DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

A Cosmological View

Robert R. Marsh

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION in 2006, *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins has become something of a literary phenomenon, occupying best-seller lists, spawning imitators and enemies, and establishing a cultural beachhead for what has been called the New Atheism. In his book Dawkins argues that religion is, at best, just one fairy-tale among many and, at worst, a divisive and destructive force in the world. Such sentiments are, of course, by no means novel, yet surely the popularity of Dawkins' book flags a new phase in the public estimation of religion. Many Christian commentators have been stirred to oppose such a shift; but I want to suggest it may well be for the better, since it draws attention to the quiet cost we people of religion have paid for our easy life these last few hundred years, and it offers us a choice.

This article is about discernment of spirits, particularly in the Ignatian tradition: that capacity of 'perceiving and understanding, at least to some extent, the various motions which are caused in the soul: the good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected' (Exx 313). Discernment is about perceiving, understanding and choosing among spiritual things so as to act in this world under the influence of God.

Maybe I can write these words in a journal of spirituality without eliciting pity or amusement, but how would they fare in a wider public context? It is in such a context that Dawkins and Dennett, Hitchens and Harris mark out their territory. Secular society often seems to regard religion as a quaint personal quirk, deserving patronising bemusement rather than active opposition—harmless enough as long as its adherents keep it to themselves and do not expect belief to make a difference in the real world where it does not belong.

The Way, 48/1 (Jan 2009), 9–24

The Religious Pact with Modernity

This is a caricature, of course, but one that catches the reality of the pact that religious people have made with modernity.[1] We have gratefully accepted confinement to the private sphere as the price of our freedom to believe as we wish. We are glad of the live-and-let-live attitude that permits us our personal beliefs as long as those beliefs do not publicly challenge others. This is the pact that makes liberal democracy possible—the careful division of social life into public and private spheres. But it is a pact increasingly threatened by radical religion, which challenges that division, insisting that religion is a public matter and that real belief makes clear political claims.

What does all this have to do with Ignatius and his Exercises, or with discernment? Everything! We seem to be presented with two options: either to live with our religious beliefs safely confined to the private sphere, with no public force, or to stand up for the kind of religion which erupts into the public and political arena with claims of absolute knowledge and ethical certainty. But even if we reject such fundamentalist positions out of both temperamental and epistemological humility, belief in discernment requires us to remain confident in the extraordinary claim, made in the name of a half-millennium-old mystic, that God can and should influence the choices we make and the practical projects we undertake in this world. What can ground such an audacious claim?

These issues would not have surprised Ignatius Loyola. In a profound sense the cultural questions of his day and ours are similar: faced with the shattering violence of warring religions, how do we adjudicate among opposed opinions to find a way of living together in a semblance of civilisation? Ignatius' context, on the cusp of the modern

[1] *Modernity* and *modern* are much-contested terms. The interpretation of the advent and nature of the modern period I am working with in this article relies on, among others, the following sources: Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989); Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Louis K. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993); John N. Deely, *New Beginnings: Early Modern Philosophy and Postmodern Thought* (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 1994); Alejandro García-Rivera, 'Creator of the Visible and the Invisible: Liberation Theology, Postmodernism, and the Spiritual', *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*, 3/4 (1996), 35–56, and *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999).

age, was a Europe beginning to be torn apart by Reformation and religious war, and by a proliferation of opinions and authorities that seemed ready to undermine the foundations of knowledge itself.

The Modern Divide

Over the last five hundred or so years an epistemological solution to this problem has gradually taken shape in the West: a public consensus about what kind of things we can know and how we can know them, a way of settling differences of opinion. This involves drawing divisions, between public and private, fact and value, culture and nature, subject and object. The working compromise that made modernity—and made possible its political expression in liberal democracy—was the agreement that there are basically two kinds of things we can know about and two completely different ways of knowing them.[2] We can know about *nature* by scientific means, through experiment and mathematics, by excluding purposes and values and sticking to objective knowledge based on evidence and guaranteed by methodological objectivity. This is still our standard for public knowledge.

The second kind of thing we can know about is *culture*—human things. What we have come to call the humanities involves a kind of knowing from the inside, a knowledge from feeling, a very personal kind of knowledge, resting on empathy, understanding and hermeneutics. Where our scientific knowledge of nature objectifies and enforces unanimity, our knowledge of culture burgeons and breaks into the heady variety of subjective interpretations. For example, it is the single explanation for the orbit of a planet or the structure of DNA that satisfies; but we can delight in the many interpretations of a single poem, let alone a single human soul.

