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# DISCERNMENT – THE COMPASS ON THE HIGH SEA OF SPIRITUALITY

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses and evaluates the need and nature of discernment in contemporary spirituality. It first describes the complexity of spirituality as a phenomenon that has, on a cultural, anthropological and mystical level, lost its boundaries and expanded beyond all existing horizons. It motivates how, like a ship sailing on the high seas, needs a compass, discernment is needed in the face of this complexity. The article then focuses on two paradigms for reflection on discernment. First, it examines discernment as it is practised in the house of study in the Jewish tradition, and describes how this practice reveals two seminal dimensions of discernment. It then analyses and evaluates discernment in the community of desert monks in the Christian tradition which illustrates the significance of discernment for spirituality. It describes the conversation within a spiritual community as an essential element of discernment as the highest form of spiritual practices. Discernment as seeing and appreciating differences of opinion is a sign of God's way. The article concludes that discernment permeates all spiritual practices and represents the exercise of all exercises without which one is without a compass on the high sea of spirituality.

## 1. SAILING BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Spirituality has changed markedly in recent times. One could describe this development by means of a seafaring image. A ship on the high seas needs a compass in order to navigate safely. One can sail without a compass on a small lake or on inland waterways. The shorelines and the landmarks constantly provide sufficient orientation for a safe journey. The situation is different when one moves to the high seas. The shorelines have receded into a distance and reference points have disappeared. This is what happened in spirituality. Recent developments reveal that, on almost all levels, spirituality itself has become a phenomenon without boundaries,

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as institutional reference points have fallen away and trusted beacons have been left behind.

The most visible level in spirituality is the external landscape. In our modern world, spirituality has outgrown the limited horizons of monasteries and traditional practices. Spirituality has moved into unexpected places. In the media, it exploded in esoteric scenes and locations. A lively book trade has grown around spirituality and mysticism, reflecting an almost endless variety of themes and topics. Among these are such themes as mindfulness and meaning, health and happiness, meditation and near death experience – to name but a few examples. Spirituality is no longer confined to religious institutions. Numerous people have become fascinated by spiritual topics outside the religious context. Spirituality has, for example, become a core business in all kinds of spiritual centres. In the past few decades, spirituality has made itself known in such spheres as health care, education and the workplace. In addition, spiritual counter-movements have made themselves felt. In this instance, there are a number of examples, among which ecological spirituality, liberation spirituality, peace spirituality and feminist spirituality. In fact, spirituality has become so widespread that, as statistics reveal, approximately 25% of modern society has some interest in the field of spirituality, whatever it may mean to them. One can, therefore, conclude that, on a cultural level, spirituality has lost its contours. It is sailing without shorelines, on the high seas (Swart *et al.* 2009).

On an anthropological level, spirituality has also broadened its horizons. Spirituality is no longer enclosed in the interiority of the spirit and the soul. Instead, it has become a holistic phenomenon. In particular, the body has become an important workplace for spirituality, as indicated by vocabulary that relates to work on the body. This includes, among others, massage, shiatsu, tantra, reiki, shamanism, movement therapy, sacred dance, and natural healing. Not only the body, but also the social dimension has become an essential aspect of spirituality. This again is clear from, among others, phenomena such as group meditation, group discernment and prayer groups. Spirituality is no longer an individualistic endeavour; it is performed in social settings. The anthropological landscape of spirituality has lost its sharp outlines of interiority. The shorelines have become vague and an endless horizon has appeared, providing no orientation point (Waaijman 2007).

Not only have the parameters of culture and anthropology faded away. The inner core of spirituality itself has also opened its infinite space. Spirituality is no longer oriented on a dogmatic framework or a set of ascetic practices. It is oriented on its mystical core. This process started

more than one hundred years ago, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Artists, in particular poets, perceived mysticism as the universal essence of spirituality. This process has been strengthened by Eastern spiritualities. The universal essence is a mysticism without boundaries. It is about the breakthrough of the Infinite itself in the core of spirituality. With this, it has become far removed from any form of dualistic thinking (Nissen 2008).

All these developments are not really new. Almost all western mystics experienced God as the one who is beyond every name, every language, every boundary and every concept. God is above the heaven of heavens, deeper than our deepest interiority. The highest mystical knowledge is precisely this experience of God in God's infinity. The soul touched by this infinity loses its narrow-mindedness and is filled with fear and joy, beyond the limitations of its self-made world.

