 2 (1924) 84–91.

⁷¹ *Capita centum de perfectione spirituali* is the standard title. E. des Places uses *Cent chapitres gnostiques* but reports that some MSS include the word "discernment" in the title. Des Places has edited the critical text, *Oeuvres spirituelles* (SC 5⁶⁶; Paris: Cerf, 1966). On the titles see p. 23. His edition also has an excellent introduction and a French translation (the only translation available in any modern language). See also his article on Diadochus in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 3 (1957) 817–34 (a reworking of the introduction in the SC edition); that by D. Stiermon in DHGE 14 (1960) 374–834 (valuable for historical data); J. Quasten, *Patrology* 3 (Westminster: Newman, 1963) 509–13; and V. Messana, "Diadocho di Fotica e la cultura cristiana in Epiro nel V secolo," *Augustinianum* 19 (1979) 151–66.

(the name comes from a Syriac word meaning "intensive prayer") arose among monks in Syria and Asia Minor and was condemned at a synod in Side in 390. It was essentially a form of exaggerated asceticism and mysticism. As reported by its opponents, Messalianism taught that even after baptism a demon dwells in the soul and can be driven out only by intensive prayer; once this is done, the ascetic can become capable of perceiving sensibly the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁷² Interest in Messalianism has flourished in the twentieth century since a collection of fifty homilies, cherished in both East and West for their spiritual teaching, which had circulated under the name of the saintly Macarius the Egyptian, were identified as the work of the Messalian leader Symeon of Mesopotamia.⁷³ Diadochus has been read as an opponent of Messalianism who may, in the process of refuting the error, have been affected by its categories.⁷⁴

Diadochus' teaching on discernment is found in ch. 26–35 of the *Chapters*, with supplementary material on visions in ch. 36 and 40, and material on dreams in ch. 37–39. Ch. 75–89, on the psychology of temptation and the true meaning of desolation, are also relevant to the topic.

Diadochus never uses *diakrisis pneumatōn*, but *diakrisis*, *diakrinein*, and *diakritikos* occur at crucial places.

Diadochus teaches that there is one natural sense of the soul (*aisthēsis physikē tēs psychēs* [ch. 25, 29]), just as there are five senses of the body. The bodily sense to which Diadochus most frequently compares the sense organ of the soul is taste, and he frequently mentions sweetness. He states explicitly that this spiritual sense is the organ of discernment: "the sense of the mind is our sense of taste for things being discerned" (ch. 30). Moreover, this spiritual sense, in the healthy soul, is infallible. Diadochus derives this surprising teaching from his analogy with the

⁷² There is a convenient summary in K. Baus and E. Ewig, *Die Reichskirche nach Konstantin dem Grossen* (Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte 2/1; Freiburg: Herder, 1973) 386–88.

⁷³ The literature on the issue is abundant. See J. Quasten, *Patrologia 2* (Madrid: BAC, 1973) 176–83, for a survey of the problem and a bibliography to 1972. The strongest proponent (but not the originator) of the Macarius/Symeon hypothesis was H. Dörries, *Symeon von Mesopotamien: Die Überlieferung der messalianischen Makarios-Schriften* (TU 55/1; Leipzig: Hinrich, 1941). For a survey of the more recent work and a defense of the orthodoxy of the Macarian homilies, see J. Meyendorff, "Messalianism or Anti-Messalianism? A Fresh Look at the 'Macarian' Problem," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten 2* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970) 585–90. Macarius was on the reading list for Jesuit masters of novices (see n. 14 above).

⁷⁴ See E. des Places, "Diadoque de Photicé et le messalianisme," in *Kyriakon 2*, 591–95, and H. Dörries, "Diadochus und Symeon: Das Verhältnis der kephalaia gnōstika zum Messalianismus," in his *Wort und Stunde* 1 352–422; and Fr. Dörr, *Diadochus von Photike und die Messalianer: Ein Kampf zwischen wahrer und falscher Mystik im fünften Jahrhundert* (Freiburger theologische Studien 47; Freiburg: Herder, 1937).

physical sense of taste: just as healthy persons can tell good food from bad without erring (*aplanōs*), so too the mind, when it is strong and free from anxiety, can richly sense the divine consolation and never be deceived by the opposite kind (ch. 30). Equally surprising is the important role which Diadochus assigns to experience (*peira*).⁷⁵ He speaks of the mind's advancing in the experience of discernment (ch. 31); and in ch. 30 it is precisely the experience of sense perception that is infallible. In another bold statement he says that the mind, after defeating the enemy, has a second weapon besides grace, namely, confidence in its experience (ch. 32).