Consider language: language is what connects us to each other and to the world. It is how we understand each other and understand the world: but how does what we say or write refer to the world? How do our words touch the world? The modern age's divide runs down through language too. Science touches the world through mathematics, the only language seemingly clear enough to go directly between what

[2] See, for example, Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* or Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*.

we think and what we think about, with—so we promise ourselves—no need for interpretation. Just plug in the numbers and you can plot the planets in their courses or you can build an atom bomb. The aim of scientific language is transparency and, with it, utility—physicists do not let how they feel about their symbols outweigh the practical power of using them. All they ask is: 'Does it work?'

If the language of science is transparent, the language of the humanities tends to reflect like a mirror. All you can do with texts is to interpret them, creating more texts. The language of the humanities has tended to become its own focus: language as a labyrinth of endless referral where truth is not to be found in any correspondence to the real world, but only in the internal coherence of the text itself.

Of course this analysis is something of a caricature; but caricature itself is a symptom of modernity. Changes that began around about Ignatius' time ultimately led to the transformation of a rich diversity of ways of knowing into two mutually caricaturing polarities. Scholars have tracked the way, in early modern times, the words 'nature' and 'science', and 'culture' and 'humanity' began to shift in meaning, becoming increasingly defined as mutual opposites.[3] It is now difficult for us to explore the meaning of a word such as 'natural' without opposing it to, for example, 'artificial'.

The response to violent disagreement which forged modernity was to imagine two worlds and two ways of knowing: public, factual, objective knowing based on evidence; and private, value-laden, subjective knowing based on human empathy. That is the caricature of imagination we live under. But where does religious belief belong in this picture? The problem is that it has no real place. In the modern dispensation, religion's ways of knowing have become marginalised, not fitting into either half of a divided world. Is religious knowing capable of objective demonstration? Hardly. Is it then just a matter of human interpretation? Many theologians have concluded that it is, but to do so is to give up religion's own way of knowing, which transcends the modern divide.

Ignatius is one of the figures who resisted the divisive effects of incipient modernity. He trekked back and forth across a war-torn Europe, dodging armies and privateers, gathering a polyglot bunch of

[3] See, for example, Funkenstein, Merchant, Dupré or García-Rivera.

fellow pilgrims dedicated to a religious way of perceiving, understanding, choosing and acting in the world, based on the discernment of spirits. The *Spiritual Exercises* consistently muddle the division of creation into nature and culture. They insist that God is alive and labouring both in the world and in every human experience. They are structured according to a technology of discernment: the moment-by-moment apparatus of encounter through the pattern of the hour of prayer, the hour-by-hour rhythm of review and repetition, and the day-by-day orientation of spiritual direction. The *Spiritual Exercises* have no heart without discernment.

Listening to the Message of Discernment

I work in an Ignatian retreat house. We live by the conviction that we can discover the places in experience where God is alive and labouring, and by the practical knack of fostering such encounter so that God's work might be done in the world. Sometimes it seems almost humdrum: we hardly think about how extraordinary that conviction and practice are. We take for granted—we have confirmed for us every day—that God does stuff, real stuff, in the lives of those who join us for a day, a week, or a month. And we forget how outrageous that belief is for modern epistemology: discernment is real; it works. How do we manage to live with the discomfort of that knowledge?

I think we have three options. We can accept that our experience of discernment is not a matter of objective knowledge, and therefore treat it as private and subjective. Or we can insist that our experience is in fact objective and attempt to enforce it as universal. Or we can take our experience of discernment seriously as religious knowledge: knowledge neither merely of the natural world nor of human culture. Unsurprisingly, I favour the third option.

The first accepts that religious behaviour is only ever a private or personal matter; that even though we make life-changing choices based on discernment—choices with wide-ranging practical effects—we make them for no stronger reason than personal inclination. We see the second option in those who regard their personal religious beliefs as objective knowledge—the people whom Dawkins despises, who deny evolution based on their reading of the Bible or seek to impose their opinions by suicide bombing. Neither option satisfies our sense of what

A premodern view of spirits: angels and devils from a fifteenth-century French manuscript

discernment is actually like. The third possibility is to take our practice of discernment seriously and let it question what can indeed be known.

