

John Climacus on Discernment and Spiritual Perception

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Abstract: The paper explores a connection between discernment and spiritual perception. The discussion proceeds in four main steps. First, discernment as a practice underlying most Christian practices is introduced. Second, a distinction is made between judgment and perception, and it is argued that discernment involves both. Third, the concept of spiritual perception is introduced and the models of such perception are briefly discussed. Finally, drawing on John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a connection is established between discernment and spiritual perception.

Keywords: Spiritual Perception, John Climacus, Discernment, Judgment

Discernment as a Meta-Practice

In patristic theology, discernment occupies a special place and may be viewed as a meta-practice. For the sake of this discussion, a meta-practice may be defined as a practice that underlies most Christian practices. Let me venture a bold claim that our thinking about most, perhaps all theological topics requires a discerning mind. Discernment *as a practice* or a capacity seems to be, if not necessary, then certainly most appropriate and highly desirable for thinking about everything else in Christian theology and beyond. It is an excellence underlying other excellences or, as John Cassian puts it in his *Conferences*: “among all the virtues it [discernment] holds the scepter and the rule.”¹ The practice of

¹ John Cassian, *Conferences* I.23, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), 58. Cassian preferred term for discernment is *discretio*, which can also be used more broadly as “judgment” or “power of distinguishing.”

discernment is so far-reaching as to make our reflection on the topic somewhat circular: we need a measure of discernment in order to analyze and reflect on discernment. However, this circularity is not hopeless since having conceptual and historical grasp of discernment is different from practicing discernment. The theoretical grasp of discernment and the practice of discernment are two distinct acts with two different contents and goals. Hence, there seems to be no performative contradiction involved in trying to analyze the concept of discernment without necessarily achieving any spiritual heights in practicing discernment.

If it takes a measure of discernment to reflect on discernment, it should also be true that a lack of discernment often leads to rather poor accounts of discernment. For example, there is no denying that careful word studies of the Greek term *diakrisis* and the Latin term *discretio* in patristic thought are helpful; they are motivated by a pragmatic need to limit the scope of historical inquiry, especially when such an inquiry begins its life as a dissertation; however, the exclusive focus on studying one term in its context often leads to a failure to see the forest through the trees, no matter how beautiful.² The trees in question are the specific mentions of the term *diakrisis*; the forest is the incalculable number of other patristic texts and materials, which are relevant to the understanding of the *practice* of discernment because they imply the practice of discernment without the use of any technical terms.

Consider, for example, the discernment exercised by the Christian communities of Jerusalem and beyond in accepting Saul, a recently converted Pharisee with a shady history of violent persecution of Christians, into the church. The Book of Acts as well as the Pauline Epistles shed some light on this process, largely reflecting the future Apostle Paul's and his supporters' interpretation of events. It was natural for those who followed Jesus during his lifetime to regard Paul with suspicion (Gal. 1:23) or even disqualify his apostleship (cf. Acts 1:21-26). Consider the further collective discernment exercised in recognizing Paul's apostolic ministry and teaching authority: "when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" (Gal. 2:9). This distribution of labor, proposed by

² For one example of such a word study, based on a dissertation, see Anthony D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007).

the already “acknowledged pillars” to Paul, who lacked the same endorsement, did not prevent all tensions. On the contrary, the tensions occurred with James and Peter (Cephas) concerning the rules for the admission of the Gentiles. The discussion of these rules would be brought to the communal attention and discernment of the Apostolic Council (Acts 15). However, Paul’s position did not prevail immediately but was rather a matter of graduate acceptance and discernment by various local churches. The salient features of the discernment process are its communal character and length of time.

Finally, consider the eventual incorporation of Paul’s letters into the canon of the New Testament. The process of such an inclusion itself required an exercise in communal decision-making and informal judgment. Those making the decisions regarding the place of Paul’s letters in the New Testament had to ask themselves: Should Paul’s letters be included at all? If so, which letters? If certain letters, why not others? If these particular letters are authoritative, which manuscripts are to be trusted, and so on and so forth? My larger point is this: personal and communal discernment played a pivotal role in Paul’s own ministry as well as in the decisions of the early Church regarding Paul’s apostolic credentials and the significance of his ministry.