Spirituality has, therefore, both externally and internally, widened its horizons beyond its familiar shorelines and institutional landmarks. It finds itself, therefore and by way of speaking, on the high seas and in need of a compass. This open-endedness of spirituality is embedded in a process of globalisation in which nearly every aspect of culture is in transition towards a future which is hidden in darkness. It has simultaneously also become part of the dialogue between religions. The impact of this process of globalisation and of the interreligious dialogue on spirituality is clear in the impressive publication, *World spirituality* (1985), an encyclopaedia consisting of twenty-five volumes. Five of its volumes deal with the indigenous spiritualities of Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and the three Americas (South, Central, and North). Fifteen volumes deal with the spiritual traditions of the Far East (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism), the Middle East (Zoroastrianism, the Sumerian, Assyro-Babylonian, and Hittite spiritualities), the Mediterranean region (Egyptian, Greek, and Roman spiritualities), the Jewish (including biblical), Christian, and Islamic spiritualities. In addition, two volumes deal with contemporary currents (esoteric and secular). The sheer volume of its contents could lead to anyone losing his/her hold. This encyclopaedia on its own already illustrates that, metaphorically, spirituality has become a high sea of forms and visions. It has become virtually impossible to oversee the phenomenon of spirituality. In the light of this lack of oversight, it has become increasingly difficult to conduct a meaningful discussion on spirituality. It asks for some compass in order to discern one's way.

In this volume, various contributors share the one common concern to reflect on discernment in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Their contributions enter the space of the Scriptures in order to listen to the

orientation given to its readers. In the light of this focus on Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, this article wishes to focus on two paradigms taken from post-biblical times, but not too far away from the Bible. This is done in order to provide information on a meaningful compass for the journey on the high sea of spirituality. The first paradigm comes from the Jewish tradition, and the second one from Christian spirituality. Both are forms of discernment on the high seas. The first one is embedded in the unending sea of suffering of the Jewish people after the destruction of the second temple in 67 C.E. The second one is embedded in the unending desert of Egypt, Judaea and Syria in the third and fourth centuries, as the homeless land of the desert monks.

## 2. DISCERNMENT IN THE HOUSE OF STUDY

A first paradigm to reflect on discernment comes from a spiritual community in the Jewish tradition. In the house of study (the *bet hammidrash*), the rabbis discovered discernment as their compass. This form developed in a specific historical context. After the destruction of the second temple by the Romans, the Jewish communities lost their spiritual centre. The temple liturgy came to an end. Pilgrimages to the temple could no longer be undertaken. It was the time of the second exile. The tradition viewed it as a time in which the presence and glory of God, the divine *shechina*, left her holy place and followed her people, weeping with them on their graves, praying together with them in their synagogues and studying with them in their houses of study. Thus it is recorded that Rabbi Akiwa begged from the Roman Emperor the favour, “Give me a house of learning”. The emperor acceded to this request, not realising that by this permission he would contribute to the survival of the Jewish faith. In the house of study, learning became its liturgy. The house of learning became the temple (Waaijman 2002:789-794). The *shechina* became God’s presence in the house of study. As a result, the centre of Jewish spirituality became biblical spirituality (*Avot* 2:4, 7-8; 3:14).

In this context, the question arises about the role of discernment. The rabbis were convinced that their pupils had to sharpen their mind by debating with each other, as iron sharpens iron. Torah study is a battle, according to the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 2:93b). It is well known that the rabbis challenged their partners in discussions to the limit and could fundamentally differ with each other in opinion, while at the same time they never forgot each other’s names and position. Their fight was fought within the arena of peace: the teacher and the pupils became enemies when they learned together. Their battle in their times of learning and their clash of opinions did not lead them to abandon each other.

To understand the differences in this arena of opinions, it will be helpful to reflect on an important theme in the house of study: the clash of opinions (*machaloket*), as the rabbis perceived it (Poorthuis 1992:272-275). To the rabbis, the difference of opinion was not a sociological fact. It was not something that was simply unavoidable in a community in which important matters were discussed. To them, the difference of opinion was part of revelation as such. About the schools of Hillel and Shammai, which had more than three hundred differences of opinion, it is said:

For three years there was a dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel, the former asserting, 'The *halachah* is in agreement with our views' and the latter contending, 'The *halachah* is in agreement with our views'. Then a *bath kol* issued announcing, '[The utterances of] both are the words of the living God, but the *halachah* is in agreement with the rulings of Beth Hillel' (*Eruvin* 13b).

