

MARK S. BURROWS

Jean Gerson and  
de Consolatione Theologiae  
(1418)

*Beiträge zur  
historischen Theologie*  
78

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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HERAUSGEGEBEN VON JOHANNES WALLMANN

78

Jean Gerson and  
*De Consolatione Theologiae*  
(1418)

The Consolation of a Biblical and  
Reforming Theology for a Disordered Age

by

Mark Stephen Burrows



J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen

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For Liz, Emma Clare, and one yet unnamed

“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.”

*T. S. Eliot*, from “Little Gidding”



## Preface

In a general study of medieval philosophy Etienne Gilson observed that »Gerson did not propose a system but a remedy for the evil which the clash of systems was for the Church. This remedy, he believed he would find not in any philosophy whatever, but in a certain notion of theology.«<sup>1</sup> This attempt to conceive of theology as a »remedy« to address the ills of society is an apt description of Gerson's diverse writings, early and late: whether as chancellor of the University of Paris or as teacher of children at the Celestine priory in Lyon, in his academic sermons and lectures as in his occasional letters, Jean Gerson (1363–1429) addressed himself consistently to the concrete problems – ecclesiastical, theological, pastoral, pedagogical – facing the individual within the social matrices of church and society. He was, to borrow the descriptive expression of recent vintage, a »contextual« theologian, one concerned not only with the precise arguments of scholastic theology but with the practice of professional ministry and the exercise of the Christian life among those he referred to without disparagement as »the simple.«

As a consequence of this conviction, his vision of reform – both of the human person, or *viator*, and of society – had little to do with perfected systems of scholastic theology. Rather, he focused upon the »edifying« tasks of theology, and later in his life devoted increasing attention to what he called the »consolation of theology,« the »remedy« needed in the face of the despair and disorder of the age. This was, after all, the period of rising civil strife in France, the lingering unrest and conflict of the Hundred Years' War, the confusion of papal schism and the emergence of reform councils, the looming threat of the Wyclifite heresy in its migration to Bohemia, and vexing frustrations resulting from the school debates at Paris. This sense of confusion and frustration dominates the opening elegy (I m. 1) of his *De consolatione theologiae* (1418), written at the close of the Council of Constance, in which he surveys the political affairs of the day:

Often had I been sent to foreign shores;  
Returning now, I see my homeland's walls.  
Hail, sweet land of my birth, O favored France!

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<sup>1</sup> Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1955), p. 529.

Famed Paris, noble guardian of our land.  
 Alas! What is this that I see? A goddess, raging  
 In cruel civil strife, filling all with gore.  
 In their midst a spirit of upheaval roams;  
 They slay themselves in turn with their own swords. . . .  
 Cleric, soldier, citizen alike: jailed without law;  
 All are strangled, like sheep by a maddened mob. . . .  
 Lucky stranger, you [who] sojourn elsewhere;  
 Such great evils are not now before your eyes. . . .<sup>2</sup>

In such an unstable climate Gerson interpreted the theological »remedy« not solely as an intellectual matter, but as the motor for a re-forming of the social order. Against the force of such public turmoil, Gerson worked as a conservative reformer to restore the church to the dignity which had been obscured or disfigured in his day. Thus it is that Gerson closes his *De consolatione theologiae* with a fervent cry for God's peace, praying that the *pax Dei* which »passes all understanding«<sup>3</sup> might keep »our hearts and minds in the love of God and in the patience of Christ [*corda et intelligentias nostras custodiat in charitate Dei et patientia Christi*].«<sup>4</sup> Beginning this text with a mournful admission of the chaos which had disrupted public life, Gerson closes it with this fervent prayer for peace. The gloss he adds to this Pauline text to emphasize the *patientia Christi* illustrates, as if in direct opposition to the »apocalyptic patience« advocated by John Hus,<sup>5</sup> the conservatism which dominates his later writings.

Indeed, it is this conservatism which might well characterize the »certain notion of [Gerson's] theology,« to recall Gilson's phrase, establishing the foundation from which he addresses himself as theologian-cum-pastor to the various issues and problems facing the church. His unswerving commitment to the *virtus patientiae* establishes the fundamental logic governing the exercise of his pastoral office: his formal treatises, poems, letters, and sermons of the early

<sup>2</sup> See Jean Gerson, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 4, *L'œuvre poétique*, ed. P. Glorieux (Paris, 1962), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> The biblical reference is to Phil. 4.7: »Fiat ita precor, et pax Dei, quae exuperat omnem sensum, corda et intelligentias nostras custodiat. . . .«; see *De consolatione theologiae*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 9: *L'œuvre doctrinale*, ed. P. Glorieux (Paris, 1973), p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> Gerson introduces this discussion of »the patience of Christ« through an intriguing cross reference to Rom. 15.4, with which he had also opened this treatise: »Quaecumque enim scripta sunt ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt; ut *per patientiam* et consolationem scripturarum, spem habeamus.« He also speaks of God as the »father of mercy and all consolation,« the one from whom we receive *virtus patientiae*, the »virtue of patience.« On Gerson's use of Rom. 15.4, and the textual precedent for this in a treatise of identical name written by Johannes of Dambach, see below, p. 41, and nn. 26, 27.

