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VIA PROPRIA AND VIA MYSTICA IN THE THEOLOGY

OF JEAN LE CHARLIER DE GERSON

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Historical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Theology

by

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June 1967

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## CHAPTER I

### THE SETTING AND SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

In the current flowering of late medieval studies the name of Jean le Charlier de Gerson is becoming increasingly prominent. Theologian, preacher, poet, Chancellor of the University of Paris, major figure in the great conciliar movement of the early fifteenth century, Gerson occupied a leading place in the great line that led from William of Ockham through Pierre d'Ailly to Gabriel Biel and thus on to the formative years of Martin Luther. His role in the university and the church and his theology have been illuminated by the thorough work of men such as James Connolly,<sup>1</sup> Walter Dress,<sup>2</sup> Palomon Glorieux,<sup>3</sup> Louis Mourin,<sup>4</sup> and especially of André Combes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James Connolly, John Gerson: Reformer and Mystic (Louvain: Libraire universitaire, Uystpruyt, 1928).

<sup>2</sup>Walter Dress, Die Theologie Gersons: Eine Untersuchung zur Verbindung von Nominalismus und Mystik im Spätmittelalter (Gütersloh, 1931). "Gerson und Luther," Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte (1933), pp. 122-161.

<sup>3</sup>Of special value is P. Glorieux's careful editing of the complete works of Gerson. The first six volumes of this projected eleven-volume work, which is being published by Desclée and Company, at Paris et al., are available at this writing.

<sup>4</sup>Louis Mourin, Jean Gerson: prédicateur Français (Bruges: Rijksuniversiteit te Gent Wrken uitgegeven door de Faculteit van de Wijsbegeerte en Letteren, 133; De tempel, in-8°, 1952).

<sup>5</sup>André Combes, Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson (three volumes, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1945). La théologie mystique de Gerson (Rome: Desclée et Socii Editores Pontificii, 1963).



The particular interest of this thesis has been summarized in a statement of the Chancellor himself: "Mystical theology is something beyond that which is called symbolic or proper theology."<sup>6</sup> A survey of the theological or, more specifically, "spiritual" writings of Gerson does reveal this twofold thrust. He wrote proper or symbolic theology, operating within the nominalist framework of his mentor and spiritual father, Pierre d'Ailly. On the other hand he went beyond this into mystical theology. This thesis will involve an analysis of the two strains of his theological writings. It will furthermore investigate possible reasons for this development and ask whether Gerson himself saw a possible synthesis of the via propria with the via mystica.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Jean le Charlier de Gerson, Oeuvres complètes, edited by P. Glorieux (11 vols.; Paris, Tournai, Rome, New York: Desclée & Cie, 1960--), III, 252.

<sup>7</sup>The question of Gerson's philosophical viewpoint is not within the scope of this thesis. Gerson has traditionally been considered a nominalist, but more recently this has been questioned, especially on the basis of the assumption that nominalism and mysticism are mutually incompatible. Reinhold Seeberg, for example, held that mystical theology applies the same epistemological principle to God that the nominalists apply to natural objects. Reinhold Seeberg, Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1913-1917), III, 675. Etienne Gilson, Bernard Bess and J. B. Schwab all held that Gerson was at least sympathetic to realism, if not a realist himself. E. Gilson, La philosophie au moyen age (Paris: Payot, 1925). B. Bess, "Gerson, John. Charlier," Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche, edited by Herzog-Hauck (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1899), V, 613. J. B. Schwab, Johannes Gerson Professor der Theologie und Kanzler der Universität Paris; eine Monographie (Wurzburg: n.p., 1858), p. 311. James Connolly maintained that Gerson was trying to harmonize the two systems. James Connolly, John Gerson, Reformer and Mystic (Louvain: Librairie universitaire, Uystpruyt, 1928), pp. 285-286. Still more recently, Heiko Oberman has sought to reaffirm that Gerson can rightly be called a nominalist. He stated, with regard to Gerson's



The problem of historical development is crucial in the case of Gerson. André Combes, who has been the most meticulous student of Gerson in the twentieth century, emphasizes this point very strongly:

It is necessary, in the first place, to reject the treating of Gerson as if, forever the same, he had always held the same theses and counseled the same actions.<sup>8</sup>

Careful consideration of the historical context is the very essence of his program as he analyzes the mystical theology of the Chancellor:

In the second place, it is necessary to stop judging Gerson from the point of view of an abstract teaching, and to stop judging the theses as an enduring enunciation placed under cover of the accidents of history, in order to try to consider the "givens" of the problem exactly as the protagonists of the drama have handled them.<sup>9</sup>

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mysticism, that "penitential mysticism . . . cannot only be adjusted to nominalistic presuppositions, but forms a natural complement to this type of scholastic thought." Heiko Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 339. The most thorough treatment of the question is in André Combes, Jean Gerson: Commentateur Dionysien (Paris: Vrin, 1940). Combes presents an in depth analysis of Gerson's Notulae super quaedam verba Dionysii de coelesti hierarchia, on the basis of which he establishes Gerson's early thought-pilgrimage and also his relationship to his mentor Pierre d'Ailly. In any case, the author of this thesis is of the opinion that Gerson's concern was theological not philosophical. He used philosophical argument in the interest of his call to repentance.

<sup>8</sup> André Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson (2 vols.; Rome, Tournai, Paris and New York: Desclée et Socii Editores Pontificii, 1963-1964), I, 202.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 203.



Indeed, it appears that in later life Gerson's penitential mysticism was replaced by an essentialistic type of mysticism.<sup>10</sup> For reasons such as this, it will be necessary to qualify the essentially synthetic approach of the thesis with a consideration of the historical situation in which Gerson found himself.

What is proposed then, is to concentrate upon the development of Gerson during his university period without referring to the work of his later years. The division is natural. Until 1408 Gerson was occupied primarily with his work as Chancellor of the University of Paris. Toward the end of this period and especially after 1408, he was drawn more and more into churchly-political affairs, and his concern was no longer only the reform of the University but also the resolution of the schism. It was before 1408, and especially during the years 1402-1408, that he produced many of his great spiritual writings. From 1408-1415 little in the way of such writings came from his pen. Then, beginning with a number of sermons, he embarked on the second stage of his productivity.

The plan is first to ask what moved Gerson to develop a mystical theology in addition to his proper or symbolic theology. The core of the thesis will be an analysis of the via propria and the via mystica.

The concluding section will deal with possible evidences of a theological synthesis of the two ways in Gerson's writings.

The principal documents to be examined are the following:

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<sup>10</sup>Oberman, p. 333.



De consiliis evangelicis et statu perfectionis  
 De comparatione vitae contemplativae ad activam  
 De vita spirituali animae lectiones sex  
 Contra curiositatem studentium lectiones duae  
 De theologia mystica lectiones sex  
 De theologia mystica practica  
 Spiritus Domini (sermon)

The omission of La montagne de la contemplation from the list of main sources may be surprising. But this work, written by Gerson prior to the writing of De theologia mystica lectiones sex, adds little to our understanding of his mystical theology.<sup>11</sup> With two exceptions, these principal sources are all clearly dated between 1401 and 1408.<sup>12</sup> De consiliis evangelicis et statu perfectionis appeared no later than 1415, and possibly earlier.<sup>13</sup> The dating of Notulae super quaedam verba Dionysii de Coelesti Hierarchia, to which some reference will also be made, has likewise not been determined, but it is obviously cast in the same frame of reference as the two works on mystical theology.<sup>14</sup> It may have been a set of notes in preparation for De theologia mystica lectiones sex. The sermon Spiritus Domini, dated 1416, is the one work which plainly goes beyond the year 1408. Coming at the conclusion of Gerson's "arid" period, this sermon

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<sup>11</sup>Combes speaks of it as nothing more than a rough draft. Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson, I, 120.

<sup>12</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres complètes, III, ix-xii.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., I, 128.

<sup>14</sup>Combes gives as tentative the date 1400. In Jean Gerson: commentateur Dionysien (Paris: Vrin, 1940), p. 420.



is so significant for an analysis of the relationship between via propria and via mystica that one must include it. It is a kind of link between the early and the later years.



## CHAPTER II

### REASONS FOR GERSON'S "DUAL" THEOLOGY

#### The Tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius

If one asks why Gerson taught two "ways," rather than integrating his theologizing into one unified system, the answer must first of all be that this was the tradition which he had inherited from Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>1</sup> Thus, when he stated as the first consideration of his De theologia mystica speculativa, "Mystical theology is something beyond that which is called 'symbolic' or 'proper',"<sup>2</sup> he immediately revealed to the reader that this is, after all, in the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius:

For thus blessed Dionysius, instructed by Paul who was aware of the divine secrets, handled each separately under its proper title. For when he had written about symbolic theology, which uses physical comparisons applied to God, that He is a lion, a light, a lamb, a stone, and the like, according to which God is called "of every name" [Omninomius]; and when he had moreover dealt with proper theology, in which on the basis of the affective powers

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<sup>1</sup>Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite was probably a native of Syria living in the latter half of the 5th century at the earliest. A neo-Platonist who in the Middle Ages was regularly confused with Dionysius the Areopagite mentioned in Acts 17:34, his mystical writings profoundly influenced medieval theology. Cf. Jos. Stiglmayr, "Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite," in The Catholic Encyclopedia (N.Y.: The Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1913), V, 13-18.

<sup>2</sup>Jean le Charlier de Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, edited by P. Glorieux (11 vols.; Paris, Tournai, Rome and New York: Desclée & Cie, 1960--), III, 252. For the sake of clarity, the lectures on mystical theology of 1402-3 will be called De theologia mystica speculativa; the companion document, composed in 1407, is titled De mystica theologia practica.



discerned in creatures, especially those more capable of perfection in external relationships, we rise to affirm certain things concerning God, namely that He is a thing, and life, from whom the existence, life, etc. of all things is derived--then he added a way of finding God that is better than the rest. It proceeds through abnegation and extra-mental projection [excessus mentis] as if God is seen in a divine cloud--that is, in the concealed and hidden place where He makes darkness His hiding place.<sup>3</sup>

While Gerson apparently understood Pseudo-Dionysius to have posited three distinct theologies,<sup>4</sup> it is difficult to trace such a threefold distinction in Gerson's own writings. He stated in the second proposition of De mystica theologia speculativa that mystical theology rests upon inner experience, while the other two theologies proceed from outward impressions.<sup>5</sup> In practice he appears to have allowed the symbolic and the proper to move together and fuse into one theology, which one may rightly call the "proper," or via propria--to which is opposed the inward, the via mystica.

Quite apparently, the medieval theologians in the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius felt a lack in their symbolic or proper theology. It dealt only with symbols intended to mediate a relationship between God and man, but failed to enable man to win through experientially to the very essence of the Godhead. Dissatisfied with a God-relationship mediated to him by symbols, man sought to "go beyond" and approach the throne of God, advancing into the tremendum, touching the

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.



hiddenness. Gerson, concluding his definition of mystical theology, referred to Isaiah for evidence:

heeding this, one of the prophets exclaimed with the declaration: Truly you are a hidden God. Isaiah 45:15. Therefore, this book is entitled "Concerning Mystical Theology." "Mystical," however, is interpreted as "hidden."<sup>6</sup>

Thus mystical theology sought to reach beyond the incarnational and penetrate the absolute. One senses here a direct parallel between "proper" theology and the conception "de potentia ordinata," with a corresponding parallel between mystical theology and the conception "de potentia absoluta." In "proper" theology, God is revealed in symbol. His power is harnessed to an outward, revealed order. In mystical theology God is hidden. His power is absolute and unknowable.

Gerson, then, in dealing with mystical theology as a discipline that went beyond ordinary theology, was following a tradition which he had inherited. Indeed, this division in the theology of the Middle Ages, the consciousness of the spiritual inadequacy of proper or symbolic theology and the concomitant attempt to go beyond to a theology that would fill the void, is one of the most striking characteristics of the religious thought of the period.

#### Mystical Theology as an Instrument of Reform

But in Gerson's hands mystical theology gained a new function. It was for him a method by which he sought to counteract some of the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.



abuses at the University of Paris. He saw there an arid intellectualism and a barren theology which was inadequate as an expression of the Christian faith. He felt that the heart had to play its role, and it was precisely the tradition of mystical theology which presented itself to him as a possible solution to the religious problems of the day. By grounding this theology in human psychology and by emphasizing the affective powers of the soul, he was able to add to his own "proper" theology a theoretical and practical mode of attaining the kind of warm relationship to God for which he and others yearned, and which would stand in opposition to the barrenness of Paris intellectualism. The lecture series Contra curiositatem studentium and De mystica theologia speculativa are to be understood both as presenting Gerson's idea of a theology of reform and as an attempt to institute a reform movement at the University of Paris.

#### The Onset of the Reform Endeavor

Gerson had delivered his lectures De vita spirituali animae from January to July, 1402. There is no more than a hint of a mystical theology to be found in this work. During the winter 1402-1403 the Chancellor delivered the series of lectures which constituted his first major mystical treatise, De theologia mystica speculativa, his formal attempt at suggesting the solution to the spiritual problems which were vexing the university. One cannot, of course, draw the conclusion that the De theologia mystica speculativa was conceived suddenly between July 1402 and the winter of that same year. One can conclude that the years 1400 to 1403 were an extremely creative period in Gerson's life.



For several years the Chancellor had been preoccupied with the work of John the Baptist. He had delivered a pair of lectures on Mark 1 and 2, the first of which has been lost. The second of these has been dated October-December 1401 by Glorieux.<sup>7</sup> There followed a number of lectures and treatises, all of which grew out of the account of John the Baptist's preaching. Notable among these are the De distinctione verarum revelationum a falsis, on Mark 1:4 and the De duplici logica, on Mark 1:5. These are both dated November-December 1401.<sup>8</sup> The essay De comparatione vitae contemplativae ad activam, also based on Mark 1:5, is dated in the same months.<sup>9</sup> Works such as these laid the groundwork for what was to be the true onset of Gerson's reform endeavor, the Contra curiositatem studentium. The latter may well be regarded as the first part of a trilogy composed, in addition, of the two great treatises on mystical theology. In Contra curiositatem studentium is to be found both Gerson's reformatory purpose and his analysis of the ills which beset the university, together with some indications of the author's own place in the philosophic milieu.

#### The call to repentance

Gerson introduced his call to repentance in Contra curiositatem studentium with a grand sermonic sweep reminiscent of John the Baptist,

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., I, x.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.



whom he held in his mind's eye.<sup>10</sup> The nub of the human problem and its solution are analyzed briefly:

Thus rational man after sin is like a worthless servant, answerable for the crime of lese majesty, cast into the exile of this vale of misery and thrust into the gloomy prison of corrupt, stinking flesh. There, sitting in darkness, he does not see the light of heaven unless he is first reconciled by way of repentance, which we correctly call the portress who frees us from the bonds of sins, and by whose mediation the light of faith can shine more clearly to the soul.<sup>11</sup>

Cut off from the light of heaven by sin, man is unable to approach God unless the way is prepared through penitence.<sup>12</sup> Penitence precedes faith in the same way that the purging of a field precedes sowing, and the way healing of the eye precedes vision of light. Then, however, faith is necessary, since without faith it is impossible to please God. But this faith must work itself out in deeds and operate through love, because faith without works is dead.<sup>13</sup>

With this program outlined in simple terms--repent, believe,

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<sup>10</sup>The theological formulation of repentance will be dealt with in Chapter III.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>12</sup>Combes misinterprets here when he says of the above passage, "La premier moment de la réforme gersonienne consiste à rappeler à des théologiens ivres de spéculations transcendentes, que ce n'est pas sur la terre que l'on peut jouir de la vision béatifique." He breaks off the above quotation at "videt," thus completely losing the implication of the "nisi reconcilietur . . ." Cf. André Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson (2 vols.; Rome, Tournai, Paris and New York: Desclée et Socii Editores Pontificii, 1963-1964), I, 43.

<sup>13</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Completes, III, 226.



let faith work through love--Gerson turned passionately upon his hearers:

Do you therefore wish to believe the Gospel? Do you desire to see the light of heaven? Do you want to be borne from the lowest depths of prison to the higher regions? I know you do. Therefore obey the preaching of Christ and repent. And thus believe the Gospel.<sup>14</sup>

But while the appeal was to believe the Gospel, Gerson's emphasis was upon penitence produced by the threat of hell. There are, he said, three courts of divine judgment: this present life, purgatory, and eternal hell. He expatiated on the horrors of hellfire, and noted that for this reason Christ our judge admonishes man to repent and believe the Gospel; for whoever does not repent here with men, will repent with the demons in the future.<sup>15</sup>

The Chancellor's remonstrances give insight into the evils of the day: some felt that it was foolish to afflict oneself with penitence instead of seeking honor and voluptuous pleasures. Some excused themselves because they despaired of getting rid of a bad habit. Others pointed to the serious sins of their fellows. Still others pleaded the difficulty of making satisfaction. The order of the day, Gerson continued, was not to have order, the faith was not to have faith, the goal, to avoid a goal. The single root of all this evil is the original corruption of nature or the tyranny of the members or the law of sin, whatever name it is given. And its ultimate nature is

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 227.



pride, which is the source of avarice and luxury and vain curiosity. But the foundation of penitence is humility and the root of faith's humility is subjection to God.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore pride is to be done away. Sadly, the fruits of pride and her sister, envy, are to be seen especially among the scholastics. Out of these twin evils grow curiosity, stubborn independence [singularitas], out of which in turn develop contention, dispute, impudence, stubbornness, defense of error, love of one's own understanding, fierceness of opinion; then, scandal and contempt of the simple. Such, said Gerson, were the evils of the day--especially among the scholastics, and most particularly among the theologians.<sup>17</sup>

#### The attack upon the university scholars

The theoretical principle of Gerson's attack is outlined in his first proposition: Philosophic inquiry is not able to advance into the immensum.<sup>18</sup>

The capabilities of natural knowledge are outlined thus:

Thus the leading of the natural reasoning power gets to the point where it is known that there is one God, the chief and ruler of all, who gives existence and life to all things. To some He gives more clearly, and to others

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 231.



indeed, more obscurely. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.<sup>19</sup>

Man is duty bound to remain within the limits imposed upon him. There are certain things which he is not qualified to investigate on his own, lest he become lost in his own thoughts and his heart be darkened. Thus, questions relating to the origin of the earth, or concerning the incarnation and the other articles of faith, cannot be known out of the experiences of the philosopher, because they are situated in the free will of the Creator.<sup>20</sup>

This does not mean that the articles of faith are contrary to natural philosophy, but that they are not attainable without revelation.<sup>21</sup> The root problem is simply that philosophy, finding God to be the prime mover, does not discern His total freedom but binds Him to natural law. This is one of the key thoughts of Gerson:

At this point someone will respond and say that although philosophic reason finds that God is the prime mover and the first cause and the goal of all things, it still does not find that He operates freely by the freedom of contradiction, but more by natural necessity and by a certain individual character of that goodness of His which is shed abroad. This, I assert, is the total and particular root of the errors in those who philosophize, who on the basis of the immobility of the order in the universe--insofar as

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid. The Scripture reference is to Romans 1:20.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 231-2.



this has been determined--think they can conclude that the cause moving all these things is not only immovable--for this they understand correctly--but that He is bound to act in a given way and is unable to ordain differently.<sup>22</sup>

Such people, who try to limit the free will of God by binding it to a natural necessity, are the ones of whom the apostle spoke when he said that knowing God, they did not glorify him as God.<sup>23</sup> Whoever tries to investigate what has not been revealed is in danger of falling into the abyss. Far better the humility which responds to the mysteries of life with the confession, "I do not know; God knows, and the one to whom God will want to reveal it. Believe the Gospel and it suffices."<sup>24</sup>

Thus Gerson regarded God as a totally free agent, unbound by any natural law. Man can know only a few things about God on the basis of his natural powers, and anything beyond must come by revelation. Man's duty is to accept that revelation, repent, and believe the Gospel.

Closely related to this limiting of God's freedom of which Gerson complained was the activity of the formalizantes, who, generally speaking, were the followers of Duns Scotus. It should be emphasized that Gerson did not condemn them out of hand, nor can he simply be interpreted as an enemy of Scotism.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 233.



What was it that the formalizes were trying to do? They were bringing a great variety of new terms to bear, endeavoring to aid the intellect in intuiting the quiddities of things. They sought in this way to strip the quiddities of objects of their accidents of place, time, and the like, thus presenting the bare quiddity to the eye of the mind. To this Gerson gave his hearty approval.<sup>25</sup> For this endeavor was related to the principle of abstraction which he was to utilize in his mystical theology.

What Gerson did object to was the making of countless actual (ex parte rei) distinctions, rather than recognizing that the analysis of an object of sight or thought into its component parts is merely something that goes on in the mind. Thus, it is a "given" for every metaphysics that God is the very ultimate in simplicity. Yet the attempt was being made to analyze Him into actual components:

If God's unity is granted, what need is there to separate, divide, put together and split apart [ex parte rei, as they say] that very perfectly unified essence by way of metaphysical forms or quiddities or rational ideals, or in any one of a thousand imagined ways? Why do this ex parte rei, as they say, and not on the basis of the intellect's handling of these things?<sup>26</sup>

Gerson was here not attacking Scotus himself so much as those who had gone far beyond him:

Holy God, how many precedences, how many pressing matters, how many signs, how many modalities [? modeitates], how many definitions do some make

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 242.



distinctions about--beyond Scotus! Right now a thousand books have been filled with such matters, so much so that the long life of men hardly suffices to read them, not to speak of understanding them.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, these contentious individuals, while calling all who did not agree with them "terminists," went around compounding even longer congeries of terms.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, Gerson had in mind Jean de Ripa, although at one point he mentioned Scotus himself critically. He felt that Ripa was in error, and was furthermore offended by the extreme learnedness of his writing. The latter apparently boasted that anyone incapable of understanding his language must be dull. This aroused Gerson's ire. How then could Ripa expect young people to understand? Theologians who are eager to repent and believe the Gospel will pay more attention to the knowledge that edifies than to that which puffs up.<sup>29</sup> Here one sees emerging Gerson's great concern for the spiritual well-being of the people, and his distaste for anything that smacks of haughty erudition.

