

How to Deal with the Restless Dead? Discernment of Spirits and the Response to Ghosts in Fifteenth-Century Europe

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Although spiritual discernment is commonly treated as an aspect of demonology and as driven by the theological, political, and social needs of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, fifteenth-century writings by theologians Heinrich of Langenstein, Pierre d'Ailly, and Jean Gerson formed many later discussions. This article situates discernment of spirits in that late medieval context. Discernment thus becomes central to pastoral concerns about death and the afterlife in which demonology played only a small role. In the process it built on a broader definition of spirits that encompassed the wide variety of supernatural entities populating the late medieval world. Among those spirits were ghosts. Stories about the revenant dead played essential pastoral roles, and such spirits were subject to the same testing and judgment as the demons and angels found in discernment literature. An analysis of the famous ghost story of Arndt and Heinrich Buschmann, produced not long after Gerson's death, demonstrates that the practice of discernment of spirits and the pastoral directives about the good death need to be seen as reflecting a continuum of enduring beliefs concerning the dead and their ongoing relationships with the living. Discernment of spirits was embedded in late medieval theologies and ministries of death and, as such, was central to the assessment of other apparitions – like those of ghosts.

“Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1). In early modern Europe such “trying” (*probare*) was an essential part of the discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*), a practice that originated in ancient Christianity. Both Catholics and mainstream Protestants mistrusted direct, personal revelation, seeing in it opportunities for demonic corruption of the soul, and both developed means of ascertaining the origins of such revelations. Self-examination, directed piety, and wise clerical observation and action could force spirits inspiring visionaries or tormenting the possessed to reveal their true natures. The correct

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discernment of such spirits enabled Christians to appreciate God's care for them and the value of an individual soul in a world and on a battlefield where the supernatural and natural were intertwined.¹

Modern scholars have highlighted the concomitant development of demonology and spiritual discernment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially among Catholics. In the process, discernment of spirits is often approached from three perspectives. The most common emphasizes its theological foundation. Concentrating on the central problem of distinguishing true from false revelation – and blessed from damned spirits – such works explore the implicit and explicit themes this distinction raises. The qualities of blessedness and damnation; the permeability of the afterlife, this world, and humanity; the nature of the visionary experience; and the tensions in ascertaining supernatural qualities using merely human, natural senses and understanding are only a few of the debates dissected in these analyses. The second approach is more political and social, stressing the dangers of the false visionary. Author after early modern author described the ways visionaries could challenge ecclesiastical and secular authorities; supporters could see such critiques as mandating reform, whereas opponents argued that the visionary was doing the devil's work. Modern assessments emphasizing this aspect of discernment trace social and political networks implicated in spiritual assessment, highlighting the extent to which discernment depended on the eye of the beholder. A third interpretation develops from the second but is so pervasive that it has become a distinct area of concern: gender. Scholars stressing gender's influence on the understanding and practice of discernment note that both lay and clerical women were believed to be especially susceptible to spirits' influences. Most discernment literature emphasizes possibilities for demonic corruption. In the process, the spiritual authority that such women could exercise became especially dangerous at a time when Christianity itself was seen as under siege.

Although they were developed in an early modern context, each of these themes is commonly applied to late medieval texts about discernment of spirits. In so doing, a false continuity can be suggested. Certainly theology, gender, and worldly authority are all aspects of discernment,² but the transition from fifteenth-century *discretio spirituum* to early modern demonology and the witch-hunts is less smooth than such evolutionary studies can imply.³ Central to late medieval Christianity, and discernment, were the preparations for a good death, the fate of the dead, and the interaction of the living and the dead, and such topics were far less debatable than they would be a century later. As such, discernment of spirits

1 For the discussion in this paragraph and the following one, I am particularly indebted to Caciola & Sluhovsky 2012; Sluhovsky 2007; Haliczzer 2002; Keitt 2005; Ferber 2004; Kagan 1995; Robert 1997.

2 For the Middle Ages, see Caciola 2006, 2000.

3 Here I agree with Michael Bailey 2013, 10–11, who makes this argument in light of fifteenth-century analyses of “the superstitious.” See also Anderson 2011.

needs to be integrated into a continuum of beliefs about the dead and their ongoing concerns with this world, not treated primarily as a demonological or confessional question.

In the process, what is meant by “spirit” becomes complex. More than just the demons and angels of a stereotypical demonological binary, *spiritus* and *discretio spirituum* encompassed the vital force of humanity as well as the other amorphous spirits of European folklore. The spirits being assessed could thus include ones living in forests or by rivers – and more personal and familial figures, such as ghosts. Ghosts, in particular, were believed to be drawn to humans during times of crisis or to be produced through the unresolved tensions of those crises. And death was a crisis all experienced. Given such connections, literature on the good death and discernment of spirits, especially its more pastoral requirements, shared many themes, albeit implicitly. They also demand of modern scholars a broader appreciation of ghost stories. As seen here through a comparison of Jean Gerson’s writings on discernment and the good death and of the description of Heinrich Buschmann’s ghost, a continuum of beliefs about dying, the dead, and a superenchanted world allowed for a broad definition of “spirit” and, with it, the discernment of ghosts.