All of this, however, presupposes that the person is in the right state, which Diadochus describes as calm, health, and peace (ch. 26–28). He repeatedly distinguishes his topics into two categories, so that as his work progresses his teaching on discernment is increasingly refined. There are two kinds of souls: those always mindful of God are sensitive to even the smallest evil, while those blinded by love of the world disregard even the most heinous sins (ch. 27). There are two kinds of consolation: when the mind begins to experience the consolation of the Holy Spirit, Satan also consoles it with the illusion of sweetness (ch. 31). The two kinds of consolation can be distinguished, however: the first moves the soul to love, the second agitates it with the winds of illusion (ch. 32). Even an experience of love is distinguished: if the mind conceives of nothing but the object toward which it is moved, the cause is the Holy Spirit; but if the experience is accompanied by doubts or inappropriate thoughts, the consolation comes from the deceiver (ch. 33).

It would be possible to cite many further examples, but the point is made. Diadochus presents a sharp-witted and perceptive analysis of mental experience. Among writers who mention discernment, he is the most specific about the organ or faculty of discernment, namely, the spiritual sense. The similarity of his thought to St. Ignatius' is noteworthy. Yet Diadochus' work was not printed in the West until 1570, and then only in a Latin translation by the Jesuit Francisco Torres (ca. 1509–1584). Diadochus is included in the list of authors recommended to Jesuit masters of novices.

THE LATIN WEST

"Discernment of spirits," it would seem, underwent no independent development in the Latin West. It was rather the function of the Western monastic tradition to formalize the Eastern teaching on discernment into rudimentary treatises. The Western patristic and medieval development

⁷⁵ Des Places has a concise study of the term in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 3 (1957) 825–26.

of the tradition has been thoroughly researched by Fr. Dingjan,⁷⁶ whose thesis is that Aquinas' teaching on the place of prudence among the four cardinal virtues is a development of the patristic and early medieval doctrine on *discretio* rather than a simple borrowing from Aristotle without Christian precedent.⁷⁷ With this work available, it will be sufficient here to point out the beginnings of the Latin doctrine of *discretio*.

As in the later East, the teaching on discernment in the West is found in the literature of monasticism. The Western monastic movement was itself derived from the Eastern and looked to the East for its inspiration and ideals, even though the Western movement had its own distinctive characteristics, being to a significant degree aristocratic, urban, and clerical.⁷⁸

The first theoretician of monasticism to write in Latin—and a figure of lasting importance—was John Cassian (ca. 360–430/35), who, like Diadochus, was a disciple of Evagrius Ponticus. Cassian was Oriental by birth and lived in monasteries in Bethlehem and Egypt before going to Gaul ca. 415, where he founded a monastery for men and one for women. There he wrote the *Institutes* in twelve books and the *Conferences* in twenty-four for these religious. In these writings the constant ideal is Egyptian eremitism, and the *Conferences* are written in the form of extended discourses by Egyptian abbas.⁷⁹

The whole of the second conference, which is put into the mouth of Abbot Moses, is on the virtue of discernment (*discretio*). At the beginning of the conference Cassian cites 1 Cor 12:10 (“*discretio spirituum*”)—the only time he does so—and calls this gift “the greatest reward of divine grace.” But the “spirits,” for Cassian, are not demons but rather spirits that rise up in the monk himself (“*ascendentium in sese spirituum*”).⁸⁰

⁷⁶ *Discretio: Les origines patristiques et monastiques de la doctrine sur la prudence chez saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1967). He has an excursus on discernment of spirits, pp. 229–50.

