

# John Gerson and the Foundations of Mystical Theology

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**Abstract:** Among other contributions, Jean Gerson (1363-1429) has played a decisive role in establishing spiritual theology as an *experimental science*, the foundation and process of which are independent from the ones of dogmatic theology, even if their results need to eventually coincide. Based, as all works in the field, on Pseudo-Dionysius, Gerson's *De theologia mystica* (written between 1402 and 1423) developed an epistemology of mystical knowledge, itself grounded upon an anthropology describing how humankind's cognitive and affective powers operate together. Gerson's work played a major role in the development of French, and more largely, modern approach to mysticism.

**Keywords:** Gerson; mysticism; Pseudo-Dionysius; spiritual theology; synderesis

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## Introduction

A theologian of great stature, situated at the crossroads of the nominalist and mystical currents, Jean Gerson (1363-1429) was also a committed intellectual: Chancellor of the University of Paris from 1395 to 1415, he played a major role in many theological and political conflicts of the time. In particular, he contributed to the settlement of the Great Western Schism (1378 - 1417). He is generally known for the influence that his work had on Reformed thinkers such as Luther and Calvin as well as on Catholic thinkers such as Saint Francis de Sales.<sup>(1)</sup> He was also a representative of the first French humanism, which took shape under the Italian influence, in particular that of Petrarch. He could therefore be described as a “transitional figure”, between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance still to come, and this is how he is most often presented.<sup>(2)</sup>

However, to call him a “transitional figure” is to obey a rather facile chronology, which neglects both the specific spirit of the time in which Gerson wrote and the complexity of his own thought. We prefer here to study Jean Gerson as a thinker in his own right, and to do so by focusing on one of his contributions: the way he founds “mystical theology” as an autonomous speculative field.

In the last period of his life, Jean Gerson wrote many spiritual treatises. But these are not the ones that interest us here. We will focus our study on the first treatise he devoted to mystical theology: *De mystica theologia* originated in lessons that Gerson gave at the University of Paris in 1402-1203. It evolved little by little

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(1) For the laudatory references to Gerson made by Luther, see Yelena Mazour-Matusevich, “Gerson's Legacy,” in *A Companion to Jean Gerson*, ed. Brian Patrick McGuire, Leiden: Brill, 2006, pp.356–399. For a rapprochement with (and differentiation from) Luther's anthropology, see notably Steven E. Ozment, *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: Brill, 1969.

(2) On the life and work of Jean Gerson, see in particular Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005; Daniel Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity Before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. For a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to the work, see Brian Patrick McGuire (ed.) *A Companion to Jean Gerson*, Leiden: Brill, 2006.

and eventually took the form of a book for which we possess one textual witness of 1408. The text was reworked again; a version dated 1422-1423 is used as a basis for the contemporary critical editions.<sup>(3)</sup> A complementary treatise by Gerson is known as *De theologia mystica tractatus secundus practicus*; it focuses on spiritual practice. It is only the first treatise (*tractatus primus speculativus*) - a set of lectures with a theoretical focus - that concerns us here.<sup>(4)</sup>

We will first recall how the field of mystical theology has traditionally been defined, and what are the sources and influences that have shaped Gerson's approach. From there, we will try to define the object of study that Gerson sets himself, and the way in which this object determines the structure of the treatise. We will then show the salient points and the originality, which will allow us to better understand its posterity.

## The Context and Sources of the *De Mystica Theologia*

Throughout the Middle Ages and in the early modern period, the field of "mystical theology" corresponds almost exclusively to the study of a very short work that bears that title - the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>(5)</sup> The very term "mystical" ("hidden") applies properly to God: God is "hidden" (*absconditus* in Latin<sup>(6)</sup>), and mystical theology is directed toward the mystery of his being. The paradox is that mystical theology can only come close to its goal by "letting God be God" as Master Eckhart (1260-1328) would say, and thus by accepting that God goes beyond what it is possible to say and think about him.<sup>(7)</sup>