Given the breadth of the practices of discernment, I submit that the often-discussed passage regarding the “discernment of spirits” (*diakriseis pneumatōn*) in 1 Cor 12:10 represents only a silhouette of a tree in an immensely vast forest. Important as such a tree might be – and there is no doubt that this tree has produced much theological fruit – it is still only one tree. The passage is highly suggestive, of course; but focusing exclusively on this passage may lead to overlooking the fact that Paul’s whole proclamation rests on discerning what is relevant and irrelevant at a particular moment and in a particular context.³

³ For example, in his speech in the Athenian Areopagus, as related by Luke in Acts 17, Paul speaks to philosophically-minded Gentiles. Because of his target audience, he reshapes the fundamentally Jewish message about the Jewish Messiah into a message that would be more comprehensible for his Gentile audience, speaking to its polytheistic context. Paul (in Luke’s presentation) drops any extensive references to the Old Testament; instead he takes the pagan inscription “to the unknown God” as his point of departure to speak about the difference between God the Creator and the Greco-Roman gods (and idolatry); he has recourse to Stoic and Platonic ideas and quotes the Greek poet Aratus to talk about human relationship with God. In other words, he makes a considerable effort to translate the message intended for the Diaspora Jews and the Godfearers into a message intended for the Gentiles with no knowledge of Judaism. All these

Beyond Paul and the New Testament, consider the practice of collective discernment exercised in an early Christian collection for traveling catechists known as the *Didache*, or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. The document begins with a summary of the teaching about the two ways, the way of life and the way of death. The fundamental aim of the teaching is to discern a path of life that leads to salvation and to avoid a path that leads to damnation. If earlier chapters deal with the discernment as a spiritual practice in everyday life of all converts to Christianity, later chapters deal with the discernment exercised vis-à-vis church leadership, providing the guidelines for the reception and treatment of itinerant prophets, teachers, and apostles. These guidelines include the rules for judging the intentions of visiting Christian leaders. The rules are designed to discern whether a visiting “apostle” or “prophet” is likely to abuse the laws of hospitality, whether his preaching is consistent with the “ways of the Lord,” whether he seeks financial gain, and so on (*Didache* 11.3-12). What I wish to emphasize is that while the text does not offer a second-order reflection on *diakrisis*, and mentions the associated verb in passing only once, the underlying concept and, even more importantly, the underlying *practice* of discernment, both individual and collective, is writ large upon this document. The *Didache* provides the guidelines for forming Christian conscience with a view of maximizing the chances for a proper exercise of collective discernment.⁴

In another document, probably dating to the third century and known under the title of *The Apostolic Tradition*, the discernment of character and the discernment of spirits are undertaken in a meticulously stipulated and exceedingly rigorous selection process culminating in the admission of adult candidates to baptism in an ancient house church. Notably, the term *diakrisis* (or its equivalents) is never mentioned, but the selections, the interviews, and the exorcisms all testify to how the relatively uncomplicated first-century rite of Christian initiation became a highly developed practice of careful selection, judgment, and discernment. Not all newcomers to the church are admitted to receive the instruction. *The Apostolic Tradition* requires a rigorous inquiry into the occupations and lifestyles of those coming to the faith:

apologetic and pedagogical choices required a discerning mind capable of fitting two worlds, Jewish and Gentile, into a coherent proclamation. See N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018).

⁴ See Elisabeth Hense, *Early Christian Discernment of Spirits* (Zürick: Lit, 2016), 28-49.

If any is a pimp or procurer of prostitutes he should desist or he should be rejected. If any is a sculptor or a painter he should be instructed not to make idols; he should desist or he should be rejected. If any is an actor, or makes presentations in the theater, he should desist, or he should be rejected. If somebody teaches children it is better that he desist; if he have no other trade let me be allowed. Likewise a charioteer who competes, or anyone who goes to the races, should desist or be rejected. If any is a gladiator, or trains gladiators in fighting, or one who fights with beasts in the games, or a public official engaged in gladiatorial business should desist, or he should be rejected. If any is a priest of idols or guardian of idols, he should desist, or he should be rejected. A soldier in command must be told not to kill people; if he is ordered to do, he shall not carry it out. Nor should he take the oath. If he will not agree, he should be rejected. Anyone who has the power of the sword, or who is a civil magistrate wearing the purple, should desist, or he should be rejected. If a catechumen or a believer wishes to become a soldier they should be rejected, for they have despised God.⁵