⁷⁷ Aquinas defines prudence as “*quaedam rectitudo discretionis in quibuscumque actibus uel materiis*” (1–2, q. 64, a. 4) and is, according to Dingjan, *Discretio* 2–4, the first to identify *discretio* with prudence.

⁷⁸ See Lienhard, *Paulinus of Nola* 106–10.

⁷⁹ The texts were edited critically by M. Petschenig, *Conlationes patrum* (CSEL 13) and *De institutis coenobiorum et de octo principalibus uitiorum remediis* (CSEL 17). The Latin text with a complete French translation is available, ed. E. Pichery, *Conférences* (SC 42, 54, 64) and *Institutions cénobitiques* (SC 109; Paris: Cerf, 1955, 1958, 1959, 1965). There is an older English translation of almost all the *Conferences* and *Institutes* (three books were apparently considered too indelicate to translate) by E. C. S. Gibson in NPNF, 2nd ser., Vol. 11 (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973). O. Chadwick, *John Cassian* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: University Press, 1968), is a good general introduction; see also R. Appel, “Cassian's *Discretio*: A Timeless Virtue,” *American Benedictine Review* 17 (1966) 20–29.

⁸⁰ Cassian, *Conlationes* 2, 1, 3–4 (CSEL 13, 39–40).

Moreover, when he goes on to speak of acquiring (“conquiescere”) discernment, he writes that this is done by humility and that the test of humility consists in submitting all one’s actions and even thoughts to the judgment of the elders and acquiescing in their decisions on all matters.⁸¹ Cassian calls discernment the *fons* and *radix* of all virtues⁸² and shows by a number of cautionary tales that a terrible end awaits an ascetic who lacks it.⁸³ But this discernment is a form of moderation, and it is an acquired virtue. Cassian is aware that Paul mentions “spirits,” but he is unsure of what to do with them.

The other work which, formally at least, is a little treatise on discernment is in one of the Latin translations of the apophthegmata. Several translations of various selections were made; one of them was done by the deacon (later pope, from 556 to 561) Pelagius in the middle of the sixth century. The sayings are arranged topically, and one group is entitled “De discretione.”⁸⁴ Of these sayings, however, only eight use the words *discretio*, *discernere*, or *discretor*.⁸⁵ The understanding of discernment is here, if anything, looser than it was for Cassian, and the selection of apophthegmata for this heading is less than careful.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it is significant for the Western tradition that *discretio* became a chapter heading in Pelagius’ translation and that it contains more sayings than any other chapter.

One final document for which the word *discretio* is particularly significant is the *Rule* of St. Benedict (ca. 480–547), and this for two reasons. The monastic rule “of St. Benedict” which begins “Obsculta, o fili” is anonymous, as most rules are. The earliest and almost only source of information about Benedict is the second book of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*, composed in 593,⁸⁷ almost fifty years after Benedict’s death. In the *Dialogues* Gregory treats Benedict’s life and miracles extensively but inserts only a short notice on his writing a rule; and Gregory chose to praise the *Rule* particularly for its discretion:

⁸¹ Ibid. 2, 10, 1 (CSEL 13, 48).

⁸² Ibid. 2, 9 (CSEL 13, 47).

⁸³ Ibid. 2, 5–8 (CSEL 13, 44–47).

⁸⁴ Pelagius’ translation is printed in PL 73, 851–992. “De discretione” is the tenth chapter, and the longest in the collection; it contains 115 apophthegmata. For partial English versions, see n. 61 above. See also C. M. Batlle, *Die “Adhortationes sanctorum patrum” (“Verba seniorum”) im lateinischen Mittelalter* (Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinerordens 31; Münster: Aschendorff, 1972).

⁸⁵ Six of the eight are apophthegmata which are also found in the Greek alphabetical collection. They are: 1 = Antony 8; 10 = Agathon 5; 28 = John the Dwarf 7; 59 = Poemen 52; 72 = Syncletica 15; 76 = Abba of Rome. The other two, 85 and 91, are found in a slightly different form in the anonymous Greek collection published serially by F. Nau in *Revue d’orient chrétien* 10–18 (1905–13) and partly translated by Ward, *Wisdom: Verba seniorum*, ch. 10, 85 and 91 = Nau 217 and 222 = Ward 85 and 90.