But to continue his analysis: What could be identified as the source of these ills? Part of the problem, Gerson felt, stemmed from putting too much stress on the pagan philosophers. This led to a dangerous erudition in matters of theology, and to the avoidance of

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 243.



penitence and belief.<sup>30</sup> Gerson also singled out Avicenna and Al-Ghazali as disturbers of the theological peace, because of their use of the principle ex uno in quantum unum non provenire nisi unum. This led them to posit that only a single second intelligence can be caused by a first. This in turn led some Christian philosophers into the error of positing distinctions within the divine essence--not real distinctions, to be sure, but distinctions ex natura rei; and many felt that there is no difference between a real distinction and a distinction ex natura rei.<sup>31</sup>

The Chancellor also singled out Plato as a source of current problems, for in his theory of abstraction he posited eternal universals outside the soul and outside God.<sup>32</sup> This approach had led some of the Christian philosophers into error, for they had posited eternal quiddities of things, outside the human soul, which are not God, nor are they produced by God, nor producible by Him, nor annihilable by Him. This is clearly contrary to the Paris Articles dating from the time of William of Paris and Bonaventure.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>"Fundamenta nimio studio accipere a philosophantibus paganis, curiositas est in theologica eruditione periculosa, et tanquam ademptrix poenitentiae et credulitatis evitanda. Tradunt hi qui conversationem et doctrinam Origenis conscripserunt, quod nimis biberat de aureo calice Babylonis, calicem Babylonis aureum, philosophiam non qualemque, absit, sed philosophiam Gentilium appellantes." Ibid., pp. 245-6.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>32</sup>"Rursus Plato volens abstrahere quidditates a motu et a materia et tempore et loco et ceteris extrinsecis, posuit ideas rerum aeternas sicut ideam hominis separatam quae erat quidditas omnium hominum, ideam boni et universalis realia extra animam et Deum aeterna, si verum sit quod ei imponitur." Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.



Thus, in his general criticism of the pride, idle curiosity and divisiveness prevalent at the University of Paris Gerson singled out three highly disturbing philosophical opinions:

1. Some were limiting God's freedom by trying to bring Him into the framework of natural law.
2. Some philosopher-theologians were coming dangerously close to positing real distinctions in God's essence.
3. The view had been espoused by some that eternal quiddities of things exist apart from God and at the same time outside the human soul. This is of course closely related to number 1 above.

In view of the common allegation that nominalism and mysticism are mutually exclusive<sup>34</sup> it should be emphasized that even now, on the brink of presenting his first lectures on speculative mysticism, Gerson betrayed a clearly nominalistic orientation. His denunciation of conditions at Paris, while they may have been directed against certain offsprings of nominalism, were designed not to undercut but to support the nominalistic system.

In point of fact, Gerson was fundamentally uninterested in the niceties of philosophic debate, even though he was often drawn into it. He was not making propaganda for any particular school of philosophy. In fact, he suggested that the solution to current philosophic problems might ultimately be found in the work of St. Thomas

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<sup>34</sup>Cf. supra, p. 2, n. 7.



Aquinas.<sup>35</sup> He saw himself as a theologian whose obligation it was to deal with the things which edify.<sup>36</sup> He had no patience with erudition for its own sake, with self-conscious avant-garde-ism, with itching ears. Philosophical speculation and the nice questions it raised were peripheral matters for him, except where they touched upon the crucial issues of theology.<sup>37</sup> Thus, conscious of the unity of God, he objected to the "neo-Scotists" who did not merely use distinctions as tools for human understanding but sought to divide God into various quiddities ex parte rei. He objected to a philosophic approach which would detract from the sovereign freedom of God and make Him subject to overarching principles. He felt constrained to criticize the pagan philosophers who found absolute ideas existing outside of God, neither produced nor

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<sup>35</sup>"Forte controversiam totam solveremus, distinctione facta de analogia hujus nominis, ens, quae tam late a sancto Thoma, supra quartum Metaphysicae in principio ponitur (S. Thomas Aquin, In Metaphysicam Arist. IV, Lectio I.), ut ad possibilia et objectalia, immo ad negationes et privationes eam dicat extendi, sicut Gregorius complexe significabilia ad tertium entitatis modum resolvere conatus est. Ita forte contrarietas de relationibus an sint res distinctae vel non, concordaretur ex facile, apud illos qui non tam contendere quam verum quaerere parati sunt." Ibid., pp. 246-247.

<sup>36</sup>"Postremo omnibus omissis quae christianam pietatem vel offendunt vel non aedificant, paratiores simus poenitere et credere Evangelio, quam in talibus plus aequo tempus atterere. . . . Finis autem praecepti est caritas de corde puro et conscientia bona, et fide non ficta, a quibus aberrantes conversi sunt in vaniloquium, volentes esse legis doctores, non intelligentes neque quae loquuntur neque quae affirmant." Ibid., p. 247. The reference is to I Timothy 1:4-7.

<sup>37</sup>In De duplici logica, Gerson remarked that theology has its own logic and that it is a current weakness when theologians apply themselves to "nude logic." Ibid., pp. 59, 62.



capable of annihilation by Him, for this too detracted from the sovereignty of God. Thus Gerson opposed philosophical conceptions which he believed obscured the glory of God.

At the time when he delivered the lectures Contra curiositatem studentium Gerson had already begun to present the structure of the spiritual life of a Christian in terms of the via propria, especially in De vita spirituali animae. He had analyzed and spoken prophetically against the self-centered intellectualism of the university. This was the first step in a planned program of reform which Gerson hoped to institute. He intended to appeal to the scholars and students of the university to forsake empty intellectualism and pursue the path of penitence. Therefore, having presented his critique of the current situation, he gave promise of his plans for the future. He remarked that the lucid understanding of those things which are believed from the Gospel are to be gained through penitence rather than through human investigation; and this clear and wise understanding is specifically mystical theology.<sup>38</sup> Therefore Gerson intended next to take up the question, in a series of public lectures, "whether in this earthly pilgrimage God is better known through penitence of the affective power than by the investigating intellect."<sup>39</sup> This attempt to change the minds and hearts of his hearers was to be the heart of his reform endeavor at the university.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.



The purpose of this chapter was to seek reasons for Gerson's use of the two ways in his theology, the via propria and the via mystica. It has become apparent that this method was a part of the tradition which he had inherited, and that the tradition may well have developed as Christians sought a deeper relationship with God than the via symbolica or via propria, as these were understood, afforded. But the specific occasion which led Gerson to "go beyond" into mystical theology was his desire to reform the university by leading its members away from "vain curiosity," by way of penitence, into a meaningful relationship with God.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE VIA PROPRIA IN GERSON

##### Groundplan of De Vita Spirituali Animae

The lecture series De vita spirituali animae, which Gerson delivered January to July 1402, affords an excellent entree into the author's spiritual theology. The treatise resulting from this series was dedicated to Pierre d'Ailly, who had assisted Gerson in preparing one of the lectures. The plan of the work was outlined in a letter to d'Ailly in which the author stated that he used as the theme of the work Paul's statement, "In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28)." Gerson understood this to mean that we live in God by the vivification of grace; we move in Him and toward Him by good works; we are in Him in a kind of quiet contemplation. The first occurs in the baptism of water or of fire, the second in the struggles of the pilgrim, and the third in "the consolation of angelic ministration." The first is true of all who live under grace, the beginners; the second is true of the more proficient; and the third is true of the perfect.<sup>1</sup>

One can see in this plan for the De vita Gerson's attempt to bring together the total experience of the Christian: the essential

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, edited by P. Glorieux (11 vols.; Paris, Tournai, Rome and New York: Desclée & Cie, 1960--), II, 64.



grace which makes him a member of the household of God; the Christian life with all its trials and its attempts to live according to God's will; and finally the contemplative life wherein a more sure confidence is to be found. But while Gerson was here apparently endeavoring to establish a kind of pattern which would incorporate all his thinking regarding the spiritual life, the treatise De vita is by no means the balanced presentation which he had outlined thematically. Most of it is devoted to the second part of Paul's statement, "In him . . . we move."

It should also be emphasized that this treatise does not cover the mystical theology at all. Combes asserts:

Briefly, nothing in the V [ita] S [pirituali] tends toward the Mystica just as it is. Nothing in the Mystica presents itself as the logical outcome of the V. S. Even when the elements appear to be common, they are radically different. However much we know that Gerson is the author of both, it would be more normal to attribute them to different authors.<sup>2</sup>

It may be that Combes has overstated the case, and that hints of the theology that "goes beyond" can be found in De vita. But it is apparent that this document is a major statement of Gerson's conception of the via propria. Its content will be analyzed in the following pages.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>André Combes, Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1945), III, 119. Combes is so certain of this that he cannot accept the customary dating of De vita (January-July 1402), which Glorieux does accept in his new edition.

<sup>3</sup>Unless specifically stated otherwise, all references to Gerson's own work in the rest of Chapter III will be to De vita spirituali animae.



The Four Lives of the Anima Rationalis

A closer analysis of the four lives of the rational soul provides the basic outline of Gerson's proper theology.

In the first place, Gerson stated that it is correct to understand the words, "In him we live and move and have our being," in a natural sense, because it is God who vivifies and preserves every living thing.<sup>4</sup> This life of nature in the soul is defined as "the purity of essence with the integrity of its powers."<sup>5</sup> Corresponding to this life is a form of death, which is produced by original sin. Original sin, to which Gerson also gave other names, including "the tyranny of the members" and the "law of sin," either annihilates or distorts the first life.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the destructive effects of original sin upon the first life, the life of grace is necessary. This is produced by the working of the Holy Spirit:

The second life is the life of grace, so named because the Holy Spirit--who by His deeming worthy and His benevolence gives life to the soul so that it is empowered for the third

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<sup>4</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 114.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>6</sup>"Nam est mors naturae quae fit seu per annihilationem ejus totalem, seu per ablationem eorum quae naturae suae debita sunt, seu per immissionem contrariorum habituum prohibentium liberum exercitium hujus vitae, quaemadmodum est peccatum originale quod fomes mortis dicitur et tyrannus membrorum et lex peccati et a quo proveniunt cetera incommo, ut debilitatio virium, ignorantia, hebetudo et similia etiam post baptismum." Ibid., p. 116. Of particular interest is the statement that the effects of original sin continue even after baptism.



life, which must still be discussed--acts in advance to place justifying grace into the soul as a certain necessary concordance with regard to the law. But prior to this life is the life of nature--its material subject, so to speak.<sup>7</sup>

The life of grace is the work of the Holy Spirit through baptism:

Now baptism is that most profound infusion and sprinkling of grace and other powers, which washes and makes suitable the soul to which the Holy Spirit inspires and gives His own life and movement and essence.<sup>8</sup>

A form of death corresponds to this life also, namely the loss of the harmony which exists in the presence of saving grace. The Holy Spirit does not remain where this harmony is lost.<sup>9</sup>

When an individual has been granted spiritual life by the Holy Spirit, he will live a life of meritorious action. This then is the third life of the soul, corresponding to the "move" of the Acts passage:

For the rest, by the third life I understand nothing other than the meritorious or obliging action derived from this (aforesaid) life of grace, as any activity at all of a living person is called its second life by the Philosopher, I<sup>o</sup> de Anima.<sup>10</sup>

True to his pattern Gerson noted a death in this connection also, namely the cessation from necessary good works, which ultimately causes the Holy Spirit to leave.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 116.



Finally, the Christian may arrive at a situation of confirmation and stabilization, which is the fourth life:

Finally, the fourth life is not so much another life, properly speaking, as it is an establishing and strengthening of the first two lives. It occurs either on the earthly pilgrimage [in via] through an abundance of spiritual charisms which keep the soul from the contrary death, or in the homeland in a condition of beatitude and stable felicity.<sup>12</sup>

This corresponds to the "have our being" of Acts. (Note that this fourth "life" is naturally the third spiritual "life" of which Gerson speaks. The natural life is listed as an antecedent to the three spiritual lives.) The corollary death, completing the pattern, would be the sin which is mortal.<sup>13</sup>

It should be apparent that the way of salvation was never static in Gerson's thinking. It was exactly what the word implies: a way which man goes, always striving, retrogressing if not progressing. Stepwise the Christian strives to ascend, from "mere" state of grace to meritorious living to stabilization and confirmation. To be in a state of grace is theoretically sufficient for salvation; but to rest comfortably in this state of grace without further striving would be to invite its loss. The ultimate goal of stabilization can occur in two ways: either at the consummation, or in some cases, when a Christian in this life obtains certain charisms which protect him from the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-116.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 116.



corresponding death.<sup>14</sup> The latter concept is merely mentioned here and not developed.

Thus Gerson conceived of the Christian as a person who is in a tension between the forces of life and death. Ordinarily, assurance of final salvation is not yet his. His task is to strive onward toward a deepening relationship to God and a strengthened conviction of his salvation. This is the classic stance of the viator, whom Oberman defines as:

One who has not yet completed his journey either to the new Jerusalem or to eternal damnation. He has no evident knowledge of God, but is dependent on his sense knowledge and his faith.<sup>15</sup>

Gerson used the customary distinction between viatores and comprehensores. In De consiliis evangelicis et statu perfectionis he wrote:

"The viatores, comprehensores, perfecti viri, incipientes and proficientes differ in their love for God."<sup>16</sup> Apparently two sets of terms are involved at this point. The first set are the viatores and the comprehensores. The viatores can be broken down into two further classes, the incipientes and the proficientes. The incipientes then correspond to the first spiritual life and the proficientes correspond to the second spiritual life. The comprehensores are equated with the perfecti viri and correspond to the third spiritual life, which is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 115-116.

<sup>15</sup> Heiko Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 476.

<sup>16</sup> Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 13.



achieved in the world to come, or possibly, and presumably in rare cases, here on earth. The viator is the subject of Gerson's concern.

### The Spiritual Life in Terms of Faith, Hope and Love

Gerson defined the life which the Holy Spirit works in the individual in terms of faith, hope and love.

#### Faith

Faith is a great miracle because it rests upon hidden and inevident truths, in addition to or even contrary to natural reason.<sup>17</sup> Therefore it runs counter to the wisdom of the Greeks and is a stumbling block to the Jews. Hence the apostle calls it "the gift of God . . . lest any one should boast."<sup>18</sup>

This statement has deep significance for Gerson. As a protégé of d'Ailly and a follower of the nominalist line, his view of natural theology was severely limited. As has been noted, Gerson took up the question in detail in his lectures Contra vanam curiositatem studentium, when he locked horns with the intellectualism prevailing at the University of Paris. He stated then that philosophic speculation errs when it seeks to go beyond its limits and penetrate into the "immensum." The Incarnation and other articles of faith are precisely that--articles of faith.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 127.



Gerson gave a clear presentation of his conception of faith in his Declaratio veritatum quae credendae sunt de necessitate salutis of about 1416. He defined three aspects of faith in this document: faith as an infused habitude, faith as an act and faith as an acquired habitude. The infused habitude inclines one to believe the Catholic truths. The act is a true and certain assent to the Catholic truth, proceeding out of infused faith. The acquired habitude is a true and certain habitude which is acquired by hearing the word of Christ. It is called "true" to differentiate it from error, "certain" to differentiate from opinion and "acquired" through hearing the word of Christ to differentiate from science, art, wisdom and the intellect. Gerson then went on to point out another use of the concept "faith," namely its objective character as the aggregation of truths which are believed.<sup>19</sup> Thus he understood faith to be an assent to the Catholic truth which is revealed in the word of Christ, which assent is made possible by the infused habitude of faith.

Since the source of the Catholic faith is the word of Christ, Gerson's understanding of Biblical interpretation and the relationship between Scriptural and churchly authority is of considerable importance. In the Declaratio veritatum he discussed the true and proper literal sense of Holy Scripture and the matter of authority:

The first level of truths to be believed is the entire canon of sacred Scripture and the individual truths which are literally asserted in it. Thus it is obviously incompatible with faith for anyone to dissent stubbornly from

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<sup>19</sup>Jean le Charlier de Gerson, Opera Omnia, edited by L. E. Du Pin (Antwerp: n.p., 1706), I, 27, C. In all references to this edition, the Roman numeral refers to the volume; the Arabic numeral refers to the column; the letter refers to the section within the column.



anything contained in that Scripture according to the understanding of the Holy Spirit, which is truly and properly the literal sense. If reason for this is required, Matt. 5:18 suffices: "For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass away from the law until all is accomplished." Later on (24:35): "Truly, I say to you, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." It is certain, moreover, that the canon of the Bible is the law of God acquired through revelation, and its literal assertions rest upon this single, literal foundation. All revelation from God is true, and because sacred Scripture is divinely revealed by God, in each of its parts it is the Word of God which cannot pass away.<sup>20</sup>

Thus one finds in Gerson both the conception of one literal, valid sense of Scripture, and a clearcut statement of his understanding of the totality of Scripture as given by divine revelation.

The Chancellor also put a great deal of stress upon the authority of Scripture in its relationship to tradition. He approved the statement of Augustine, "I would not believe the Gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not compel me," but made the following counter-statement:

although on the other hand it could be said, I would not believe the Church if the authority of sacred Scripture did not constrain me. And so in both respects and on both sides the reciprocal and mutual authority confirms itself.<sup>21</sup>

This statement was made in the throes of Gerson's involvement with the Great Schism. But he had also limited the force of Augustine's famous statement in De vita spirituali animae when, after quoting it, he added:

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., I, 22, B.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., C.



For in that very place he understands the Church as the primitive congregation of those faithful who saw and heard Christ and were His witnesses.<sup>22</sup>

Thus he imitated that a merging of Scripture and tradition in the primitive congregation is the source of revelational authority.

But Gerson recognized that faith is more than assent to revealed truth. In a sermon on John 8:46 he carried out his thought in greater detail. He stated that there are three kinds of faith: living, dead and feigned. To have a living faith is to believe the truth of God and to love and fear Him. Without this faith there is no merit. A dead faith is one which accepts the truth of the Gospel without performing works as a result, and without fearing and loving God.<sup>23</sup> The "feigned" faith is one which is not firm and falters in time of temptation.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Gerson did not consider faith merely the habitude or act of assent to doctrine. He held that if it is to be truly alive and meritorious it must be active in love. To have faith is to believe the truth of God and to love and fear Him through the affective power. For Gerson faith was a living, vital thing, out of which proceeds a life which reflects the love of an individual for God and for his fellowmen.

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<sup>22</sup>Gerson; Oeuvres Complètes, III, 139.

<sup>23</sup>Gerson, Opera Omnia, III, 1106, D-1107, A.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 1107, A.



## Hope

Hope is the second member of the trilogy. Gerson spoke of the Apostle Paul, in the flood of human fragility and vicissitude, writing triumphantly of the love of God from which nothing can separate him. The soul can find quiet and rest because God gives it hope.<sup>25</sup>

## Love

The third and most important factor in the trilogy is love, without which faith and hope are nothing.

One way to get at the crucial part played by caritas in Gerson's theology is to begin by investigating his analysis of the four states of man:

1. The original condition of man. This is the original righteousness of man, whether viewed as a gift super-added to his nature or as part of the nature itself. This involves also man's initial right, derived directly from God, to have dominion over nature.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>"Ceterum non minus est in ipsa spei certitudine miraculum. Nam qualiter, obsecro, inter tot fluctus humanae fragilitatis et vicissitudinis incertissimae potest dicere aliquis cum Apostolo: certus sum quod nec mors nec vita, etc. me separabit a charitate Dei quae est in Christo Jesu. Qualiter inter haec potest ita certificari anima et quietari ut dormire dicatur et requiescere in idipsum quoniam singulariter eam in spe constituit Dominus; quemadmodum pulchre declarat Bernardus super Cantica, super illo: introduxit me rex in cubiculum suum (Cant. 2, 4): cogita si potes et quantum potes; tu hic esse miraculum grande fatcberis. (Bernardus, Sermones in Cantica, sermo 23 (PL 183, 886)). Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 127.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 145.



2. Even in his fallen state, man has certain natural gifts--but not the grace that saves (gratia gratum faciens). This ability, which occurs on various levels, is the foundation of civil order. Gerson stated that "It is concerned with the relationship of masters to servants, fathers to sons, husband to wives, and the like, also among unbelievers and sinners."<sup>27</sup>
3. In the third state God gives caritas, which is the grace that saves. This is truly called a donatio because by it occurs the adoption of sons.<sup>28</sup> This is the evangelical kingdom or the kingdom of grace, as opposed to the civil kingdom.
4. Finally there are those other gifts of God which pertain to the state of nature glorified and confirmed.<sup>29</sup>

Thus Gerson presented the four states of man. Of greatest concern is the kingdom of grace, where caritas seems initially to be a gift of grace, a given from God--and then, as a result of this given, is viewed as one of the three theological virtues. It therefore has both an objective and a subjective side: the objective gift and the subjective

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 147.



response. God graciously accepts from men those things which they have in fact received from His hand.<sup>30</sup>

Thus one has arrived at the very center of Gerson's conception of the via propria. To possess love is to be in the kingdom of grace, for love and its commandments are the vital perfecting principle of the Christian life, wherein God perfectly and intimately unites the believer to Himself. It is on the basis of this gift that Christians can say, "In Him we live and move and have our being."<sup>31</sup> Gerson gave three reasons for the preeminence of love. In the first place, it is the constitutive element of the Christian life and perfection, because it more perfectly unites the Christian with the perfecting principle itself, namely God. Secondly, the Christian life consists of theological and moral powers, and the most perfect and perfecting of these is love. Thirdly, love is the fulfilling of the law.<sup>32</sup> Love as the perfecting principle, the highest of the theological virtues, the height, end, goal and completion of the entire law and Gospel, is therefore the fulfillment of what is initiated in faith and hope.

A similar subject-object relationship occurs in connection with the concept justitia. Justice is in the first place God's freely giving

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<sup>30</sup>"quasi videlicet numisma legitimum sit caritas dans pretium actibus nostris per quos ex dignissima condescensione Dei mereamur cum eodem de regno coelorum cum foenore multo. Et quamquam omnia quae damus eidem sint de suo et susceperimus ea de manu sua et ita proprie dare nequimus quid pro quo, nihilominus ipse totus desiderabilis acceptat bona nostra ex valore hujusmodi numismatis tamquam nostra essent appropriate et non sua." Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-11.



to each person what is his, not out of debt but out of a most free condescension.<sup>33</sup> All depends upon God's good will, in which justice in the dual sense of righteousness and kindness is found.<sup>34</sup> This justice rests principally in the Father but is shared by the Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup>

But justice is transferred to man in terms of a habitude and an action. It is then defined as "a habitude or something like a habitude which conforms to divine justice [justitiae] and imitates it by participation, and justice [jus] is the act or usage or effect of such justice [justitiae]."<sup>36</sup> The pattern is familiar: like caritas, justitia is transferred to man and becomes his habitude and action. As one would anticipate, Gerson held that man can have four different kinds of justitia: (1) original; (2) that which does not save, in the area of civic righteousness; (3) saving; and (4) that which belongs to the kingdom of glory.<sup>37</sup> The most significant feature is that while justitia stems from the free will of God it is ultimately also a property in man.