The logic of these regulations seems to be to discourage the trades implicated in idolatry, murder, and sexual immorality, which was the general direction of prescriptions issued by the Apostolic Council in Acts 15: 20. In most cases, the catechumens pursuing such trades are to be rejected. The admission rules of *The Apostolic Tradition* may strike contemporary readers as unduly rigorous, even severe. The undergraduate students whom I teach at a private college in North America often rebel against what they perceive as undue elitism and exclusivity of this ancient Christian handbook. The guidelines of *The Apostolic Tradition* were intended to shape Christian conscience and provide orientation for Christian leadership. Whether imposing such guidelines was, in practice, a successful strategy for the selection of new members in the early church is a different matter. It would be possible for such guidelines to give rise to a community of tormented moral rigorists, who look at those in the world outside their church with a sense of moral superiority, even disdain. Such an application does not describe a healthy practice of discernment; on the contrary, such rigorism connotes narrow judgment. The practices of discernment that have gone wrong include narrow dogmatism and extreme asceticism. In

⁵ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition* 15.2-10, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 100.

justice to early Christians, it should be mentioned that the tensions and debates between moral purists and rigorists on the one hand and those who took a more forgiving attitude was internal to the second-fifth century church, as it evidenced, for example, by the Donatist and the Pelagian controversies.

Alternatively, and more plausibly, the rigorous selection process described in the *Apostolic Tradition*, when properly executed, was important for the preservation, continuation, and growth of early Christian communities, whose existence was threatened both by the external forces, such as persecution by non-Christians, and by the internal forces, such as divisions. Internal divisions among Christians were partly fueled by theological disputes and personality clashes, and partly also by the breakdown of communal discernment in some groups that associated themselves with the Christian movement. For example, according to the orthodox Christian authors, some Gnostic Christian communities, while abounding in theological imagination, often lacked discernment, which in turn was a cause of serious moral and spiritual turpitude. In his *Against Heresies*, the second-century bishop Irenaeus of Lyons complained against the Gnostic leaders: “By specious argumentation, craftily patched together, they mislead the minds of the more ignorant and ensnare them by falsifying the Lord’s words. Thus they become wicked interpreters of genuine words. They bring many to ruin by leading them, under the pretense of knowledge, away from him who established and adorned this universe, as if they had something more sublime and excellent to manifest than the God who made heaven...”⁶ The Gnostics led others astray, added Irenaeus, “by speaking the same language we do, but intending different meanings.”⁷ If Irenaeus is to be trusted – and such a trust is also a matter of subsequent and ongoing communal discernment – the distorted image of the Gospel present in the Gnostic writings is the result of arrogance, presumption, and spiritual delusion (or deliberate deception) leading to doctrinal indifferentism and moral laxity. Irenaeus’ judgment may have been harsh; nevertheless, the pastoral decisions that he had to make and the discernment that he had to exercise in the process were vital for the spread of the gospel, the handing on of the apostolic tradition, and the growth of the Church. The claim that Irenaeus was right and most Gnostics were not is a historical and theological conclusion that presupposes trusting later patristic judgment about Irenaeus’ contribution and discernment.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Haereses*, 1. Praef. 1.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Haereses*, 1. Praef. 2.

To conclude, discernment is a meta-practice undergirding much of Christian decision-making and believing. In early Christianity, the practice of discernment was far more significant than formal theological discussions about the meaning of the practice. The practice was widespread; concrete communal guidelines, as we saw in the cases of the *Didache* and *The Apostolic Tradition* were important; however, the second-order theoretical accounts of discernment are rare. Among the early authors who provided such accounts of discernment is John Cassian, who built on the Origenist tradition as transmitted and enriched by Evagrius of Pontus.⁸ While the discussion of discernment in this earlier tradition is quite valuable, the focus of the present paper is the relationship between discernment and spiritual perception. Given this focus, I will draw upon the account of discernment and spiritual perception in the classic of Christian spirituality that has been received in a distinct manner by the Christian East, namely, John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

Spiritual Perception

As a power of the human self, discernment is a form of judgment. The link between *diakrsis* and spiritual vision, or spiritual perception broadly conceived, is of paramount importance for spirituality and theology. Before we investigate this link, let us pause to identify the ways in which judgment and perception are quite distinct. As a rule, judgment involves different modalities of reasoning, from intuition to inferential reasoning to formal deduction. In contrast, ordinary sense-perception is standardly treated as something non-inferential. It is an ability to acquire beliefs about objects in the world on the basis of experience, that is to say, on the basis of something being present or given to consciousness, not on the basis of a chain of reasoning.