Theological and Pastoral Aspects of Discernment

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries at the University of Paris three theologians emerged whose writings provided the foundations for late medieval and early modern European interpretations of discernment of spirits: Heinrich of Langenstein, Pierre d’Ailly, and Jean Gerson.⁴ As professors working at the center of theological and scholastic life, their compositions would be widely disseminated and, particularly from the second half of the fifteenth century, cited in treatises, textbooks, letters, and sermons.⁵ Religious and political debates arising from the Avignonese papacy, the Great Schism, conciliarism, and Gallicanism inspired each author, yet personal pastoral concerns also pervaded these works; Gerson, for example, composed his first treatise on discernment, *On Distinguishing True Visions from False* (1401), as a spiritual guide for his brother, a Celestine monk.⁶

4 Caciola 2006, 284–314. See Bailey 2013, 113–47, for d’Ailly’s and Gerson’s perspectives about the late fourteenth and early fifteenth-century debates over superstition. Langenstein wrote the first treatise (ca. 1383) explicitly on discernment, while d’Ailly composed two, written almost two decades apart, with the same title, *On False Prophets* (pre-1395, ca. 1410–13).

5 Caciola 2006, 285, notes that these texts seemed to have little impact on contemporary pastoral care, but theologians adopted many more of their recommendations by the mid- and late-fifteenth century. For example, Bailey 2013, 148–94, describes the influence of these early treatises on the debates over discernment in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, especially in German-speaking lands. The most comprehensive treatment of late medieval preaching and the dissemination of themes found in sermons is Martin 2007; see esp. 351–420, 515–29, 560–84. See also Caciola 2006, 309–12.

6 *De distinction verarum visionum a falsis* (Gerson, 3:36–56), here 44.

Gerson's pastoral concerns also appear in his other two treatises on discernment – *On the Testing of Spirits* (1415) and *On the Examination of Doctrines* (1423) – and in sermons and letters on similar subjects.⁷ Here Gerson will represent the late medieval theology and ministry of discernment because later scholars highlight his role in the creation of early modern attitudes and because he was the intellectual successor to both Langenstein and d'Ailly.

Like many of his contemporaries, including the other two theologians of discernment mentioned here, Gerson saw contemporary Christianity as weak and facing a crisis. With the Great Schism undermining the Church, false visionaries flourished and the devil reveled in the damage he caused to both individual souls and the institution responsible for them. Faced with demonic resurgence, lay enthusiasm, and clerical ignorance, Gerson felt that he must provide clear criteria for judging the truth or falsity of spiritual inspiration. In so doing, Gerson dove head first into a murky theological pool. One problem all theologians of discernment faced was a definition of the devil as the “father of lies” (John 8:44). By definition, devils could appear fair when they were at their most foul, and even apparently orthodox theology and piety supported by devils was tainted. Not surprisingly, testing such spirits was difficult and dangerous, and the power implicit in such abilities could make clergy and laity alike susceptible to corruption.⁸ Given women's innate weakness, they were the most endangered and their visions the most suspicious; Langenstein and Gerson, in particular, would argue that “[e]very teaching of women, especially in an authoritative manner in word or writing, is to be considered suspect.”⁹ In addition, the only tools humans had available to test supernatural, spiritual entities were natural, physical senses. This conundrum led Gerson and other theologians of discernment to develop precise schema for questioning, even while gradually concluding that almost every physical sign of possession could have a demonic origin. In his *On the Testing of Spirits*, Gerson itemized the types of spirits to be tested – the spirit of God, the spirit of a good angel, the spirit of an evil angel, and the human spirit – and provided a list of questions that the clergyman guiding the discernment must be able to answer: “*Quis?* Who has the revelation? / *Quid?* What does the revelation mean? / *Quare?* Why is it said to have taken place? / *Cui?* To whom did the witness look for advice? / *Qualiter?* What kind of life does the visionary lead? / *Unde?* Whence does the revelation originate?”¹⁰ Along with the other authors, however, Gerson recognized that such scholastic structures led readers to a false sense of clarity.

7 *De probatione spirituum* (Gerson, 9:177–185), *De examination doctrinarum* (Gerson, 9:458–660). Caciola 2006, 307, provides one of many examples in sermons.

8 Gerson, 9:181.

9 Gerson, 9:468, trans. in McGuire 2005, 317.

10 Gerson, 9:175, 183, as translated in Chesters 2001, 26.

Treated as a compendium of theological concerns and scholastic method, it is easy to discount or even ignore the important pastoral element of such fifteenth-century writings on spiritual discernment.¹¹ Yet, as Chancellor of the University of Paris, Gerson gave sermons, prepared instructional guides, and provided religious council on topics ranging from the correct posture for prayer to the resolution of the Great Schism. Two areas particularly influenced his guidelines about and attitudes towards discernment. The late fourteenth century had seen the rise of lay religious communities, the best-known being the Beguines (women) and Beghards (men). Influenced by Rhenish mystical traditions, such communities offered more scope for personal, divine revelation among the laity than other contemporary religious movements. Their strong appeal to women concerned Gerson. In addition, Gerson was immersed in the debates surrounding the canonization of two of the most influential female saints of the later Middle Ages: Brigit of Sweden (d. 1373) and Catherine of Siena (d. 1380). Both Brigit and Catherine had been actively involved in the debates over the movement of the papacy from Rome to Avignon, with Brigit going as far as to accompany the new pope, Urban V, to Rome to ensure his return. Although Gerson became prominent well after the deaths of both women, he played a central role at the councils that were called to resolve the Great Schism and that debated their sanctity. While lay visionaries and ignorant clergy concerned Gerson when he wrote *On Distinguishing True Visions from False*, the debates over Brigit and Catherine clearly inspired his latter two works on discernment, leading one prominent modern scholar to describe Brigit as “the first test case for the discernment of spirits.”¹²