What would it look like to take discernment seriously, to draw out its epistemological implications? What would it be like to say that what we do when we discern is at once about God, ourselves and the world? It would require, I think, a reconception of each of those terms, of God, of ourselves and of the world—our theology, our anthropology and our cosmology. I am only going to explore the last of these here: our cosmology—our sense of what the world is like, what it is made of and how it works. What must the world be like if we are not deluded in our sense that discernment actually works? Discernment poses an awkward cosmological question: what is real? What kind of cosmology makes sense of discernment, rather than reducing it to either an anomaly or a private devotion?

Are Spirits Real?

If these questions seem too grand or too woolly, let me be more specific: we talk about discernment of spirits—Ignatius speaks of the good spirit and the bad spirit, of the angel of darkness masquerading as an angel of light, and so on—but what exactly are we talking about? Are the spirits that we are discerning real? I believe these are the crucial questions we need to answer in order to avoid the modern divide.

There are four ways that the central question—are spirits real?—gets answered among those who give the Exercises and those who study them.

Pragmatic Agnosticism

Most modern translations of the *Spiritual Exercises* have a footnote somewhere that addresses the issue of spirits, usually in a tone of careful embarrassment. The authors do not want to put anybody off by making claims for the realism of Ignatius' language. They talk about 'context', 'hermeneutics', 'a different age'. But, whether the footnote is long or short, it tends to end up with the pragmatic, instrumental, 'hey, who cares?' approach. One way of handling the question of what spirits we discern is simply to say that it does not matter because discernment works; discernment is a practical tool. We can follow the rules, map out consolation and desolation, and make our choices, whatever we believe, and whatever Ignatius believed. This is true, but it is also very unsatisfactory. If I am going to use a tool I like to know how it works, or at least to know that someone somewhere knows how it works and why it works.

Cosmological Realism

The footnotes I mentioned are embarrassed or apologetic because Ignatius makes—or more often takes for granted—a cosmological claim: that there are spirits making up this created world alongside rocks and plants and animals and us. Once that claim would have been commonplace; it would have been general knowledge, like our own belief in atoms or gravity. But a lot has changed, both in cosmology and in epistemology, since then. In modernity angels and spirits are no more real than pixies and elves—at least not objectively, publicly real. I am often surprised at how many people will admit to believing in angels; but, when pressed, they often turn out to be private, closeted believers who would not be willing to base public policy on their belief if they were a monarch, a Prime Minister or a President. The cosmological understanding of discernment is an uncomfortable one: all it seems to have to recommend it is the fact that Ignatius assumed it, and that our Ignatian language assumes it.

Theological Immediacy

There are two other ways of answering the question 'Are spirits real?', which go beyond pragmatic agnosticism while still appearing to dodge uncomfortable cosmological commitments. One is theological, and the other is anthropological. The theological option translates Ignatian

language about created spirits into language about the Holy Spirit: language about God. Instead of talking about the good spirit causing consolation we can talk about God causing consolation. It has the attraction of cutting out the middleman, and appeals to the familiar Ignatian principle of letting the Creator deal directly with the creature. But I think it has problems. First, although it sounds good we have very little idea of how to conceive of God actually doing that, acting in us! How does the absolute interact with the relative, the infinite with the finite, the eternal with the fleeting? I am not saying God does not do all those things but I am left needing an explanation.

A second issue with the theological stance on discernment is that it fails Ignatius in a couple of ways. First, though Ignatius does speak of the direct action of Creator on creature, he in fact devotes much greater space to the way our experience of God is mediated by created things rather than being direct and immediate.[4] For Ignatius the usual situation is for God's action to be mediated, and the theological account misses this. The second way the theological account fails Ignatius is crucial: the question of the bad spirit. If I substitute the Holy Spirit for Ignatius' good spirits and good angels what do I put in place of his bad spirit and bad angels, his 'enemy of our human nature'? The usual answer, when spirit language is being removed from our talk of discernment, is to parse the bad spirit as something vague such as 'whatever in us opposes God'. But while sliding from the good spirit to the Holy Spirit happens easily (even Ignatius seems to fall into such talk from time to time) the shift from bad spirit to human intransigence introduces real changes in the way discernment is practised: it is simply not the equivalent that it is claimed to be.