Consider the following classical example of the distinction between immediate sense-perception and judgment. When we look at a stick dipped into water, we see the stick as (seemingly) bent at the point where it crosses from air to water. Based on a single sense-experience, we form a belief that the stick is bent. We may subsequently check this belief against other experiences, such as taking the same stick out of the water to determine its shape, and the relevant background beliefs, such as the properties of air and water in the reflection of light. Based on this larger set of

⁸ C. Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.

experiences and background beliefs, we form a more accurate belief that the stick was not bent after all, although it originally presented itself as bent to our sense of sight. Unlike our original belief based on a single sense-perceptual experience, this later belief is a result of judgment exercised in analyzing a sequence of experiences or presentations. On the one hand, judgment is different from sense-perception because it operates on perceptual experiences; on the other hand, judgment and sense-perception are intertwined, because even a judgment that the stick is *not* bent is ultimately perceptually based, that is, derived from several observations involving perception rather than from mere speculations about the properties of light, water, and sticks.

Ordinary sense-perception operates on physical reality, converting the objective (non-mind-dependent) properties of physical objects into subjective qualia, such as shapes, colors, and smells. Spiritual perception, if it is possible at all, taps into the spiritual dimension of reality. The early Christian vocabulary of spiritual perception is fluid and does not use the expressions “spiritual perception” or “spiritual senses” as preferred terms. Instead, the patristic authors often speak of one sensory modality (such as vision or audition, for example) or sense-organ (such as eyes or ears) as qualified by reference to spirit, heart, mind, soul, or faith (“ears of the heart,” cf. Eph. 1:18; “eyes of the mind,” and so on). Spiritual perception refers to the direct apprehension of God, Christ, angels, divine presence in creation, art, the saints, as well as the apprehension of the inner state of human persons.⁹ To be sure, the possibility of such an apprehension could be challenged on metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological grounds. Some of these challenges are addressed in a collected volume that I co-edited with Frederick D. Aquino, entitled *Perceiving Things Divine: Towards a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception*.¹⁰ These challenges need not distract us here, as our primary goal is to explore the connection between spiritual perception and discernment.

There are two main models of spiritual perception. The first model treats spiritual perception as a perceptual power *sui generis*. In Greek patristic literature, this power is often located in the nous, which is the center of the self that unites the mind, heart, and will.

⁹ For a survey of Christian understandings of the concept, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ See especially John Greco’s chapter in this 2022 volume published by Oxford University Press.

John Climacus seems to have this model of spiritual perception in mind, when he uses the expression “noetic perception” (νοερά αἴσθησις) and locates the relevant power in the *nous*: “A mind disposed to the things of the spirit is certainly endowed with spiritual perception (Νοῦς νοερός πάντως καὶ νοεράν αἴσθησιν περιέβληται) and this is something that, whether we possess it or not, we should always seek to have. And when it comes, our senses desist from their natural activities.”¹¹ The saint’s main point seems to be that noetic perception is an activity that could be acquired when the ordinary senses do not operate in an ordinary way or do not operate at all. Since Climacus does not offer a well-developed account of spiritual perception, he should not be misinterpreted as using the first model exclusively.

The second model proposes an analogy between the spiritual sensorium and the five physical senses. The operation of the physical and spiritual sensorium may be conceived in three different ways. First, the physical and spiritual sensorium may be understood to function disjunctively: spiritual perception only kicks in when the physical senses are inoperative or subdued by ascetic effort. In the passage cited above, John Climacus appears to presuppose this view. Second, spiritual sensorium could be understood as working in tandem with the physical sensorium, apprehending the aspects of reality not otherwise captured by the physical sensorium. Such a view could be found in such patristic authors as Maximus the Confessor, among others.¹² According to the third view, there is one unified perceptual apparatus and spiritual perception is a transfigured, graced, and deified state of physical perception. Some patristic authorities, including St. Augustine, could be interpreted as advocating this view of the relationship between physical and spiritual perception.¹³ It should be stressed that many patristic writers discuss spiritual perception in a cursory rather than systematic manner. While the three views of the five-fold spiritual sensorium offer a helpful taxonomy, how a particular ancient Christian author fits into this taxonomy is often quite difficult to establish.

With these preliminary points of clarification in mind, we may now approach the matter of the relationship between discernment and spiritual perception. I propose to do so historically

¹¹ John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 233.

¹² See Frederick Aquino’s chapter on Maximus the Confessor in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, 104-20.