<sup>5</sup> The letters which Hus wrote during the final month of his imprisonment often speak of patience, the patience which those assaulted by »Antichrist and his ministers« must manifest in response to their suffering; on this point, see Hus, »Letters,« in *John Hus at the Council of Constance*, trans. and intro. Matthew Spinka (New York, 1965), pp. 271, 273, 279.

conciliar period (ca. 1409–1418) demonstrate his patient and moderating efforts on behalf of *reformatio in capite et membris*.<sup>6</sup> It is as »patient reformer« and conservative churchman that we confront in the mature Gerson the man later known not only as *doctor consolatorius* but as *doctor christianissimus*. It is in the *De consolatione theologiae* that we see the distinctive form, when compared with his earlier writings, which his theology took at this late juncture of his career.

The initial impetus for this study grew out of my reading of Gerson's later, post-Parisian writings (i.e., 1415–1429). It was with surprise that I discovered that recent Gerson studies devote relatively little attention to this period of his career. My surprise grew in realizing that most of these studies, despite Gerson's legacy as *doctor consolatorius*, ignore the treatise in which he addressed himself to this theme in sustained fashion. This literature also tends to focus upon the narrowly academic, mystical, or controversial writings, in general, and those emerging from his earlier university career, more specifically, and thus overlooks treatises such as this which fit none of these neat categories. Such a restricted focus has allowed for interpretations of his works as a consistent theological »system,« an irony not lost on those familiar with Gerson's vigorous criticism of rigid loyalties among academic theologians to schools or systems. As a consequence, Gerson's œuvre has often been read without an attentiveness to the specific maladies of the day which shaped and re-shaped the varying remedies he offered, to carry forth Gilson's apt description. In a word, the development in Gerson's thought has been largely ignored in this literature.

My greatest surprise, however, came in realizing that the various remedies which Gerson offers in *De consolatione theologiae* articulate theological and pastoral themes either altogether absent or not yet fully developed in his earlier writings, an observation which eventually led me to recognize a distinctive theological shift in his thought during the period of his sojourn in Constance (1415–1418). Themes in this treatise depart in significant ways from the earlier university writings, including, for example, a defense of the cloistered life as the most effective means of church reform; the suggestion that a pious lay person embodied the »spirit of catholic judgment« more faithfully than an erudite but immoral academic theologian; and the avoidance of the soteriological language of *facientibus quod in se est* in favor of a mystical doctrine of justification based upon Heb. 11.6b. These departures from earlier theological positions were more than incidental, suggesting that the shape of Gerson's later theology had developed in decisive directions. And, as I came to realize in working with materials emerging from the ecclesiastical controversies of the Constance period, the »evil« confronting Gerson was not so

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<sup>6</sup> This phrase is from the reform decree »Sacrosancta« which emerged at the Council of Constance, dated March 30, 1415; see Giovanni Domenico Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Paris, 1900), 27: 585.



much a matter of school debate, a clash in the academic arena of competing theological systems, but the conflicts emerging from the Hussite controversy – many of which were anchored at their deepest stratum in exegetical disputes. With this realization in mind I undertook the present study of the later Gerson, focused as a close and critical reading of the treatise he apparently presumed in Boethian style to be his final literary effort: viz., *De consolatione theologiae*.

The original form of this study was the result of my doctoral studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, appearing first as a dissertation bearing the same title.<sup>7</sup> I am glad to recognize here the tangible support I received in the midst of this research which allowed me to devote my full energies to this project: first, my selection as recipient of a National Graduate Fellowship, subsequently renamed the Jacob Javits Graduate Fellowship (1986–1988); and, second, a leave of absence from Wesley Theological Seminary during my first year as a member of its faculty to complete this dissertation. In addition to such institutional support, thanks are due above all to the readers of that early draft who comprised my dissertation committee: E. Jane Dempsey Douglass, Edward A. Dowey, Jr., and Karlfried Froehlich. Each of these readers perused the manuscript with care and offered numerous critical suggestions which have undoubtedly strengthened this study in its now significantly revised form. To all of these generous and critical readers I remain grateful.

Other historians have offered encouragement and assistance of various sorts as this study progressed. Clyde Lee Miller (SUNY, Stony Brook) took an early interest in my project, as we found ourselves both working on the same text. Prof. Miller generously shared with me his own work as translator of an edition of this treatise which is still in progress. Conversations with him during the past several years as I advanced with my own work on this text and the wider Gerson oeuvre have clarified my own reading of Gerson at several points, both textual and thematic. My own translations of the poetic material in particular rely upon his more seasoned linguistic instincts. What began as a collaboration on this treatise blossomed into a friendship of professional as well as personal dimensions, for which I am appreciative. I have also benefitted from the interest which Louis Pascoe, SJ (Fordham University) and Christoph Burger (Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen) have expressed in this project. I would also like to thank all those who listened with patience and responded to portions of this research delivered in papers at various conferences: the American Society of Church History meeting (Cincinnati, OH; December, 1988), the Villanova Patristic, Mediaeval, and Renaissance Studies Conference (Philadelphia, PA; September, 1989), and the Symposium on the History of Biblical Interpretation (Princeton, NJ; May, 1990). Finally, I am grateful to the

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<sup>7</sup> See *Jean Gerson and ›De Consolatione Theologiae‹: The Consolation of a Biblical and Reforming Theology for a Disordered Age* (Princeton Theological Seminary dissertation, 1988; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms Incorporated, 1988, no. 8818496).