Anthropological Reductionism

In fact when it comes to the bad spirit the theological approach slides over into an anthropological one. Why not, then, simply interpret both Ignatius' kinds of spirit as essentially human phenomena? Ignatius talks about the 'motions' of our souls—thoughts, feelings, desires, urges, fears—being caused by spirits, but in places he lets the language slip and seems to be talking about the motions themselves as if they were the spirits. Discernment does lend itself to anthropological

[4] Ignatius' single paragraph treating consolation without previous cause (Exx 330) is indicative of this.

language; we say that it is about finding our deepest desires, about seeking out life, light and energy. Why not simply replace talk of spirits with talk of our moods?

This is an attractive proposition—it gives us scope to unleash the riches of the psychological arts, for instance—but, if it is carried through to completion, using the ideas of consolation and desolation with any real force becomes quite difficult. Most of the translations and commentaries, and many informal discussions, find themselves doing semantic gymnastics trying to distinguish 'spiritual' consolation from 'ordinary' consolation, or just feeling good. What makes the difference between being in a good mood and being 'in consolation', or between being 'in desolation' and being down? The anthropological approach finds itself having to define 'spirit', 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' all over again in purely human terms to be able to make such discriminations. And that is not easy to do in the face of the experience of the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises, when what looks good can be deceitful, what feels terrible can be a place of grace, and the experience of new life can be profoundly disturbing.

Good and bad angels, from a fifteenth-century French manuscript

I am not saying that the anthropological account of discernment cannot be carried through, but that to do so costs more in complication than is worth paying. Ignatius himself has no such difficulty, believing that we should receive or

reject motions not according to any characteristic of the motions themselves but according to whether they originate in a good or bad spirit. He is more concerned with where a motion comes from and where it is going than with what the motion is like in itself. This is not just a semantic issue: it makes a difference in our practice as professional 'discerners', as spiritual directors and as retreat givers.

I suspect that most modern retreat-givers and spiritual directors are, most of the time, content with pragmatism. When pushed to defend a stance, they may adopt some hybrid of the theological and anthropological stories. Such a state of affairs is unsurprising given our account of the modern settlement: the specific realm of religious knowing is yet again lost in the space opened up by a dichotomy between the natural and the human. This is the real failure of the non-cosmological angles on discernment: they shirk the enormous epistemological opportunity of acknowledging this realm. A braver response would be to consider what the world would need to be like to make what we do in discernment more than an embarrassing anomaly. There is no need to reject what modernity has given us—humanism, democracy and science, for starters—to recognise that it has also taken away something important, something essential: a sense that religious phenomena can be in some way known, in some way real. The central term we must re-imagine is, of course, spirit.

Angelic Hints for Re-imagining Spirit

Premodern Europe handled the sense of religious knowing through the idea of the angel, and though we may no longer be willing to speak of angels and spirits in the way Ignatius did, there remains a value in examining the role they played in the cosmology of his day to see what our own cosmology may have lost by outgrowing them. What did angels do?

A Spiritually Polarised Cosmos

Angels found their way into Judaism late, through the influence of other Near Eastern religions, but they have been part of the Christian story from the start.[5] They are part of created reality but actors in the

[5] A good survey of premodern cosmology can be found in C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994). A fine account of the place of angels in medieval culture is provided by David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle*

drama of its salvation too: both the powers and dominions from whom we are saved and the messengers and agents assisting salvation's unfolding. We may now regard them as mythological decoration, but they represent two insights that we forget at our peril: that the cosmos itself can be spiritual, and that the spiritual is already polarised. We encounter the spiritual under two aspects, as both assisting and impeding our quest for God and God's quest for us. Any cosmology that drains the created world of good and evil has to find them elsewhere: either seeing the origin of good and evil in the divine or in humanity—and often doing both. A cosmology with created spirit gives us a way of understanding our sense that the world itself can be both magnificent and malign.

A Beautiful, Active Cosmos

Angels are not just part of our stories but part of our creeds. The Nicene Creed declares our belief in God as creator of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. Heaven—the unseen world—is the world of created spirit; and the creed both affirms its reality and soundly subordinates it to God. This was, among other things, a way of keeping the Platonists in their place and their Forms and Ideas firmly on this side of the chasm between creator and creature, but it also enshrines a sense that the world is more than what we see, is more than just things. Take the scientific question: what is the world made of? We are often tempted to say *things*—stuff, matter in motion, energy. Indeed, scientists often go too far in making a material answer to that question, misremembering something else under their noses: what, for example, is a field or a law of nature? Are they real? What is gravity, for example? It isn't a thing, an object, part of the visible world: it is related to the form, the structure, the pattern of things—invisible but potent. We might have banished angels but we still have powers and dominions even if they are in the neutered form of natural laws.