Under these circumstances, certain pastoral themes recur throughout Gerson’s writings on discernment. In each work he stresses the need to find a good spiritual guide, that is, an educated male clergyman: “To test the spirits to see if they are of God, in a particular case, through a general and infallible rule or art, either cannot be done at all or can scarcely be done through human ability. This requires a gift from the Holy Spirit...”¹³ Unordained and unconsecrated, women and the laity do not have the theological sophistication and spiritual acumen to assess spirits, much less to compel them to give truthful testimony. Even mendicants are less likely to provide good guidance than regular clergy.¹⁴ In *On Distinguishing True Visions from False*, Gerson censures those who want to achieve notoriety for their revelations and their inability to discern true and false spirits; in *On the Testing of Spirits* he returns to this theme when he describes a woman who wants recognition,

11 Brown 2007.

12 The role of gender in late medieval discernment of spirits is a key theme in Caciola 2006. For this quote, see p. 278.

13 Gerson, *On the Testing*, 9:178, trans. in Caciola 2006, 291.

14 Caciola 2006, 303.

constantly talks about her experiences, and will only live among clerics.¹⁵ Even honest people may have other foundations for their visions. Gerson considers both natural and supernatural causation and describes how such actions and much more convincing revelations might have physical or psychological roots. He notes that mental or physical illness can produce melancholy, delusions, fantasies, and other symptoms that may lead an individual to assume she is having divine revelations. Compulsive seeking after spiritual consolation is another form of mental or spiritual illness that can manifest in false perceptions of spiritual communication.¹⁶ Women are especially liable to such extremes. A standard part of later litanies against false sanctity was Gerson's description of the woman of Arras who starved herself because of demonic inspiration interpreted as a divine commandment.¹⁷

Spirits also play key roles in Gerson's pastoral discussions, although in the more traditional forms of saints, angels, demons, and purgatorial souls. Gerson had no doubt that spirits were active in his world and they affected it in ways that humans could not perceive without divine guidance and inspiration. Such perceptions of immanence imbued late medieval Christianity and allowed for the material world to reveal God's will.¹⁸ They also allowed for humans – albeit inspired, consecrated humans – to practice spiritual discernment. Like most elite theologians of his time, Gerson knew the extensive literature distinguishing between soul and spirit, parsing the varieties of spirit and locating these varieties in the human body. He even wrote some of it. Such anatomical and theological knowledge guided his answers to pastoral questions: Is this even a case of where spiritual discernment should be practiced? What signs suggest a spirit is divine or demonic? How can such spirits be made to reveal the truth and, if necessary, be banished? The answers to these and related questions demanded sophisticated assessment of physical signs as well as spiritual states.

Such a sense of immanence and knowledge of physiology and nature were not confined to clergy like Gerson, however, although he assuredly worried about the ways others understood these topics. Material signs of supernatural status and truth underlay actions such as sniffing for sulfur, raising a skirt to check for cloven hoofs, and testing the solidity of a spirit, legitimate practices but ones lacking the analytical and spiritual depth Gerson demanded. Moreover, while such methods were endorsed for distinguishing the divine from the demonic, they were also employed to assess spirits that fell between those binaries, such as the revenant dead. Through his acceptance that the material and spiritual were joined, even in states beyond that of human life, and that human senses could assess the quality of spiritual beings, albeit imperfectly, theologians such as Gerson implicitly allowed

15 Gerson, 9:184.

16 Gerson, *On Distinguishing*, 9:40.

17 Gerson, 3:43–44.

18 Camporesi 1988 (1983), 46–66.

for spiritual discernment to be employed with any apparition that integrated the material and the spiritual and that humans could perceive. Gerson thus connected ghosts to other discernable spirits in a way that early modern theologians would rarely address but that made perfect sense to his contemporaries.¹⁹

Death and Discernment

Ascertaining the legitimacy, purposes, and qualities of ghosts also complemented late medieval ministries of death and linked discernment to that powerful pastoral mission. By the time Gerson produced his treatises on discernment, a pastoral theology and geography of death were widely shared among western and central European Christians.²⁰ Upon death human souls entered heaven, hell, or purgatory and retained some element of their material form and senses. Theologians might debate if purgatory was a place or state, but it was widely treated as a distinct location normally inaccessible to the living, although some believed it could occur on earth or that souls existed briefly in an earthly limbo before moving to purgatory. Pastoral work focused on assisting Christians to reach heaven or at least to minimize the time they spent in purgatory by providing satisfaction to God for their sins and removing the stain of sin from their souls.²¹ With the sufferings of purgatorial souls vividly depicted in sermons, stories, and art, the consequences of sin and need for repentance motivated a piety revolving around good works, that is, the performance of Christian charity.²² The last opportunity the living had to accomplish such charity and, especially, true penitence was on their deathbed.