The most important sentence in this quotation is: "both are words of the living God". Hence, they are not merely an interpretation of the word of God, but God's word itself. In their plurality and in their mutual differences, they are the word of God. According to the Talmud, "God utters traditions from the mouth of all the Rabbis" (*Chagigah* 15b).

It is striking, though, that it is added that the *halachah*, the decision that is followed as a rule of conduct, the discernment, is in agreement with the school of Hillel. This is motivated by the remark,

Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beth Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the actions of Beth Shammai before theirs (*Eruvin* 13b).

This paradigm of the house of study offers three insights concerning discernment, as it is revealed in "the clash of opinions". The first insight is that the compass needle was not primarily being pointed by the contents of the discussions (and thus by the question: is it true or is it not true?), but by the spiritual attitude of the fighters. This is the reason why the school of Hillel was regarded as being on the right way. Despite the sharp differences with its opponents, this school remained friendly and modest. It passed on both positions in the dispute. It mentioned the position of the other school first. This I learned about discernment: Ultimately it is not the result that is decisive (the tested truth), but the way in which this result has been gained (the spiritual attitude).

The second insight is more fundamental. Both schools obviously shared the same foundation. In a strange outcome of their struggle, the two schools accepted the heavenly voice that both their positions are

the words of the living God. This does not mean that their struggle was meaningless. Precisely *in* their respective differences, the utterances of the schools were the revelation of the living God. In and through their battles, the representatives of both schools experienced that differences made by human beings reveal the richness of the Word of God. This can be compared with our experience of nature that immediately appreciates differences between species. One “tastes” the differences as a revelation of an overwhelming splendour of Life. One enjoys the variety of animals and flowers. The Jewish house of study affords us the same experience in the realm of discernment. The difference between the schools of spirituality is fundamentally the revelation of the richness of God. This I learned about discernment: In our intense discussions, we, human beings, need training to discover, to see, to accept, to appreciate, to taste, to enjoy differences between human beings as the revelation of the living God. This means that discernment is an exercise in discussing, speaking and listening, puzzling and understanding. Discernment is really an art. It means to see, to accept, to appreciate and to enjoy the differences between schools of spirituality as a grace, even if the differences cannot be brought to a synthesis.

A third insight is closely linked with the previous one. If the differences, generated by human discussions in an atmosphere of mutual respect and modesty, are grounded in the immeasurable breadth of God’s wealth, the fighters should remain conscious that their differences should be grounded in God’s richness and should be understood as a revelation of God’s infinite depth. If this consciousness is absent, the differences, created by their discussions, will appear to be purely human constructions. They will disappear from the scene. As the Mishnah says:

Every controversy (*machaloket*) that is in the name of heaven, the end thereof is [destined] to result in something permanent; but one that is not in the name of heaven, the end thereof is not [destined] to result in something permanent (*Avot* 5:17).

Discussions on discernment should, therefore, be led by two principles. The first principle is reflected in questions such as: What are the real differences in a conflict between different views? What are the real reasons? Are they valid? The second principle is: Are these differences really “in the name of heaven”, that is to say: Do they really help us to articulate the presence of God in this human world or are they invented to protect human interests? Both these principles are essential. Processes of discernment are, on the one hand, fully human. On the other hand, though, they should be placed under the perspective of God’s presence, under the divine name. It is in this sense that differences that really matter are all related to God, while all other differences, only determined by human

interests, will eventually disappear. The real differences are related to God and to God's praiseworthy presence. This I learned about discernment: two eyes are needed for processes of discernment. With the one eye we strive to determine human differences, with the other eye we try to discover the relevance of differences from the perspective of God.

### 3. DISCERNMENT IN THE DESERT

A second paradigm to reflect on discernment comes from the desert monks, another spiritual community. In the third century, men and women moved into the unending deserts of Egypt, Judaea, and Syria. Beyond the shorelines of the institutional churches and established family life, and beyond the boundaries of organised and organisable life, they exposed themselves to the presence of God, struggling, as Jesus did, with demons. In the desert, the unending sea of sand, the monks discovered discernment, *discretio* as their compass (Waaajman 2002: 483-514, 801-803).