The forms of nature are not only experienced as causal powers but also under their complementary aspect as beauty: gravity may force us

Ages (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998). Two intriguing postmodern applications of angelology are: Michel Serres, *Angels, a Modern Myth*, translated by Francis Cowper, edited by Philippa Hurd (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), and Régis Debray, *Transmitting Culture*, translated by Eric Rauth (New York: Columbia UP, 2000).

to fall but we are drawn by the beautiful forms of things. The idea of angels supported the sense that creation is not the value-free mechanism of modern cosmology but something capable of moving our human hearts. Angels once drew us, moved us, supplying the aesthetic dimension of reality and speaking of the significance of creation.

A Cosmos that Mediates Presence

Moreover angels have always been go-betweens. Their Hebrew name, like the Greek, means *messenger* or *envoy*. In the Old Testament the text is always shifting back and forth between the angel of the Lord and the Lord in person, as though neither alone would do. Angels are the kind of being that mediates a divine presence; and they remind us that the created world itself can mediate and make present God in person. Most of us have been in a place that seems to echo with the sacred; and we have also been in places that we cannot leave quickly enough.

A Relational Cosmos

To speak of angels as go-betweens is to speak of a quality of relatedness in creation that is neither mathematical nor coincidental. To ask about their reality is to ask whether relationship can be real or if it must always be subjective. An answer going back at least as far as William of Ockham is that relation is only real as a mental phenomenon; the patterns we see in the universe are in our all in our minds, like hawks and handsaws seen in clouds. When our cosmology lost room for created spirit it squeezed out a far more nuanced view of the reality of relations. Angels offer a way of saying that relation and spirit are real aspects of the world. It is a sense we need keenly in these times of global warming, extinction and waste, since it helps us to talk about the worth and value of creation in its own right rather than as an extension of human interests.

An Undivided Cosmos?

I am not asking you to believe in chocolate-box cherubs or androgynously handsome guys with feathers. Though I have appealed to angel traditions, this is not in order to move them from the subjective to the objective pole of modern knowledge. What is of prior importance is the work they did in the cosmology to which they belonged. There may well be something better than angels to keep our cosmology hospitable to spirit but, whatever that might be, we need to keep space in creation for

significance, value, power, presence and beauty: this is the very space that was excluded when the available ways of knowing were reduced to two, and we must not let it be lost or forgotten.

The Three Archangels, *by Marco d'Oggiono*

It might seem an easy move when considering the discernment of spirits to dodge cosmological questions and opt for pragmatic, theological or anthropological accounts, but the cost is greater than dismissing a childish belief in angels; it is even greater than making Ignatius' teaching on discernment incoherent and difficult to apply. The cost is that we acquiesce in a vision of creation as a splintered reality with no more meaning or pattern or beauty or moral worth than we project on to it. That is not the vision of the Principle and Foundation nor of the Contemplatio.

Presence, Discernment, Justice: Thronic Mysticism

I shall conclude with a kind of parable or angelic 'Just So' story. Once upon a time Europe was fascinated by one aspect of angels. Jewish scholars, Islamic mystics and Christian theologians loved the idea that the angels made a kind of ontological and epistemological bridge between us and the Divine. They were fascinated with counting angels, naming them, and putting them in their proper order in a spiritual butterfly collection. In the Christian tradition Pseudo-Dionysius elaborated the idea of the celestial hierarchy, a grand choir of angels with nine kinds in all, in three ranks of three. Scholars and mystics embellished and refined until this angelology became an insight into humanity as

well: an anthropology. Perhaps this is clearest in the heaven-most choir made up of Cherubim, Seraphim and Thrones. Together, I believe, they provide an icon of the human imagination. The Cherubim, often depicted with wings alive with eyes, are the epitome of intellect. They know God in a vision that is as unimpeded as our own is not. The Seraphim are the angels on fire with zeal and devotion for God—their name means 'burning'—and in them we see an image of our own thirst for God, our own passion and unquenchable desire. The Thrones, however, are more difficult to place.

Much, much later, when mysticism became a subject to be studied academically, these orders of angels provided a standard way of classifying different kinds of mystic. There were Cherubic mystics who went to God by way of the intellect, and whose spirituality focused on vision and insight, knowing and unknowing, such as Meister Eckhart. Seraphic mysticism was the way of love and longing, feeling and fervour exemplified by St Francis of Assisi. There were two kinds of mysticism according to two kinds of angels. This division of mysticism into two parallels nicely the modern divide: knowing and feeling as the two halves of the human being. But could the order of angels missing from this account, the Thrones, give us a secret glimpse of what modernity did away with?