Dying a good death thus assumed a central role in a human's spiritual progress.²³ Done correctly, it allowed for a smooth transition to a new status in the Christian community while both reflecting and contributing to an individual's greater sanctification.²⁴ Visualized as a spiritual drama, with demons and angels hovering beside the dying, a good death also testified to God's blessings. Ideally,

19 Chesters 2011 briefly notes such ideas, then moves to their sixteenth-century manifestations: 34–35.

20 Ariès 1982 (1977); Vovelle 1983.

21 The classic statement on Purgatory remains Le Goff 1984 (1981). For a recent bibliography, see Edwards 2013.

22 Many examples exist of the influence of the purgatorial and intercessory systems on late medieval piety; for specifics on how they affected burial and funeral practices in medieval France, see Alexandre-Bidon 1998; Alexandre-Bidon & Treffort, eds. 1993.

23 Bayard & Lecouteux 2000.

24 Koslofsky 2000, 23, develops the beliefs about the continuum of Christian existence and the role of death's rituals in it: "Medieval death ritual interwove themes of continuity and separation. Death marked a transition *within* the community of Christians: in many of the ritual books, the prayers and responses offered on the deathbed were repeated after death in the house, at the burial itself and at the anniversaries of the death. Despite the passage from life to death, the Christian remained within the Church and continued to benefit from her intercession."

a priest led the way.²⁵ He provided comfort and care, redirecting the dying from familial and worldly concerns towards eternity through repentance and purification. He ensured that death was accepted, not sought, and that provisions were made for the dying's post mortem spiritual needs.²⁶ With the dying person's cooperation, the priest managed the final hours so that the dying received the greatest spiritual benefit from and testified most forcefully to God's mercy and providence.²⁷

Discernment of spirits was integrated throughout a good death, albeit in often implicit ways. Spirits could influence both the priest and the dying person, and both had to be able to perceive and assess the exterior and interior spiritual impulses such spirits could inspire. Medieval sermons were filled with stories of devils gloating when they could lead souls astray at death. The consequences of such corruption were unimaginable, although preachers were willing to try. Among the most common fates that they described in vivid detail were extended time in purgatory and even banishment to hell. It was widely believed, moreover, that a bad death eased or even mandated a soul's return to earth after death. Writings and stories about the revenant dead were well known in the later Middle Ages, and one of the first tasks facing all who did not simply flee from such spirits was ascertaining who they were, what they wanted, and how they were allowed to return – in other words, to practice spiritual discernment. An especially bad death – sudden, unrepentant, or self-inflicted – could lead to a ghost who was indistinguishable from a demon.

Given the value Gerson placed on his pastoral responsibilities, it is not surprising that he provided guidelines for dying well; given the concerns he had over false spiritual inspiration and its consequences and the spiritually fraught and liminal scene of a death bed, it would be surprising if themes in his work on discernment and the good death did not overlap. In late 1400 Gerson prepared a three-part pastoral guide for “simple and non-learned” clergy, all simple people more generally, those ministering to the sick, young people, and children.²⁸ Called the *Tripartitum*, it culminated in a brief manual for dying well, *La science de bien mourir* or *La médecine de l'âme*. By terming his work a “science” or “medicine,” Gerson implied that his directives were clear and intelligible through human reason and that they

25 Alexandre-Bidon 1998, esp. Chpts. 2 & 3 (15–108).

26 Murray 1998, provides the most comprehensive analysis of attitudes about suicide and the suicidal during the High Middle Ages; for a work focusing more on the later Middle Ages to the present, see Minois 1995.

27 Swanson 1995, 191–234; Koslofsky 2000, 19–28; Ariès 1982 (1978); Dinzelsbacher 1986, 70–87.

28 Components of the *Tripartitum* were *Le miroir de l'âme* (also called *Le livre des dix commandemens*; Gerson, 7.1:193–206), *Examen de conscience* (Gerson, 7.1:393–400); *La science de bien mourir* (also called *La médecine de l'âme*; Gerson 7.1:404–7).

would lead to a cure for human souls if applied properly.²⁹ There is some debate about how this collection was composed, but the most recent consensus is that Gerson first wrote it in Latin and soon translated it into French. Making it available in both languages contributed to its wide dissemination among a literate audience throughout Europe, as did its author's status and its relatively simple, lucid style.

Nothing in the *Tripartitum* was revolutionary. Its value and popularity stemmed from its succinct and clear exposition of traditional doctrines and practices.³⁰ The first of its three parts interpreted each of the Ten Commandments, while the second focused on how to examine one's conscience and prepare for confession through a consideration of the Seven Deadly Sins. In the third part, on dying well, Gerson began with four exhortations to the dying followed by six "interrogations" and four brief prayers. Gerson provided a clear framework that highlighted a person's spiritual progress in preparing for death while making it easier for the priest and the dying person to stay on track. He concluded with ten brief points which might or might not arise but for which a priest should be prepared. They included the need for the dying to receive communion devoutly; the procedures for ministering to a dying excommunicate; the ways to question someone who was mute but retained full understanding; and the necessity for family and friends to distance themselves from a dying person so that he could concentrate on the life to come.³¹ Through such careful pastoral guidance and correct application of the "memory, understanding, and will"³² that God gave all humans, the dying could thus enter the next stage in their spiritual journey as consoled and confident as possible.³³