A further, major feature of Gerson's caritas doctrine was that love leads the recipient to keep the commandments. The subject-object relationship inherent in his concept of love was no theoretical

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.



construct, but was worked out concretely in terms of keeping the commandments as an act of thanksgiving to God.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, however, Gerson recognized that love will also lead man to humility before God. He will recognize his frailty and lack of dignity, for he is "chief of sinners."<sup>39</sup>

How then shall a man seek love, the highest of the religious virtues, the very essence of the spiritual life? The lectures De vita spiritali animae picked up the theme of keeping the commandments, concentrating on problems of the law particularly as these relate to the viator's quest for assurance of salvation. But now, at the moment when he posed the crucial question, Gerson answered by giving a hint quite irrelevant to the burden of his essay but indicative of the direction which his spiritual theology would take in the future: "If you wish to know the secret of love, move from the theology of the intellect to the theology of the affective power, from knowledge to wisdom, from cognition to devotion."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>"Porro de charitate quid dicemus, quale est in ea quantumcumque miraculum. Purificat hominem et gratum reddit Deo, ambulantem in omnibus mandatis sine querule." Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>39</sup>"Nihilominus dicere facit ex affectu homini qui ejusmodi est cum Apostolo: venit Deus salvos facere peccatores quorum primus ego sum. (I Tom. 1,15) Non utique mentiebatur Apostolus studio humilitatis sed ita de se sentiebat reputatione propriae fragilitatis et indignitatis; cui tamen dignus non erat reliquus mundus." Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.



## Nature and Grace

Thus far the basic features of the via propria in Gerson have been sketched in rough outline. There yet remains the task of dealing with the role of the law, which looms large in that part of his theology. But first, two specific problems must be taken up individually, nature and grace, and predestination and free will.

Gerson spoke out clearly against a bold work-righteousness: "We again add the statement that it is impossible for the soul, living by its natural life alone, to work out its own salvation."<sup>41</sup> On the other hand he could not bring himself to admit a condition of total inability in the soul as yet untouched by grace. He outlined the Augustinian view in graphic terms:

There were those who were saying that the soul, oppressed by such a death, cannot accomplish good moral acts, in keeping with the well-known opinion that the demons themselves and the damned can neither will nor act aright in the moral sense. They reason the same way with regard to viators who are dead in sin and separated from the life of grace. So great, they say, is the self-centeredness and depravity or corruption and deadness of life in the souls of such people, that they are drawn more powerfully to evil than to good; for death draws them more vigorously than does life. Therefore they say that everything relates to their lust, which is their death, and consequently all their works are dead because they proceed from death. They add as proof that the quality of grace is missing in every act of the sinner. In truth, since the good subsists in all its works just as in any one work, if good is lacking, evil results according to the sayings of Dionysius that nothing is entirely good because corrupt things are brought forth by a bad tree and a corrupt root.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 117.



Apparently this point of view was a live option in Gerson's day, at least in some circles. But in his opinion this was a demoralizing doctrine which had long since been refuted. In pragmatic fashion he asked, "Who would not be astounded to hear that, apart from grace, to honor one's parents, to give alms, to keep ecclesiastical precepts regarding fasting, indeed to prepare oneself for grace by attrition, is to sin mortally?"<sup>43</sup> Gerson of course admitted that such deeds are a preparation for grace and do not in themselves merit eternal life.<sup>44</sup> But he plainly held that one must "do what is in him" by way of preparation, and this is one of the keynotes in his theology:

[Good works of the natural soul untouched by grace] are nevertheless morally good and merit temporal blessings. They pave the way for grace de congruo because by them a man does the best he can [facere quod in se est]. For I understand "to do the best one can" to mean to do what a man can according to the powers which he actually has.<sup>45</sup>

The "operationes informes" dispose the individual to life. This is by no means sufficient because the life of the spirit is not yet present, but at least the individual is doing his best. What is necessary then, is that the infusion of the Holy Spirit be added.<sup>46</sup>

#### General grace

Gerson was also conscious of a more general view of grace, in the

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp. 117-118.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., pp. 114-115.



sense of anything which God has given freely without merit to every living thing. In this sense, even tribulation and infirmity and temptation would be a gift. From this point of view Gerson would admit that man can do no good without grace. But he saw no reason to speak of this as "grace" in the technical sense of the term.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore his position is clear: In a general way, all life on this globe can go on only as the result of a kind of common grace of God; but the individual must "do what is in him" to prepare for the specific, gracious infusion of the Holy Spirit.

While Gerson committed himself to the viewpoint outlined above, he wanted to guard against pride in men. He insisted that no individual can of his own free will produce truly good works. Therefore man needs to despair of his own powers and place all his hope in God.<sup>48</sup>

#### Grace in contrition and repentance

Gerson's handling of the nature-grace question is also revealed in his discussion of contrition and repentance. In his lectures Contra curiositatem studentium, he divided contrition into four parts:

1. The movement of the free will in seeking God above all things;
2. The movement of the free will in hating sin;

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>48</sup>"Denique perspicuum est quanta necessitate desperare debeamus de viribus nostris, nec ponere carnem brachium nostrum nec confidere in homine, sed projicere totam spem nostram in Deum ne confundamur sed liberemur et nutriamur et glorificemur." Ibid., p. 126.



3. The infusion of saving grace; and

4. The expulsion of guilt.<sup>49</sup>

But one ought not assume that these four factors occur in an orderly time sequence. On the contrary, according to Gerson, they commonly occur at the same time. But with respect to the subject the expulsion of guilt precedes the infusion of grace, while with respect to the agent the order is reversed, because the agent infuses the positive disposition of grace before expelling the fault.<sup>50</sup> Confession and satisfaction of course follow.

In the main, then, Gerson followed the customary pattern of human striving followed by the infusion of divine grace. He viewed penitence in terms of a virtuous habitude and a resultant action:

Penitence is a virtuous habitude which inclines the free will to hate and punish sin in itself against the law of God, whether this be sin of commission or of omission, in order to gain the goal of beatitude. Or thus: penitence is a habitude of righteousness which inclines the free will to hate and punish sin in itself, either indirectly or directly, so that it might be reconciled to God. . . . Actual penitence is defined as every act which indirectly or directly comes forth and proceeds from such a habitude.<sup>51</sup>

Penitence as a habitus virtuosus then cooperates or works together with the free will. The purer the free will, the more perceptive of his needs the individual will be.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 235.



But Gerson also sensed that underlying the movements of contrition and repentance is the grace of God, and tried to solve the nature-grace tension, on the level of contrition at least, with the subject-agent theory cited above. Moreover, in his discussion of contrition he noted that a fifth point could be added, namely the divine praeventio by which the will is incited to seek God above all things and to hate sin.<sup>53</sup> Thus he moved back to the ultimate question of predestination and free will.

#### Predestination and free will

The absolute freedom of God is one of the basic themes of Gerson's theology and it recurs in connection with predestination. In his Sermo primus de Sancta Trinitate he asserted that God can do anything He wants with His creatures, without censure. It is presumption on the part of man to want to seek out reason and cause, other than the just will of God. It is presumption when man asks why some and not others.<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand Gerson also spoke very clearly regarding human responsibility in connection with predestination. He stated in his Sermo de Nativitate Domini that God does not cause the damnation of anyone. He designed man for Paradise and it is man's responsibility

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>54</sup>"Congruum igitur est & rationabile Deum posse facere de omnibus nobis creaturis suis ad liberam suam voluntatem absque ulla reprehensione, absque hoc ut ei dicatur: quare hoc agis? Et est contra stultam praesumptionem humanae creaturae, quae alteram vult inquire rationem & causam, quam justam Dei voluntatem; murmurando quidem contra eam: quare Deus salvet hos, & non illos; quare potius gratiam confert & remissionem his quam illis?" Gerson, Opera Omnia, III, 1273, D-1274, A.



to strive to gain that for which he was created. God gave you a free will and showed you the good path and the evil, Gerson asserted. If you choose the bad blame yourself, not God.<sup>55</sup>

Gerson's great sermon Spiritus Domini was the occasion for one of his most painstaking attempts at reconciling the tension between a strict view of predestination and human freedom. This sermon may well be regarded as typical of his thought, perhaps even definitive for the early period. Therefore an attempt will be made here to develop his line of reasoning in that portion of the sermon devoted to divine determination and free will.

Gerson began by cautioning his hearers against seeking to understand the conundrum "Why He [the Holy Spirit] fills one person and not the other." Man's responsibility is merely to seek to be filled, if he feels that this divine filling has not yet occurred in him.<sup>56</sup> The Chancellor then launched into an analysis in which he appears to have come very close to the conception of grace alone, while operating within the framework of merit in the technical sense of the term. The principal motif is that the Holy Spirit must take the initiative:

The Holy Spirit comes to the soul which He is going to fill spontaneously and in advance, not preceded by works or merits, because it is not a matter of works but of Him who calls, as it is written: I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau. Malachi 1:13.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>"Cum dicunt insuper, quod Deus nullam facit creaturam ut damnetur, verum dicunt, quia eum facit ut Paradisum adipiscatur, si modo ipsum lucrare velit. Et in Dei nomine propterea pumeris, si te non disponas & laborem adhibeas ad finem habendum propter quem creatus es. Deus liberam tibi dedit voluntatem; tum bonum, tum malum viam tibi ostendit: si malam elegeris, te ipsum argue, non Deum." Ibid., 948 A.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 1239, A.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., C.



On the other hand Scripture clearly teaches that the soul must prepare itself for the reception of the Holy Spirit by doing what is in it. The basis for this statement is the assertion of Paul that "We are co-workers with him. (I Cor. III. 9)" The point is that if the soul did not thus prepare itself there would be no merit. Yet the cooperation occurs "through the spontaneous consent which obeys the Holy Spirit." Furthermore, this cooperation and obedience stem from prevenient grace. Thus the soul is made humble and aware of God's grace, for whatever it has of merit is given by prevenient grace and is not won on the basis of purely natural capabilities.<sup>58</sup>

To press this exposition would at first appear to limit human free will. But Gerson insisted that both free will and necessity are left untouched. This does not mean, however, that he weakened his presentation of the Holy Spirit's gracious operation. Instead he pursued another tack, and sought to solve the problem by positing a kind of cooperation between God's operation and free will, with God taking the initiative. This means essentially that human freedom is most free when God's grace is most active.<sup>59</sup>

Clearly, Gerson remained within the framework which he had

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., C-D.

<sup>59</sup>"sinat ipsum agere Deus proprios motum suae libertatis, immo tanto liberius & efficacius sinit, quanto ipsum ampliori praevenit gratia, vivificat, coroborat, informat, & languidum erigit, & sanat. Puto (exempli gratia) quod dum aegrotus homo sanatur a Deo, non idcirco Deus eum proprios motus agere non sinit, sed ad eosdem aptiorem reddit." Ibid., 1240, A-B.



inherited. He operated with infused qualities which were held to be meritorious in the technical sense of the term. He insisted that a man must always seek to do the best he can, and thus seek salvation. His De vita spirituali animae, certainly one of his most comprehensive statements of the via propria, was devoted largely to the problematics of law and the external manifestations of charity. But in his theorizing about nature and grace he sought to drive out nature and receive grace. One can understand why, when he was once asked the best antidote for temptation he answered, "O cross, hail! My only hope."<sup>60</sup> The thought is echoed in the little verse which concludes Du Pin's edition of De mystica theologia practica:

Conscius est animus meus, experientia testis,  
 Mystica quae retuli dogmata vera scio.  
 Non tamen idcirco scio me fore glorificandum,<sup>61</sup>  
 Spes mea Crux Christi, Gratia, non opera.

#### The Role of Law

##### Perspective

When he began his presentation De vita spirituali animae Gerson indicated that its thematic outline would be the four (three spiritual) lives of the soul. He also told d'Ailly by letter that this would be the outline of the lecture series. But no such balanced presentation was in the offing, for after presenting his plan in barest outline

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., IV, 360, A. Quoted in Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology, p. 232.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., III, 428, B.



Gerson launched into a detailed discussion of sin and the law. Combes points out that what Gerson actually did was to deal firstly with the way of grace and its stabilization, secondly with mortal sin, and thirdly with venial sin.<sup>62</sup>

But this development is understandable. Gerson simply stated the existence of the first spiritual life, the life of grace initiated by the Holy Spirit, without great elaboration. The third life was in fact that aspect of the Christian way which he was to develop as his mystical theology. The great bulk of the treatise therefore deals in effect with the second spiritual life, which is the life of meritorious action. Such matters as mortal and venial sin and the law come within the scope of this life. They deal with what happens when a Christian strives to live the life of meritorious action. In a sense, Gerson did not really forsake his original scheme but devoted most of his effort to one aspect of it.

From another perspective, it is apparent that Gerson was endeavoring to deal with one part of caritas, which is the very center of the Christian way. Love, the highest religious virtue, has a twofold character: it purifies a man and returns thanks to God by walking in all His commandments without complaint.<sup>63</sup> Christ told His disciples

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<sup>62</sup>André Combes, Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1945), III, 104-105.

<sup>63</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 127.



in Matthew 19:17, "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."<sup>64</sup> Gerson concluded that one's assurance of salvation is involved in this aspect of caritas. It is for that reason that so much of De vita and of De consiliis evangelicis, which will also be considered in this connection, is devoted to the exposition of active caritas.

#### Law as sign

If a man is to strive to prepare himself for grace and then, having received the gift of caritas, is to carry out God's will without complaint, it is necessary that God reveal His will to man. Therefore the basic function of the law in Gerson's system is that of a sign which reveals to man what God wants him to do and not to do in order to gain eternal life and avoid damnation.<sup>65</sup> God simply does not obligate His creatures unless He tells them first what He expects of them. But this

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>65</sup>"Lex divina praeceptorum est signum verum revelatum creaturae rationali quod est notificativum rectae rationis divinae volentis teneri illam creaturam seu ligari ad aliquid agendum vel non agendum pro dignificatione ejus ad aeternam vitam consequendam et damnationem evitandam. Ibid., p. 130. Dress makes the following comment in this connection: "Wie das Gesetz hier für Gerson ein signum ist, d.h. der den menschlichen Erkenntnismöglichkeiten entsprechende Ausdruck des göttlichen Willens, so sind später für Luther die Sakramente signa, d.h. dem menschlichen Auffassungsvermögen angepasste Verkünder und Übermittler der in ihnen und durch sie gegebenen Gnade. Wie bei Gerson, so ist für Luther das signum, das Gott uns gibt, zugleich ein Ausdruck und eine Begrenzung seines selbstherrlichen Willens." Walter Dress, Die Theologie Gersons: Eine Untersuchung zur Verbindung von Nominalismus und Mystik im Spätmittelalter (Gütersloh: C. Vertelsmann, 1931), p. 143, n. 1.



notification can occur in a variety of ways: by "voices," by writing, and even by internal inspiration.<sup>66</sup> The signs are revealed to the rational creature; hence, no irrational creature is bound. This is true also of infants.<sup>67</sup>

Here Gerson is not speaking of a special revelation as opposed to general revelation. He appears rather to lump both together. His point is that by himself man cannot attain to a knowledge of God. Therefore it is necessary that God reveal Himself, which He does in a variety of ways:

And because the divine precepts insofar as they relate to God as He is blessed, cannot be known by the rational creature by the natural light alone, revelation will need to be added in whatever way it may occur, whether through angels, or men, or by inner illumination, as the Apostle says regarding philosophers to whom he says that the hidden things of God have been revealed. Thus the theologians think that God is not absent from anyone, wherever he may be, who does the best he can, namely by using well the gifts he now has, and that God in fact divinely illumines him regarding the truths necessary for salvation, as Peter says in Acts.<sup>68</sup>

The latter part of this statement sounds very much like a natural theology. But the emphasis is still on God revealing, not man discovering on the basis of the light of nature. On the other hand, it is apparent that Gerson's nominalism did not lead him into any kind of irrationalism. When God gives the signs of His will to man, He gives them to man as to a rational creature.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



It has been stated that the law is necessary as a sign of God's will to man, who cannot learn the will of God by his own lights. Underlying this is Gerson's conception of God the almighty and absolute, whose actions and will are never contingent, never dependent upon a natural order. Gerson remarked in a sermon on the fourth Sunday in Advent:

For God can deal with His creature and bind him according to His good pleasure. Moreover, the only rational reason He needs is that He says: I want it that way.<sup>69</sup>

For this reason no sin can be remitted unless God freely refuses to impute it as sin, and probably no creaturely act has intrinsic worth apart from the will of God.<sup>70</sup> Goodness or evil in any action are entirely contingent upon the will of God, in contrast to the conception that God's will is in some way bound, e.g. by natural law. God does not approve something because it is good; it is good because He approves it. The will of God is determinative.<sup>71</sup>

But this conception of God's absolute freedom in determining good and evil did not lead Gerson into any kind of antinomianism or moral relativism. On the contrary, it drove him straight to the signs which God had given and upon which man is utterly dependent.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Gerson, Opera Omnia, III, 928, B.

<sup>70</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 123-124.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>72</sup>Just as Gerson conceived of man as learning the will of God by means of law-signs, so also he thought of the person of God in terms of figures and types which reveal the nature of God to man in a language which he can understand. He wrote in De simplicatione cordis, "Et si



Thus a nominalistic denial of the supremacy of natural law need not lead to antinomian relativism if the signs which God has given are taken seriously. Gerson demonstrated how seriously he took these signs in his struggle against John Petit and the latter's view on tyrannicide. He argued:

If an angel came down from heaven to assure me that the action was good, I would declare him anathema. More, if I had direct assurance from God himself, I would not believe, because such a supposition is impossible.<sup>73</sup>

This statement, given in the heat of conflict, reflects Gerson's confidence in the given signs rather than a disavowal of God's freedom.

#### Types of Law

With Gerson's understanding of the law as sign firmly in mind one is prepared to consider his view of law in the life of the Christian. He used the traditional distinction of natural, human and divine law, stressing particularly the natural and the divine. The latter distinction reflects the nature of man, who has two aspects, the spiritual and the corporal and mortal. This is the reason for the distinction between

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pergas ultra requirere: Quis est iste Pater tuus, cujus essentiae, cujus perfectionis, cujusque conditionis? Respondeat? Incomprehensibilis est & infinitus & ideo comprehendere ipsum non laboro: satis mihi est, ipsum pro statu praesentis exilii cognoscere sub eis quae memoratae sunt rationibus; quia Pater, quia pius, quia benefactor, amicus, intimus, pulcher, decorus & totus desiderabilis." Gerson, *Opera Omnia*, III, 463, A. For Gerson's view of moral rectitude as conformity of the will and its acts to the divine law and right reason cf. Gerson, *Oeuvres Complètes*, III, 124.

<sup>73</sup>Gerson, *Opera Omnia*, V, 379. Translated in James L. Connolly, *John Gerson: Reformer and Mystic* (Louvain: Uystpruyt, 1928), p. 352.



a supernatural and a natural law.<sup>74</sup> The natural law corresponds to the civil kingdom, which was instituted in answer to the needs caused by original sin but which tends to be self-seeking and can be retained or renounced in the interest of love. The kingdom of love (the evangelical kingdom) derives directly from God just as love itself does. It is selfless and cannot be done away because it is nothing other than the adoption of sons.<sup>75</sup>

#### Love as keeping the commandments

The present inquiry is concerned specifically with the role of the divine law at this point, particularly as obedience to it grows out of and gives evidence of the gift of love in the heart of the individual. The supposition is that in Gerson's thought keeping the commandments is an intrinsic part of love. Stated conversely, caritas is first a gift of grace and then a habitude and an activity, namely the keeping of the commandments. The fundamental question is therefore, "What are the minimum requirements which constitute an adequate fulfilling of the law?" The procedure will be to observe how Gerson circled this question in several ways in De vita spirituali animae, and then to follow his attempt to strike the center of the problem in De consiliis evangelicis.

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<sup>74</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 149-150.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.



## Mortal and venial sin

Early in De vita, Gerson approached the issue of keeping the commandments from its negative aspect by inquiring into that which is destructive of the spiritual life. This brought him into a discussion of mortal and venial sin, especially their effects.

As a kind of first principle Gerson stated that every sin is inherently death-bearing because it is an offense against God and His law and therefore separates the sinner from glory. That such an offense can be remitted is due only to the pure liberality of God who remits and no longer imputes. This is true even of venial sins.<sup>76</sup> But wherein lies the essential distinction between mortal and venial sin? There is no essential or intrinsic distinction. In His mercy God has simply decided not to impute certain sins to death.<sup>77</sup> Of course to sin deliberately, even though venially, is to abuse the mercy of God who has elected not to consider certain sins mortal.<sup>78</sup>

Gerson took up the issue more specifically later on in his essay. He noted that scholars had traditionally sought to define venial sin

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>77</sup>"Nulla offensa Dei est venialis de se nisi tantummodo per respectum ad divinam misericordiam quae non vult de facto quamlibet offensam imputare ad mortem, cum illud posset justissime. Et ita concluditur quod peccatum mortale et veniale in esse tali non distinguuntur intrinsicè et essentialiter, sed solum per respectum ad divinam gratiam quae peccatum istud imputat ad poenam mortis et aliud non." Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 121.



more closely by disputing whether it is contrary to or merely outside of the precepts of God.<sup>79</sup> But Gerson chose an entirely different method of approach. He sought to follow the ascending scale of the four lives, noting the effects of the two types of sin on each of them.<sup>80</sup>

1. Neither mortal nor venial sin is contrary to the first (physical) life, in the sense that they directly destroy it.<sup>81</sup>
2. Only mortal sin is contrary to the second life. It is destructive of the life of grace because it dissolves the harmony of love; thus God departs from the soul and it dies. Such mortal sin dissolves the very disposition in which the life consists. Venial sin, on the other hand, does not actually kill the life of grace. It is like bodily wounds which are not mortal, unless out of the mass of wounds another, mortal wound is generated.<sup>82</sup> Both Gerson's psychological interest and his emphasis on love as a kind of fusion of habitude and activity are apparent here.
3. It is assumed that mortal sin is destructive of the life of meritorious action. Venial sin is called not "destructive of" but "incompatible with" this life. For the same

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>80</sup>Here Gerson returned to the basic motif of the lectures.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., pp. 183-184.



act can hardly be both meritorious and venial sin.

The solution is to distinguish between love and the "ardor" of love. Then it is possible to assert that venial sin is not contrary to love itself but to the fervorem of love.<sup>83</sup>

4. All sins run contrary to the fourth life, particularly with regard to that stability which we will have in the world to come. The stability or confirmation which may occur "in via" can perhaps be compatible with some venial sins.<sup>84</sup>

It is apparent that in his discussion of mortal and venial sins Gerson was operating primarily with two principles: (1) The distinction is ultimately in the hands of a gracious, free God; and (2) caritas--a "given" from God, a habitude and an activity, is the very essence of the Christian's life. The mortal-venial question is handled from the viewpoint of the possible disruption of caritas.