Committee on Research of the American Society of Church History for recently awarding an essay presenting the broad conclusions of this research the »Sidney E. Mead Prize.«<sup>8</sup>

It is a great pleasure, both professionally and personally, to acknowledge here my profound appreciation for my Doktorvater and colleague, Karlfried Froehlich. He it is who encouraged my early interest in Gerson, who introduced me to the complexities of historical research generally and medieval studies more specifically, and who has always provided the rare combination of intellectual insight and scholarly precision by which I shall always measure – with humility and respect – my own efforts. Beyond such formalities, he has shared with me a generous measure of his restless curiosity and contagious joy in engaging in the tasks of historical research. As scholar and teacher he has embodied Gerson's characterization of the *theologus* as »a good man, learned in sacred scripture.« Yes, this, and much more!

Beyond these notes of thanks for those whose encouragement and advice have helped to shape this study in its present form, I am pleased to express my thanks to Prof. Johannes Wallmann who accepted this study for inclusion in the series, »Beiträge zur historischen Theologie.« Several persons have assisted in differing capacities with the technicalities always involved in such projects: Mr. Ulrich Gaebler and Ms. Ilse König of J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), who coordinated the technical handling of the manuscript; my father, Dr. Robert Burrows, who read the manuscript in an early draft and suggested numerous stylistic improvements; Dr. Charles Tidball (George Washington University, Washington, DC), whose insight into the mysteries of electronic technologies helped to translate a file generated by an American computer into a format legible by its European sibling; and, finally, Mr. Jeff Noyes Aamot, who provided diligent and careful assistance in proofreading the manuscript and in preparing the indices for this volume.

One final word of gratitude must be made for the one whose presence has been real if not also substantial throughout the germination and growth of this study, my wife Liz. During the decade in which we have shared common life and labors, she has created the atmosphere in which scholarly work has been not only sustainable but enjoyable. The *virtus patientiae* of which Gerson speaks at the close of *De consolatione theologiae* and which she embodies is, after all, a divine gift of domestic proportions! And, as the first chapters of this research took shape and form, her own labor brought Emma Clare, our first daughter, into the world to share our life and win her father's affection. For all of this, and with sentiments exceeding words, I reserve my deepest gratitude for her.

All Saints' Day, 1990 Washington, DC

Mark S. Burrows

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<sup>8</sup> See »Jean Gerson after Constance: *Via media et regia* as a Revision of the Ockhamist Covenant,« *Church History* 59/4 (December, 1990); pp. 467–81.



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## Abbreviations

- CCSL Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina. Turnhold: Brepols, 1954 ff.
- CUP Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis. Edited by E. Chatelain and H. Denifle. 4 vols. Paris: Delalain, 1889–1897.
- DSAM Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique. Edited by M. Viller, F. Cavaller, J. de Guibert, et al. Paris: Beauchesne, 1932 ff.
- Du Pin Joannis Gersonii. Opera omnia. Edited by Louis Ellies du Pin. 4 vols. Antwerp: Petrus de Hondt, 1706.
- G Jean Gerson. Œuvres complètes. Edited by Palémon Glorieux. 10 vols. Paris: Desclée et Cie, 1960–1973.
- PG Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graeca. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 161 vols. Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866–1886.
- PL Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1844–1890.
- RGG Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft. 3rd edition. Edited by Kurt Galling, with Hans Frhr. v. Campenhausen, Erich Dinkler, Gerhard Gloege, and Knud Løgstrup. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1957.
- WA D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe. 72 vols. Weimar: Hermann Böhlau und Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger (Weimar edition), 1883 ff.

## Chapter I

### Introduction

Few historical periods have provoked as much debate and elicited such divergence of interpretation as the later Middle Ages. These centuries have acquired in the hands of historians a largely derivative character, having been frequently and persistently studied in terms of what they either succeeded or anticipated: the vantage point of an earlier tradition of Roman Catholic historiography has portrayed this era as a decline from the crest of the high Middle Ages, a decadent interlude between the height of papal influence during the thirteenth century and the reclaiming of that power in the Catholic reform of the sixteenth, while older Protestant histories have often viewed it with either benign neglect or more aggressive contempt as little more than the prelude if not indeed the cause itself of the true apogee in the church's history. In both cases confessional interests, bolstered by the too facile approach of historical retrospect, have rendered this an interim period, either criticizing or dismissing it for what it was not, rather than understanding it for what it was. These days of rancor and parochialism are, fortunately, largely a memory now that a more ecumenically sensitive spirit seems to prevail among ecclesiastical historians, but the easing of the pressure exerted by confessionally inspired histories in general has not yet ushered in a consensus of interpretation with regard to the turbulent though highly creative period of the later Middle Ages. Thus, in a recent study of this period one historian has observed that »in the historiography of the later medieval church complexity now reigns as king.«<sup>1</sup> This conclusion betrays his generosity of perspective. A less involved bystander to the recent terminological debates among historians of this period might no longer detect in this interpretive »complexity« the vitriol of a former age, but confusion and disagreement still dominate the scene. Indeed, one witness to this spectacle has designated one of the crucial intellectual developments of this period, the still widely disputed and complex phenomenon of nominalism, as »evanescent« because of the surging controversy it has provoked among recent interpreters,<sup>2</sup> while another characterizes »the so-called

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1979), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness. Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (London, 1970), I: 59.



nominalistic movement« less cautiously as »a tangled and embattled subject.«<sup>3</sup>