Cassian provides more information about the discovery of discernment. In his text, in the first conference, he describes how abba Moses addressed the main theme of the spiritual way by pointing out the difference between the purpose (*skopos*) and the final goal (*telos*) of the spiritual path. After this first, fundamental distinction, abba Moses concentrated explicitly on the matter of discernment. To stress the importance of discernment and to give insight in the phenomenon itself, abba Moses told a story dating back to the early period (Cassian, *Conferences* 2.2-4).

The story is about Anthony who had met with some elders to focus on what is most important regarding perfection, the grace of contemplation and the *telos* of the spiritual path. It asks what virtue or practice would bring a monk with a firm tread to the summit of perfection. It then observes, "Each one gave an opinion in keeping with the depth of his insight." In their discussions of perfection as a theme, one recognises the classical approach of monks in discernment. Everyone was heard and given an opportunity to outline his position with reasons. Others then responded by presenting their views.

In the case of perfection, different positions and arguments were provided. The story reveals how some viewed fasting and vigils as the shortest road to perfection. Their motivation was that this practice makes the mind sensitive and pure. This, in turn, removes insensitivity as the greatest stumbling block for union with God. Others held that those who detached themselves from all things (poverty) are no longer bound by any earthly ties and, unhindered, can draw near to God. Still others viewed isolation from social life and solitude in the desert as the most effective

means of attaining perfection. In solitude, after all, one can address God more intimately and cling to Him more closely. Still others saw the love of their neighbours as the most effective means to attaining perfection. What matters in the desert is the virtue of hospitality. Those who practise the virtues will receive the kingdom of God, that is, contemplation as the final goal (*telos*) of the spiritual way. Apart from the love of neighbours and the virtue of hospitality, still other virtues were proposed to which the speakers attributed “more certain access to God”. That discussion “filled the greater part of the night”.

Finally, Anthony responded. First, he affirmed the arguments of the others. “All the things that you have mentioned are indeed necessary and useful for those who thirst for God and desire to come to Him.” Anthony also had his reservations. “The innumerable failures and experiences of many people do not at all permit us to attribute the highest grace to these things.”

One recognises how Anthony first uses the method of falsification. Monks fast and keep vigil to the extreme, live far off in utter solitude in wondrous fashion, deprive themselves of all belongings in utter poverty, and fulfil the demands of hospitality with the utmost devotion, but they ruined themselves as a result of their own praxis. This happened in the first place because they failed to discern the real motives underlying their praxis. Secondly, they often got stuck halfway. Thirdly, they collapsed. This happened because they were misled and failed. They lacked discernment (*discretio*). They did not see through their own motives. They failed to realise that the extremes (e.g. extremely severe fasting and extreme gluttony) boil down to the same. They did not see through the snares of the devil who tries to ruin the monk.

Anthony’s response is, secondly, characterised by verification. Discernment keeps a person away from extremes. It teaches a monk “always to proceed along the royal road”, helps him persevere, and enables him to see through the snares of the devil. Anthony then supports his discernment with a quotation from Scripture:

The eye is the lamp of your body. So, if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is dim, your whole body will be full of darkness (Matt. 6:22-23).

Finally, using examples from Scripture, he showed how a lack of discernment leads to destruction (1 Sam. 15 and 1 Kg. 20) and how discernment leads to life (Eph. 4:26; Prov. 11:14; Ps. 103:15; Prov. 24:3-4; 25:28; 31:8; and so forth). These examples from Scripture reveal that “no virtue can either be perfectly attained or endured without the grace

of discretion". The conclusion of this *collatio* between Anthony and his monks is to "decide that discernment is the virtue that would lead the monk sure-footedly and safely to God".

The course of this argument reveals three phases. Practices such as fasting, vigils, detachment (poverty) and *anachoresis* (solitude) that belong to the order of spiritual exercises are listed first. Practices such as mercy and other virtues that belong to the order of the virtues are mentioned in the second place. Neither of these two categories, however useful and necessary they may be, compares with the only practice that leads to perfection. The latter is of a very specific category. It is the practice of discernment, which is an attitude that permeates all spiritual exercises, even the exercises of virtue. "For the mother, the guardian, and moderator of all virtues is the virtue of discernment" (Cassian, *Conferences* 2.4). *Discretio* is the virtue of all virtues and the exercise of all exercises, because it is the inner light that illuminates all of them. Without it, the monks would be blind and out of control.