It is also becoming clearer how several themes, the faith-hope-love trilogy and the notion of the four lives, fit together. Love as that which informs and goes beyond faith and hope, is the essence of the three spiritual lives. To be in love is to have spiritual life, to live meritoriously, and thus to be moving toward the goal of confirmation.

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<sup>83</sup>"Hanc intentionem, sicut opinor, habent doctores qui dicunt peccatum veniale non esse contra charitatem sed contra charitatis fervorem; appellantes fervorem actionem ex charitate venientem, quae quidem actio pro tunc impeditur dum actio venialis committitur."  
Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.



But the question has still not been answered, "What are the minimum requirements?" Or, "How can I know that I am in love?" Much of Gerson's exposition is devoted to this thorny problem.

#### The four-fold division of requirements

Gerson sought to provide some answers to the question, "What are the minimum requirements?" in De vita. His method was to set forth a kind of four-fold division of divine expectations:

1. There is a justitia which God demands of all men.

Outside of this there can be no rectitude. To slip from this justitia is to fall into mortal sin.<sup>85</sup>

2. There is a further standard of justice or rectitude to depart from which is only a venial sin.<sup>86</sup>

3. The Christian can go still further and keep the "counsels."<sup>87</sup> In fact, the Christian who wishes to attain his supernatural goal is obligated to pursue this category.<sup>88</sup> Here Gerson was thinking of such

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., pp. 188-189. Gerson would prefer to call the first division that of precept or (negatively) prohibition. The second division would then be that of mandatum or statutum or ordinatio or monitio; his personal preference is the term monitio. This would be a category midway between precept and counsel--more binding than counsel and less binding than precept. Ibid., p. 190. Gerson distinguished clearly between counsels, which are aids to the Christian life, and precepts, which pertain to the very essence of the Christian life, in De consiliis evangelicis. Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 190.



aids to piety as poverty, chastity and the like. He felt that this is what Christ had in mind when He said, "If you would enter into life, keep the commandments. (Matt. 19, 17)"<sup>89</sup> It appears from the context, however, that the keeping of the counsels, while it is to be sought, is not essential. Rectitude is possible outside of the keeping of the counsels.

4. The fourth category is that of the complementum perfectionis. This is what the Lord meant when He said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matt. 5:48) In this connection Gerson mentioned, with apparent approval, Augustine's remark that this command cannot be fulfilled to perfection by the viator.<sup>90</sup>

It is evident that Gerson, despite his desire to minimize nature and magnify grace in connection with predestination and free will, was here trying to help man find assurance of salvation partly on the basis of his performance of acts of love. The impact of God's demand was softened by Gerson by means of his four-fold division of divine requirements.

#### Limited love

A similar but more refined approach is to be seen in the tract

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 191.



De consiliis evangelicis. It is impossible to date this work accurately.

It may well have been produced a number of years after the De vita, since it deals in a more sophisticated way with some of the same questions.

It is probably safe to say that this document contains Gerson's final answer to the question, "What must I do?" within the period under discussion. Therefore an analysis of the line of argument in De consiliis evangelicis should reveal Gerson's concept of the Christian life.

The Christian life, Gerson stated, consists in love. This is its vital principle by which the Christian is joined to God most perfectly and closely. Moreover, love is the most perfect and the most perfecting of the theological and moral virtues. It is the height, end, goal and fulfillment of the entire law and Gospel. The fact that love is the most perfect and the most perfecting of the virtues is proved by the commandments themselves, as John said: "We know that we have passed out of death into life. Why? He adds the reason: because we love the brethren. (I John 3:14)" Man's assurance of being in love, then, is found in his fulfillment of the commandments of love; for it is love and its commandments that constitute and perfect the Christian life.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, this involves a perfection of love: "just as God gives His precepts concerning love and all their powers and acts, so [the precepts] are also given concerning the perfection of love and all powers." The perfection is that a man love God with his entire heart and soul, and his neighbor as himself. However it is generally agreed, Gerson held, that this cannot be accomplished in its fulness by any but the beati.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 12.



It is apparent that a tremendous demand is being made upon man. Some have sought to alleviate this demand by using the distinction between precepts and counsels. According to this scheme a certain minimum of love belongs under precept and must be fulfilled, while whatever goes beyond this comes under the category of counsel. But Gerson did not go along with this. The command is clear: man is to love God with all his powers, and nothing is excluded here.<sup>93</sup> Precepts and counsels have differing material and objectives. But the dilectio Dei involves the precept of caritas; therefore it is not a counsel. Such a concept is nowhere to be found in Scripture.<sup>94</sup>

How then did Gerson deal with the obvious question that arises? If the rule of love comes entirely under precept, and no part of it merely under counsel, then how deal with the manifest imperfection of fulfillment in men? In fact, Gerson stated that even beatific dilectio comes under precept; therefore all men are obligated to "reach out, strain and strive" for this perfect dilectio.<sup>95</sup> The solution which he found is a kind of tailoring of the concept of necessary fulfillment to fit the needs and abilities of individuals. The essential point is that not everyone is required to love God in the very best way; what is necessary is to love God above all other things:

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<sup>93</sup>"Apparet istud minus sufficere: primo ex statim dictis; secundo ex ipsa forma praecepti quae totalitem mandat et perfectionem et nullum grandum relinquit sub consilio: diliges, praecepit, ex totis viribus; qui autem totum dicit, nihil excludit." Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.



From this it is apparent that whatever falls under precept can be fulfilled in various ways without guilt or transgression. The viators, the more advanced [comprehensores] and the blessed [perfecti viri], the beginners [incipientes] and the accomplished [proficientes], love God on different levels. Yet the imperfect sin less if they do not love God in the same measure as those already entrenched and rooted in love; nor is guilt imputed to the viators if they do not cling to God with the same uniting love as the blessed ones themselves, even though according to Augustine beatific love falls under precept. Granted that it belongs under precept, still it is not under the necessity of precept. For it is not necessary to love God in the best way. No, to avoid guilt one must love Him very much [appretiative plus]; this means that the love of God takes precedence over everything else, so that a man is prepared to dismiss every other love rather than the love of God. This is the one type of perfect love possible for us, and that which is necessary according to precept.<sup>96</sup>

Here is a basic characteristic of Gerson: while he did not seek to soften the law by means of the usual distinction between counsels and precepts, he did seek to render it capable of fulfillment by tailoring the command of love to individual circumstances.<sup>97</sup> But the burden--and the possibility--of fulfillment still rest upon the Christian.

It was this factor that led Luther, while admiring Gerson's attempt to aid worried Christians in their search for assurance of salvation, nevertheless to criticize him for softening the law instead of letting it strike with full force and then turning to Christ alone for help:

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>97</sup>This line of reasoning was characteristic of Gerson in his later works also, particularly those which deal with temptation and the care of souls.



By softening the law he freed many so they should not despair. Therefore the pope condemned him. Now Gerson was the best kind of man; he was not a monk but reached the point where he could console consciences with Christ and His promise. But he only softened the law. He said: Oh, not everything can be such great sin. And so he gave consolation on the basis of the keeping of the law. But Christ knocks the bottom out of the barrel. He says we are not to trust in the law but in Christ: If you aren't pious, I am. This is the method-- to shift from my sin to the righteousness of Christ, so that I'm as sure that Christ's piety is mine as that this body is mine.<sup>98</sup>

In summary, Gerson found the very heart of the Christian life to be the command to love God and one's neighbor. The keeping of this command is the working out in life of the gift of love. It is the proof to the individual that he is living in love. The command to love cannot be broken down into precepts, which must be fulfilled, and counsels, which are optional. The command is total and demands perfection. Yet what constitutes an adequate fulfillment of the precept will vary with the individual. Herein is to be found the "softening" of the law which Gerson found necessary if man is to be able to attain a measure of assurance of salvation.

#### The Active Life versus the Contemplative

Thus far this inquiry has dealt primarily with questions relating to the proper theology of Gerson and the active life of the Christian. But a major portion of Gerson's thought was devoted to the contemplative life. Insofar as Gerson practically came to the point of equating contemplation with his mystical theology, the thrust of this paper is

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<sup>98</sup>TR II, Nr. 2457a, S. 468, 15, quoted by Dress, p. 167.



the relationship between the active and the contemplative life; or, put differently, the relationship between the active caritas-life and the striving for mystical union.

Gerson already called attention to this interrelationship in his work De vita contemplativa ad activam. This work was written in November-December 1401,<sup>99</sup> and therefore antedates the development of the mystical theology. Nevertheless, Gerson was deeply aware of the twofold thrust, the active and the contemplative, also before he began to write his works dealing with mystical theology.

According to Gerson both kinds of life, the active and the contemplative, are brought together in the human soul:

It should be noted that in one sense the contemplative life or the active life is understood by some as the soul itself, which is the first life. So there is no difference between those two lives in the same man, unless we return to the understanding that when it lives the speculative life the soul behaves differently than when it lives the active life.<sup>100</sup>

Gerson consistently used the principle of economy. Thus in this connection there is no ultimate distinction between the two kinds of life; the distinction rests in the human soul. However, it is necessary to use distinctions for purposes of understanding and analysis.

On the above basis Gerson made his analysis. Four modes of living can be co-existent in the same church, at least in theory:

1. Neither contemplative nor active (for example, baptized babies not yet capable of reason).

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<sup>99</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, x.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 71.



2. Purely active.
3. Purely speculative (contemplative).
4. Mixed.<sup>101</sup>

People can be saved in any of these four groups. In the first, obviously, baptized infants. In the fourth, prelates and other saints who lead the mixed life. More difficult is the case of the adult who never practices the contemplative life, for it is necessary that man's entire reason love God above all things. But Gerson stated that he followed Holcot in positing that the man who is very much involved in the active Christian life, without "actually and formally eliciting the act of loving God above all things," can be saved.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, a man who practices only the contemplative life could be saved, in a situation where he never had the opportunity to be active. But this case, like the former, would be rare.<sup>103</sup>

Which life is then to be preferred? Gerson gave the following breakdown:

1. The first life (neither active nor contemplative) is good.
2. The second life (purely active) is better.
3. The fourth life (mixed) is better than the second.
4. The third life (contemplative) is best of all.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.



But this is true only in theory, or in an absolute sense. In the case of Adam, for example, upon whom there was no claim actively to help a neighbor in need, the contemplative life was definitely the best.<sup>105</sup> At the present time the speculative life (Gerson here uses contemplative and speculative interchangeably) is of more profit to the church than the active, just as prayer does more good than active works.<sup>106</sup> But in the actual exigencies of life, where the need of man is in evidence, it is better to pursue the active life and help him.<sup>107</sup> In fact, the speculative person who sees his brother's need and refuses to help is lacking in love toward God, and is not living in a contemplation which is embraced in divine love, but merely in philosophic speculation.<sup>108</sup> Gerson's final position appears to be that, despite the theoretical superiority of the contemplative life, the mixed life is preferable in view of the human situation:

Presupposing sin and the diverse needs in the Church of God which stem from original sin, and all other things being equal, the fourth life, which is composed of both action and contemplation, is better than the merely active or merely speculative life, that is, than one of them without the admixture of the other.<sup>109</sup>

As added proof Gerson cited the example of Christ--and at the same time, incidentally, demonstrated an insight into man as totus homo:

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 73.



In this connection it should be noted that the whole mass of meritorious works of each man is pictured as a certain homogeneous body, according to Christ's way of speaking in Matt. 6 [22b]: If your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light. Explanation: If the intent is unmixed, any act whatsoever will be good. Proof: That life is better which is more conformable to the life of Christ. But Christ lived with His whole body during His life, submitting the life of all His members to the rule, both actively and speculatively.<sup>110</sup>

#### The Fundamental Outlook of the Via Propria

The key word in defining the via propria is caritas--as gift, habitude and activity. Gerson sharply limited man's natural ability to attain love, and appeared to come close to a conception of pure grace in his theologizing on predestination and free will. But in practice he sought proof of being in grace in a limited conception of law, which man had to keep. There is a tension here, the answer to which may perhaps be found in the common medieval idea of potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata. With reference to God's absolute power, Gerson tended to conceive of man as utterly dependent upon God's good will. But when he turned to presenting the way of salvation which God has instituted for man to follow (since he cannot gain insight into the absolute), he saw salvation in terms of a cooperation between God and man, wherein man does the best he can.

The Christian life, namely the habitude and activity of love, which is virtually the same as being in a state of grace, was seen by Gerson as a kind of ladder. To live in God is to possess love. To

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid., pp. 73-74.



move in God is to perform the works of love. To have one's being in God is to achieve a stability or confirmation in love. This is an ascending scale of righteousness, all levels of which may be found in the same individual: the first is essential; the second will be a natural outgrowth of the first and must occur, in varying degrees, in all but those not responsible (for example, baptized infants); and the third (which certainly few attain in this life<sup>111</sup>) should be sought after.

The position of the Christian is therefore that of the viator, the person who has neither arrived at his supernatural destination nor been eternally lost. This embraces almost all Christians.<sup>112</sup> Total assurance of salvation is not ordinarily attained this side of heaven, even though the Christian is to strive for it. In a very real sense, the via propria is a via: a way which man must go, not a salvation already assured.

The Christian traversing this way lives both the contemplative and the active life, both of which are embraced by love, for love includes both the attitudinal love of God and the activity which results from that love. Faith and hope are lesser habitudes and activities which are worthless unless informed by love.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>So far as has been determined, Gerson did not expand on his statement that a stabilization can occur "in via per abundantiam spiritualium charismatum animam a morte contraria prohibentium . . ." Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 115-116. The present assumption is that this was considered to be a rare occurrence, and that the role of most Christians was held to be that of viator.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid.

<sup>113</sup>Gerson, Opera Omnia, I, 175, A.



Thus both outward Christian activity and the cultivation of the inner life were a part of Gerson's proper theology. But the situation at the University of Paris, with its intellectualism as portrayed in Contra curiositatem studentium, called for a renewed emphasis on the affective powers. Therefore Gerson sought to expand the affective aspect of man's relationship to God by means of his mystical theology, which he intended to use as an instrument of reform.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE VIA MYSTICA IN GERSON

#### Gerson's Place in Western Mysticism

In Contra curiositatem studentium, Gerson analyzed the problems at the University of Paris. He saw there a rising intellectualism, void of true spiritual warmth. He saw a tendency to deprive God of His majesty by limiting His sovereignty. He saw a pretentious learnedness, a compounding of confusion, as masters of the university sought new ways to formulate problems in an endeavor to reach itching ears. And out of this too there grew a testy and pugnacious distrust, as scholars sought to refute previous masters and their own colleagues. Gerson saw little stress placed on the things which edify, and much emphasis placed on intellectual independence and brilliance.

The solution which he proposed was essentially a return to feeling and emotion, in opposition to arid intellectualism; a recognition of the limited ability of man to know God through the intellect; and therefore a concentration upon the affective powers. Thus his final sentence in Contra curiositatem was the promise that he would deal with the question "whether in this life [in via] God is better known through penitence of the affective powers than through the investigating intellect."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jean le Charlier de Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, edited by P. Glorieux (11 vols., Paris, Tournai, Rome and New York: Desclée & Cie, 1960--), III, 249.



The theological vehicle which Gerson chose for his endeavor lay close at hand. Mysticism had long been a part of the texture of medieval religious life. Gerson was a student of St. Augustine, of Pseudo-Dionysius, of St. Bonaventure and the Victorines. From this tradition of western mysticism he was to draw his own ideas for the reform of spiritual life at the university.

While it is not the purpose here to go into great detail in analyzing the specific roots of Gerson's mysticism, a brief résumé will be helpful. Gerson was greatly indebted to men like Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Bonaventure and St. Albert, but he did not follow them in every detail. He was related to a school of theologians--men like Hugh of Balma and Thomas Gallus--who have been called the "spiritual Dionysians," and who were his true masters. Like him, they had moved from Pseudo-Dionysius' negation to a positive experience of the affective powers.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, they had picked up Pseudo-Dionysius' concept that the soul, which had come out from God, returns to Him.

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<sup>2</sup>André Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson (2 vols.; Rome, Tournai, Paris and New York: Desclée et Socii Editores Pontificii, 1963-1964), I, 98-99. Hugh (Henry) of Balma was a Franciscan theologian who was born in Geneva and became a member of the Friars Minor in the province of Burgundy. He wrote a Theologia mystica which for a long time was attributed to St. Bonaventure. He died in 1439. Andrew Egan, in The Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1913), II, 224. Thomas Gallus is probably to be identified with Thomas of Strasburg, a 14th century Augustinian scholastic. After 1341 he was active at the University of Paris and in 1345 became general of his order. He closely followed the teachings of Giles of Rome, the doctor ordinis of the Augustinians. The relationship of Gerson to Thomas is seen in that the latter opposed Henry of Ghent and the fine distinctions of the Scotists. He held that there is no formal distinction among the divine attributes. The only permissible distinction is that of the external effects of the attributes. Also, he held that there is no formal distinction between God and the divine ideas. William Turner, in The Catholic Encyclopedia, XIV, 695-696.



This return is by way of love, since God dwells in a darkness inaccessible to the created spirit. But the Augustinian education of these men had colored their conception with psychological overtones, so that they interpreted Pseudo-Dionysius in terms of their psychological experience. They did keep the idea of God's essential unknowableness, which relates them to Pseudo-Dionysius and distinguishes them from St. Bonaventure, St. Albert, and also St. Thomas.<sup>3</sup>

This then was the tradition upon which Gerson drew. The two essential points to be noted are (1) that to the mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius the spiritual Dionysians added a psychological emphasis derived from their Augustinian heritage; and (2) that they preserved the concept of the essential unknowableness of God and are therefore

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<sup>3</sup>I am here dependent upon the analysis of Paul Philippe. His text follows: "Par spirituels dionysiens, il faut entendre les auteurs qui ont adopté le vocabulaire et surtout le thème principal de Denys sur les relations de l'âme avec Dieu: sorti de Dieu, l'homme doit rentrer in lui, et comme Dieu habité dans une ténèbre inaccessible à l'esprit créé, c'est par l'amour que l'homme devient un avec lui, au-dessus de toute connaissance intellectuelle. Pourtant, entre Denys et les dionysiens du moyen âge, une longue évolution c'est accomplie; nos auteurs du 13<sup>e</sup> siècle, ainsi que leurs disciples du 14<sup>e</sup> et du 15<sup>e</sup> siècle, ont reçu de leur éducation augustinienne une tournure d'esprit "psychologique" qui leur fait interpréter Denys en fonction de leur expérience personnelle. Ils gardent néanmoins du thème dionysien de l'inconnaissance l'essentiel et ils en sont obsédés: c'est en cela qu'ils méritent le nom de spirituels dionysiens et qu'ils se distinguent d'un saint Bonaventure, d'un saint Albert et surtout d'un saint Thomas. Car ces derniers ont subi aussi l'influence de Denys, mais ils ont intégré ses idées dans leur théorie personnelle de la contemplation, en sorte que celle-ci ne peut plus être qualifiée de dionysienne." Paul Philippe, O. P., La contemplation au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, chapter 3. "Les spirituels dionysiens, dans le Dict. de spiritualité, t. II, 1952, col. 1974. Quoted in Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson, I, 98.



to be distinguished from St. Bonaventure, St. Albert and St. Thomas.

The De Speculativa: a Psychologically-Oriented  
Mysticism of the Affective Powers

Contra curiositatem studentium had been delivered on 8 and 9 November 1402. That same winter Gerson presented his first formal treatise on mystical theology, De mystica theologia speculativa. Later on, in September-November of 1407 he was to compose the twin to this work, De mystica theologia practica. One might think here in terms of a trilogy, Contra curiositatem studentium presenting the Chancellor's analysis of the ills of the university, thus paving the way for the solution presented in the two treatises on mystical theology. The task now will be to present the main lines of De mystica theologia speculativa, and then to contrast this basic work with De mystica theologia practica; for a shift took place in Gerson's thinking between 1402 and 1407. In dealing with the De mystica theologia speculativa it will also be necessary to make some references to Gerson's opposition to the mysticism of Ruysbroeck.

**Basic assumptions of Gerson**

Gerson immediately clarified the context in which he wrote the De mystica theologia speculativa: like most of that which had gone before, it was to be a part of his call to repentance. "Repent and believe the Gospel" is the first statement it contains.<sup>4</sup> What follows is therefore

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<sup>4</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 250.



an explication of ways and means in which the hearer can go about seeking the Lord in repentance.

The Chancellor made it clear from the start that he was now embarking upon a new program of theology: "Mystical theology is something beyond that which is called 'symbolic' or 'proper.'" Symbolical theology seeks to know God by applying to Him terms derived from human observation. Gerson intended to propose a better way of finding God, namely through mystical theology. This is clearly in the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>5</sup>

Mystical theology rests upon experience and proceeds through the process of negation. This does not imply, however, that there is no positive cognition involved. (This latter point separates Gerson from the pure Dionysian mysticism.) In other words, just because mystical theology operates by saying what God is not, this does not mean that it ends up with nothing positively known or experienced of God. But the fact that it is intrinsically an experience does imply that it cannot be deduced by the inexperienced.<sup>6</sup> It also implies that mystical theology should be considered more perfect and more certain than other theology.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Gerson continued, the fact that mystical theology rests upon inner experience does not preclude teaching and learning the

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 253.



principles of it, even apart from personal experience. There is value in paying attention to those who have experienced these things.<sup>8</sup> The stance of the hearer must always be: believe in order to understand.<sup>9</sup> Holy men and experts in mystical theology have much to teach us and it is foolish not to heed them.<sup>10</sup> Of course the fact remains that the inner workings, particularly with respect to the affective powers, are more clearly sensed than described.<sup>11</sup>

There is something rather defensive in Gerson's approach at this point. He argued, despite what he had already stated, that a man less experienced in the affective powers may be more erudite in discussing these matters--and then asked why this could not hold true in the present case.<sup>12</sup> This raises the question of Gerson's personal experience in mystical theology. He seemed to hint rather broadly that he could not claim a great deal of personal mystical experience, unless he was merely being modest. However that may be, having stated his presuppositions and having made his apologia, he was ready to present the psychological basis of mystical theology.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. .

<sup>12</sup>"Cur igitur in re nostra par eventus negabitur ut homo parvum vel nihil devotus possit aliorum devotorum scripta studere, conferre ad invicem, unum ex altero vel concludere vel elicere, impugnare vel fulcire. Hoc modo itaque de fidei articulis utique non expertis quotidianum exercitium theologiae scholae facit." Ibid., p. 255.



