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Sluhovsky, Moshe. Believe Not Every Spirit: Possessions, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism

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[See table of contents](#)

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Sluhovsky, Moshe.

Believe Not Every Spirit: Possessions, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. x, 374. ISBN 978-0-226-76282-1 (hardcover) \$45.

The titular incipit of Moshe Sluhovsky's volume alludes to 1 John 4:1 and the Evangelist's admonishment to "Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits if they be of God." It is an apt intertextual echo for introducing a study on "embodied encounters with the supernatural" in early modern Europe (7): the reference successfully points to the attendant hermeneutic challenges of discerning the nature of another's intersubjective inner experiences (real or feigned? mystical or melancholic? demonic or divine?), and the identity of the spirit in question (God, the devil, or a disembodied soul?). The Johannine reference points metonymically to one of the book's most intriguing central arguments that once the post-Tridentine church had successfully systematized and regulated exorcismal rites, discernment became increasingly valuable not as a curative technique for expelling demons from the possessed, but rather as a probative tool to scrutinize interiority for divine presence, diabolical agency, and the devil that was heresy.

The book consists of nine chapters and four sections, though according to the author the ideal format would have been a "tripartite columnar structure allowing for the contrast and comparison of exorcism, discernment, mysticism — a "synoptic configuration" that "would have given the inherent interconnectedness of the three narratives a visual and spatial representation" (9). The four parts address possession and exorcism, mysticism, discernment, and their intersections in conventual life and female spirituality, respectively. The structure of the work follows the logic of the discourse.

Part 1 is composed of three chapters. "Trivializing Possession" traces the evolution of the presence and conception of diabolic possession in early modern Italy, Spain, and France: Catholic countries where the routine happening was first interpreted as a corporeal experience — the possession of a *body* — and only subsequently understood as a spiritual event taking place in the soul. This first chapter shows how the naturalizing of affliction coincided with the spiritualizing of demonic possession as indicators of possession came to include visions and other marks of spiritual distinction.

Chapter 2, “The Prevalence of a Mundane Practice,” explores the eclectic contexts and overlapping methods for curing the possessed in the late medieval period, when demoniacs tended to visit shrines known for their thaumaturgic relics or images and to consult with ecclesiastical exorcists or lay healers, both of whom used herbs, crystals, and Christian rituals to expel demons. Sluhovsky persuasively argues that lay practitioners were later marginalized by the church as it set about and ultimately succeeded in clericalizing exorcismal activity between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The third chapter, “From Praxis to Prescribed Ritual,” charts the systematization of exorcismal rites and their ultimate codification in the *Rituale romanum* of 1614. Sluhovsky shows how as the practice of exorcism became increasingly regulated by the church, non-ecclesiastical methods came to be viewed as superstitious and heretical.

Part 2, “Mysticism,” explores the impact on early modern exorcismal practices of new forms of passive interiorized spirituality that substituted traditional meditative exercises with non-discursive contemplative activities aimed at emptying the self in preparation to receive the divine. In chapter 4, “La Spiritualité à la Mode,” Sluhovsky reveals how *Alumbradismo*, *Illuminismo*, and Quietism encouraged church authorities, doubtful of the ability of contemplatives to distinguish between diabolic and divine infusion, between Satan and God, to clericalize exorcism and to adapt probative discerning methods to the silencing of heretics and other potential subversives, females in particular. Chapter 5, “Contemplation, Possession, & Sexual Misconduct,” presents a study of mass possessions together with an interesting case of the demonic-mystical possession of a Jesuit theologian.

The two chapters comprising part 3 contrast male and female approaches to discernment through the close reading of early modern texts. The sixth chapter, “Anatomy of the Soul,” examines methodological debates regarding how spirits ought to be discerned. Sluhovsky considers the writings of Henry of Langenstein, Jean Gerson, and Girolamo Savonarola. Chapter 7, “Discerning Women,” investigates a veiled theology of discerning spirits and interiority elaborated for women by the female writers Barbe Acarie, Teresa of Avila, and Jeanne-Francoise Frémyoti de Chantal.

In chapter 8, “The Devil in the Convent,” Sluhovsky asserts that possession was a form of “female monastic creativity” (242). He clarifies the confluence of spirituality, sensuality, and sexuality in early modern mysticism by un-

derscoring how sexuality could bespeak intense spirituality just as erotic imagery could convey intrapsychic or spiritual tensions in an environment where competition for spiritual distinction prevailed. In chapter nine, his conclusion, Sluhovsky emphasizes how the reliability and trustworthiness of the demoniac or mystic ultimately became the privileged method of “discerning” interiority.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of this work is its memorable anecdotes such as the riveting case of a Modenese Theatine brought before the Inquisition in 1642 to answer for his suspect method of “genital exorcism” (47). The variety and scope of primary documents examined in this study are as impressive as they are extensive. Sluhovsky variably but judiciously employs the three traditional paradigms of possession — the psychopathological, the sociological-feminist, and the communicative-performative approaches — to show how “confessors, Inquisitors, spiritual advisors, directors of conscience, and mother superiors of spiritually inclined nuns all participated in the redrawing of the new maps of interiority,” and how interiority itself became gendered (7).

An investigation of triangulated relations among the “possessed” (demoniac or mystic), infused supernatural presences (diabolical or divine), and the lay and ecclesiastical witnesses who lent private events their public significance in a world where encounters with the supernatural were banal occurrences and the spectacle of exorcism was tied to religious and civic ritual, Sluhovsky’s *Believe Not Every Spirit* constitutes far more than a history of possession, mysticism, and discernment. It is an original and insightful interdisciplinary addition to early modern studies. The author succeeds admirably in historicizing without rationalizing.

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