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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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THE CARE OF SOULS**

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*Testing the Spirits:
Discernment, Deception and
the Care of Souls*



L. Joseph Letendre

Ten years ago the news media began reporting a remarkable phenomenon occurring at a Pentecostal church near the Toronto airport. Instead of the expected signs of spiritual anointing, speaking in tongues or being "slain by the Spirit," church members were manifesting a behavior called "holy laughter." Leaders of the Vineyard church where this was happening were quick to link this behavior with the behavior which led to the apostles being accused of "drunkenness" after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2). It was, they claimed, a manifestation of the joy which St. Paul lists as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

The phenomenon was not confined to laughter. Other observed behavior included barking like dogs, clucking like chickens, spasmodic body movements, vomiting, and even sexual orgasms. Not surprisingly, the phenomenon was controversial. Some hailed it as a new manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and the "anointing" appeared in other congregations, notably in Pensacola, Florida. Others were not so sure. One of my friends, a pastor, dismissed it as a case of mass hysteria: "Any shaman can produce the same results." Another pastor I know was even more blunt. "It's demonic!" he said.

My concern is not to reopen the debate about the "Toronto Blessing," as the phenomenon came to be known, but to

cite it as one example of a problem that has challenged the Church throughout its history. From the earliest days Christian pastors and congregations have had to determine the authenticity of experiences, visions, messages, and missions which individuals and groups claim to have received from God. Such discernment was, and is, complicated by the fact that the individuals making such claims were often sincere and dedicated Christians, and sometimes "signs and wonders" would accompany them.

At issue is the risk of deception, a hazard that should come as no surprise: the Word of God provides explicit warning of the dangers of deception. We are told that "false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders" (Matthew 24:24). The devil, whom Jesus denounces as "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44), is striving "to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). It is a concern St. Paul expresses when he writes the Christians in Corinth that "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed . . . you put up with it readily enough" (2 Corinthians 11:3-4). He continues with the warning that "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). He admonishes his congregations in turn: "Let no one deceive you in any way. . . . Let no one deceive himself" (2 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Corinthians 3:18). Believers are thus always in need of what the New Testament calls *diakrisis* (διακρισις): a word sometimes translated as "discernment" or "discrimination" and defined by St. Paul as "the ability to distinguish between spirits" (1 Corinthians 12:10).

SOURCES

Those concerned with the perennial need for discernment could not do better than to consult two sources: One is Jonathan Edwards' writings and reflections on the two "awakenings" of religious fervor that occurred during his ministry in Northampton, Massachusetts. The other is the collected writings of Church Fathers who wrote on the subjects of prayer

and spiritual direction. These two apparently disparate sources, separated as they are by time and place, by culture and confession, have in this matter more in common than one might think. Both Edwards and the Fathers root their writing in Scripture, for example, and both are charged with the "cure of souls"—that is, both are concerned with the good order of the communities and the salvation of the souls entrusted to their care. Edwards' approach to the problem of spiritual delusion is characteristically systematic and scientific. By contrast, the Fathers of the early Church are more charismatic. For them, as for St. Paul, discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit and one more likely to be sought among mature and experienced Christians.

THE FATHERS

Because the writings of the Fathers are mostly unknown to many contemporary Western Christians, a few words of introduction are necessary. "Fathers" is a collective term for the Christian pastors and teachers who wrote, preached, and taught in roughly the first thousand years of Christianity. Some were apologists who wrote to explain Christianity to its pagan persecutors. Others were theologians who defended the Church against heretical doctrines like Arianism. Most were pastors who led congregations or oversaw monastic communities. Many suffered and were even martyred for their faith. Since those engaged in pastoral ministry were expected to know, as a minimum, the Psalms and the four Gospels by heart, the Fathers were men immersed in prayer and the study of God's Word.

Some of the Fathers' writings on what we now call "spirituality" are published in a five-volume anthology called *The Philokalia*, which is Greek for "love of what is good." The texts from the fourth through fifteenth centuries were compiled by two Greek monks and first published in 1782. These writings address the practical issues of learning to pray, practicing spiritual disciplines, and the struggle to acquire the virtues. Like the writings of Jonathan Edwards, many of these texts were written to speak to specific issues or questions. Not surprisingly, the

problem of spiritual deception, and the need for discernment, is one of the subjects addressed.