It is within the horizon of this »tangled and embattled subject« – viz. the broad trajectory of late-medieval nominalist theology – that the present study of Jean Gerson is to be situated. Of course to say this is to immerse this work at the outset into an arena of unsettled and perhaps irresolvable controversy; for this reason an explanatory word on terminology and the approach here embraced toward nominalism is in order. During the past several decades the study of nominalism has devoted increased attention to the theological concerns of scholars associated with the *via moderna*; this has been a development led earlier in this century by Paul Vignaux and, more recently, Heiko Oberman and his students. According to this approach, nominalism has been identified quite closely with the theological contribution of the Venerable Inceptor, William of Ockham, and later heirs to his thought. Following this lead, nominalism and »Ockhamism« come to be used interchangeably, such that a reference to the former points to the trajectory of scholars loyal to certain fundamental tenets of Ockham's »modern« theology; one might speak more accurately in this regard of an »Ockhamist nominalism« or simply »Ockhamism,« principally because this perspective represents a coherent intellectual tradition – albeit one which has been characterized as »the inner core« or »the main stream« of nominalism more generally<sup>4</sup> – among theologians of the *via moderna*. Our study of Gerson utilizes this approach as a working definition, at least as a starting point since Gerson has been persistently and persuasively identified in the recent literature as belonging to this »moderate nominalist« school.<sup>5</sup> Yet a closer examination of the later

<sup>3</sup> Charles T. Davis, »Ockham and the Zeitgeist,« *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus, Heiko Oberman (Leiden, 1974), p. 59; my emphasis, though this admission already recognizes the complex discussion surrounding this terminology.

<sup>4</sup> See here Heiko Oberman, »Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism with Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance,« *Harvard Theological Review* 53 (1960), pp. 49, 55, 56. On the question of terminology and the larger matter of recent historiography on nominalism, see also William Courtenay, »Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion,« in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, pp. 32–35. In the same study Courtenay concludes that »Ockhamism« is »the least undesirable term« to describe the theological trajectory from Ockham through Biel; see *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> This is above all due to the influence of Oberman's work; see his early essay, »Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism« in which he articulates a model of four basic »threads of tradition« or »schools« of nominalism, a thesis later expanded in his *The Harvest of Medieval Theology. Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA, 1963). Courtenay surveys the recent historiography of nominalism in his »Nominalism and Late Medieval Thought: A Bibliographical Essay,« *Theological Studies* 33 (1972), pp. 716–34, and his later essay, »Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion,« as well as a subsequent updated study, »Late Medieval Nominalism Revisited: 1972–1982,« *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983), pp. 159–64. More recently, Michael Shank has abandoned the use of the

writings of the Parisian chancellor now calls for a revision of this view: we now see that the mature Gerson moved away from this »school« – perhaps better described as a late-scholastic theological tradition – abandoning after the Council of Constance this moderate (i. e., Ockhamist) nominalism in favor of themes associated with Scotist theology.<sup>6</sup> This study hence does not diminish but actually magnifies the problem of terminology by identifying in Gerson's post-conciliar thought a distinct and fundamental shift of theological perspective. Thus, rather than abandoning »nominalism« as a term appropriately descriptive for this late-scholastic theological tradition, this study offers a revisionist perspective to earlier work on one of the key figures occupying the mid-point of the supposed trajectory of Ockhamist theologians. That is, we find in the later Gerson a decisive reshaping of the covenantal basis of this scholastic tradition, a shift which accentuates the complex and fluid spectrum of »nominalist« theological traditions, particularly that ascribed to the self-designated heirs to the Venerable Inceptor (Ockhamists) among whom Gerson has often been portrayed. It is within the scope of this »embattled« subject, then, that this study must be placed, and our thesis regarding Gerson's theological development will inevitably further complicate the existing »tangle.«

One further word regarding late-medieval historiography – that subject in which complexity still reigns – is in order. The period of Gerson's life, the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, was an era marked by intense theological debate, new and variegated expressions of public and private piety, and attendant forms of social, political, and ecclesiastical unrest. It is a period which has been described by one school of historians as a time of decline, a »waning« or »dissolution« of a supposed synthesis or highpoint of medieval

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term »nominalism« altogether, arguing that »given the inevitable ambiguities of these terms in current historiography, it has seemed preferable to describe the positions of individual thinkers rather than to give them labels that only spread confusion«; see his »*Unless You Believe, You Shall Not Understand*«: *Logic, University, and Society in Late Medieval Vienna* (Princeton, 1988), p. xiii.

<sup>6</sup> In his early study »Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism,« Oberman identifies as one of the nominalist »schools« what he called the »Parisian syncretistic school« of John of Ripa and Peter of Candia; see *ibid.*, pp. 54–55. It is worth noting that Oberman here disavows Gerson's association with this »school« – i. e., John of Ripa and Peter of Candia – citing his criticism of the Scotists as *formalizantes* who occupied themselves in »idle curiosity« with questions surpassing the use of reason. This point certainly holds true for the early Gerson, including his strident university lectures *Contra curiositatem studentium* (see Vol. 3 *L'œuvre magistrale* (Paris, 1962), pp. 224–49; all further references to Gerson's works, unless otherwise noted, are cited from this edition (*Œuvres complètes*, edited by Palémon Glorieux [Paris, 1960–1973]) as »G« followed by volume and page numbers). But our research on the later Gerson would suggest that Gerson's theological perspective after Constance had embraced central aspects of Scotism; see below, Ch. 5.