⁸⁶ Similarly Widmann, “Discretio” 25.

⁸⁷ Text in PL 77, 149–429. English translation by O. J. Zimmerman, *Dialogues* (FC 39; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959).

He wrote a Rule for Monks that is remarkable for its discretion ["scripsit monachorum regulam, discretione praecipuam"] and its clarity of language. Anyone who wishes to know more about his life and character can discover in his Rule exactly what he was like as an abbot, for his life could not have differed from his teaching.⁸⁸

Discretio has come to be considered the typical Benedictine virtue.⁸⁹ One Benedictine can write that St. Benedict makes *discretio* the basic virtue of his monastic constitution and therefore of Benedictine life.⁹⁰ The word is found only three times in the *Rule*: once in a passing reference to moderation in punishment,⁹¹ but the other two in a key chapter on the abbot, where Benedict wrote:

Let him be prudent and considerate in all his commands; and whether the work which he enjoins concern God or the world, let him always be discreet ["discernat"] and moderate, bearing in mind the discretion ["discretio"] of holy Jacob, who said: "If I cause my flocks to be overdriven, they will all perish in one day" [Gen 33:13]. So, imitating these and other examples of discretion, the mother of the virtues ["discretio mater uirtutum"], let him so temper all things that the strong may still have something to long after, and the weak may not draw back in alarm.⁹²

Benedict's reference to *discretio* as the mother of virtues is derived from Cassian, who wrote: "omnium namque uirtutum generatrix, custos

⁸⁸ Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 2, 36, tr. Zimmerman 107.

⁸⁹ See D. Feuling, "Discretio," *Benediktinische Monatsschrift* 7 (1925) 241-58, 349-66; Widmann, "Discretio"; H. Walter, "Die benediktinische Discretio," in *Benedictus, der Vater des Abendlandes, 547-1947*, ed. S. Brechter (Munich: Schnell & Steiner, 1947) 195-212; H. Lang, "Die benediktinische Discretio," in *Einsicht und Glaube*, ed. J. Ratzinger and H. Fries (2nd ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1963) 209-15; A. M. Raabe, "Discernment of Spirits in the Prologue to the Rule of Benedict," *American Benedictine Review* 23 (1972) 397-423; A. de Vogüé, "'Discretione praecipuam': A quoi Grégoire pensait-il?" *Benedictina* 22 (1975) 325-27; Böckmann, "Discretio im Sinn der Regel"; P. Gordan, "Discretio," *Erbe und Auftrag* 52 (1976) 363-86. Feuling has a good systematic survey; Widmann has a careful philological study of pre-Benedictine monastic literature and pagan philosophy. Walter and Lang are good but derivative. Raabe is concerned more with modern Benedictine renewal, although she includes much useful historical information. Vogüé traces Gregory's remark not directly to the *Rule* but to Gregory's commentary on 1 Kgs (4, 70 [CChr 144, 330 Verbraken]), where he praises the *discretio* of a "magister optimus" with verbal echoes of the *Rule*, 58, 1, 2, 8, 10—and this is the only near citation of the *Regula Benedicti* in Gregory's writings, and therefore the only literary proof that Gregory meant the rule "Obsculata, o fili" when he spoke of the rule that Benedict composed. Böckmann studies the *Rule* in relation to the *Regula magistri*, pointing out that the word *discretio* never occurs in the latter, and is therefore original with Benedict. (The *Regula magistri* is now generally accepted as Benedict's immediate source.) Finally, Gordan also deals with renewal.

⁹⁰ Walter, "Benediktinische Discretio" 204.

⁹¹ "But if anyone venture without the abbot's instructions . . . to treat the boys with immoderate severity ['sine discretione'], let him undergo the discipline of the Rule" (70, 6). Quotations are from the translation of J. McCann, *The Rule of St. Benedict* (London: Burns & Oates, 1952), here p. 157.