Spiritual discernment entered these preparations for a good death obliquely but repeatedly. The preparatory process was one of self-examination, and the dying was exhorted repeatedly to examine his conscience for flaws and to recognize

29 This title is often translated as *The Art of Dying Well*, a translation that may give modern readers a false sense that a good death involved a creative process. There are several problems with this interpretation of Gerson. In the fifteenth century an "art" was applied more to crafts and skilled work. A craft might involve some sort of secret knowledge available only to initiates, but this knowledge did not depend on individual inspiration. "Science," however, was simultaneously more profound and transcendental. A "science" involved fundamental truths, both natural and divine, and was accessible to all who had sufficient understanding and, in some cases, education. Everyone could, in theory, learn a science, a knowledge, although in reality not everyone would even be given the opportunity.

30 Gerson, 7.1:194–95.

31 Gerson, 7.1: 406–7, trans. in McGuire 2005, 345.

32 Gerson, 7.1:195.

33 Gerson does not address the many burial practices that had been developed by the early fifteenth century to ensure that the deceased's transition was smooth and that the tensions between common practices and ecclesiastical guidelines were resolved. Hands, heads, and legs were carefully positioned, eyes and mouths closed, and bodies wrapped to ensure an appropriate death. Although the Church condemned "excessive mourning," death ceremonies were often loud and mourners shrieked or men tore their beards. Corpses remained adjacent to the living, with ossuaries for the laity only appearing in the late fourteenth centuries; arguments for the relocation of burial sites to areas outside the church and even the city develop mainly in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and cemeteries remained a place for public gatherings in Gerson's day. See Alexandre-Bidon & Treffort, eds., 1993, 121–33, 136–37, 183–206; Alexandre-Bidon 1998; Koslofsky 2000, 40–75.

and thank God for His mercies. Implicit was the need to separate oneself from false impulses inspired by demons and to respond to divine promptings alone. According to Gerson, the priest himself must defend the dying against corruption – and corrupters – through his repeated questioning and prayers as well as by his very presence. Objects for which the dying had special devotion and demons particular abhorrence – such as crucifixes, relics, and holy images – should be deployed when available; they focused and enhanced the dying’s devotion while simultaneously repulsing evil.

Although Gerson did not tie these techniques directly to the practices of spiritual discernment, they relied on the same logic and even employed the same tools. They allowed the dying and their priest to assess promptings that could come from personal piety or external spirits. These spirits were seen primarily as angels or demons, but they could include purgatorial souls and other ghosts. Evaluating such spiritual influences could enhance and, in some cases, enable the benefits of a good death.³⁴ By allowing for a smooth, or at least a smoother, transition to the afterlife, spiritual discernment as practiced in a good death could thus actually prevent the appearance of ghosts.

Spiritual Discernment and the Revenant Dead

Although those who experienced a good death were unlikely to become ghosts, at least for long hauntings, the belief that humans could return from the dead built on one of Christianity’s central tenets: resurrection. While the revenant dead were not resurrected – that is, they were not reborn into a new life – their return could be eerily similar to one of the many “resurrections” found in late medieval Christianity and could lead to troubling questions.³⁵ How should one distinguish between the miracle of Lazarus, a mutilated baby who is reassembled and reanimated, a saint who sits up and converses at his funeral, and an uncle who comes back from the dead to reveal the location of his will? Incorruptibility was equated with sanctity, and Christ himself returned to the apostles in a form intelligible to human senses. How then could one condemn a visit by the recently deceased when such a being lacked all signs of corruption and seemingly conformed to scriptural standards?

34 In his roles as priest and chancellor of the University of Paris, Gerson was asked to decide if common but unofficial pious practices were legitimate, and he was generally willing to accept them if they reflected an innate piety. See Daniel B. Hobbins, “Gerson on Lay Devotion,” in McGuire 2006, 41–78, and Gerson, *De Directione Cordis*, 8:37–8 & 108–9, translated in Cameron, 50–51: “Some rites concerning God and the saints are lawful and obligatory; some are entirely unlawful, expressly forbidden by the Church; some are in between, neither good nor bad in themselves ... [and] may be morally good or bad according to the circumstances, especially the intention and purpose behind them... ”

35 Smoller 2013; See especially Part 3 of Bynum 1995 for the foundations of the debate over corporeal resurrection (227–340).

Based on medieval monastic accounts, the answers were that such visitations did occur and were only condemned if the spirit was judged false. A long literary tradition existed of monks returning to tell their colleagues “the truth” about the afterlife, especially purgatory, and such spirits were tested physically, theologically, and emotionally – in other words, those they visited practiced spiritual discernment.³⁶ Requests for intercession to minimize the suffering of purgatorial souls came to dominate these accounts by the late Middle Ages. In fact, the frequency with which individuals received such visitations was seen as evidence for the existence of purgatory.³⁷ Not all hauntings fit readily within this purgatorial framework, however. Scandals ensued when individuals claimed that their relatives haunted the neighborhood or when participants in “wild hunts” included aborted fetuses whose parents could be identified.³⁸ Even in approved feasts where good souls might be expected to appear, such as those around Shrove Tuesday, it could be unclear if the spirits were demonic or something else entirely.