This story of abba Moses shows that the conclusion of the nightly *collatio* was discernment as the mother, the guardian and the moderator of all virtues and practices. But discernment was not only the outcome of the conversation. The conversation itself was a matter of discerning. The way and the goal are one. *Collatio* is a way of discernment, and the fruit of this exercise is discernment.

We have presented the paradigm of the desert monks in a simple way. Their practices were much more complicated and full of experience. But this short exploration has given us enough material to gain some insights.

The first insight I gained is the result of investigating the way in which Anthony arranged the meeting (*collatio*). Every hermit participated in this meeting with his own experience and knowledge. This collating important points of discussion, sharing of motives, argumentations, perspectives, and experiences is in itself discernment. The reason is that discernment is about seeing differences. This involves a training, like a musician should train his ears to "discern" different sounds and different voices. This is also not the end of the way, but its beginning. It implies becoming sensitive for different positions, experiences, and perspectives in the field of spirituality.

A second insight is that, in listening to different voices, new insights can be born, new differences can be created, new, previously unrecognised layers of transformation can be revealed. If we do not allow other insights, other positions and other perspectives to enter our consciousness, we will become narrow-minded. We are increasingly left untouched and, ultimately, we become untouchable. Listening to other voices challenges

our limited scope and is necessary to grow. I learned from the desert monks that an exchange of experiences is essential for our discernment which is understood as the capacity to discover new, unexpected differences. But discerning the many voices by listening to them all, and allowing for new things to open up our mind is not the end of the way. It is a necessary second step.

A third insight is that discernment needs discussion and evaluation. Anthony not only listened to and appreciated differences. He discussed them and evaluated them through rational argumentation. He, for instance, made an important distinction between exercises and virtues, pointing, among others, to the possible danger of good practices. He was very conscious of human ambiguity, observing that destruction can be covertly present even in the noblest practice. This I learned from the monks: nothing is *a priori* excluded from critical reflection. Everything in the field of spirituality needs critical argumentation. Though it is at times painful, it remains unavoidable. Discussion and evaluation (known as *collatio*) are indispensable for valid discernment.

A last insight gained from the desert monks is that their point of reference was perfection, namely the grace of contemplation. Their compass needle was oriented towards this *telos*. All the previous steps of discernment as a process are directed towards this point. Their experiences, their new insights and their arguments are all oriented towards one *telos*, the kingdom of God, which is to be understood as living in God's presence, as contemplation. This certainly did not mean that they thought they knew what perfection and what contemplation are. Though they were continuously seeking it, they never thought that they grasped it. Because they did not yet know it, they used discernment as a way to discover it. This is the reason why they claimed that discernment should guide a monk from the first steps in the desert to the highest stages of prayer and contemplation. Discernment, an ever-present reality in the monk's life, is a wise guide.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The reflection on these two paradigms reminds one of an insightful note of Dag Hammarskjöld in his diary which can, in turn, illuminate the discussion of discernment further. In a passage written in 1954, Hammarskjöld describes himself as sailing on the high seas. His eyes are concentrated on the invisible goal beyond the horizon; his power is concentrated in the hand on the tiller. The salt spray catches his face. Between two waves he is overwhelmed by an experience of self-forgetfulness, freedom, and

responsibility. Life opens its infinite space of pure intimacy and timeless happiness. For him, this is a moment of pure discernment. The feeling of the infinite space of Life is enjoyed by an unending, widened heart:

With all the powers of your body concentrated in the hand on the tiller,  
 all the powers of your soul concentrated on the goal beyond the horizon,  
 you laugh as the salt spray catches your face in the second of stillness  
 before a new wave  
 - sharing the happy freedom of the moment  
 with those who share your responsibility.  
 So - in the self-forgetfulness of concentration -  
 a new space of perfection is opened,  
 conveyed by the intimacy of life,  
 a shared, timeless happiness,  
 conveyed by a smile,  
 a wave of the hand.  
 (Hamarskjöld 1964:90)

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