The three cognitive and the three affective powers

The basic framework of Gerson's De mystica theologia speculativa is his division of the soul into three cognitive and three corresponding affective powers. However, he understood this to be only a useful methodology for purposes of understanding, and not as true ex parte rei. He credited the formalizantes with having developed a useful technique but wished it to be pressed no further:

But when they assert in addition that beyond each operation of the intellect those distinctions are in the things themselves, inwardly, just as the intellect imagines them in its process of abstraction, e.g., that they are universal or separate or eternal and the like, then without doubt I dissent from them in this entire opinion, because I do not understand on what basis that dictum can be upheld as true or as sane, particularly in view of the simplicity of the deity.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore the various powers are to be considered distinct in name but not in re.<sup>14</sup>

Having clarified his use of such a principle of division, Gerson proceeded to define the three cognitive powers. The first is the simple intelligence:

Simple intelligence is the cognitive power of the soul which receives a certain natural light directly from God, in and through which light first principles are recognized as true and most certain, within the limits mentioned [terminis apprehensis].<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.



Gerson listed a number of other common names for this, of which particularly "scintilla rationis" and "apex rationis" are worthy of note.<sup>16</sup>

The second cognitive power is the reason:

Reason is that cognitive power of the soul which deduces a conclusion from premises, also eliciting the imperceptible things from the perceptible and abstracting the quiddity, needing no organ in its operation.<sup>17</sup>

While the first power is a very basic natural light given by God, the second is more plainly a factor in human psychology, namely that power by which man can reason, draw conclusions from premises, and the like. It is distinguished from the third power principally in that it utilizes none of the sensory organs.

The third power is that of the senses:

The sensory cognitive power is that power of the soul which uses both exterior and interior organs of the body in its operation in order to get to know those things which are perceivable by the senses either per se or accidentally.<sup>18</sup>

This power has a number of more specific functions: it can simply perceive outward objects, or perceive the sensations felt in the five senses, or even rearrange the various reactions to sensations; thus it can also be called imagination or fantasy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.



Corresponding to the three cognitive powers are three comparable affective powers. Each affective power is a kind of emotional reaction to the corresponding cognitive power:

For whenever the cognitive power grasps and in some respect is confronted with something which is either in accord with it or inharmonious with it, we find that the soul in a measure approves this perception if it is concordant, and becomes fearful if it is inharmonious.<sup>20</sup>

Corresponding to the simple intelligence is the synderesis:

The synderesis is the appetitive power of the soul which receives directly from God a certain natural impulse toward good through which it is influenced to pursue the suggestion of that good which is offered by the apprehension of the simple intelligence.<sup>21</sup>

Synderesis is in relationship to the good as simple intelligence is in relationship to the true. As simple intelligence cannot dissent from certain basic, self-evident truths, so synderesis cannot deny the first moral principles.<sup>22</sup> However, with respect to these first moral principles the synderesis may "non velle"--hold itself in suspense.<sup>23</sup> Other common names for synderesis are, for example, "natural stimulus

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. Gerson appears at this point to depart from nominalist principles and posit a natural moral order. Perhaps, however, he was merely speaking of a fundamental order ordained by the will of God. The latter interpretation is to be preferred because of his customary emphasis on God's freedom.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.



to good" and "pristine part of the soul."<sup>24</sup>

Corresponding to the reason is the rational appetitive force:

Rational desire is the affective power of the soul which can be set in motion directly by reason's cognitive act of apprehending.<sup>25</sup>

Will and liberty are involved in this power, the former where a question of choice is involved.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, corresponding to the cognitive power of the senses is the sensual appetitive power:

Animal or sensual desire is the affective power of the soul which can be set in motion directly by the understanding which comes through the senses alone.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Gerson laid the foundation for his mystical theology in human psychology. In a neat package he divided the cognitive and affective domains of the human soul into three corresponding parts each. But he emphasized that this is purely methodological, and not true ex parte rei, as some of the formalizantes would say.

The question of origins still remains. Are these powers innate, or are they immediately given by God? Gerson approached the question by considering the six powers as lights. He noted that some say that God, who is the true light, immediately lights the soul, whereas others hold that these powers or lights are innate, of the essence of the

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.



soul, "from which they issue or come forth and sprout."<sup>28</sup> His own opinion was that these are acquired characteristics, within which are to be found much complexity and diversity.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he distinguished between those powers of the soul which are immediately given and the various habitudes or acts, whether cognitive or affective, which are gratuitously infused. Specifically mentioned as infused gifts are faith, hope and charity, and the seven gifts of the Spirit.<sup>30</sup> Thus the gifts of the Spirit which already relate to the via propria are carefully separated from the psychological foundations of mystical theology. Infusion is something quite distinct from the act whereby God immediately lights the soul; the latter belongs to the psychological basis of mystical theology.

#### The activities of the six powers

From the definition of the cognitive and affective powers, Gerson proceeded to a statement of the activities of these powers. It should be noted at the outset that he first used the term "contemplation" in a general way, as opposed to the "active" life. However, he soon pointed out that just as contemplation is an activity of the cognitive power, so mystical theology is an activity of the affective power, thus giving

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 265.



the term "contemplation" a more specific meaning.<sup>31</sup> Moreover he narrowed its use still further when, under the cognitive activities of the soul, he distinguished among cogitation, meditation and contemplation.<sup>32</sup> This careful delineation of the term will have to be borne in mind particularly in connection with De mystica theologia practica.

The three activities in the cognitive domain of the soul are clearly defined. Cogitation is "an aimless contemplation of the mind prone to straying." It is very easy to perform since it is formed directly from sensation or fantasy, and occurs at random.<sup>33</sup> A capsule description of its functioning is: "Cogitation therefore wanders and winds without effort and without fruit."<sup>34</sup>

Meditation is a "pointed contemplation of the mind eagerly engrossed in thinking or inquiring about truth." This is far more difficult since it involves sorting out specific actual sensations of fantasies and concentrating on selected points.<sup>35</sup> When this happens, cogitation passes into meditation. Even more difficult is the further

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 266. He made himself very clear on p. 273: "Propterea non fallitur qui dicit contemplationem sine dilectione nomen contemplationis non mereri; sed nos unum ab altero secernimus ut precipior habeatur inquisitio veritatis, et cognoscamus quoniam appropriate loquendo sicut contemplatio est in vi cognitiva intelligentiae, sic in vi affectiva correspondente mystica reponitur theologia."

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.



task of meditation, namely to strip cogitation of its accidents and thus to arrive at the absolute quiddities of things.<sup>36</sup> Its capsule description: "Meditation strives and advances with effort and with fruit."<sup>37</sup>

Contemplation is "acute and free, a gazing of the mind upon things that can be inspected, a gazing which is diffused and suspended everywhere in God's amphitheater."<sup>38</sup> Just as cogitation passes into meditation, so meditation passes into contemplation. Contemplation operates with a facility born out of habits acquired through meditation. Furthermore, it is easy to perform because it follows meditation, which has already performed the task of abstraction and separated understandings from sensibles.<sup>39</sup> Its capsule description: "Contemplation flits around and circles without effort and with fruit."<sup>40</sup>

The correspondence between the powers and the activities is the following:

Cogitatio is related to sensualitas.  
Meditatio is related to ratio.  
Contemplatio is related to intelligentia simplex.

Gerson likened the three powers to the bottom, middle and top of a mountain. At the top one can look around freely without slipping back

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 267.



down to the lower reaches. The pre-fall Adam possessed this capacity but it has been darkened by sin.<sup>41</sup>

The trip up the mountain, to stay with Gerson's imagery for the moment, is undertaken by means of abstraction, which is the process by which the simple quiddities of things are stripped of their accidents. Gerson held that this process can be undertaken by meditation but that the kind of abstraction necessary for contemplation cannot be attained by either imagination (related to cogitatio) or reason (related to meditatio) alone. Just as reason is better able to abstract than is sensuality or imagination, so the simple intelligence is superior to reason in its ability to abstract. This is a crucial point. In this context, Gerson criticized the formalizantes specifically because they sought by way of imagination or reason alone that which can be found only by the cleansing of the simple intelligence.<sup>42</sup> Although Gerson did not spell it out, this is obviously the point at which repentance is to enter, in relationship to mystical theology.

Man's cognitive abilities, then, can move step-wise from lower to higher until he arrives at the state where he is beyond all the flux and confusion of the senses and reason in a situation of liberty.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>42</sup>"Et hoc est quod reddidit multos ex eis qui dicuntur formalizantes in fabulam et risum, immo in insaniam, quia per solam imaginationem vel rationem quaerunt illud quod per intelligentiae depurationem erat inveniendum." Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>43</sup>"Videmus itaque quosdam de hominibus vivere non elevatius quam bruta; solis enim sensibus utuntur aut eos solos insequuntur. Alii magis insequuntur rationem, intelligentes abstractius regulas artium et scientiarum. Tertii ultra haec omnia elevant se supra rationem in



This is the height which man can achieve through the activity of the highest cognitive power.

But Gerson had not yet reached the key point which he intended to make. He had shown that three affective powers correspond to three cognitive powers, and had analyzed the activities of the three cognitive powers. His next step was to take up the relationship between the affective and the cognitive activities.

Just as three affective powers correspond to the three cognitive powers, Gerson held, so also three affective activities correspond to the three cognitive activities:

Cupido (or libido or concupiscentia) corresponds to cogitatio.  
Devotio (or contritio or compunctio or oratio) corresponds to meditatio.  
Dilectio (extatica and anagogica) corresponds to contemplatio.<sup>44</sup>

If cogitatio is without foresight and vague, so is cupido. If meditatio is intense and planned, so is devotio. But if contemplatio freely pursues those things which meditatio has sought with difficulty, so also dilectio is free and expeditious, pure and abstract. Thus it is an ecstatic devotion, or jubilation or exultation. It is inexpressible and goes beyond all sensation.<sup>45</sup> This dilectio is the goal which Gerson was seeking:

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quamdam regionem aeternitatis et spiritualitatis et super omnem fluctationem et confusionem infinitam desideriorum et cogitationum in auram quamdam libertatis serenam assurgunt et evolant; et jam quasi non minus videtur differre eorum vita a ceteris hominibus quantum distant homines a pecoribus." Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp. 272-273.



And this is the wisdom of God hidden in mystery. This is the mystical theology which we are seeking, and which leads to the mystical and supramental ecstasies. Sometimes in my reading this is called "contemplation," sometimes "devotion," and then again "love" or "cherishing love."<sup>46</sup>

Thus Gerson, operating out of a psychological system, pointed out the highest reaches attainable by the cognitive powers of man, and went beyond that to a higher goal, namely the dilectio which is attainable through the affective powers. In keeping with his closing statement in Contra curiositatem studentium he reiterated that the relationship to God which occurs through mystical theology is better acquired by way of the penitence of the affective powers than by way of the investigating intellect. Mystical theology is superior to symbolical or proper theology, which is related to contemplation (intellective), just as dilectio is more perfect than cognitio, and voluntas than intellectus, and caritas than fides.<sup>47</sup> Gerson's mystical theology<sup>48</sup> relates more to the will and the emotions than to the intellect and is in his own estimation for that reason superior to his proper theology. For God is better known to man in via by the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> The following are further definitions of mystical theology used by Gerson: "extensio animi in Deum per amoris desiderium;" "motio anagogica, hoc est sursum ductiva in Deum per amorem fervidum et purum;" "cognitio experimentalis habita de Deo per amoris unitivi complexum;" "sapientia, id est sapida notitia habita de Deo dum ei supremus apex affectivae potentiae rationalis per amorem cunjugitur et unitur;" "irrationalis et amens et stulta sapientia excedens laudantes." (The final definition is from Pseudo-Dionysius.)  
Ibid., p. 274.



penitent affective power than by the investigating intellect.<sup>49</sup>

The interaction between cognition and affective power  
in mystical theology

The very essence of Gerson's mystical theology is that it is centered in the affective powers and is as available to unlettered folk as to trained theologians. In fact theological training might even be a handicap. It was in this spirit that he wrote many letters to his sisters, introducing them in a practical way to the via mystica which he taught. It was in this spirit that he addressed his Montaigne de contemplation specifically to the common man, and in it defined the simple knowledge that is necessary for its realization and the advantages of a simple faith:

The knowledge or learning that one has of God by true faith alone, is sufficient for reaching such wisdom as stated: namely, to love God and to serve and honor Him. And it seems to me that Aristotle said that simple folk can have beatitude by believing what the philosophers testify regarding God and the angels and by judging it according to their conviction and love.

And from this I conclude that simple Christians who have firm faith in the goodness of God and accordingly love intensely, have more true wisdom and ought rather to be called wise men than certain clerics who are loveless and without affection for God and His saints. Therefore such people are more pleasing to God. But what is more, such clerics are displeasing to Him and are, in short, salt without savor and foolish wise men.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>50</sup>Jean le Charlier de Gerson, Initiation à la vie mystique, edited with a preface by Pierre Pascal (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 48.



In De mystica theologia speculativa too, Gerson had harsh words for speculative knowledge devoid of love and spoke highly of the unlearned who nevertheless are experienced in affective relationships:

From this I draw the noble deduction that if philosophy is spoken of as every skill which proceeds from experience, then mystical theology will truly be a philosophy, and those who are knowledgeable in it, granted that from another angle they may be uncultivated, are rightly called philosophers.<sup>51</sup>

This is of course basic to Gerson's entire scheme. The ultimate in religious experience is something which takes place in the emotions rather than in the intellect. Consequently, this experience is not contingent upon intellectual attainment and is equally available to all.

But this should not be interpreted as though Gerson was promulgating an uncontrolled religion of the emotions. That would have run counter to his essential conservatism. In many respects he was a most cautious, almost reactionary individual, as witness some of the closing remarks in Contra curiositatem studentium, where he spoke out in favor of the prohibition of vernacular translations of Scripture, careful choosing of preachers for the people and the like.<sup>52</sup> Thus Gerson did not consistently emphasize feeling at the expense of doctrinal, cognitive theology. When he wrote his first letter to Barthélemy Clancier regarding Ruysbroeck's mysticism, he made the general remark that where matters of Scriptural belief are concerned, more confidence should be placed in theologians who have speculative

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<sup>51</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 253.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 249.



knowledge than in uncultivated people who are skilled in the contemplation of the affective powers.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, in De theologia mystica speculativa itself, Gerson cautioned against the antinomian excesses of the Beghards and Turlepins, who had a zeal that was not according to knowledge, and specified the need of regulating ones feelings according to the law of Christ. It is necessary, he said, that Christians obtain guidance and direction from men who have given themselves over to a "scientific" devotion.<sup>54</sup> Thus Gerson called for a return to a sane and sober dependence upon Christian theologians who have reason to know what they are talking about. Despite the essential freedom of his mystical theology, his basic conservatism made him recoil from any runaway emotionalism.

Nevertheless, one ought not infer that Gerson conceived of cognition only as a necessary defense against free-wheeling, uncultivated mystics. That it played an essential part in his mystical theology becomes apparent when one analyzes his careful ten-point comparison of the relationship between speculative and mystical theology.

The essential relationship between the speculative (cognitive) and the mystical is rooted in human psychology. Both merge in the rational soul and are merely distinguished by reason of their respective powers. That is, speculative theology is related to the intellective

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<sup>53</sup>"Scientia quippe inflat, intellige si sola est, caritas aedificat. (I Cor. 8:1) Nihilominus ubi de veritate fidei quaeritur tradita in sacris scripturis, magis interrogandi consulendique sunt theologi vigentes in contemplatione secunda quam idiotae pollentes in prima, secluso in eis patenti revelationis miracule." Ibid., II, 61.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., III, 256.



power and mystical theology is related to the affective power. Therefore the object of speculative theology is truth, while that of mystical theology is goodness. They come together (conveniunt) because both are in the higher portion of the soul, not only in the sensory apparatus or the reason. They are the two powers or eyes or offices of the higher part of the soul.<sup>55</sup> It can be assumed that, although Gerson did not specifically mention it in this connection, his usual principle applies, namely that the distinction made here is true in terms of human understanding and not ex parte rei.

What role did Gerson then assign to the intellect? He stated clearly enough that mystical theology does not need the "school of the intellect," for it is acquired in the "school of the affective power." In the context of the moral powers one makes the hierarchical ascent through purgation to illumination to perfection.<sup>56</sup> But this does not mean that cognition plays no role at all in Gerson's mystical theology, for he also stated explicitly:

But since it commonly turns out, even among brutes, that there is much love where there is little knowledge, it follows that to obtain the teaching of this mystical theology is not a task accomplished chiefly by great mental skill. For I know by faith that God is completely desirable and lovable. If the affective part has been cleansed, illuminated, put in proper order and trained, why will it not be borne and snatched up into Him who is completely desirable and lovable, without studying a lot of books?<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.



Bearing in mind that the immediate cause of Gerson's reform endeavor was the intellectualism at the University of Paris, one notes that certain expressions in the paragraph cited above are very significant: there can be much affectio where there is little (not: "no") cognitio. Mystical theology is not acquired by magna scientia. (Note the magna.) For Gerson, "knowing by faith" can hardly exclude all knowledge and assent. That cognition plays a role here is also clearly indicated by the following statement of the interrelationship between the two powers:

For since the cognitive power can grasp and in some respect be confronted with something which is either in accord with it or inharmonious with it, we find that the soul in a measure approves this perception if it is concordant, and becomes fearful if it is inharmonious.

Let me state further that there is no being which does not have desire in proportion to the goal which is owed it by right of divine law. But this is not properly called an affective desire except in things which flourish on the basis of knowledge.<sup>58</sup>

Again, Gerson was able to speak of the two powers as reinforcing one another, somewhat in the manner of light and heat.<sup>59</sup>

The interaction of the two powers may therefore be explained somewhat as follows: The two powers come together in the higher soul. Some cognitive knowledge is necessary for the process of abstraction to occur, but the highest religious experience attainable by man occurs when the highest part of the cognitive power in man passes into the

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 262.



affective domain,<sup>60</sup> at which point the extent of theological knowledge is irrelevant to man's religious experience. The resultant act of love is called the supermentalis excessus.<sup>61</sup> Thus, in terms of human psychology, it is possible for the affective power to move beyond the cognitive to a higher experience of God. Apparently this state involves also a cessation of all intellectual activity (but not that which led up to the activity of the affective powers), for when in a letter to Jean le Celestin, in 1425, Gerson explained how his mind had changed somewhat, he also explained his former position, the one now under discussion:

Others ground this in the love of synderesis or pinnacle of the mind [apex mentis] alone, all work of the intellect ceasing, as I at one time supposed, in my earnestness, following or thinking to follow the interpreters of the blessed Dionysius and Bonaventure.<sup>62</sup>

Mystical theology therefore consists in a "going beyond," all intellectual effort ceasing. But this is not to say that it occurs without antecedent involvement of the cognitive powers or that the truths which faith receives are no longer necessary as a control. Clearly, in De mystica theologia speculativa Gerson broke with all

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., .II, 261-262. Gerson stated as his new view that the union of mystical theology "neque consistit in opere intellectus nec in operatione affectus," but in this, that "essentia animae simplificada, purgata et denudata ab omni solitudine, concupiscentia et fantasmate, dum perditis alteritatibus, ut Dionysius loquitur, et concupiscentiis curisque conclusis revoluto autem in divinum monadem congregantur, dum praeterea, ut alibi loquitur, secundum meliorem nostrae mentis et rationis virtutem, ineffabilibus et ignotis ineffabiliter et ignote conjunguntur." Ibid., p. 262.



mystics who hold that there exists in man's cognitive powers the ability to win through to a relationship with God in His hiddenness. But he retained the cognitive as a guard against enthusiasm and granted it an ancillary but essential role in the structure of his mystical theology. This is fully in keeping with his nominalist principles, for it is rooted in the idea of the unity of the soul.

#### The mystical union

Thus far Gerson had developed the thought that the ultimate religious experience which man can attain is the mystical union with God, and that this is to be sought by means of man's affective power. But what did he mean by the "mystical union?"

Gerson's use of the process of abstraction has already been pointed out.<sup>63</sup> By abstraction he meant the process whereby through meditation (its corollary being devotio) and contemplation (its corollary being dilectio) objects are stripped of their accidents. This of course is the via negativa, which if followed consistently will result in nothing but negation. In fact, Gerson did hold that the cognitive powers can attain only negation according to this scheme. But, and here is the heart of his mystical theology, the movement of the affective power is able to produce a positive union with God. This is the raptus mentis, which occurs not through the mere affection of love, which is related to the inferior sensate powers, or through the love of the will, which

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<sup>63</sup>Supra, p. 81.



is related to reason, but through ecstatic love.<sup>64</sup> This love unites the lover with the beloved.

But what is the nature of this union? Gerson was able to speak of it as a "transformation,"<sup>65</sup> but only with great care. He explicitly denied the pantheistic conception that

such a soul loses itself and its existence utterly, and receives the true divine existence, so that it is no longer a creature nor does it see or love God through the creature, but it is God Himself who is seen or loved.<sup>66</sup>

In his correspondence with Barthélemy Clantier, Gerson also opposed Ruysbroeck's (apparent) teaching that in the mystical union the soul loses its own existence and is transformed into the divine essence.<sup>67</sup> He objected to the common illustration in which the soul's absorption is compared to a drop of water mixed in a bowl of wine so that its essence perishes and it is converted into the wholly other.<sup>68</sup> He

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., III, 284.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 285

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid. In the first letter to Clantier, Gerson wrote: "Verum alia potior est ratio quae me ita sentire compellit. Siquidem tertia pars ejusdem libri prorsus repudianda rescindendaque est tamquam vel male explicata vel plane abhorrens et discrepans a doctrina sana doctorum sanctorum qui de nostra beatitudine locuti sunt. Nec stat cum determinatione expressa decretalis ponentis beatitudinem nostram consistere in duobus actibus, visione et fruitione scilicet, cum lumine gloriae." Note especially the following: "Et si hoc ita est in beatitudine consummata, quod Deus non est visio et claritas nostra essentialis sed tantum objectalis, quanto magis hoc erit alienum in beatitudinis quadam assimilatione imperfecta quam fas haberemus gustare hic in via." Ibid., II, 57.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., III, 286.



also rejected the use of transubstantiation as an illustration.<sup>69</sup>

How then did Gerson interpret the mystical union in De mystica theologia speculativa? The first impression one gets is that he taught only a union through conformity of the will to God:

When our spirit clings to God in intimate love it is one spirit with Him through conformity of the will. For only love--perfect and clinging perfectly to God--can truly pray: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Matt. 6:10. Whoever prays in this way assuredly prays in spirit and in truth, just as The Truth taught us how to pray in the Gospel and as He Himself prayed to the Father saying: Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt. Matt. 26:39. And so in this way a person is united with God and established in and with Him.<sup>70</sup>

This statement, taken in conjunction with the total rejection of an essentialistic union in the letters to Barthélemy Clantier, seems to point to a simple, voluntative union. Were this the case, Gerson's conception of the mystic union would be easy enough to understand.