The word most frequently used by the Greek Fathers for delusion is *plani* (πλανη), sometimes also translated as “illusion.” The literal meaning is “wandering astray, deflection from the right path; hence, error, beguilement, the acceptance of a mirage mistaken for truth.”¹ The verb form of *plani* is the word of choice used by the evangelists for Jesus’ warnings against being “led astray.” The word occurs in the first warning that accompanies Jesus’s foretelling of the signs of the close of the age: “See that no one leads you astray” (Matthew 24:4 and Mark 13:5). Gregory of Sinai (1265-1346), one of the authors anthologized in *The Philokalia*, writes: “today’s great enemy of truth, drawing men to perdition, is delusion. As a result of this delusion, tenebrous ignorance rules the souls of all those sunk in lethargy and alienates them from God.”²

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards’ discussion of discernment was driven by pastoral necessity. During his ministry in Northampton, Edwards oversaw two revivals, or “awakenings.” The better known of the two—the “Great Awakening” of 1740–1742—was, in fact, the second that he witnessed. The first began in the summer of 1734 among the younger members of his congregation. It was the fruit of Edwards’ preaching and his encouraging his flock to organize smaller religious meetings in their homes. George M. Marsden, Edwards’ most recent biographer, comments that, as far as Edwards was concerned, what was happening

was not just a fad of religious enthusiasm, not excited claims to faith without evidence of holiness, not shallow arousal of the affections that would not last, but lives that were being permanently changed. . . . [T]here seemed no mistaking it: the fires of the Holy Spirit were sweeping through the hearts of many of the people.³

As the revival spread south into Connecticut word of it

spread and criticism began. Many saw the behavior of the newly-converted, particularly of the young, to be disturbing, disorderly, and divisive. To defend the revival, Edwards wrote *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. However, by the time it was finally published in 1737, there had been a marked decline in spiritual fervor in Northampton.

Edwards was facing the disconcerting reality that, just as Northampton was becoming internationally celebrated, many of his parishioners were returning to their old way of greed and constant infighting. He could not escape the evidence that he had overestimated the extent of genuine awakening. Real indications of the Holy Spirit’s presence remained, but other evidence suggested that many apparent conversions were the devil’s counterfeits.⁴

The second awakening—the “Great Awakening”—inspired by the preaching of George Whitefield began a few years later. This time even Edwards’ wife, Sarah Pierpont, was caught up in the fervor. Marsden writes:

On Wednesday morning, January 20, 1742, Sarah Edwards was enraptured by spiritual ecstasy and that continued for more than two weeks. Repeatedly she was physically overwhelmed by her spiritual raptures, sometimes leaping involuntarily to praise God and more often so overcome by joys and transports that she collapsed physically.⁵

This was hardly the sort of behavior people were accustomed to observing in the wife of a Puritan minister.

If anything, this second eruption of revival in Northampton brought with it even more dramatic manifestations and drew greater attention and harsher criticism. The fruit of this controversial Second Awakening was Edwards’ masterpiece on discernment, his *Treatise on the Religious Affections*, which appeared in 1747, some years after the fires of revival had cooled down again. In it, Jonathan Edwards wrote of the need “to distinguish between true and false religion, between saving affections and experiences, and those manifold fair shows, and glittering appearances, by which they are counterfeited; the

consequences of which, when they are not distinguished, are often inexpressibly dreadful."⁶

THE VALUE OF RELIGIOUS FEELINGS

As the title suggests, Edwards is greatly concerned with the value of intense religious feelings as an indicator of the genuineness of a person's experience. The excessive emotionalism associated with the Northampton revivals provided ammunition for its critics and confirmation to its supporters. In *Religious Affections*, Edwards argues with those on both sides of the debate. Noting that "some are ready to condemn all high affection: if persons appear to have their religious affections raised to an extraordinary pitch, they are prejudiced against them, and determine that they are delusions without further inquiry."⁷ In the first part of *Affections*, he asserts that "true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."⁸ Arguing from Scripture, he maintains

that religion which God requires and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference. God, in his word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, fervent in spirit, and our hearts be vigorously engaged in religion.⁹

However, Edwards goes on to argue, emotions, however sincere and deeply felt, are not enough. It can be a case of what my pastor calls "mistaking adrenaline for the Holy Spirit." In a letter to James Robe, a pastor in Scotland, Edwards summarized what experience had taught him:

Many among us have been ready to think, that all high raptures are divine, but experience plainly shows that it is not the degree of rapture and ecstasy (although it should be to the third heavens), but the nature and kind that must determine us in their favor.¹⁰

The second part of *Religious Affections* systematically demonstrates that it is "no sign" of God's grace if religious

affections are "raised very high," or if they prompt a person to talk about religion or become "zealously engaged in the external duties of worship." Before he is done, Edwards lists, and dismisses, a total of twelve manifestations of religious emotion as being useless for discerning if a given spiritual experience is genuine or a satanic counterfeit.