Despite such problematic cases, even respected theologians like Thomas Aquinas allowed for the existence and activities of spirits who were neither demons nor angels, although he argued that their manifestations were rare. For Aquinas, three points had to be determined: (1) were such spirits real; (2) how could such spirits manifest; and (3) what qualities led to their classification as good or bad spirits.³⁹ In other words, spiritual discernment must be applied to them. Gerson, like other late medieval theologians, would echo Aquinas.⁴⁰

A closer examination of such an apparition from the generation following Gerson demonstrates the intersection between discernment of spirits, the good death, and ghosts in such apparitions during the first half of the fifteenth century.⁴¹ On a November evening in 1437 Arndt Buschmann was returning from his fields near the city of Cologne when a black dog suddenly appeared and followed him. Frightened, Arndt crossed himself, and the dog transformed into an old man who gradually faded away. Arndt hurried to the local priest, one of several he would consult, and the priest told Arndt that, the next time he saw the spirit, Arndt must demand in God’s name that the spirit say who he was and why he appeared. The demand worked. After divulging that he was Arndt’s grandfather, Heinrich, the spirit revealed that he was there to ask Arndt’s help in fulfilling vows and righting wrongs so that he could ascend from purgatory to heaven. Over the course of twenty-seven

36 Koslofsky 2000, 26, gives a classic instance. While much of Schmitt 1999 focuses on monastic writings, particularly vivid examples can be found on pp. 62–65 & 79–81. See also Caciola 1996, 15–26.

37 Le Goff 1984, 243.

38 Caciola 1996, 2000; Alexandre-Bidon 1998, 273–96. For a summary of the many possibilities, see “A Densely Populated Universe,” in Cameron 2010, 31–40.

39 Le Goff 1984, 269.

40 Schmitt 1999, 156–59.

41 Lecouteux 1999. This case is briefly discussed in Schmitt 1999, 152–55.

weeks, Arndt worked on Heinrich's behalf. In the process the ghost and the farmer had long discussions about the afterlife, religious devotion, and familial bonds. Two days before the last mass benefitting Heinrich, he told Arndt that he needed to take a small trip; three days later the transfigured Heinrich returned to Arndt to thank him, reveal details about heavenly blessings, and promise to intercede for Arndt in the future.⁴²

Such events were rare yet plausible, if we are to believe medieval monks, but were they real?⁴³ For many modern readers, the "reality" of such ghost stories determines the reader's response, but that perspective misses the point in the fifteenth century. The story of Arndt and Heinrich may be a fabrication; records have not survived that allow verification of the story or even the individuals' existence, if such documents were ever produced in a world where literacy was so limited. But the author took great care to embed the story in a distinct time and place and to provide it with a myriad of verifiable details. Like the best of such accounts, he addressed the way the story came to be written. Several manuscripts state that Arndt himself was unable to write down even half of the story because of the "terror" he still suffered when thinking about it. In one manuscript the final lines contain a notation that this "history" was written by Jean de Hoerhausen in December 1446, but it at least suggests that Arndt had some hand in its composition.⁴⁴ Such specific attribution, the details about daily life in the western Empire, and the combination of legitimate and questionable piety gave Heinrich's haunting the ring of truth. That sense of plausibility was all that was needed for it to be effective. Further contributing to the story's verisimilitude were the integration of beliefs and practices involving the good death and spiritual discernment.

One of the central preoccupations of the living in such visitations was ascertaining if the spirit was good or bad and, thereby, if its revelations were legitimate or illegitimate. For the laity, that meant seeking clerical guidance. Arndt Buschmann thus immediately did the right thing when faced with Heinrich's ghost: he consulted a priest. The priest told him to "put the spirit on oath," that is, to subject him to the type of questioning found in spiritual discernment and exorcisms. When Heinrich responded satisfactorily and accepted being doused with holy water, he clearly was not a demon, but what he was remained vague.⁴⁵ Despite such signs, Heinrich had to continue to prove himself throughout his time on earth. As with more traditional cases needing spiritual discernment, Heinrich had to be tested

42 There have been several recent editions of such "dialogs": von Tepl 2013 (1401); Gobi 2004 (1323). Marie-Anne Polo de Beaulieu provided a brief interpretation of the latter text in "Le 'De spiritu Guidonis' ou comment apprivoiser un revenant," in Alexandre-Bidon & Treffort 1993, 295–307.

43 Schmitt 1999 bases his synthesis of such ghost stories on accounts from the eleventh to early fourteenth centuries. The most popular work of the famous Carthusian Jacobus de Clusa (d. 1465) was his *De apparitionibus animarum post exitum*. Koslofsky 2000, 26, notes that "at least 80 manuscripts and 13 printed editions, in Latin and German, survive from the period 1465–1520."