But the union of will of which Gerson spoke occurs only in the second power, namely in the reason:

The carrying off of the reason [raptus rationis]--in its own impulse--beyond the lower powers, occurs through the love of the will.<sup>71</sup>

The actual union which occurs in mystical theology is not merely the "raptus rationis," which relates to the will, but the "raptus mentis."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.



The "raptus mentis" may be called a transformation. Did Gerson then teach an essentialistic union anyway? He denied it. At this point he again refuted all the mystical imagery which hints at or explicitly states the loss of the soul's essence and produced his own imagery. Love, like heat, he said, has the capacity to unite the homogeneous and to divide the heterogeneous. Thus, love separates everything in men which is spiritual or divine from everything which is terrestrial and corporeal. There occurs a division of the spiritual from the animal or sensual. The precious is separated from the vile. Since God is spirit and is the cause of the union, it is apparent why the rational spirit, purified, is united with the divine spirit.<sup>73</sup>

While this union is spiritual, the whole man is ultimately involved. This too occurs through the affective power:

Thus when the spirit is joined to God and so made fit and influenced by love, it consequently fits out and influences its own body, its own formable or material part, so to speak, as the spirit streams in return to the body. For this reason it happens that the body proper, thus habituated and influenced, puts on and carries certain qualities of the spirit itself, its own qualities being either abandoned or greatly suspended from action. Thus the saying of Aristotle is fulfilled (Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, I, 13): In the good man all things are consonant with reason. Thus our spirit, drawn by God, consequently draws all the things which belong to the body and accordingly the wonderful union of the spirit with God and the body with the spirit results.<sup>74</sup>

In terms of the historical context, here was Gerson's triumph. He had made Aristotle himself defend the superiority of the affective power.

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., pp. 287-288.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 288.



## Combes comments:

At this point the victory of the reforming Chancellor is not only complete: it is crushing. The least mystical of the philosophers has been invited to act as herald. That mystical theology is superior to speculative theology in the order of intellectual knowledge itself--that is the very thing which no one could possibly refuse to grant him any longer, since that theology had been defined as the obtaining of an experimental knowledge of that God whom the intelligence alone could never reach here on earth. But the superiority of the one kind of knowledge over the other far exceeded that which Gerson's challenge required, since, in actually uniting the spirit to God, mystical theology extended its benefits to the entire human realm and spiritualized the body itself.<sup>75</sup>

But did Gerson teach an essentialistic union at this time? He forthrightly denied it, yet sought to go beyond a mere conformity of will. In the first letter to Clantier (1402) he commented on the word of the apostle, "Whoever clings to God is one spirit," by speaking of an assimilation or participation:

But here only that assimilation and participation is observed which Luke exemplifies when he states that the multitude of believers were of one heart and one soul. Vulgar usage speaks in the same way concerning two friends, just as glowing coal and illuminated air are called, respectively, one with the fire and one with the light.<sup>76</sup>

In the second letter to Clantier (1408) he again spoke of an assimilation, but stipulated that it perfects but does not remove human nature.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson, I, 109.

<sup>76</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, II, 60. The conception of union stated here is, in Combes' opinion, "rien d'autre qu'un pur accord de volontes. . . ." Combes, Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson, III, 101.

<sup>77</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, II, 99.



It is true on the one hand that he spoke of the transformational union of mystical theology, wherein love separates the precious in man from that which is vile and unites the precious part to God, whereupon the spirit draws the body to itself. But even in the general context of this presentation he refuted the various essentialistic misconceptions and gave favorable mention to an alleged modification made by Ruysbroeck:

granted that in some of his writings this mistake seems to have been corrected when he stated that such a soul always remains in its own proper existence which it has in its own genus, but is said to be transformed only by way of comparison, just as we say of friends that they are one heart and one soul. This explanation we certainly concede.<sup>78</sup>

It therefore appears that during his university period at least, Gerson's idea of mystical union was basically moral or voluntative. But within this general framework he sought a further explanation for what happens when the highest affective power breaks in. At this point he brought his statements regarding the separation of the precious from the vile in the soul and the body's subsequent sharing of the purified soul's unity with God. He appeared theoretically to allow the union to mean more than the raptus rationis, which is clearly related to the will according to his psychological scheme. At the same time, however, he introduced many safeguards to preclude an essentialistic interpretation of the union. The logical conclusion is that he understood the unio to be essentially a union of wills.

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., III, 286.



## Summary

In Contra vanam curiositatem studentium Gerson had promised that he was about to elaborate a simple, Gospel-based mystical theology. He had stated that this mystical theology is achieved better through penitence than through human investigation alone. He had further promised to deal with the question whether one can know God better in this life by means of the penitence of the affective power than through the investigating intellect.<sup>79</sup> He had now executed a scholarly tour de force over against the Paris theologians, in that he brought even Aristotle to the defense of his basic contention. But had he really done what he had promised? Had he presented a simple, Gospel-based penitential piety? Combes thinks not. He maintains that instead of conducting his reform attempt with the simple "givens" of the Gospel and instead of simply appealing to faith, Gerson had elaborated a psychology. Therefore his plan was essentially philosophic and was offered not to the faith of his hearers but to their free discussion.<sup>80</sup>

It is true that in these lectures Gerson built his mystical theology upon a psychological foundation. It is also true that at the very moment he was proposing a religious path grounded in the affective powers he was presenting it in a speculative framework. But Combes is rather too sharp in his criticism. Gerson was still a scholastic,

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<sup>79</sup>"Intelligentia clara et sapida eorum quae creduntur ex Evangelio, quae vocatur theologia mystica, conquirenda est per poenitentiam magis quam per solam humanam investigationem. Et circa hoc pertractabitur ista quaestio an magis per poenitentiam affectum quam per investigantem intellectum Deus in via cognoscatur." Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>80</sup>André Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson, I, 109.



speaking to other scholastics. The lectures were admittedly speculative and theoretical. It is true that Gerson did not offer them to the faith of his hearers but to their free discussion. Precisely. He met them on their ground as scholars in the university and spoke to them theoretically or speculatively about his conception of mystical theology.

Gerson was also inclined to proceed with much caution. Near the beginning of the lectures he had said that a person less experienced in the pious affections may be better at discussing them.<sup>81</sup> Apparently he considered himself to be that person. At this point he was laying the theoretical groundwork. Later on, in De mystica theologia practica, the psychological framework would be dropped and Gerson would move toward an emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit in mystical theology. Was he then planning, from the very beginning, to start with a highly speculative exposition and then move toward a more spiritual point of view? Or did he change his mind between 1402 and 1407? Probably neither answer is entirely satisfactory. He met the Paris theologians on their terms in 1402, and his own insights and experience had deepened by the time he wrote De mystica theologia practica. He was himself in a process of development, moving from the speculative accents which were so much a part of his milieu, to a more profound and spiritual understanding of the mystical piety which he was endeavoring to teach. One ought not to criticize him too harshly because, in 1402, he presented his thinking

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<sup>81</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 255.



about a mystical theology of the affective powers in a framework which still smacked of the speculative. This was a stage in his own development. It was also his method of seeking to communicate with the Paris theologians of his day.

The psychological framework in which De mystica theologia speculativa is cast also leads one to ask whether Gerson at this time conceived of man as being capable of following the via mystica on the basis of his own natural powers. This does not seem to have been Gerson's intention. At at least one point he declared that the via mystica which he proposed cannot be traversed except under the calling of the Lord:

The reasoning spirit, taught like a spiritual sailor by mystical theology, cannot proceed from the sea of sensuality to the shore of eternity, that is, from fleshly things to spiritual things, unless the Lord Jesus calls it and by His secret breathings fills the sail of the mind; and except through His love it cannot rest steadfast and firm in the divine port.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, a trace of naturalism is inherent in some basic conceptions of the treatise. In the tenth proposition Gerson defined the simple intelligence as the cognitive power of the mind which receives directly from God a certain natural light in and through which first principles are known to be true and most certain.<sup>83</sup> More significant is his statement regarding the corresponding affective power. Gerson

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>83</sup>"Intelligentia simplex est vis animae cognitiva suscipiens immediate a Deo naturalem quamdam lucem in qua et per quam principia prima cognoscuntur esse vera et certissima, terminis apprehensis."  
Ibid., p. 258.



defined the synderesis as the appetitive power of the mind which receives directly from God a certain natural inclination toward good, which leads the individual to follow after good.<sup>84</sup> The conclusion is inescapable that he was speaking here of natural powers that exist in man quite apart from any special revelation or special grace of God. Statements such as these, plus the psychological orientation of the entire treatise, do lend certain naturalistic overtones to De mystica theologia speculativa.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, one must call attention to the striking contrast between Gerson's via propria with its tailoring of the law to the individual and its active faith, and his via mystica with its personalistic, step-wise ascent toward the breaking-in of the dilectio. To relate these two aspects of Gerson's thought will be the aim of the final

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<sup>84</sup>"Synderesis est vis animae appetitiva suscipiens immediate a Deo naturalem quamdam inclinationem ad bonus per quam trahitur insequi motionem boni ex apprehensione simplicis intelligentiae praesentati." Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>85</sup>In speaking of Gerson's naturalism, even hinting that this might involve a "soupçon de pélagianisme," Combes maintains that Gerson later came under criticism for this and defended himself: "A cet égard, nous n'en sommes pas réduits à des suppositions gratuites. Gerson lui-même tient à nous attester qu'il n'est pas tombé dans l'erreur. En protestant plus tard, dans son Elucidatio, de la pureté de ses intentions, ne nous indique-t-il pas de façon assez claire ce que l'on a dû lui reprocher?" Combes believes furthermore that the opening lines of De practica are intended to remove any suspicion of naturalism raised by the De speculativa: "En tout cas, de deux choses l'une: ou bien de telles critiques ont été réellement dirigées contre la speculativa, ou bien elles ont fini par assiéger, du dedans, la conscience gersonienne. En toute hypothèse, il n'est pas douteux que, dès ses premières lignes, la practica ne tiene à écarter, de façon aussi décisive que directe, toutes les objections qu'aurait pu faire naître le naturalisme apparent de la speculativa." Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson, I, 145-146.



chapter. But first it will be necessary to examine the last member of the "trilogy" on mystical theology, the De mystica theologia practica, and to see the further movement of Gerson's thought as revealed in it.

The De Practica: A Charism-Oriented Mysticism  
of the Affective Powers<sup>86</sup>

Two apparent shifts in Gerson's position, and their implications

One of the main characteristics of De mystica theologia speculativa is the careful distinction which Gerson made therein between contemplatio as belonging to the cognitive power of man, and devotio as belonging to the affective power. How striking then, to find that he began his De mystica theologia practica by speaking of the gift of contemplation as though that were of the essence of mystical theology.<sup>87</sup>

A second major characteristic of the 1402 lectures was the emphasis on mystical theology as attainable by all, even those who have limited cognitive knowledge, since it is rooted in man's psychological nature. How strange then, to find Gerson beginning his De mystica theologia practica by noting that different gifts are given to people, and by considering the gift of contemplation as one of the gifts gratis data:

Everyone ought to heed the call of God, for this reason that He calls all men to salvation--since, indeed, according to the apostle, "He wants all men to be saved." Hence the natural and indelible desire for

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<sup>86</sup>In this entire section, I am deeply indebted to André Combes for his analysis in La théologie mystique de Gerson, especially I, 157-175.

<sup>87</sup>Cf. quotation given below.



beatitude among all men. Nevertheless one person walks this way and another that in the path of God's calling, according to the diversities of graces, administrations and operations, as the apostle concludes: "To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills, just as the body is one and has many members" and diverse and various functions. Note that the utterance of wisdom, which is considered very similar to or the same as the grace of contemplation, is given by the Spirit to this one or that and not to all. The same thing is true of faith, which I consider peace "in believing;" also with regard to the working of miracles, prophecy and the rest. Since therefore it is agreed that not all who are called should try indiscriminately to attain each grace of administration or activity, neither ought all devote themselves to wisdom or the study of contemplation.<sup>88</sup>

Thus the call to salvation is universal. God wants all to be saved and the universal desire for beatitude testifies to this. But different people have different gifts in the church. The key passage quoted by Gerson is the one in which Paul speaks of charismatic gifts. Gerson linked contemplation to "sermo sapientie," the first gift mentioned. That he understood this to be a gift gratis data is stated clearly later on, in the sixth proposition:

because the grace of contemplation is counted among the graces freely given, such as faith and hope or prophecy or other such powers, which are occasionally

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<sup>88</sup>Jean le Charlier de Gerson, De Mystica Theologia, edidit André Combes (Lucani: In Aedibus Thesauri Mundi, 1958), p. 29, l. 4 to p. 131, l. 31.



given to individuals who are reprobate and who live without love.<sup>89</sup>

Thus the "contemplation" which Gerson began to discuss in De Theologia mystica practica no longer appears to be attainable by all Christians. It has now become a special gift which is given to some. This is a conception far removed from the theoretical universality of the mysticism developed in De mystica theologia speculativa. On the other hand, by using this approach Gerson removed his mystical theology from its earlier psychological orientation and placed it into the circle of faith--faith being understood here in a broad sense, in antithesis to natural theology.<sup>90</sup>

It is therefore apparent that Gerson began his De mystica theologia practica from another perspective than that of the earlier treatise. On the one hand, he moved out of his psychological framework and began to treat mystical theology as a charismatic gift. On the other hand, whereas he had previously made a clearcut distinction between contemplatio, which relates to the intellect, and devotio, which relates to the affective power, he now began to use the term contemplatio in a sense broad enough to embrace the more specific senses of both terms. Why? Combes is probably correct in holding that he did this in order to meet the

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 155, l. 1, 21-24.

<sup>90</sup>Combes states: "en rattachant ainsi de facon essentielle le contemplatif en tant que tel aux autres membres de ce corps, et au Christ lui-meme, on donne le primat absolu a l'ordre de la foi, on ecarte les outrances philosophiques, on se place dans l'atmosphere meme ou veut agir le Chancelier reformateur." In La théologie mystique de Gerson, I, 153.



needs of a large number of people, most of whom did not work with the fine distinctions used in De mystica theologia speculativa.<sup>91</sup>

The question is, did Gerson move from this general sense of contemplation back to the mystical theology of De mystica theologia speculativa? Did he return to the universal mysticism presented in the former lectures, finally arriving at the conclusion that each Christian is to move toward the perfect union of bride and bridegroom? Or had he now deserted his former position in favor of a contemplation which is a special charismatic gift for certain people?

One thing is certain: there is no passivity implied in Gerson's presentation. All are to seek their vocation, which is understood here in the sense of "place in the body of Christ:"

You have been elected to this activity in the mystical body, and you to that. Strive to make certain your calling to salvation.<sup>92</sup>

This means that the individual who is in doubt regarding his own vocation is to seek counsel of men who are expert in spiritual matters.<sup>93</sup>

But is the individual to seek only that way of life which is obviously his even if this does not involve the ecstatic love of mysticism? Or is every person to go beyond his apparent calling to seek the mystical union? M. Pourrat speaks for those who hold that at this point Gerson did not teach a universal mysticism:

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>92</sup>Gerson, De mystica theologia, p. 130, l. 29 to p. 131, l. 31.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 131, l. 1, 31-34.



All the faithful, moreover, are not called to the contemplative life, as opposed to the teachings of certain mystics who wished to make all Christians contemplatives; which, says the Chancellor, is a dangerous error. There are some among the faithful who are only suited to the active life. Their ardent and passionate temperament could only be tamed by hard work and engrossing business. The calm needed for contemplation would expose them to very great temptations; it would be a crime to persuade them to it. Also they would be incapable of contemplating divine truths, and their failure would discourage them. Those who from their position are compelled to live an active life, such as prelates, pastors or mothers of a family, would sin if they left those dependent on them in order to lose themselves in contemplation.<sup>94</sup>

However, Pourrat does concede that Gerson encouraged people suited for the active life "to think of God and bemoan their faults."<sup>95</sup>

Is this what Gerson taught in De mystica theologia practica?

At first glance, such would seem to be the case. He had begun by speaking of contemplation as a charismatic gift for certain people.

He pursued this in the second proposition when, on the basis of the thesis that the soul follows the body, he pointed out that some people are better disposed than others for the contemplative life.<sup>96</sup> He

became even more specific in the third proposition, where he remarked

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<sup>94</sup>Pierre Pourrat, Christian Spirituality, trans. by S. P. Jaques (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1953), II, 272-272. Pourrat's references are to De monte contemplationis and to De exercitiis devotorum simplicium, both of which are less significant than the two great treatises on mystical theology.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>96</sup>"Phylzophatum est animas sequi corpora; quod cotidiano experimento cognitum sic accipientum est ut non necessitatis vel coactionis sit ista sequele, sed inclinationis. Iuvat autem miris modis ad operationes has vel illas conformis inclinatio naturalis, sicut e converso dissonans tantum obest quantum vix libertas animi, vix disciplinatio, vix conatus assuefactionis sufficit evincere. Tradit beatus Gregorius, quem in arce contemplationis sepe diuque versatum constat, quosdam



that just as the state has many offices and stations, so also the mystical body. Those who are caught up in many responsibilities find it difficult to lead the contemplative life.<sup>97</sup> This is particularly true of the lay occupations.<sup>98</sup> Therefore the most likely candidates for the contemplative life are the clergy, especially the monastics.<sup>99</sup> The clergy, and especially the prelates, have both a certain obligation to contemplation and various practical duties. Therefore Gerson believed that the ideal state for them involved a kind of ambidexterity in which the contemplative life and the active life could be brought together: contemplating, they could act, and acting, contemplate.<sup>100</sup> In terms of Gerson's immediate reformatory purpose at the university his goal had herewith been reached: every churchman was definitely called to the contemplative life.<sup>101</sup> Some, such as the monastics, were in a

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homines inveniri nature tam inquiete et varie ut otium contemplationis vel non possint vel molestissime ferre potuerint, ad quod alii nature tranquillioris aptissimi pronique sunt. Primos ad actionem, secundos ad contemplationem mittit." Gerson, De mystica theologia, p. 136, l. 6 to p. 137, l. 18.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., pp. 140-141.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 142, l. 1, 32-36.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 141, l. 1, 26-29.

<sup>101</sup>Thus Combes: "Tous les théologiens qui professent ou étudient à l'Université de Paris sont, ou vont être, au sens fort, hommes d'Église. Tous, par conséquent, doivent se considérer comme appelés à la perfection contemplative." Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson, p. 161.



position to emphasize contemplation over against activity. Others, especially prelates in positions of responsibility, were to pursue a kind of balanced ambidexterity. None of the religious could excuse themselves from the contemplative life.

But granted that certain people received contemplation as a charismatic gift and that it belonged to others in their roles as churchmen, what of the rest? What did Gerson do with the simple people? Thus far Pourrat seems to have been correct. But his interpretation does not take into account that at this point Gerson began to shift his ground and pave the way for a universal mystical theology. He opened the discussion by stating the usual point of view, namely that it is sufficient for a Christian to be a partaker of the common Christian life, the via propria:

The voice of the crowd is: The ordinary life is good enough for me. If I shall be able to be saved with the least, that is enough. I do not desire the merits of the apostles or martyrs; I do not want to fly to the heights; I am satisfied to plod the plain.<sup>102</sup>

But Gerson did not agree with this attitude of being satisfied with the minimal in the Christian life. He stated that imperfection is not to desire to be perfect, and that on the pathway toward God not to advance is to regress.<sup>103</sup> Therefore the lazy servant is damned, and Mary's hospitality is preferred to that of Martha--and the contemplative

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<sup>102</sup>Gerson, De mystica theologia, p. 143, l. 4 to p. 144, l. 7.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 144, l. 1, 7-9.



life is more perfect than the active.<sup>104</sup> Therefore it is the obligation of each Christian to strive for the perfection which is found in the contemplative life. Gerson did not insist upon a certain level of achievement. He did say that contemplation is to be sought and that it can be found by people in various estates:

But there are many among whom to neglect to seek contemplation must be judged worthy of damnation, for example, those who are stationed in the school of religion, that is, the school of devotion, prayer and weeping. Such, it is agreed above, are the clerics, who have leisure at the people's expense in order that they can guard the judgments of the Lord and search His law. Many other such men and women can be found in the secular world, who have leisure, instruction and inclination enough so that they can turn and draw themselves completely unto God. Faith, hope and love are present in them. In fact, they lack little in the way of a more precise education in order that they may pass over "into the affective power of the heart" that is so good and delightful, etc.<sup>105</sup>

Thus Gerson was moving from a contemplation understood as a special, charismatic gift or as something that belongs to ones vocational status, to a more universal conception. At the same time he was moving from a rather ambiguous use of the term "contemplation" toward the terminology of his earlier mystical theology: "that they pass completely over into the good and delightful affective power of the heart, etc." The same movement is reflected in the fifth proposition, which deals with fleeing vain occupations and seeking communion with

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 146, l. 46 to p. 147, l. 58.



God.<sup>106</sup> Finally Gerson forsook all ambiguity and emphasized the affective power in opposition to the cognitive:

It is useful, before the time of prayer itself, to get a head start by meditating upon the things which are to be declared, so that one can more freely pass over into the affective power. There is also value in trying to draw out those things which are said not so much in relation to subtle and manifold knowledge as with regard to relish and exultation. For often where there is less knowledge there is more love. "Love gets in where knowledge stands at the door."<sup>107</sup>

Especially significant are the closing words as quoted above:

"Ecstatic love (which can practically be equated with the essence of mystical theology) gets in where cognition stands at the door."

With this conclusion, Gerson was right back in the circle of De mystica theologia speculativa, except that he had arrived there without recourse to the psychological considerations so evident in those first lectures on mystical theology.

Ecstatic love is therefore to be sought by all. Even if a Christian has no clear indication that this gift is his, and even if he is not a churchman, he is to strive. Not to advance in the Christian life is to retrogress. One does not find Gerson saying, however, that each Christian will arrive at the goal of ecstatic love. It is not essential to salvation, but it is essential that each Christian strive to attain it.

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<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p. 147, l. 1, 1-4.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p. 152, l. 74 to p. 153, l. 80.



In the first half of De mystica theologia practica Gerson used a different approach from that of De mystica theologia speculativa. He began with a very general use of the term "contemplation," one which would fit the popular conception, and gradually narrowed this term down until he arrived at the mystical theology of De mystica theologia speculativa. Moreover, he abandoned his psychological groundwork, or at least did not make use of it for the purposes of De mystica theologia practica. Instead he treated contemplation as a charismatic gift, or as a gift connected with certain vocations. Then he gradually moved toward a more precise conception of mystical theology, and at the same time indicated that this is available to any Christian and is therefore to be sought by all. It is clearly not limited to those with specialized cognitive knowledge, for it goes beyond the cognitive domain into the affective. Thus Gerson moved from an essentially philosophical-psychological approach into a faith-approach.