¹³ For an important treatment of these distinctions, see Mark McInroy, *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

by looking at a passage from John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. John was an ascetic writer who lived in the seventh century and spent most of his monastic career on Mount Sinai. There he wrote his now classic *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, which envisions Christian striving towards perfection as an ascent involving thirty steps, combining the biblical images of Jacob's ladder with the thirty years of Christ's earthly life. *Ladder of Divine Ascent* drew on the preceding ascetic tradition, which included Origen, Evagrius, and Diadochos of Photiki, as well as incorporated many fresh insights drawn from John's own monastic experience. John Climacus locates discernment as the twenty-sixth step of the ladder and dedicates the second-longest chapter to the topic, giving a clear indication of the topic's central significance in his thought. The chapter on discernment opens with the following reflection:

Among beginners, discernment is real self-knowledge (καθ' ἑαυτοὺς ἀληθῆς ἐπίγνωσις); among those midway along the road to perfection, it is a spiritual capacity to distinguish unflinchingly between what is truly good and what in nature is opposed to the good; among the perfect, it is a knowledge resulting from divine illumination (διὰ θείας ἐλλάμπσεως), which with its lamp can light up what is dark in others. To put the matter generally, discernment is—and is recognized to be—a solid understanding of the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things; and it is found only among those who are pure in heart, in body, in speech...¹⁴

The connection between discernment and purity of heart is in line with the tradition going back to John Cassian, who dedicated the first two chapters of his *Conferences* to the purity of heart and discernment respectively. If Cassian considered four types of discernment,¹⁵ Climacus envisions discernment as subject to

¹⁴ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 229. The Greek text may be accessed at <https://el.wikisource.org/wiki/%CE%9A%CE%BB%CE%AF%CE%BC%CE%B1%CE%BE>.

¹⁵ John Cassian, *Conferences* I.22: "So, then, the four kinds of discernment to which I have been referring will be necessary to us. First, as to material, is it true gold or spurious? Second, we must reject as fake and counterfeit coinage those thoughts which have the deceptive appearance of piety. They bear a false and not the genuine image of the king. Then we must be able to detect and to abhor those which impose a viciously heretical stamp on the precious gold of Scripture. This is not the effigy of the true king but of a tyrant. Finally, we must drive away thoughts which are like underweight coins, dangerous and inadequate, thoughts which have lost weight and

development and outlines its three stages. The first stage is “real” or “true self-knowledge” of the beginners. The alignment of discernment with self-knowledge is a relatively common trope in the ascetical tradition.¹⁶ For Climacus, discernment begins by acquiring a knowledge of the self that corresponds to reality and is free from delusion. “Real self-knowledge” is a form of introspection that goes beyond merely noting one’s internal states. This form of self-knowledge also goes beyond introspection by insisting on the importance of guarding the self against the passionate thoughts (*logismoi*). The preoccupation with the passionate thoughts reflects John’s standing within the tradition of the Evagrian writings, especially his *Praktikos*. However, John does not follow earlier ascetic writers slavishly, but speaks from the depth of his own ascetical experience.

The second stage consists of acquiring clear-sighted discrimination between good and evil. Such a form of judgment would apply to good and evil in oneself, in other individuals, in the community, in nature, and so on. It is possible that the background biblical passage for Climacus is Hebrews 5:14, where the author describes mature believers as “those whose senses (αἰσθητήρια) have been trained by practice to discern (διάκρισιν) good from evil.” The Pauline author importantly connects the discernment of good and evil with the operation of the senses and assumes that the senses can be trained. Drawing on Hebrews 5:14, some patristic writers connected the discernment of good and evil with the spiritual smell, which signals to the self the spiritual food that may be harmful and the food that may be beneficial for consumption. While John does not dwell on Hebrews 5:14, he takes the third and final stage of discernment in the direction of spiritual perception.

While the first two stages are a result of monastic discipline – the spiritual battle with the vices and the habitual acquisition of the virtues – the third stage is explicitly aligned with the operation of divine grace. John points out that the reaching of perfection is impossible without the divine illumination. In all three stages, discernment represents the alignment of the mind with the will of God. In other words, the apprehension of the will of God is the primary function of discernment. Everything else is secondary. The immediate biblical inspiration for this insight are the words of Rom. 12: 2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the

value because of the rust of vanity, thoughts which do not measure up to the standard of the ancients” (57).