44 Lecouteux 1999, 88–89.

45 Ibid., 45–48.

whenever he interacted with humans, which left Arndt sounding quite persistent or perhaps a little slow. When Arndt returned from Cologne, where he fulfilled Heinrich's requests for masses, he told Heinrich that "[m]any people say that you're not a true spirit but a deceitful one, and that you act against the faith."⁴⁶ This led Heinrich to make a profession of faith. Only a few days before Heinrich ascended to heaven, Arndt returned to this topic and asked why he should believe Heinrich. Even when the blessed Heinrich returned, bearing the influence of the beatific vision, Arndt raised the question again: should the dead who return be believed?⁴⁷

Heinrich's intermingling of piety and personal concerns would also signal to an audience that he was a legitimate spirit, even if those concerns contributed to his suffering after death. Although such discernment might not fit within a Gersonian program, it appealed to a commonsensical piety. Following a pattern in such apparitions, Heinrich appeared to a family member, his grandson Arndt, and recounted details about family history and finances, including ones that called his family's morals into question. Also, as in many such accounts, he asked for masses, being quite specific about how many were to be said by which religious order. The revelations he brought from Purgatory contained stories about the suffering of clergy who were covetous, men who did not respect Sunday, and people who prayed poorly, all stereotypical images of the false Christian.⁴⁸ As a contrite soul, he blamed himself for his suffering: he was unduly sad when his wife died and was angry when his children stole some of his money while she was dying. Heinrich's final confession acted as an antithesis to the thoughtful and transformative confession found in the literature on the good death: he could not abandon his hatred of others. As such, it reinforced the message found in those works. If Heinrich had only been truly penitent over these emotions, even on his deathbed, he would have been saved. In fact, if he had not received grace through communion at the last minute, he would have never been saved at all.⁴⁹

Heinrich's grasp of theology also complemented the level of learning found in works about the good death, and his accuracy confirmed the argument made in discernment literature that a spirit would be known by his products. Many main pastoral concerns are covered during the discussions Arndt and Heinrich had: the value of fasting, the importance of good works, the need for true contrition, and the essential role of a good death, including a thorough confession.⁵⁰ Throughout the *Tripartitum* Gerson emphasized the need for complete confessions and the consequences of flawed ones. For example, when Gerson discussed the Eighth Commandment, he depicted omission and lying in confession as "bearing false

46 Ibid., 54.

47 Ibid., 73–44, 77–78.

48 Ibid., 45, 48–50, 61, 65–66.

49 Ibid., 55, 64–65.

50 Ibid., 64–65, 83–85.

witness” as much as falsely accusing others.⁵¹ His exposition of the Seven Deadly Sins in part two gave the penitent and his spiritual director a precise, progressive guide for the “examination of conscience” at the heart of a good confession. For Gerson, confession must be done at least annually, it should occur in a public place where others are able to see, and some “crimes” cannot be absolved by an ordinary priest.⁵² Heinrich echoed Gerson’s statements about confession’s value and the correct methods for performing it.

Yet the interpretations found in accounts, such as that of Arndt Buschmann, are never without theological problems, problems that signal the extent to which lived religion embodied theological concepts developed by more academic thinkers. In literature on the good death and discernment of spirits, the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins provided precise guides for the penitent to bear in mind when confessing. Heinrich’s list of flaws encompassed many of their aspects but was far more diffuse.⁵³ Heinrich was particularly likely to challenge official doctrine when he was asked to integrate material and spiritual components, such as bodies and spirits or the natural and supernatural realms. Near the middle of the haunting, Arndt asked Heinrich how he could speak so well if he did not have a body. In a linguistic *tour de force*, Heinrich conflated multiple senses of “spirit” and gave a rambling disquisition explaining how God only allows certain spirits to speak and that the spirit forms speech, not the body. His perspective directly challenged late medieval theology of the body and the logical foundation for the pains of purgatory.⁵⁴ Later, at the end of Heinrich’s time on earth, Arndt described how his spirit ascended to heaven and left his body, a point Gerson clearly challenged in his analysis of resurrection.⁵⁵ Arndt and Heinrich also engaged in a lengthy discussion of purgatory that led to the description of multiple purgatories and the ability to experience purgatorial cleansing in the material world; in so doing, they moved far beyond the question of earthly entrances to purgatory found in other contemporary texts.⁵⁶ Some of Arndt’s questions moved into more suspect territory, too, such as when he asked Heinrich if he would ever like to return to earth, that is, to be reincarnated, although Arndt did not use that term.⁵⁷

Such pronouncements and speculations were only some of the reasons why it could be difficult to discern Heinrich’s spiritual status and to compel him to speak the

51 Gerson, 7.1:202.

52 Ibid., 7.1:399.

53 Lecouteux 1999, 57.

54 Ibid., 58–59.

55 Ibid., 79; Gerson 7.1:195.

56 Lecouteux 1999, 70–71. Such an idea was not as odd as it might seem. Some medieval theologians had allowed for the possibility of a place where the dead could wait before they continued to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. Such waiting areas had several names: *receptacula*, *habacula*, *promptuaría*. See Ariès 1985, 139–40; Dinzelbacher 1986, 71.