#### The interplay between grace and human endeavor

Having carefully brought his readers to the point of realizing that ecstatic love is possible for any Christian, Gerson in his sixth and seventh propositions presented a dialectical discussion of the interplay between grace and human endeavor.

The sixth proposition is designed to encourage the reader to strive against idle curiosity and to realize his own human weakness as he strives for the grace of contemplation. A person always needs to remember that his own endeavor is useless without the grace of God. In fact,



contemplation can be informis and therefore devoid of charity. In view of this, who would glory except in the Lord?<sup>108</sup> The Christian may even find that God sometimes withdraws from him, although not out of wrath or forever.<sup>109</sup> Ultimately, the spiritual heights cannot be reached by our own efforts, as is shown by the fact that when we have prepared ourselves diligently for contemplation, we may just then be victims of spiritual barrenness. On the other hand grace may come when we least expect it.<sup>110</sup> Therefore the Christian's attitude must be one of hopeful waiting for whatever God sends, always aware that the kingdom of God consists in love alone.<sup>111</sup>

But this does not mean that the Christian should be passive. On the contrary, having conceded all human weakness and the impossibility of man's attaining the gift of contemplation on his own, Gerson went on in the seventh proposition to emphasize that it is up to man to strive with all his power. He began by depicting the individual who excuses his neglect of contemplation on the grounds that he does not know

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 155, l. 20 to p. 156, l. 25.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 156, l. 1, 36-38.

<sup>110</sup>"Fit hoc quandoque ut cognoscatur illud apostoli: 'Non est currentis neque volentis, sed Dei miserentis'. Cuius rationis signum perspicuum est, quia postquam homo sibi dixerit: tu tali die, tali hora, vacuus eris ab omni occupatione, tu certissime aptus eris ad suavitatem contemplationis degustandam, tu sic ages, sic te disponas; sed quid, venerit illa dies, apportabit ariditatem amariorum animae, fastidium spiritui, ut non solum sit orationis et lectionis horror, sed tenebre et conturbatio. At ex adverso, dum tibi nichil horum proposueris, 'grata veniet, que non sperabatur hora'." Ibid., p. 160, l. 89, to p. 161, l. 98.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., p. 164, l. 142 to p. 165, l. 948.



whether it will be spiritually profitable or harmful to him.<sup>112</sup> Gerson scored this attitude of passivity. God, he asserted, wants the believer to plant and water. This applies to things spiritual as well as to things carnal, for Christians are His co-workers. Their task is to plant and to water, and Christ gives the life-giving, superinfused power for which they humbly pray and which they trustingly await from Him.<sup>113</sup> Gerson used the gift of sight as a further comparison. Man opens the windows, he said, lifts up his head and opens his eyes. But how does he see? If the sun's rays were hid, man could not see. The same thing holds true concerning Christ, the true sun of righteousness.<sup>114</sup>

Cognition and affective power reviewed .

It has already been demonstrated that Gerson, beginning with a broad use of the term "contemplation," gradually led over to the conception of mystical theology which he had developed in De mystica theologia speculativa.<sup>115</sup> This would involve an emphasis upon the affective powers, and therefore necessitates re-opening the question concerning the relationship between cognition and the affective power.

In the eighth proposition of De mystica theologia practica Gerson spoke explicitly of a mystical theology which reposes in the affective powers:

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<sup>112</sup>Ibid., p. 165 l. 5 to p. 166, l. 9.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 166, l. 1, 12-22.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 168, l. 1, 38-42.

<sup>115</sup>Supra, p. 108.



The characteristic of mystical theology is that it rests in the affective power, while all other skills rest in the intellect. Moreover, since every affection either is love or arises from love, according to philosophic deduction, ought mystical theology therefore not be called the art of love, or the science of loving?<sup>116</sup>

This is precisely the mystical theology of De mystica theologia speculativa. Proposition twelve takes up the thought of proposition eight, and once again opens the question of the interrelationship of cognition and affective power in Gerson's thinking.

Gerson apparently considered this section of some importance. His introductory words are: "Therefore it behooves us to recall those things which we have dealt with regarding the quiddity of mystical theology."<sup>117</sup> This is followed by a definition of mystical theology:

Therefore we state that mystical theology is ecstatic love which follows the understanding of the spirit itself, which understanding is assuredly freed from the clouds of phantasms. Therefore the person who wants to devote himself to mystical theology must necessarily strive after this pure understanding. Otherwise, in what manner could he obtain the love which follows from it?<sup>118</sup>

Several points are of significance here. As one would expect, mystical theology is defined as ecstatic love. But what is striking is that the ecstatic love follows upon simple intelligence. This means that the cognitive part of the soul plays a role. Which role? That of abstraction. For this reason one should prepare for mystical theology by way of

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<sup>116</sup>Ibid., p. 172, l. 7 to p. 173, l. 12.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., p. 208, l. 1, 5-6.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., l. 6, 6-12.



the simple (pura) intelligence. One detects a hint of the former psychological emphasis and a considerable stress upon cognition. The latter emphasis becomes quite apparent in what follows.

After giving his definition of mystical theology, Gerson provided a review of his basic conception regarding the upward movement of the cognitive powers from the senses to pure intelligence. In this connection he spoke of the world, which had gone out from God, returning to Him. To move farther from God is to tend toward the material. Conversely to return toward God is to return toward the spiritual.<sup>119</sup>

Next Gerson turned to Pseudo-Dionysius' principle of abstraction, whereby the mind is freed from all corporeal fantasy. It is after this action that the spirit then bears itself by love into the divine cloud, where it ineffably and extra-mentally has a cognition of God.<sup>120</sup> Using Pseudo-Dionysius' familiar image of the sculptor, Gerson described how the spirit removes all accidents by abstraction, thus arriving at

the image of God, that is, a conception, as it were, which is actually without power, altogether without dependence,<sup>121</sup> clearly without lack and necessarily without mutability.

Thus the soul attains a relationship with God which, while it is gained

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., pp. 209-210.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., p. 210, l. 1, 37-41.

<sup>121</sup>"agalma Dei, hoc est notitiam tamquam rei actualissime sine potentialitate, supreme sine dependentia, pure sine privatione, necessarie sine mutabilitate." Ibid., p. 211, l. 1, 48-20.



through the process of Dionysian abstraction, is essentially a going beyond this through the affective powers. Moreover it involves not merely negation but also a positive cognition or experience. In De mystica theologia speculativa Gerson had asked, "But who would say that mystical theology pursues only negation, retaining nothing positively known or experienced about God?"<sup>122</sup> The answer to the question is, Pseudo-Dionysius himself. Here is where Gerson parted company with him by positing something positive.

But what is the nature of that positive something reached at the end of the process of abstraction? Gerson confronts the reader with a surprise ending: he will again inquire whether this is something experienced only in the affective power, or whether it may involve the cognitive power after all:

But truly, whether that conception is only experiential in the highest affective power united with God by love, or whether it can be called intellectual--not intuitive to be sure, but abstracted or perceived in twilight by cognition [abstractiva seu cognitione vespertina], and not by connotative cognition alone but by absolute cognition--this would be most worthy of consideration and inquiry. For each opinion has its very prestigious defenders.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup>Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, III, 252.

<sup>123</sup>Gerson, De Mystica Theologia, pp. 211-212, ll. 50-63. Of the various arguments in favor of the view that man can attain an intellectual concept of God after abstraction, the one that seemed to impress Gerson the most is that God has given man His name, and that Christ has stated that only God is good: "Addunt argumentum quia Deus hoc esse sibi nomen proprium respondit Moysi dicens: 'Dices, inquit, qui est misit me ad vos.' Affirmant isti simile de conceptu bonitatis, sicut in lege nova Christus respondit: 'Solus Deus est bonus.'" Ibid., p. 212, ll. 70-74.



Understandably, Gerson was now surprised that he had slipped back into speculative mystical theology. He confessed his surprise openly:

But look! Somehow or other, while I have been lecturing on mystical theology, I am falling back into speculative theology.<sup>124</sup>

But there was reason for his procedure. He concluded the above remark with the comment, "But not without cause."<sup>125</sup> Why then? Because the cognitive powers play a major role in the process of abstraction by which a man is prepared to seek God in the ecstatic excessus:

Therefore it is necessary for you, O soul, you who seek to hasten to God through mystical ecstasies, that you learn to turn yourself from mental images through your innate power of abstracting; just as a lesser power of abstracting in brutes elicits forms that are not perceived from forms that are perceived, so you also well know how to distinguish imperfect things from perfect, in order that at length something perfect shines forth to you clearly in its essence and goodness.<sup>126</sup>

Thus in the end Gerson was led to accept the role of the cognitive powers in the process of abstraction. He clearly held that mystical theology goes beyond what this abstractive process can do. On the other hand he was uncertain whether the goal involves only a union with God by love or whether, after all, something intellectual is also involved. One cannot pin him down here. He stated plainly that this was still a mooted question for him. One is tempted to speculate

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<sup>124</sup>Ibid., p. 213, ll. 77-79.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., p. 213, l. 79.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid., ll. 80-86.



whether he had himself confused the cognitive process of abstraction, which is ancillary to his mystical theology proper, with a cognitive knowledge of God. He seemed first to state that he did not know whether the end goal is purely affective or involves some cognition. Then he proceeded to defend his having recourse to cognition on the grounds that this is a necessary part of abstraction. At any rate, he had moved away from his earlier, clearcut stress upon the union by way of love.<sup>127</sup>

But Gerson had not yet finished. His tension at having been drawn back into an emphasis on the cognitive powers was accentuated when he suddenly realized that his goal was to provide a mystical experience that is available to all, not only to those who are learned in metaphysics and theology. In view of all that he had said in the twelfth proposition, what could he now say to the unlearned?<sup>128</sup>

Gerson's answer to this question is the ultimate explanation in De mystica theologia practica of what leads to the mystical experience.

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<sup>127</sup>Combes seems to overstate the case when he makes the following judgment: "Au moment de conclure sa practica, de façon tout à fois technique et efficace, Gerson tient donc à ouvrir son textus à une thèse théologique qui, si on l'adopte assez intégralement pour lui permettre de porter tous ses fruits, rompt de façon éclatante avec la pure tradition dionysienne et s'épanouit dans la spéculation des formalisantes." André Combes, La théologie mystique de Gerson, I, 175. Incidentally, Combes seems to miss the thrust of the statement "Est quippe tibi . . ." (previous citation). He uses this to point to the universality of mystical theology. But in the context this statement is Gerson's explanation of why he had been led back into speculative mystical theology. Combes avoids mention of Gerson's surprise at having been drawn back into speculative mystical theology at this point. Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>128</sup>Gerson, De mystica theologia, p. 213, l. 1, 86-89.



While to an extent both cognition and the affective power are involved, a man does not remain merely in cognition but seeks the experience by way of the affective power. He does this by letting his heart concentrate upon God's power and wisdom and goodness, remembering how terrible God is in His counsels regarding men (Ps. LXV. 5). As he concentrates, a veritable torrent of images rushes in upon both of his interior eyes (presumably, the cognitive and the affective powers).<sup>129</sup> When this occurs, the individual will struggle mightily against the onrush of images by means of devotion,<sup>130</sup> and will desire God.<sup>131</sup> But this cannot occur except by way of penitence and the stepwise progression through purgation and illumination.<sup>132</sup>

Here then is Gerson's conclusion in De mystica theologia practica: the simple person can achieve ecstatic love. He prepares by penitence, going the way of purgation and illumination. So far as the final movement to the heights is concerned, as the individual concentrates upon the greatness of God by means of his affective power, many images

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<sup>129</sup>"Occurrent tibi sic nitenti, sic intento, plurima turba fantasmatum. Credo equidem irruent importune fantasmata et irrumpent in utrosque oculos tuos interiores." Ibid., p. 214, ll. 99-101.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., ll. 101-103.

<sup>131</sup>"Sitis te spiritualis exstimulet ut 'quemadmodum desiderat cervus' undique canum morsibus patens et supercalescens gelidos tutosque 'fontes aquarum,' sic tu labora contra impedientia fantasmata, ut possis et tu dicere rore sancti Spiritus calefactus: 'Desiderat anima mea ad' te Deus, 'sitivit anima mea ad Deum fontem vivum, quando veniam et apparebo ante faciem Dei?' Ibid., p. 214, l. 105 to p. 215, l. 112.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., p. 215, ll. 112-120.



break into both his cognitive and affective powers (which are united in the soul). Struggling against these images, and desiring God, he can reach the point where he says, "My beloved is in me, and I in Him."<sup>133</sup>

The role of the mystical experience in  
the life of the viator

The question of the universality of mystical theology is of first importance. Is ecstatic love something which all must finally attain for salvation, or is it a special gift given only to some? Gerson began by speaking of contemplation (from which he gradually shifted into mystical theology proper) as a gift gratis data and as belonging to certain vocations. But he also insisted that since the gift may be hidden all are to strive for it. He therefore sought a method whereby even the unlearned can attain this goal, in keeping with the program of De mystica theologia speculativa. But nowhere did Gerson indicate that the attainment of this special experience is an absolutely essential part of the via salutis. It is linked as a sine qua non with personal salvation only from the negative point of view. To refuse to progress spiritually is to retrogress. Therefore the person who refuses to listen for the call of God is toying with his salvation. On the other hand, even contemplation can be informis. The heart and core of Christianity is still caritas. Mystical theology is potentially attainable by any Christian, but it will not necessarily be experienced by all Christians.

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<sup>133</sup>Ibid., p. 216, l. 134.



Therefore mystical theology is, as Gerson stated from the very beginning, something that "goes beyond." The experience is a grace of God zealously to be sought, but which only God can give. It is a goal of the viator as he seeks to establish a deeper relationship with God.

It is evident that in Gerson's mystical theology a great amount of emphasis is placed upon the individual's working out of his salvation. A part of this working and struggling for a saving relationship with God is the endeavor to arrive at that blessed union of ecstatic love, the union of bride and bridegroom, which the two treatises on mystical theology define and teach. The road to that relationship is always the road of penitence. For this was the cry with which Gerson initiated his attempted reform: Repent and believe the Gospel.



## CHAPTER V

### TOWARD A SYNTHESIS OF THE TWO WAYS

#### General Observations

The two tracks of Gerson's theology, the via propria and the via mystica, have now been presented and analyzed. What remains is the task of seeking the interrelationship between the two ways. The via propria centers in caritas. While this is fundamentally a loving of God more than anything else, it is worked out in terms of law and in relationship to one's neighbor. The via mystica is subjective and personalistic. In it the viator is urged to strive for an ecstatic union with God. This is therefore the fundamental tension: Love as keeping of the commandments versus the ecstatic love-experience; reduction of law for the sake of assurance versus seeking the ultimate relationship with God; obedient following of the ordained way versus flight into the affective relationship with the absolute; the traditional conception of an "informed" faith, hope and love, versus the love of mystical theology.

While caritas is in principle a genuine, active love of man for God called forth by God's love for man, it became formalized and legalized, also in Gerson. In terms of the situation at the University of Paris, the via mystica represents an attempt to substitute penitence for a runaway speculation. But beyond the immediate historical context it represents the yearning to go beyond a formal relationship with God



to a deeper relationship of the affective powers. Caritas-love, as developed in proper theology, did not suffice as a total relationship to God.

From another standpoint, the via propria is related to God's power ordinata. It seeks to develop a relationship with God by way of the symbolic representations of Him revealed in Scripture and the law-requirements thus revealed. The via mystica is an attempt to relate to the absolute, hidden God. The formalizantes were seeking to do this by rational speculation. Gerson scored them for it, and substituted mysticism. But whereas mysticism generally held that man could actually penetrate to a cognitive knowledge of the absolute, Gerson recognized the limitations of reason and sought such a relationship in the affective power. Moreover, despite the psychological framework of De mystica theologia speculativa, he did not hold that the mystical theology of the affective powers could be attained in a purely naturalistic way. He was exceedingly chary of any kind of mysticism which wanted to break loose from the moorings of Scriptural revelation or churchly tradition. Gerson, even when he sought to "go beyond" and reach the hidden God through the affective powers, still used God's self-revelation through symbol as his launching pad.<sup>1</sup>

Both the via propria and the via mystica center in the love of God. The via propria is the way of an informed faith and hope and

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<sup>1</sup>Reinhold Seeberg's allegation that certain nostics took the experiential principle which nominalism applied to the natural world and applied it to God and His works, does not fit Gerson's case. Cf. supra, p. 2, n. 7.



love--the caritas which shows itself in works of love. The via mystica is the way of a love which unites the lover with his beloved<sup>2</sup> and which is essentially a concordance of the act of willing.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, both ways involve the viator in a constant struggle to do what is in him, or do the best he can. Not to progress on the way of salvation is to retrogress. Thus even the person who sees no indication that the gift of contemplation is his, is to continue to seek it. It is difficult to ascertain whether Gerson believed that a Christian can gain absolute assurance of salvation in this life, as a fait accompli. He hinted at it, spoke of it occasionally, but did not develop this idea extensively. His message was for the viator, who is still on the road to eternal salvation.

Thus the via propria and the via mystica, which one might with some over-simplification call "outer-directed" and "inner-directed" religion, are the two poles about which Gerson's theology ranged. The question that confronts one is simply this: Did Gerson conceive of via propria and via mystica as divergent ways? Or did he manage to fuse them as two aspects of the only way which the viator must go? Do Gerson's own writings give evidence of a synthesis between the via propria and the via mystica? There is some such evidence.

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<sup>2</sup>Jean le-Charlier de Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, ed. by P. Glorieux (11 vols.: Paris, Tournai, Rome and New York: Desclée & Cie, 1960--), III, 285.

<sup>3</sup>"Spiritus ergo noster cum Deo adhaeret per intimum amorem, unus spiritus est cum eo per voluntatis conformitatem; solus enim amor perfectus et perfecte Deo adhaerens veraciter orat: Fiat voluntas tua sicut in coelo et in terra." Ibid.



In De vita spirituali animae Gerson had laid out an ambitious program. He planned to base his treatise on Paul's words, "In him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28) On this basis he would develop the theme:

We live in God by the vivification of grace.  
 We move in Him and toward Him by good works.  
 We are in Him in a kind of quiet contemplation.<sup>4</sup>

It soon became apparent that Gerson actually concentrated on the second factor of the trilogy in his treatise, and that he did not really produce a balanced treatment. It has also been pointed out that there is no real evidence that the third factor mentioned above already referred to a mystical theology.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the germ of the overall spiritual program of the Chancellor, including his mystical theology, is to be found in this trilogy. It seems unmistakable that the thesis, "We are in Him in a kind of quiet contemplation," given little development in De vita spirituali animae, was to bloom into the mystical theology of Gerson. Therefore already at this time he was presenting, in germ, a synthesis of his spiritual theology which is able to embrace both the via propria and the via mystica.

Gerson gave further indication of how he conceived the interrelationship of the via propria with the via mystica in the treatise De vita contemplativa ad activam, in which he wrestled with the problem

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., II, 64.

<sup>5</sup>Supra, p. 25.



of the active versus the contemplative life.<sup>6</sup> He concluded that the contemplative (also called speculative) life is better in theory, but that in practice, presupposing the actual state of the church, the mixed life is better. He demonstrated a real insight into the unity of man, and was able to defend his view at this point by referring to Christ Himself, who lived as a total man, both active and contemplative.<sup>7</sup> It is apparent that the via propria corresponds in broad outline to the active life. The via mystica as subsequently developed by Gerson corresponds to the contemplative life of which he wrote in De vita spirituali animae and in De vita contemplativa ad activam.

Thus in these two documents is to be found the seed of a possible synthesis between via propria and via mystica. De vita contemplativa ad activam points to a resolution of the tension between the two ways by means of the mixed life. De vita spirituali animae pulls the two ways together in its motif-trilogy. The via propria corresponds to the first and second factors of the trilogy: the viator lives in God by the vivification of grace and moves in Him and toward Him by good works. The via mystica corresponds to the third factor of the trilogy, given little

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., III, 71-74.

<sup>7</sup>"Pro quo advertendum est quod tota multitudo operum meritoriorum unius hominis imaginatur quasi corpus quoddam et homogeneous; ad modum loquendi Christi, Matth. vi: si oculus tuus fuerit simplex totum corpus lucidum erit (Mt. 6, 22); glossa: si intentio simplex bona quaelibet operatio erit. Probatio: vita illa melior est quae est vitae Christi conformior. Sed Christus conversatus est secundum totum vitae suae, ad regulam ad vitam cujuscumque membri sui, scilicet tam active quam speculative; ergo, etc." Ibid., pp. 73-74.



development in De vita spirituali animae: we are in Him in a kind of quiet contemplation. Why then did Gerson not develop this third factor more fully? Because at the very time he was writing the De vita spirituali animae his mind was already occupied with the lectures on speculative mysticism, which would be delivered just a few months later.<sup>8</sup> The whole picture lay before him, and was outlined in the motif-trilogy. But the development of the third factor would have to wait until the following winter.

It appears, then, that Gerson had some conception of an inherent unity existing between the two strands of his theological thought already in 1402. In the De vita spirituali animae he presented the three great motifs, and then proceeded to develop the two which related to the via propria. Subsequently, in the writings on mystical theology, he developed the third motif. Did he ever succeed in pulling the two strands together into a truly harmonious union? It appears that he did, in his sermon Spiritus Domini, which will now be taken up. In this great work one can observe both a synthesis of via propria and via mystica, and a culmination of Gerson's development of his mystical theology itself.

### The Spiritus Domini

#### Setting and Mood

Gerson delivered the sermon Spiritus Domini in connection with the

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<sup>8</sup>Combes dates the De vita spirituali animae January-July 1402. He dates the De theologia mystica speculativa in the winter of 1402-1403. Ibid., p. xli.



Council of Constance, 7 June 1416.<sup>9</sup> But why the sudden jump from 1408 to 1416? This apparently overlooks a long period, with many intervening writings. The fact is that the years between 1408 and 1415 were practically devoid of spiritual writings from the pen of Gerson.<sup>10</sup> He preached several significant sermons in 1415, but his thought reached a clear-cut culmination in the work which will now be investigated. This sermon stands as a kind of capstone to the developing motifs of the university period and as an introit into Gerson's later development. If it represents a shift in the basic position of the Chancellor's mystical theology, it may also be regarded as a synthesis of via propria and via mystica. It is particularly from the latter perspective that the document will now be discussed.

The setting is of considerable psychological importance. The Great Schism troubled Gerson deeply, as it did any conscientious churchman. He had weighed the problem carefully in his search for a solution

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., I, 131.