⁹² *Regula Benedicti* 64, 17-19 (McCann 147-49).

moderatrixque discretio est.”⁹³ And Cassian’s second conference (where this is found) is on discernment. Although it is delivered by Abbot Moses, it begins by quoting Antony on the importance of *discretio*.⁹⁴ Benedict’s *discretio* is a sense of moderation, the latest development of “discernment of spirits.” Discretion, for Benedict, is no longer precisely a virtue, but rather a control on other virtues, the fine intuition into his subjects’ strengths and weaknesses that allows the abbot to guide them and foster their growth without straining them or letting them become lax. Even so, the trail leading back from Benedict to the deserts of Egypt has not been obscured.

CONCLUSIONS

While it would be rash to claim any kind of completeness, all identified instances of the use of the term “discernment of spirits” by the Greek and Latin Fathers have been noted in the course of this article. Many occur in the course of citing one or more verses from 1 Corinthians 12,⁹⁵ and the context makes no specific reference to discernment. Because Paul names the Spirit, the Lord, and God in that order in 1 Cor 12:4–6, these verses are often cited in patristic writings on the Trinity.

“Discernment of spirits” is discussed explicitly in two categories of works, exegetical and ascetical. The one exception to this—and an important one—is the passage in Origen’s *De principiis*.

In considering any passage on discernment of spirits, it is useful to ask three questions: Who has this gift, or should have it? What is meant by “spirits”? What criteria, if any, are proposed for the discerning or distinguishing.

On the first question: for the Antiochene exegetes, some Christians in Corinth in Paul’s time had discernment of spirits. For the Latin exegetes who follow the Ambrosiaster, it is the clergy who have it, and that *ex officio*. Origen leaves the question open. For Athanasius, there is a clear answer: Antony received the gift after thirty-five years of intense asceticism and of personal struggle with various kinds of demons; discernment, therefore, is a gift which an advanced ascetic may receive. After Antony, discernment of spirits is seen as more and more necessary for the monk. Gradually it ceases to be viewed as an exceptional gift or charism and is treated as a virtue, even a necessary virtue. As this change is taking place, the phrase is shortened from “discernment of spirits” to “discernment.”

⁹³ *Conlationes* 2, 4, 4 (CSEL 13, 44 Petschenig). Benedict, without naming Cassian, recommends his writings enthusiastically (*Regula* 73, 5; cf. 42, 3, 5).

⁹⁴ The whole of *conlatio* 2 has been called a commentary on *Apophthegmata patrum* Antony 8, cited above, where Antony says that asceticism without discernment leaves one far from God.

⁹⁵ See nn. 18–21 above.

The best examples of the later stages of this development are in the *Apophthegmata patrum*, Cassian, and the *Rule* of St. Benedict.

On the second question, the identity of the "spirits": the Antiochene exegetes thought primarily of the demons who were believed to inspire soothsayers, who had to be distinguished from prophets in the Church. Origen thinks of the good and evil spirits who inhabit the sublunary air. Athanasius is concerned with the highly individualistic, personal demons who plague the ascetic with all kinds of tricks and deceptions. After Athanasius, there is a quickly growing tendency to identify the demons with the passions, or even more specifically with the eight capital sins.

On the third question, the exegetes offer no criteria. For Origen, and all the ascetical writers who offer a specific criterion, that criterion is some form of mental or psychological experience: for Origen, calm and freedom; for Athanasius, joy and confidence; in the life of Pachomius, absence of doubt; for Diadochus, unmixed consolation which leads to love. Some of the works surveyed, however, have implicitly a very different criterion. For the *Apophthegmata patrum*, Cassian, and Benedict, discernment (not discernment of spirits) is a form of superior insight exercised in acting or deciding, which is then recognized and acknowledged by other persons, usually subjects or younger or less experienced monks.

In terms of historical influence, Origen stands at the head of the tradition. Palladius, Diadochus, and John Cassian were all disciples of the Origenist Evagrius Ponticus, and Cassian in turn exercised a strong influence on Benedict.

One final observation: the term "discernment of spirits" was in use as long as the spirits were understood to be personal; in this period, too, discernment of spirits was looked upon as a charism given only to some, not to all. Once attention was turned to the working of the psyche, particularly by Evagrius Ponticus, the phrase was shortened and discernment became a virtue or technique needed by every ascetic to prevent him from falling victim to excess or bad judgment. This distinction may well be worth preserving.