thought, characterized by »extreme doctrinal confusion.«<sup>7</sup> To conclude this, however, is to misread the intellectual creativity and pastoral sensitivity of university masters such as Gerson, deliberately eclectic theologians in whose works we find a contribution aptly described as a »harvest« of earlier theological themes, to borrow Oberman's revisionist metaphor.<sup>8</sup> Yet the »harvest« we find in the later Gerson, and this against the grain of historians who have concentrated on the earlier university writings, reverses the emphases which historians have traditionally identified in his earlier »university« writings: thus, for example, we find the later Gerson underscoring the »sufficiency« of scripture as the norm for doctrine and life, and advocating a decidedly anti-Pelagian understanding of justification in the Scotist tradition. More will be said about this reversal in subsequent chapters. Let it suffice at the outset to suggest that this development raises one of two questions: either we must now reconsider the question of the »catholicity« of nominalism which Oberman advanced at the close of *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, or we must

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<sup>7</sup> See Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages. A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Garden City, NY, 1954), and Gordon Leff, *The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook. An Essay on Intellectual and Spiritual Change in the Fourteenth Century* (New York, 1976). Huizinga concludes his study by observing that »the soul of Western Christendom itself was outgrowing medieval forms and modes of thought that had become shackles. The Middle Ages had always lived in the shadow of Antiquity, always handled its treasures, or what they had of them, interpreting it according to truly medieval principles: scholastic theology and chivalry, asceticism and courtesy. Now, by an inward ripening, the mind, after having been so long conversant with the forms of Antiquity, began to grasp its spirit. . . . Europe, after having lived in the shadow of Antiquity, lived in its sunshine once more.« *Waning*, p. 335. Leff takes a decidedly different approach, focusing not on the recovery of pagan antiquity but on a renewed vision of the primitive church: »What all these [late-medieval] thinkers, and, in an indirect way, the popular movements that echo many of their emphases, have in common is a reinterpretation of the source and the nature of spiritual power away from its institutional forms to conformity with Christ's life and teachings. In almost every case it meant the exclusion of the hierarchy from the dialogue between the individual believer and Christ, with his word, not the sacramental power of the church, as mediator. It made for a new spirituality which, whether it took an apocalyptic or a directly antisacerdotal form, was impelled by the same ideal of a return to an archetypal church.« *Dissolution*, p. 144. Finally, Etienne Gilson concludes his *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1955) with a chapter entitled »Journey's End,« in which he laments the »tired« and »sceptical disintegration« of theological thought, a period of increasing decadence in which »the doctrines accumulated by the successive masters [and particularly those of the thirteenth century], backed by their Orders, exploited by their schools and continually distorted in the heat of endless controversies, finally created what cannot be described otherwise than an extreme doctrinal confusion.« *Ibid.*, p. 528.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Oberman, *Harvest*. In stark contrast to Gilson's evaluation, Oberman sees in this »harvest« »not the barren wastelands of sterile debates that we had been led to expect by traditional late medieval scholarship, but a richness of deep pastoral and searching theological concern,« a conclusion which leads him to deny speaking of nominalism as a »disintegration of late medieval thought.« See *ibid.*, pp. 5, 423 ff.

extricate Gerson from the supposed »nominalist« trajectory leading from Ockham to Biel. Embracing the former will raise afresh the complex question of how the fifteenth century must be seen as anticipating the later age of Reformation, while endorsing the latter will cause us to look again at the question of Gerson's influence and legacy – and first of all during the *fifteenth* century. In either event this study will add another clarifying voice to our grasp of the later Middle Ages, the period of uncertainty and innovation which seems to us to stand so clearly »zwischen den Zeiten« but which viewed itself as the »modern« age facing overwhelming ecclesiastical and political obstacles. It is at the midpoint of this turbulent period – marked at its beginning by the Avignon »captivity« of the papacy, at its median by the »Great Schism« of the papacy, and in its final stages by the extravagancies of the Renaissance popes – that we must situate this study of Jean Gerson, who as *doctor christianissimus* dominated the period which has been called »le siècle de Gerson.«<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, the complexity which characterizes late-medieval historiography has not left Gerson research unaffected. This is perhaps even inevitable given his authoritative role at the very heart of the controversies that divided the church during his lifetime. Gerson was anything but a spectator. Indeed, his efforts as reform-minded university chancellor and conciliarist during this turbulent period kept him in the mainstream of European affairs, civil and ecclesiastical, prompting modern commentators of this era to characterize him variously as »a mirror of his times« or a »reservoir« of late-medieval thought.<sup>10</sup> But what can this mean given the volatile tenor of his age? What does one finally perceive within a »mirror« which must reflect such shifting images, and how does his thought gather together the complex legacy – in »waning« or in »harvest«? – of the ages he inherited? In a word, what exactly was Gerson's reform, theological and ecclesiastical? Complexity reigns here, too, upon the throne, not only in terms of the unsettled historiography but in the equally unsettled history itself. How, then, are we to make sense of this pivotal figure who sought to »re-form« the fragmented church of his day? In approaching this task historians have reached no consensus, as we might well expect, assessing the character of his work as churchman and reformer from divergent perspectives. Yet here complexity appears to be the consequence in large measure of Gerson's own ambivalence, and of the shifting contours of his admittedly widely eclectic thought. On the