A place to start is with the experience of premodern mystics. We are lucky to have written texts narrating the experience of many mystics, and it might surprise a modern reader how many of their visions are packed with angels, and how many auditions are told by angels. The Seraphim turn up, fiery and ardent. The Cherubim know and see a lot. And then there are the Thrones, which seem to be the puzzling place where three ideas come together: justice, discernment and presence. First, the Thrones appear as the places, the seats even, where God makes Godself present.[6] In a sense they carry the weight of mediating God's presence to the world. Secondly, the mystics also speak of that presence as being always orientated towards justice: the Thrones are

[6] For example, 'They are completely intent upon remaining always and forever in the presence … utterly available to receive the divine visitation, … they bear God and are ever open, like servants, to welcome God' (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 205D, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibhéid [Mahwah: Paulist, 1987], 165).

Judgment Seats where God sits to establish right order here and now.[7] Thirdly, the Thrones appear as the agents of discernment: they help us to tell good spirits from bad, the right way from the wrong.[8]

Presence, justice, discernment: the Thrones bring these three ideas together just as the Cherubim bring together knowing and vision and clarity. And yet how easily, in our dichotomized lives, do justice and spirituality fall apart. If anyone is a Thronic mystic it is Ignatius—the Exercises weave together those three themes intricately—yet we who follow find that our practice constantly unpicks the pattern. When modernity did away with angels it was the Thrones who suffered most. Modern Western Christians have privatised discernment; they struggle to integrate faith and justice; and they find it difficult to believe in a present God.

A cosmological understanding of discernment reopens a space for another way of knowing, one which does not divide culture from nature, or fact from value, or subject from object. Discernment is knowledge through imagination, through relationship, through encounter: it is what Ignatius called 'felt knowledge'. It is knowledge that moves us. In Ignatius' eyes we are swimming in a sea of spirit, but like fishes we do not know what water is because we have never been without it. That sea has its dangers, currents and shoals, but we have a compass to steer by: our capacity to discern or discriminate spirits.

A Hierarchy of Aims

I would like to conclude by reviewing the priorities of my argument, since I have found that talk of angels tends to attract attention away from my main objective. The goal I most want to achieve here is to evoke a sense of wonder at the amazing thing we do when we discern—and at the extraordinary epistemological claim which is implicit in our practice. We need to examine and understand the basis of that claim:

[7] For example, 'These are given the name Thrones … because of their ministry of judging …. Indeed the Thrones are themselves the seats of discernment. Thrones, in addition, represent the celestial place of assembly for supercelestial discernment in which justice is examined. Thrones are … that order through whom God … reveals His Justice.' (Alan of Lille, *Treatise on the Angelic Hierarchy*, translated by Steven Chase, in *Angelic Spirituality: Medieval Perspectives on the Ways of Angels* [Mahwah: Paulist, 2002], 212).

[8] For example, 'He who guided me was an Angel belonging to the choir of Thrones, the very ones who are charged with discernment' (*Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, translated by Mother Columba Hart, [New York: Paulist, 1980], 263).

what in the world we are doing when we discern spirits. My second goal is to encourage us to take Ignatius seriously in his own account of discernment and to think carefully about the costs of defusing his language out of cosmological embarrassment. I believe the pragmatic, theological and anthropological alternatives to Ignatius' account are flawed, and that we need to make space for a renewed cosmological treatment. I am not entirely sure that such a task that can be carried to completion, and I view the appeal to angelic tradition as speculative at best. Yet I think it points out some plausible directions for enquiry.

What kind of cosmology can do justice to the practice of discernment and can remain acceptable today? The role played by created spirit in premodern cosmology hints that what we need is a conception of creation's order and pattern that respects its reality, its power to influence, its capacity to move us, and its capability both to draw us closer to God and to drive us away. If I am even vaguely right, then discernment is a gift to the world at large. It demolishes the artificial boundaries between the public and the private, between nature and culture, between rich and poor, between humanity and the rest of creation, between us and them.

Robert R. Marsh SJ studied chemistry at Oxford for several years before entering the Society of Jesus in 1986. After studies in London and Berkeley, he is now on the staff of Loyola Hall Jesuit Spirituality Centre, near Liverpool, in the UK.