Edwards' refusal to be swayed by emotion stands as a particularly timely warning today, given the decades-long tendency of English-speaking Christians to "sentimentalize" faith. Key elements of the Christian life—faith, repentance, hope, love, for instance—are now understood as feelings and, as a result, spiritual discipline is often reduced to the cultivation and sustaining of these feelings.¹¹ In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis' avuncular demon describes how this trend can be used to undermine a Christian's prayer:

Keep them . . . trying to produce feelings. . . . When they mean to ask Him for charity, let them, instead, try to manufacture charitable feelings for themselves and not notice that this is what they are doing. When they mean to pray for courage, let them really be trying to feel brave. When they are praying for forgiveness, let them be trying to feel forgiven. Teach them to estimate the value of each prayer by their success in producing the desired feeling.¹²

AUTHENTIC SIGNS

If emotions are "no signs," what signs are there? The concluding section of the *Treatise on Religious Affections* proposes twelve "Distinguishing Signs of Truly Gracious and Holy Affections." He places great emphasis on "Christian practice" by saving it for last and dedicating three chapters to it. Authentic works of the Spirit and truly "gracious and holy affections" bear fruit in Christian practice. Among the practices Edwards highlights is "universal obedience" to the law of Christ. Edwards takes care to note that "in order to a man's being universally obedient, his obedience must not only consist in the *negatives* or in universally avoiding wicked practices; but he must also be universal in the *positives* of religion. Sins

of omission are as much breaches of God's commands, as sins of commission."¹³ For Edwards, life-long perseverance in Christian practice is the "chief sign" of the sincerity of one's Christian profession to others and a "distinguishing and sure evidence of grace" to a person's own conscience. Feelings that do not bear fruit in action, and action that cannot be sustained in the absence feelings, are worthless—or worse.

Edwards also lays stress on the practice of professing Christian doctrine: "In order to a man's being properly said to make a profession of *Christianity*, there must undoubtedly be a *profession* of all that is necessary to his being a Christian, or of so much as belongs to the *essence* of Christianity."¹⁴ Edwards lists as part of essential Christianity the messiahship of Jesus, his death for our sins, and other elements of "orthodox belief." St. Paul wrote that "even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8). For Edwards as well, any religious experience or feeling that leads one to deviate from core Christian doctrine—what, in the fifth century, Vincent of Lerins optimistically described as what "has been believed everywhere, always and by all" and C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity"—cannot be the work of God's Spirit.

Among other things, Edwards also lists as a sure sign of the deepening of faith, that "all gracious persons have a solid, full, thorough, and effectual conviction of the truth of the great things of the gospel."¹⁵ Since religion cannot be a matter of emotions alone, the intellect and understanding must also be affected. "Holy affections are not heat without light," he writes. They "ever arise from some information of the understanding, some spiritual instruction that the mind receives, some light or actual knowledge."¹⁶ Genuine religious experience helps the recipient grow in Christ-likeness; they "naturally beget and promote such a spirit of love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness, and mercy as appeared in Christ."¹⁷

HUMILITY

Both the Fathers of the East and Jonathan Edwards

emphasize the importance of the Christ-like virtue of humility, what Edwards calls "a great and most essential thing in true religion."¹⁸ For Edwards, a Christian's "evangelical humiliation" is

deep humiliation, brokenness of heart, poverty of spirit, mourning for sin, solemnity of spirit, a trembling reverence towards God, tenderness of spirit, self-jealousy and fear, and great engagedness of heart, after holiness of life, and a readiness to esteem others better than themselves.¹⁹

He lists it as one of the signs of "gracious affections." Theophan the Recluse, a nineteenth-century Russian who writes in the same vein as the early Fathers, would agree. For him, one sure sign of delusion is that it produces the opposite effect of humility in one who has been deceived: "It fires his imagination . . . and flatters him insidiously, inspiring him with self-conceit and establishing in his soul an idol—'I.'"²⁰

While Edwards necessarily focuses on humility as a sign of graciousness, the Fathers saw it as invaluable insurance against delusion. Gregory of Sinai writes that "delusion manifests itself, or rather, attacks and invades us in two ways—in the form of mental images and fantasies or in the form of diabolic influence—though its sole cause and origin is always *arrogance*."²¹

It is told among the sayings of the Desert Fathers, the first generation of Christian monks, that a demon wanted to deceive a particular monk. It appeared to the monk disguised as an "angel of light." The monk simply responded, "You have the wrong place. I have done nothing to deserve a visit from an angel." Thus, the story concludes, the demon was defeated by the man's humility.²²