<sup>10</sup>Combes remarks: "De fait, entre 1408 et 1415, la bibliographie gersonienne est vide de toute oeuvre proprement spirituelle." In La théologie mystique de Gerson (2 vols.: Rome, Tournai, Paris and New York: Desclée et Socii Editores Pontificii, 1963-1964), I, 187. This is not to say that Gerson was inactive all this time. It was a period of turmoil, and the Chancellor was much involved. The French were deeply troubled by the schism and were uncertain of their position. Gerson became very much involved in the case of Jean Petit, who had defended the assassination of the Duke of Orleans by the Duke of Burgundy. During this period he was still active in the affairs of the university. He wrote on the problems of the church, and he continued his teaching and writing on particular spiritual problems. He did not, however, produce any major spiritual writing during these years. For a brief and succinct account of Gerson, Oeuvres Complètes, I, 122-128.



and had finally opted for a moderate conciliarism. But now, in the midst of the church's trial, in the midst of the churchly-political infighting that was so distasteful to Gerson, the Spiritus Domini rang out like a paean of triumph. This was Pentecost, and on this day the Holy Spirit fills the world. Hence the theme is, "The Spirit of the Lord has filled the world, etc. (The Wisdom of Solomon 1:7) . . . this is the day which the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."<sup>11</sup> Here is to be seen the significance of Christ's Ascension to His Father and His Session at the right hand, and His sending forth of the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> Man must sing praises on account of the miracle of this sending and this filling. God is to be praised both with respect to His mercy in the elect and His justice in the reprobate.<sup>13</sup> Nothing, in fact, can exist apart from the filling of the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Gerson was speaking to the concrete situation, the papal schism. He pointed out that the Holy Spirit who fills all the universe is also active in unifying and vivifying the church, and in making her the bride of Christ.<sup>15</sup> The implication is clear: the ills of the church

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<sup>11</sup>Jean le Charlier de Gerson, Opera Omnia, edited by Ellies Du Pin (Antwerp, 1706), III, 1234, D. In all references to this edition, the Roman numeral signifies the volume; the Arabic numeral signifies the column; and the letter signifies the section within the column.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., col. 1235 A.

<sup>13</sup>"Tale nos hodie carmen canere convenit, dum per inauditum seculis misericordiae in electis, & justitiae in reprobis, miraculum Spiritus Domini replevit orbem terrarum." Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., C.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., B.



will not be solved by political maneuvering. Healing is to be found in the life-giving activity of the Holy Spirit.

With the sweeping activity of the Holy Spirit as his theme, Gerson proceeded to set the foundation for all spiritual theology. It is simply rooted in the saving activity of the Holy Spirit. Anything else that may be said must have its starting point here. All spiritual life is traced to the work of the Holy Spirit who fills the universe. Thus as Gerson was about to present a spiritual theology which embraces both the via propria and the via mystica, he grounded both in the filling activity of the Holy Spirit. This is perfectly in harmony with the motifs of De vita spirituali animae. In that treatise, too, the fundamental thought was that in God, and especially the Holy Spirit, the viator lives and moves and has his being. But the activity of the Spirit was not portrayed quite so clearly in the treatises on mystical theology. In De mystica theologia speculativa especially, Gerson began with human psychology as his point of contact. Then, in De mystica theologia practica, he moved in the direction of a Spirit-centered mysticism by speaking of mystical theology as a charismatic gift. He did not, however, follow this out to its ultimate conclusion in that treatise. Now, finally, his development is clear, for in the Spiritus Domini he achieved a cosmic view of the activities of the Spirit, under which overarching and leading principle the other factors in his spiritual theology were to be brought: "The Spirit of the Lord has filled the world." In contrast to the relative diffuseness of his other writings, this sermon is an architectonic triumph.



But what specifically did Gerson mean when he spoke of the Holy Spirit filling the world? He explained that the term "world" signifies "men": the Holy Spirit fills the people who inhabit the world.<sup>16</sup> For it is God's human creation which, having gone out from Him, returns to Him again by way of cognition and love. The "cognition" should be emphasized. At this point Gerson, no longer involved in dispute with the formalizantes, was able to speak freely of a dual capacity in man:

Although such men can appropriately be called "universes" on the basis of many comparisons, yet they are so called expressly on the basis that, as they go out from God through creation and re-creation, through knowledge and love they turn back from themselves and from all created things to God, who is  $\alpha$  and  $\omega$ , the beginning and the end.<sup>17</sup>

Having presented his principal motif, and having explained with joyful exuberance that man is the object of the Holy Spirit's filling, Gerson built four major conceptions upon this foundation:

The synthesis of via propria and via mystica.<sup>18</sup>  
 The gratuity of the filling activity of the Spirit.  
 The nature of contemplation.<sup>19</sup>  
 The activity of those filled.

#### The Synthesis of via propria and via mystica

The synthesis of via propria and via mystica in the Spiritus Domini

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., col. 1236 A.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. Whether the return to God represents a change to an essentialistic mysticism will be discussed later.

<sup>18</sup>Gerson does not himself, consciously, style this a synthesis.

<sup>19</sup>While Gerson discussed this point at length, it will be dealt with briefly here under "The Synthesis of Via Propria and Via Mystica."



is to be seen in Gerson's concept of a triple filling with the Holy Spirit. Gerson explained this from two different angles. He first described the three types of filling activity, and then proceeded to analyze this activity in terms of three different kinds of viator.

The filling, then, may occur on three different levels: (1) That which is called "sufficient." This occurs in all who have faith, hope and love. It is found even in baptized babies, or in those sanctified in the womb. (2) The fulness of abundance or of excellence. Stephen the martyr is cited as an example. Those who share in this fulness are called perfecti or contemplativi. (3) The third group strikes one as very strange. What can be higher than the perfecti? By this classification Gerson understood those who have a superabundance, such as Christ Himself. The passage cited in this connection is Col. 2:9: "For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily." Mary too had this fulness. Most interesting is the fact that Gerson credited the apostles with such a superabundance or fulness, given on Pentecost, although they possessed it in a different way than did Christ and Mary. Gerson asked to what purpose they received it, and answered, "That through their fulness and superabundance their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. Ps. 19:4."<sup>20</sup> It is apparent that all the categories of via propria and via mystica--and all three "lives" discussed in De vita spirituali animae--are here brought together under the motif of a theology of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>20</sup>Gerson, Opera Omnia, III, 1237, B-C.



Gerson made himself clearer when he restated the Spirit's three-fold activity from the standpoint of the three kinds of viator. The second is worked in the contemplativi and perfecti. The third, and here is where Gerson's second listing of the three groups is more understandable than the first, and where his solution to the problem of the active versus the contemplative life occurs, are the ambidextrous:

The Holy Spirit grants the third [filling] to heroic men, the very remarkable people who practice both lives, the active as well as the contemplative. For these, activity does not suspend contemplation, nor does contemplation preclude or shun activity.<sup>21</sup>

In terms of the interrelationship of via propria and via mystica, the first group are those limited to the via propria, the way of faith, hope and charity; the second group are those who have gone beyond into the contemplative life (mystical theology); and the third and most blessed are those who have learned the art of ambidexterity.

Ambidexterity was not a new concept for Gerson. He had used it already in his essay De vita contemplativa ad activam. But now he defined the interrelationship in a new and more careful way than before:

Let us say something about such filling, which embraces both contemplation and action equally, where contemplation now does not follow action--as in the first beginnings of its acquisition or generation--but comes before it, shapes it, gives birth to it, and enlivens, strengthens, directs and perfects it.<sup>22</sup>

He did not object to the view that there are two levels of active life, one that precedes the contemplative and is imperfect and anxious (as,

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., col. 1237, C.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., cols. 1237, D - 1238, A.



for example, Martha), and the active life which follows contemplation and is calm and tranquil.<sup>23</sup> Combes emphasizes the uniqueness of this conception of ambidexterity, holding that the interaction between active and contemplative is here actually a matter of interpenetration:

But all the other [terms] express something else than a following: an inclusion, a coexistence, an interpenetration of such sort that contemplation is the form--informat--the power--roborat--the inner principle of life--vegetat--in brief, the perfection itself--perficit--of action.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Gerson had arrived at a synthesis of the divergent strains of his theology, in terms of the Christian's life. The Holy Spirit is the key, for whatever the level of man's spiritual experience, it is worked by the Holy Spirit. The via propria of faith, hope and love is sufficient. The via mystica, or contemplation, provides a higher experience and is to be sought by the viator. At the highest level, Gerson was able to bring together both strains into a unity of mutual interpenetration. For people at this level there is no conflict between the active and the contemplative life. Such people are able to live the life of caritas-love in their relationship to their neighbor, and their further experience of mystical dilectio is not only compatible with deeds of love but actually contributes to Christian activity. This can be seen with special clarity in the practical section of Spiritus Domini where, after having presented the nature of contemplation, Gerson answered all critics who might accuse him of a selfish, subjective

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., col. 1238, A.

<sup>24</sup>André Combes, La Théologie Mystique de Gerson, I, 384.



religiousness. He stated that when the Spirit of the Lord has filled a man He renders him strong and capable for outward, active works.<sup>25</sup>

The thrust of the via propria in Gerson is love fulfilling the commandments, while the thrust of the via mystica is toward dilectio, the transport into the mystical union. Both are synthesized in the concept of ambidexterity, the harmonization of the active life with the contemplative.

The gratuity of the Spirit's work

The task has been completed. The two strains of Gerson's theology have been analyzed and their essential harmony has been revealed in Gerson's concept of ambidexterity. But several considerations remain. The first is the attitude toward nature and grace that is revealed in the Spiritus Domini.

Gerson's basic position regarding the total freedom of God sounds forth loudly and clearly in his great sermon:

While the Holy Spirit fills man who inhabits the world, He does not do this out of any natural necessity but gratuitously and with free will and with the authority of freedom. This Christ taught, who spoke to Nicodemus<sup>26</sup> saying: "The Spirit blows where he wills." John 3:8.

It is therefore from the standpoint of the Spirit's freedom that the

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<sup>25</sup>"Spiritus Domini dum replet hominem incolam Orbis terrarum per plenitudinem redundantiae, constituit ipsum fortem, & expeditum ad opera vitae exterioris & activae." Gerson, Opera Omnia, III, 1243, D.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., col. 1238 C.



differences in spiritual gifts are to be understood.<sup>27</sup> The believer is not to ask why the Spirit fills some and not others, lest he fall into error.<sup>28</sup> The individual who desires to be filled by the Spirit is to prepare himself.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, after all the preparation, it is still up to the Spirit.<sup>30</sup>

Thus Gerson emphasized the freedom of the Spirit and the utter gratuity of His gifts. On the other hand, he maintained that the individual is responsible to do the best he can:

Nevertheless the sacred Scriptures constrain the very soul to dispose itself, to do what it can in the aforesaid and similar ways: by prayer, weeping, sighing, or to do anything whatever to receive the Holy Spirit. For "We are co-workers with God," the Apostle teaches. I. Cor. 3:9.<sup>31</sup>

Merit there must be.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand all merit is the gift of prevenient grace.<sup>33</sup> God's activity always precedes man's,<sup>34</sup> for

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<sup>27</sup>"Et Apostolus, postquam dixerat, quod divisiones gratiarum sunt, dinumerans eas subdit: Hac autem omnia operatur unus atque idem Spiritus, dividens singulis prout vult. I. Cor. XII. 11." Ibid. Here Gerson appears to hark back to De mystica theologia practica.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., col. 1239, A.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., B.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., C.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid. .

<sup>33</sup>"Anima proinde redditur humilior, & Deo gratior ex ea consideratione, quod quicquid habet meriti, praevenitrix gratia donat." Ibid., D.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.



it is He who has made man.<sup>35</sup>

The mystical experience

The primary goal of this investigation has been to inquire how Gerson brought both "ways" together under the aegis of the Holy Spirit. Another major purpose, however, has been simply to learn the nature of Gerson's via mystica. In this connection much attention has been devoted to his understanding of the mystical experience. Hence it will be necessary to investigate in some detail the conception of mystical theology that prevails in the sermon Spiritus Domini. Was there further development in this sermon? One ought first to review Gerson's treatment of the foundation of mystical theology, and then consider the nature of the mystical union.

Gerson discussed the foundation of mystical theology specifically in the second consideratio of his sermon. Although he still used the terminology of De mystica theologia speculativa, he no longer grounded the mystical experience in human psychology. Furthermore, he no longer spoke of contemplation as a charismatic gift, in the proper sense, as this was developed in De mystica theologia practica. In Spiritus Domini Gerson was dealing with the total activity of the Holy Spirit, who blows where He wills and gives each person gifts according to His own desire. Now Gerson stood as it were upon an Olympian height and viewed the full and free activities of the Spirit. Contemplation is, then, based upon the filling activity of the Spirit:

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., col. 1240 A.



While the Holy Spirit fills man, the resident of the world, He raises Him up, not of necessity (as has been said) but by His spontaneous will, so that he rises unto the pinnacle of contemplative perfection.<sup>36</sup>

The activity of the Spirit is called "the mystical dew, grace."<sup>37</sup>

It is called, after Augustine, "This perfect weight (if it is not rather to be called lightness)."<sup>38</sup> At this point Gerson again referred to the idea of abstraction which he had developed in detail in his mystical writings. But now he did not develop this on the basis of human psychology. Instead he simply asserted that the perfect weight or lightness just mentioned (that is, the Spirit's love) is the force which causes the human spirit to emerge from the turbid cloud of fluctuating phantasms and carnal desires, and to move freely into the heavens.<sup>39</sup> Thus all that Gerson had developed in his mystical theology is here being brought under the sway of a sweeping conception of the saving work of the Holy Spirit. Contemplation is entered into by way of repentance, and repentance too is brought about by the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup> One is tempted to speak of "the triumph of grace in the

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., col. 1241 A.

<sup>37</sup>"Mystica ros, gratia." Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid. Gerson here quotes St. Augustine.

<sup>39</sup>"Hoc perfectum amoris pondus . . . emergere facit spiritum a turbida fluctuantium phantasmatum & exundantium desideriorum carnalium tetra caligine, ut superas liber evadat in auras, ut feratur super aquas cogitationum vagantium & instabilium, somnioque similium, ut eruatur de tenebris & umbra mortis, ibi prius erat vinctus in mendicitate & ferro malae consuetudinis, & fomitis originalis." Ibid., A-B.

<sup>40</sup>"Hanc considerationem sequitur lachrymosa devotio, flante Spiritu sancto. Nam flavit Spiritus ejus & fluent aquae. Ps. CXLVII. 18. In quibus aquis lachrymarum se lavat, balneat & baptizat contemplantis anima, quemadmodum dixit ad Apostolos Christus: Vos autem baptizamini in



mystical theology of Gerson."

With regard to the nature of the mystical union two questions are of paramount importance: (1) Do the affective powers still play the major role? and (2) Is Gerson's mystical theology still basically penitential, or has it become essentialistic? But one finds that the Chancellor has shifted his approach, and there is no recourse but to follow his new line of presentation.

Gerson had spoken of repentance (lachrymosa devotio) as a baptizing in the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup> This, he said, is followed by an illumination of the mind. The passage quoted in Ezekiel 39:29: "And I will not hide my face any more from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon them."<sup>42</sup> But since this is the countenance of God "full of grace," it cannot be seen without delectatio.<sup>43</sup> Here transformation enters the picture, as a logical consequence of the fact that divine love is ecstatic.<sup>44</sup> Gerson used the image of gold and silver which, when heated, are changed into another material so that they can take on any form

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Spiritu sancto. Act. I. 5. Et quoniam nihil ita animam lavat, purificat, decorat, illuminat & elevat, sicut intima compunctionis devotio; ad hanc sequetur mentis illuminatio, nova quaedam neomenia juxta illud." Ibid., cols. 1241 D-1242 A. The assumption is that the tearful devotion described here, which washes and purifies and illumines the soul, is Gerson's picturesque term for penitence.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., col. 1241 D.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., col. 1242 A.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.



whatsoever. But he still rejected the example of a drop of water introduced into wine. He also explicitly denied the essentialistic union taught by those who say that the soul of the contemplative loses its proper essence and has only the ideal essence, in God.<sup>45</sup>

What then did Gerson really mean when he spoke of "transformation?" The soul has already experienced repentance, followed by an illumination of the mind, to which is connected delectatio. Then comes transformation, following delectatio:

And so not in this but in the aforesaid ways [that is, not as a loss of the human essence but according to the image of gold and silver heated], a certain transformation occurs in the soul through the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle notes: "And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." 2 Cor. 3:18. From the glory of faith into the glory of knowledge. From the glory of reason into the glory of understanding. From the glory of the intellect into the glory of the experiential awareness in the affective power. Thereupon follows swooning, or falling, or ecstasy.<sup>46</sup>

"Transformation" therefore covers the entire stepwise progression from the clarity of faith to mystical ecstasy. It involves both the cognitive and the affective powers, but its culmination is an experience of the affective powers alone. Gerson was still teaching a mysticism of the affective powers, and his conception of "transformation," developed more fully here than before, did not involve an essentialistic union.

But what did Gerson mean by the exstasis? He had spoken of it

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., B-C.



as a defectio, or casus.<sup>47</sup> In his entire discussion immediately following, he saw this experience as pursuing a narrow line between life and death. He quoted Pseudo-Dionysius:

having been filled with perfectly spotless contemplation and divine splendors beyond the appearance of the rays, we grow faint in beatific experiences, through extra-mental projection [excessus mentis].<sup>48</sup>

He quoted the psalms:

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Ps. 73:26

precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. Ps. 116, 15.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, he stated that it is not necessary that the soul depart in order to achieve extasis. What is necessary is that it depart from the sensations of life and be freed from life's temptations and blandishments.<sup>50</sup> This falling out or extasis is accompanied by a kind of absorption which unites the soul with God. Gerson even spoke of this as "in its own way deifying the mind" so that "we are gathered into the divine monad."<sup>51</sup> When this happens the word of Scripture is fulfilled, "for you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. Col. 3:3." This is the peace which passes all understanding.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., C.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., col. 1243 A.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.



Is this an essentialistic union after all? Some of the terms used certainly give that impression. But Gerson did not want to be understood in this way. He expressly denied the loss of the human esse. Moreover, even the extasis was understood by him in a basically voluntative sense. It was a matter of being released from subjection to life's temptations and blandishments. It was when one had been freed from mundane strife and concupiscence and cares, that one was gathered into the divine monad.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, when human cares and desires have been cast off, when a man has been "gathered into the divine monad," this does not mean that he has now escaped from life itself. On the contrary, it is precisely this experience which best fits a man for activity in the world:

When the Spirit of the Lord fills the man who inhabits the world through the plenitude of overabundance, He makes him steadfast and unencumbered for the works of the outward, active life.<sup>54</sup>

Thus Gerson again arrived at his concept of ambidexterity, the unifying concept under which the via propria and the via mystica are brought together in harmony. But ambidexterity is the key only from man's point of view. Ultimately, Gerson saw his theological thought brought together under a sweeping and comprehensive theology of the Holy Spirit, who blows where He wills, and gives men gifts as He wills.

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<sup>53</sup>"quando, perditis nostris alteritatibus, & concupiscentiis, curisque conclusis, & supermundane explicatis, in divinum monadem congregamur." Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., D.



The sermon Spiritus Domini is breath-taking in its dimensions. Yet one is moved to ask whether it established a true harmony and unity between the two ways, or whether it was merely a formal triumph. Gerson felt that the formal caritas-love was inadequate as an expression of all of man's religious experience, and sought to fill the gap by means of an experiential mystical theology of the affective powers. His theology can be characterized as a theology of love active in works. "Love" here involves both the caritas of the via propria and the dilectio of the via mystica, both of which lead to acts of love. But while Gerson did succeed in arriving at a synthesis of the two ways, in reality his was a theology of disunited strains. His mystical theology remained something that "went beyond." It was not a necessary and integral part of everyone's religious experience, even though everyone was encouraged to seek it. The via propria of faith, hope and love remained the necessary religion, beyond which one would strive to go. The mystical experience was still a special gift of the Holy Spirit. Gerson did not limit this gift to people in certain vocations.<sup>55</sup> It was potentially available to everyone, from the person with a religious vocation to the plowboy. But it remained a super-added element. Gerson had not yet arrived at the kind of synthesis which would bring together all of man's religious experience, as Luther was later to do with his concept of faith active in love. But it appears that he may have been

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<sup>55</sup>The democratic tenor of Gerson's mystical theology was a real departure from traditional attitudes.



moving toward such an overarching conception in his sermon Spiritus Domini.

### Conclusion

The roots of the Reformation--to use Karl Adam's expression--continues to be an issue of crucial significance for the life of the Church. It will gain even greater significance as the dialogue among Christians of all communions deepens and broadens. All sides will be drawn deeper into discussion of the basic issues that confronted their fathers in the sixteenth century. All sides have been accustomed to giving easy and sometimes superficial analyses of the theological roots of the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church denigrated grace and laid stress on works. Luther was a brilliant theologian and a sincere monk, who was brought up in the nominalist tradition which represented the breakdown of the great medieval synthesis of St. Thomas Aquinas. The growing interest in late medieval studies demonstrates that a new generation of Christians in all communions sense the need for a fresh look at the Reformation and the centuries immediately preceding it.

This thesis is intended as a small contribution to the growing fund of knowledge concerning late medieval theology, without which the Reformation cannot be seen in its true perspective. Gerson was a major figure standing in the crossfire of a very difficult period in the Church. His writings were used by Luther and Melancthon and



he is mentioned ten times in the Lutheran Confessions.<sup>56</sup> Yet until recently he has been little known. This investigation has been an attempt to illuminate the two great lines of his theology and to demonstrate their inner relationship.

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<sup>56</sup>Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche (3. verbesserte Auflage; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), Augsburgische Konfession, XXVI, par. 13, p. 102, l. 27-p. 103, l. 3; XXVI, par. 16, p. 103, ll. 15-18; XXVII, par. 60, p. 118, ll. 38-p. 119, l. 12; Apologie der Konfession, XV, par. 28, p. 302, ll. 49-55; XV, par. 34, p. 304, ll. 1-10 (German version); XXIII, par. 20 p. 337, ll. 34-36; XXVII, par. 16, p. 382, ll. 26-29; XXVIII, par. 36, p. 388, ll. 31-42; Schmalkaldische Artikel, "Preface," par. 6, p. 410, ll. 41-46; Grosser Katechismus, "Taufe," par. 50, p. 701, ll. 12-20. The tenor of several of these confessional references is that Gerson was a very good man who tried to help troubled consciences by speaking of various grades and latitudes of precepts, but who could never hit upon a specific grade at which he could offer assurance of salvation and peace to the heart.



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