57 Lecouteux 1999, 80.

truth; they certainly could make theologians such as Gerson skeptical. His actions could also cast doubt on his good intentions. From his first appearance, Heinrich took many forms, and some, such as the black dog, were frequently associated with demons.⁵⁸ Heinrich inspired fear in Arndt, even once Arndt knew who he was, and his apparitions so terrorized people who shared Arndt's house that they moved out. Such manifestations and reactions to them were not confined to Heinrich's early apparitions. Throughout the account, Heinrich lacked control over his visits; he appeared suddenly and faded out at inopportune times, becoming "weakened."⁵⁹ Heinrich could only become visible to Arndt, a situation Heinrich blamed on the faults of Arndt's father, that is, Heinrich's son.⁶⁰ These are all characteristics that Gerson would see as fraught, signs that challenged earlier positive ones Heinrich displayed. Yet they, too, could have positive pastoral implications if viewed as the products of Heinrich's less than ideal death. They testified to the suffering, flaws, and unnaturalness of those who were unable to enact a good death.

The treatment of the devil, known throughout the text as "the Evil One," epitomizes the tensions between legitimacy and illegitimacy in such spiritual visitations and the ways that the literature on the revenant dead forms part of a continuum of beliefs about spirits and death in the fifteenth century, a continuum to which spiritual discernment and the good death also belong. Heinrich blamed his early appearance and some of the misfortunes Arndt faced on a devil that tormented him but was not a part of him, an important distinction in discernment. Although they were able to banish the devil with the help of clergy and pious deeds, the demonic presence overshadowed their interactions. During one discussion, Arndt continued to test Heinrich, questioning the extent to which he should be trusted:

"Can I believe what you said when the Evil One still was with you?" Arndt asked.

"You can't believe it, even if what I said was good because the Evil One deceives people through the good discourses that they believe like prophecies. He also deceives people through other charms which he accomplishes through diabolical illusions."⁶¹

Such pronouncements do not negate all of Heinrich's testimony, but they stress the limits of human perception and the challenges those practicing spiritual discernment faced.

One of Heinrich's odder stories, told after the devil was banished, illustrates the problems that even the well-intentioned could have in discerning spirits and the

58 He first appears in various forms on pp. 45–47. Heinrich's metaphorical explanation for his appearance as a black dog, a wizened man, and other suspect forms would have not removed all suspicion: *ibid.*, 56–57.

59 *Ibid.*, 47, 55, 58.

60 *Ibid.*, 54. Other ghost stories would explain sudden appearances and disappearances as the spirit being subject to God's will; here there is little sense of causation.

61 *Ibid.*, 77.

unexpected consequences of a death that was less than ideal. Inspired by Arndt's questions about the devil, Heinrich describes a visit he made after death to a "pious cousin," a visit inspired by his children who had caused him "great suffering because he left them a lot of goods and they divided them inequitably because of their envy and evil intentions."⁶² There he watched his cousin confuse his responses with those of the devil. (Gerson would likely blame some of this confusion on the fact that his cousin was a woman.) The devil's requests seemed plausible and pious: he asked her to tell Heinrich's children that each of them needed to go on a pilgrimage to Aix-la-Chapelle on Heinrich's behalf, to have nine masses said, to fast on bread and water, and to give alms. The cousin then proceeded to do each of these activities herself, after which she visited Heinrich's children and reported that he was saved. Heinrich never addressed the misdirection in this story, that the cousin accomplished these charitable and pious deeds rather than Heinrich's children. He never explained that this mistake likely had a special appeal for a devil who thereby caused Heinrich's cousin to expend such time, energy, and expense to no avail. He never noted how the devil may have reveled in confusing such a clearly pious and charitable soul who then inadvertently prevented Heinrich's family from performing similar charity that would benefit both themselves and Heinrich. He did not even remark that his cousin's intentional summoning of Heinrich could make her seem like the very necromancers Heinrich later damned! Instead, Heinrich's only preoccupations were with the source of the advice and its effects on that advice: because the Devil requested such pious deeds, they were innately illegitimate.⁶³ Because his cousin had been unable to discern a demon from his benign spirit, because she was unable to compel that demon to respond truthfully, Heinrich endured the consequences of his poor death longer than was necessary. By making his own salvation contingent on understanding the source of positive piety, Heinrich places *discretio spirituum* at the heart of Christian truth and salvation.

Although excellent work on late medieval and early modern spiritual discernment has been done, much of it tends to view the practice in light of the confessional debates and concerns over "false" mystics that were so central to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholicism. And there are good reasons to do so. As Jean Gerson's writings showed, figures like Brigit of Sweden and Catherine of Siena produced similar anxieties and inspired him to coalesce his thought on discernment into influential treatises. Such late medieval practices and attitudes towards spiritual discernment, however, should also be seen as coming out of the ministries surrounding death and the care of souls, such as the practice of a good death.

62 Ibid., 66–67; quote here from 66.

63 Further on, Heinrich reveals that his cousin was suffering in Purgatory but that she would be saved because she truly never thought that she was practicing magic and she confessed thoroughly each month (Lecouteux 1999, 67–68). Other examples exist of such matter-of-fact treatment of figures we might describe as mediums; see Caciola in Gordon & Marshall 2000, 69, for the early fifteenth-century *fraticello* of Berne.

Once discernment is placed in that framework, it highlights the diversity of late medieval perceptions of immanence; instead of a place where demons and angels battle, the world becomes populated by diverse spirits, all of which might play some role in human salvation. Although demons, angels, and saints remained the primary apparitions humans experienced, others were accessible and assessable. In this late medieval Christianity, discernment of spirits encompassed discernment of ghosts.

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