Humility defends a Christian from deception because it encourages the practice of two spiritual disciplines: watchfulness and consultation. Aware that he or she is vulnerable to deception, a Christian will be watchful, will pay attention to his thoughts and fantasies and try to be aware of his underlying motives. The Fathers saw this as a way of heeding St. Paul's

admonition to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Diadochos, a fifth-century writer included in *The Philokalia*, writes that

those pursuing the spiritual way must always keep the mind free from agitation in order that the intellect, as it discriminates among the thoughts that pass through the mind, may store in the treasuries of its memory those thoughts which are good and have been sent by God, while casting out those which are evil and come from the devil.²³

For the Fathers, watchfulness also involved “guarding the senses,” which means exercising caution in what one chooses to listen to, to watch, or to read. Being open-minded can be an overrated virtue. An open mind is like an open window: while it can let in light and fresh air, it can also let burglars in.

For the same reasons, a Christian will be reluctant to trust his own assessment of his spiritual experiences. The old sayings about being one’s own lawyer or physician apply here. Citing examples such as Samuel’s seeking guidance from Eli (1 Samuel 3:9-10), John Cassian (360?-435) writes that “nothing leads so surely to salvation as to confess our private thoughts to those fathers most graced with the power of discrimination (*diakrisis*), and in our pursuit of holiness to be guided by them rather than by our own judgments.”²⁴ For the Fathers, the gift of discernment was most likely to be found among more experienced Christians. Noting that Paul was directed to Ananias after his Damascus road encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9:6), Cassian writes that in this passage God himself “teaches us to be guided by those who are more advanced in the way.”²⁵ In Hebrews, those who are mature in the faith are described as “those who have the powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14). The way to avoid deception, the Fathers insist, is to hold ourselves accountable to those who are older and wiser in the faith.

DISCERNMENT TODAY

It should be disturbing that so little mention is made of the need for discernment in our times. The call for discernment arises from more than spectacular and controversial developments like the Toronto Blessing. One concern is the tendency of American Christians to “keep up with the Jones”—the “Jones” being, in this case, the latest secular trend. St. Paul’s exhortation to “not be conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2) has not prevented many Christians and churches from taking on the colors of our culture in chameleon-like fashion. We seem as eager as our non-believing neighbors to pursue whatever is now fashionable in religion without—and this is the root of my concern—*discerning* if the trend is a gracious opportunity, distracting trivia, or an insidious deception. Recently, we were asking “what would Jesus do?” This was followed by the *Prayer of Jabez* and now many are seeking a “purpose-driven life.” Christians, it seems, are as prone as many other American to follow the latest fads and purchase the related products. For this reason, if for no other, watchfulness is called for and discernment is needed.

Author

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Notes

1. This definition is given in the “Glossary” of Palmer, G. E. H., Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia*. Volume 1, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 361.
2. *The Philokalia*, Volume 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 251.
3. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 158.
4. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 189.
5. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 240.
6. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards (Works)*, Volume 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 235.

7. *Works*, Volume 1, 245.
8. *Works*, Volume 1, 236.
9. *Works*, Volume 1, 237.
10. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 284.
11. The same thing, it should be noted, has happened to marriage, with disastrous results.
12. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, MacMillan, 1996), 29.
13. *Works*, Volume 1, 315.
14. *Works*, Volume 1, 322. The italics are Edwards'.
15. *Works*, Volume 1, 288.
16. *Works*, Volume 1, 281.
17. *Works*, Volume 1, 303.
18. *Works*, Volume 1, 294.
19. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 284.
20. Kadlubovsky, E., and E. M. Palmer, *The Art of Prayer*. Compiled by Igu-men Chariton of Valamo (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 147.
21. *The Philokalia*, Volume 4, 249. My italics.
22. I heard this story in a lecture by one of my professors. I have not been able to find it written in the several volumes of "Sayings of the Desert Fathers" that I have read.
23. *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 259.
24. *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 106.
25. *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 106.

In a narrower sense, "care of souls" describes a particular strand of pastoral care tradition, *Seelsorge*, stemming from the Reformation and especially prominent in Lutheran pastoral theology. According to McNeill (1951), Lutheran practice rejected the compulsory nature of the confessional, but maintained it as a searching personal conversation on religious problems. Pastors gave priority to visiting the sick, the dying, and prisoners. Most important, they implemented Luther's recovery of the New Testament idea of mutual correction and encouragement, the "care of all for the souls of all," states McNeill.

ALBERT L. MEIBURG, *DICTIONARY OF PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELING*, 122.