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<sup>9</sup> See E. Delaruelle et al., *L'Eglise au temps du Grand Schisme et de la crise conciliaire*, Vol. XIV/2, *Histoire de l'église depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours*, ed. A. Fliche, V. Martin (Paris, 1964), pp. 837 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Delaruelle, *L'Eglise*, p. 837 and Johann Stelzenberger, *Die Mystik des Johannes Gerson* (Breslau, 1928), p. 102, respectively.

one hand, it is easy enough to point to his »conservatism«<sup>11</sup> as the organizing principle of a vigorous reactionary, a counter-measure not only against abusive »novelties« within the theological faculty at Paris but against what he considered the arrogant and ultimately destructive reform of the Hussite circle; in this sense reform could mean little more than defense of the threatened status quo. But this would be to underestimate the constructive depth of Gerson's program of reform, and finally to distort the theologically nuanced if also eclectic foundation he laid in this effort. Thus we must also, on the other hand, account for the progressive dimensions of Gerson's thought, weighing these finally on the other side of the interpretive balance: Gerson advanced his notion of reform not in order to ossify the church in the present or return it to some golden age of a sentimentalized past, but in order to lead it forward toward its goal in *Deum*. In this sense a striking progressivism emerges in his vision of reform, a characteristic attributable above all to the Dionysian influence upon his theology and ecclesiology as we shall see.<sup>12</sup> His conservatism, in other words, meant to preserve the outward form of the church's integrity in the midst of its progress toward reform, and in this we discern the constructive effects of his convictions as a churchman and indeed as a »pastoral theologian.«<sup>13</sup> His reform in the first instance was a matter not of control, as we

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<sup>11</sup> On this point see Wolfgang Hübener, »Der theologisch-philosophische Konservatismus des Jean Gerson,« *Antiqui und Moderni. Traditionsbewußtsein und Fortschrittsbewußtsein im späten Mittelalter*, ed. A. Zimmerman, G. Vuillemin-Diem (Berlin, 1974), pp. 171–200. Hübener interprets the censure by the Paris theological faculty of Johannes de Montesono (July, 1387), in which Gerson as a young *cursor biblicus* participated *motu proprio* and later described (1400) in a letter as *rationalibilter et catholice facta*, as the »Schlüssel-erlebnis« by which we might understand his lifelong conservatism. Furthermore, he rightly emphasizes the importance of Gerson's reliance upon Augustine's claim, in *De civitate dei* (X.23), that »liberis enim verbis loquuntur philosophi, nec in rebus ad intelligendum difficillimis offensionem religiosarum aurium pertimescunt. Nobis autem ad certam regulam loqui fas est...« CCSL 47:297. What he does not realize, however, is the centrality which this theme came to play in Gerson's *De consolatione theologiae* (1418); see below, Ch. 5, especially section B.1. Otherwise, however, his discussion of Gerson's »conservatism« is excellent, surveying not only theological themes in his thought but the practical measures he advocated or implemented as University chancellor at Paris. It is within this broader program, based on what Hübener calls his »konkordistischer Grundtendenz« applied in the hortatory voice, that we must understand his strident criticism of the divisive tendencies and idle speculation or »vain curiosity« of scholastic theology. »Der . . . Konservatismus,« pp. 172 ff., and pp. 197–200. Finally, see also Christoph Burger, *Aedificatio, Fructus, Utilitas. Johannes Gerson als Professor der Theologie und Kanzler der Universität Paris* (Tübingen, 1986), pp. 110–24.

<sup>12</sup> See below, Ch. 6. A. 1.

<sup>13</sup> This is a conclusion shared among Gerson scholars, though the conclusion is perhaps most eloquently phrased by Delaruelle. In his study of the period of the schism and conciliar crisis, he concludes in almost eulogistic style that »Gerson est – peut-être essentiellement – un pasteur. Il n'a pas entendu faire de la société qu'il décrit un tableau désintéressé; il diagnostique les maux de son temps; il critique ou condamne, il propose les remèdes et



shall later argue in greater detail, but of conversion, of a progressive reforming of the church in her pilgrimage *ad Deum*.

To speak of Gerson as reformer within a church badly deformed by schism and dissent, therefore, requires something more than the metaphors of mirrors and harvests: this task demands that we delineate the conservative and progressive dimensions of Gerson's program of reform, and that we interpret the theological and ecclesiological foundations of his thought within this tension. In this sense it is possible to discern in his writings »a fully unified pattern of reform,«<sup>14</sup> particularly in terms of how individual and social dimensions coalesce in his thought, but this unity of purpose must account for his deeper ambivalence of method. The contribution of this study, therefore, will not lie in considering once again the question of »decline« or »harvest,« this time *vis-à-vis* Gerson, nor in seeking to discern the outward unity of his thought; rather, our interest here is to explore the deliberate tension of progressive and conservative tendencies by which he structures his thought – both ecclesiological and theological – at every point. This ambivalence shapes the pastoral moorings upon which he constructs his »edifying« theology and his »ordered« ecclesiology, both in order to guide *ecclesia militans* upon its pilgrimage, or *regressus*, toward God. And, as we shall subsequently suggest, it might well be this decisive tension rather than either more specific theological emphases or his broadly acknowledged eclecticism that should discourage any simple identification of Gerson with a »school« label. He is, of course, a syncretistic theologian, and the breadth of his early thought does place him within the orbit of what has been called the »pastoral nominalism« of this age.<sup>15</sup>

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embrasse d'un large regard toute l'Eglise de ces années décisives. Il est souvent dans cet examen étonnamment moderne; dans le domaine de la religion populaire il fait date par ses analyses et par ses initiatives. « *L'Eglise*, p. 838. One wonders, of course, exactly what he means by »modern,« though this is a question better explored in another context.