¹⁶ See Antony D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism* (London, UK: Paternoster, 2007), 175-78.

renewal of your minds, so that you may discern (δοκιμάζειν) what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

John Climacus connects the ability to exercise expert discernment with the purity of heart. While he is at ease with most Evagrian categories, following the paradigm already established by John Cassian, Climacus further “biblicizes,” enriches, and expands Evagrius’ insight, as well as emphasizes the priority of grace. In Matthew’s version of the sixth beatitude (“blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” Matt. 5:8), a pure heart is said to be capable of the beatific vision. Climacus states: “Discernment is an uncorrupted conscience. It is pure perception (Διάκρισις ἐστὶ συνείδησις ἀμόλυντος, καὶ καθαρὰ αἴσθησις).”¹⁷

By connecting discernment with “pure perception,” Climacus aligns this virtue with the sixth beatitude and spiritual perception. Climacus stands within the tradition that takes physical and spiritual (noetic) perception to be operating disjunctively. Noetic perception kicks in when the physical senses are muted. The problem is not the physicality of the senses in and of itself, but the fact that the physical senses are often held captive by sensuality, which in turn muddles perception. This profound insight is shared by many patristic authors, including Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius, and provides a rationale for embracing a disjunctive view of the operation of the physical and spiritual senses.

However, as we mentioned earlier, it is also possible to conceive a greater integration of the physical and spiritual sensorium, made possible by purifying the physical senses. Such a possibility is envisioned by some patristic writers, including Gregory of Nyssa, Ps-Macarius/ Symeon, and Maximus the Confessor. Even if one may take exception to John Climacus’ understanding of the relationship between the physical and spiritual sensorium, his central point remains valid: the highest expression of discernment is not complex, drawn-out, multi-step judgment. On the contrary, the highest form of discernment is more akin to vision, intuition, and perception than to inference and judgment. To discern perfectly is to apprehend the will of God in all things. Such an apprehension is not a matter of reasoning, but of immediate perception aided by divine illumination.

As Climacus explains: “When a man’s senses are perfectly united to God, then what God has said is somehow mysteriously clarified. But where there is no union of this kind, then it is extremely difficult to speak about God,” and later adds: “The man

¹⁷ John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 229.

who does not know God speaks about Him only in probabilities.”¹⁸ Spiritual perception is a form of apprehension that converts a probable and muddled opinion about God into the clear knowledge of God. This clarity is achieved experientially, as a form of knowledge by acquaintance.

The celebration of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* and its saintly author occupies an important place in the liturgical calendar of the Orthodox Church. St. John Climacus and his work are commemorated during the Fourth Sunday of Lent, when the icon of the ladder of divine ascent is placed prominently in the middle of the church for adoration by the faithful. During the same feast day, hymns are sung in the saint’s honor. Remarkably, such a veneration is not accorded to any of the ascetic authors mentioned earlier in this paper and some, like Origen and Evagrius, have even suffered prolonged periods of *damnatio memoriae*. The prominent place of John’s *Ladder of Divine Ascent* itself is a result of communal discernment. As they were worshipping God during Lent, the generations of church leaders discerned in John’s ascetical writings intended for the monks something of great benefit to all Christians.

An Unscientific Postscript

Discernment is as important in understanding one’s interior state and judging character, as it is in selecting one’s future colleagues in the university, as it is vital in electing politicians or as in choosing an economic or social policy.¹⁹ While policies, rules, and regulations provide the necessary safeguards for human decisions, such decisions also require something that cannot be entirely rule-governed, namely, discernment as a capacity to exercise informal judgment regarding specific people and unique circumstances. When in our times a particular theological institution faces the prospect of closing down, this can never be exclusively a matter of scarce resources. The lack of money is usually a symptom of the problem, rather than the problem itself. The availability of money is primarily a measure of public trust and civic utility. As a rule, the main reason for the closure of theological institutions is their failure to uphold their mission or their leadership’s inability to give substance to the institution’s theological identity. Both mission and identity are complex exercises in communal discernment, which

¹⁸ John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 288.

¹⁹ On the application of discernment to the life of the university, see an important book by Frederick D. Aquino, *Communities of Informed Judgment: Newman’s Illative Sense and Accounts of Rationality* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

requires a razor-sharp focus on things that are truly good and the avoidance of things that are opposed to the good of the institution (to paraphrase John Climacus' second phase of discernment).

When all is said and done, the most difficult executive decisions are primarily a function of the alignment of the self with the will of God with the help of divine illumination. The highest form of discernment is not a result of arduous deliberation; it is, as John Climacus teaches, "pure perception." When purified of all things that pull the self away from God, such a perception has as its primary object the will of God in all things.

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