<sup>14</sup> This is the conclusion which Steven Ozment reached in a short essay, »The University and the Church. Patterns of Reform in Jean Gerson,« *Mediaevalia et Humanistica. Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, ed. P. M. Clogan, n. s. 1 (Cleveland, 1970), p. 121. He concludes in this study that the unity within Gerson's distinctive »pattern« of reform has to do with the coalescence of ecclesiology and anthropology, such that the *via mystica* and *via concilii* are but two expressions of the same spirit-led reform.

<sup>15</sup> For a more precise discussion of this phrase, see E. Jane D. Douglass, *Justification in Late Medieval Preaching. A Study of John Geiler of Kaisersberg* (Leiden, 1966), p. 205. Douglass identifies Geiler with this characterization, though the parallels to Gerson are quite suggestive since Geiler considered the *doctor consolatorius* as »the most important single authority . . . on the spiritual life« (*ibid.*, p. 37). Furthermore, Herbert Kraume has pointed to the links between Gerson and Geiler in his recent study *Die Gerson-Übersetzungen Geilers von Kaisersberg. Studien zur deutschsprachigen Gerson-Rezeption* (München, 1980). He builds upon this general thesis of dependence, exploring Geiler's use of German translations of select homiletical and pastoral treatises of Gerson's, and thus also aligns the two within a tradition of fifteenth-century nominalism. Finally, Oberman has also argued that Johannes Altenstaig's *Vocabularius theologie* (Hagenau, 1517), which he calls »essentially an inventory

As a general term this characterization adequately locates Gerson in the late-medieval theological spectrum. But the breadth of this term, on the one hand, and the peculiar soteriological development of his later thought, on the other, warn against using such labels without due caution. Indeed, it appears that Gerson has reconstructed his theology in fundamental ways after Constance: at this juncture we find him orienting his soteriology along a different axis altogether, one which abandons the Ockhamist approach to justification by blending elements of the Scotist view of predestination with an anthropology redolent of an extreme Augustinian position.<sup>16</sup> And, because this theme is

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of the nominalist theological vocabulary,« links Gerson and Biel as the preeminent authorities in the supposed »school« of Ockhamists within the broader tradition of fifteenth-century nominalism. See his early study, »Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism,« pp. 49 ff., and *idem*, »Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Mysticism,« *Church History* 30 (1961), p. 280, n. 25. These theses are certainly quite fruitful in suggesting how later theologians perceived Gerson's legacy within a nominalist tradition. And, of course, it is quite true that the general outline of Gerson's early thought supports an alignment which places him within the »main current« of nominalism, to recall the metaphor which emerges in Oberman's *Harvest*; from this vantage point Gerson does seem to represent the rough mid-point of the nominalist trajectory from Ockham to Biel. But for reasons we shall subsequently explore, it is not entirely accurate to interpret Gerson's thought as a whole with this label, since his later writings show a marked movement away from this position. In this sense we would label Gerson's theology, particularly in its later development, as pastoral without being »nominalist« in any strict sense, not only because the chancellor's theological preferences blurred any meaningful adherence to the logical and epistemological bases of that philosophical tradition (cf. here Hübener, pp. 196–200; more recently, Courtenay has argued, with regard to the English scene, that all such »schools« largely disappeared during the later fourteenth century due to what he has called »the revolutionary innovations in philosophical and theological methods«; see his *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth Century England* [Princeton, 1987], pp. 190–92, 198 ff., 216–17), but more importantly because the shape of his mature soteriology distanced him altogether from the so-called Ockhamist »school« within that broader tradition. We use the term »nominalism,« in other words, in guarded fashion following the usage established by Oberman and others, a perspective which as Ozment has noted »deals with nominalism almost exclusively from its theological side, in terms of its soteriology«; see his »Mysticism, Nominalism, and Dissent,« in *The Pursuit of Holiness*, p. 69. In other words, Gerson's thought in its later form no longer fits the broader pattern of this tradition, considered in its theological shape.

<sup>16</sup> The question of the compatibility of Scotism and nominalism considered as a *theological* tradition has not been resolved without debate. The principal disagreement has been well expressed in the position first advanced by Werner Dettloff, who perceived a close connection between Scotism and nominalism, grounded above all in the *acceptatio* doctrine; see his *Die Entwicklung der Akzeptations- und Verdienstlehre von Duns Scotus bis Luther mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Franziskanertheologen* (Münster i. W., 1963). Against this position Oberman has more recently argued that »the differences between nominalistic and scotistic traditions in the later middle ages should not be minimized«; he disputes Dettloff's basic approach above all by pointing to the pivotal role of *predestinatio*, the doctrine which, as he argues, determines the *context* of the doctrine of justification. Cf. »*Iustitia Christi* and *Iustitia Dei*: Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification,« *Harvard Theological Review* 59 (1966), p. 5. This is finally a more sufficient and convincing

embedded within the Ockhamist concept of covenant, which has been recently designated as the key to this theological »system,«<sup>17</sup> we cannot underestimate the significance of this shift as an index of broader and deeper theological convictions. As we shall subsequently suggest, this reorientation appears to reflect not merely the outer structure of a theological change of mind, but rather a foundational shift of perspective shaped by pastoral convictions as well as specific polemic concerns emerging from his anti-Hussite vision of reform. All of this, at this introductory juncture, stands merely as a general orientation to the complexity facing us in this study, and as an early announcement that Gerson research has not yet finished its work; these are themes that we can only sketch in barest detail at this early point, however, promising a more complete analysis as this study progresses.

A superficial review of the recent flurry of respectable Gerson studies might suggest that enough has been said to grasp the nuanced character of his complex and varied theological contribution, or at least to discern the basic outline of his thought and work. Alongside André Combes's impressive series of studies on Gerson's mysticism, which represent the energies of an entire career devoted to his thought, and to which we shall return later in this chapter, four recent studies bear particular mention in providing an orientation to the state of research. The first three of these, works by Steven Ozment, Louis Pascoe, and Christoph Burger, focus primarily upon the early, pre-conciliar writings of the chancellor, and deal with Gerson's anthropology in terms of his mystical writings, his ecclesiology, and his program of theological and ecclesiastical reform, respectively; the final and most recent contribution of Catherine Brown treats Gerson's pastoral efforts in a more comprehensive sense, though with particular attention given to his vernacular sermons. None of these, in other words, devotes sustained attention to the later Gerson, and none suggests that Gerson's thought demonstrates the kind of development we have alluded to earlier. Each testifies to the complex character of Gerson's work, but the suspicion nonetheless remains that we have not yet grasped this dominating theologian and churchman in the *full* breadth and nuance of his thought.

The first of these, Steven Ozment's *Homo Spiritualis. A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson and Martin Luther (1509–16) in the Context of their Theological Thought* (Leiden, 1969), devotes a major section to the analysis of Gerson's »anthropology.« Yet the thematic and textual focus of this analysis falls primarily upon Gerson's early writings on mystical theology;<sup>18</sup> as such, Ozment's »comparative« study does serve to update

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argument. And, as our study of Gerson suggests, this focus upon predestination enables us to identify the later Gerson's unexpected preference for the »Scotistic« rather than »nominalistic« doctrine of justification.

<sup>17</sup> See Courtenay, »Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion,« p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> Ozment focuses primarily upon a cluster of early mystical treatises, and above all



Combes's early and groundbreaking work on the mystical themes of Gerson's oeuvre, particularly by focusing not upon his formulation of *theologia mystica* itself but rather upon how this mysticism shaped his image of the person. The work, therefore, accomplishes what it promises to do, and thus accepts the general characterization of Gerson the »semi-Pelagian« nominalist which Ozment's mentor, Heiko Oberman, had earlier explored in *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*. Yet this thematic focus and the historiographical assumptions upon which the work builds necessarily preempt any broader appreciation of Gerson's own theological development, and as such render this otherwise suggestive study of limited use for our purposes. The second piece, Louis Pascoe's *Jean Gerson. Principles of Church Reform* (Leiden, 1973), appeared in the same series (Vol. VII of *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought*, edited by Heiko Oberman) and scrutinized Gerson's contribution from a different vantage point altogether: viz., that of his ecclesiology, and particularly what Pascoe calls »the ideological principles that motivated and directed that program.«<sup>19</sup> Yet Pascoe's work also focuses quite narrowly upon the early writings – and particularly those leading up to the Council of Constance – since the Great Schism provided the problematic stimulating much of his thought on ecclesiology and reform. As a consequence this study largely ignores the post-conciliar period of Gerson's life, an era during which not surprisingly his earlier pragmatic and »ideological« interests in church reform shifted to other matters. The third work, Christoph Burger's *Aedificatio, Fructus, Utilitas. Johannes Gerson als Professor der Theologie und Kanzler der Universität Paris* (Tübingen, 1986), attempts to update Johann Baptist Schwab's original monograph of similar name (Würzburg, 1858). Unlike Schwab, however, Burger restricts his attention to those writings leading up to the Council of Constance (1414–1418), and concentrates his attention primarily upon Gerson's »pastoral« intentions, both theoretical and practical, which dominated those writings from his professional career

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Gerson's *De mystica theologia speculativa* (1402/3) and his *A Deo Exiit* (1402). He published in the same year an anthology – with extracts from both of these texts, along with a section of the *Contra curiositatem studentium* – as *Jean Gerson. Selections from ›A Deo exiit, ›Contra curiositatem studentium, and ›De mystica theologia speculativa*, intro., ed., and trans. Steven Ozment (Leiden, 1969).

<sup>19</sup> Pascoe, *Jean Gerson*, p. 3. Pascoe's work, despite its differing thematic interest, does yet serve to build upon that of Combes and Ozment, for he inquires about the »spiritual orientation« underlying Gerson's »concept of reform.« Although Pascoe's thematic concern holds his focus for the most part upon the writings pre-dating the Council of Constance (1414–1418), and hence diverts attention away from the chancellor's later works, his study will nonetheless prove quite helpful to our own inquiry, particularly in our concluding chapter on ecclesiology and reform. As we shall there argue, the Dionysian ecclesiology which Gerson accepted early in his career continues to inform and shape his later thought, though within a quite specific context as the theoretical foundation undergirding his anti-Hussite polemic.

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