The Areopagite was probably a Syrian monk who lived around the year 500. Of neo-Platonic inspiration, he was influenced by the writings of Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>(8)</sup> On the basis of the text itself (the author says he witnessed the darkness covering the whole earth after Christ's death), he was assimilated with the Dionysius converted by Paul on the Areopagus of Athens (AA 17, 34), and this position of "confidant" of Paul was giving a particular weight to his work: one was prompt to find in his description of the stages of the mystical ascent the very experience of Paul, who delivered precise allusions to his visions, revelations and ecstasies (see in particular 2Cor 12). Although doubts about this attribution were raised as early as the 15th century, it was only at the very end of the 19th century that this identification of the two historical figures was definitively refuted, on the basis of the textual borrowings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite from the neo-Platonic philosopher Proclus (412-485).

(3) The Latin edition of reference is that of A. Combes (ed.), *Joannis Carlerii de Gerson, De mystica theologia*, Lugano: Thesaurus Mundi, 1958. This text is the one reproduced in Marc Vial (ed.), *Jean Gerson: Sur la théologie mystique*, Paris: Vrin, 2008. I have used this edition, and have drawn much profit from the preliminary indications provided by its introduction. See also Marc Vial, "Théologie mystique et expérience chez Jean Gerson", *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 142 (3/4), 2010, pp.229-243.

(4) The foundational studies on Gerson's mystical theology remain the ones conducted by André Combes: *La Théologie Mystique de Gerson: Profil de son évolution*, 2 vol., Rome and Paris, Desclée: 1963-1964; *Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson*, 4 vol., Paris: Vrin, 1945-1972. For an assessment of Combes' approach and results in the light of recent scholarship on Gerson, see Jeffrey Fisher, "Gerson's Mystical Theology: A New Profile of its Evolution", in *A Companion to Jean Gerson*, op. cit., pp.205-248.

(5) Cf. Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Age*, Paris, Seuil, 1996, pp.301-302.

(6) A frequent reference of the authors who comment on Dionysius (and Gerson among them) is to the Latin translation of Ezekiel 45:15: "Truly you are the hidden God! (*Vere tu es Deus absconditus*)".

(7) Cf. Alain de Libera, *ibid.*; Jean Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu; Essai sur la structure rationnelle de la doctrine mystique du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959.

(8) In addition to his *Mystical theology*, remain the following treatises by Pseudo-Dionysius: *Divine Names*; *Celestial Hierarchy*; and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

Pseudo-Dionysius establishes “mystical theology” as a kind of paradoxical knowledge founded on the ascent of the soul towards God. This science has for object to unite the contemplative to God “by that intimate taste and that ineffable feeling which those can appreciate, who have known and experienced him” (Prologue of the *MT*). Mystical theology reveals the mysteries of God hidden “among the very luminous darkness of a silence full of profound teachings” (*MT*, I,1). Dionysius’ book concludes with the proposition that “Neither affirmation nor absolute negation should be made of him; and in affirming, or denying the things inferior to him, we cannot affirm or deny him himself, because this perfect and only cause of beings surpasses all affirmations, and he who is fully independent, and superior to the rest of beings, surpasses all our negations.” (*MT*, V)<sup>(9)</sup>

The authority of the work of Dionysius is affirmed very early in the Eastern Church. In the West, a copy of the Greek text reached Paris at the beginning of the 9th century, and was deposited in the Abbey of Saint Denis, this location being chosen because the author was also sometimes confused with Denis, the first bishop of Paris, a probably legendary figure of the 3rd century. It was the object of several translations into Latin and of many commentaries. From Saint Bonaventura (1221-1274) onwards<sup>(10)</sup>, Dionysius’ *Mystical theology* is interpreted from the other parts of his work, those of which the text has been preserved and those to which Denys alludes: Denys is said to have first elaborated a “symbolic theology” which speaks about God starting from the experience of the senses translated into symbols<sup>(11)</sup>, then a “speculative theology”, which corresponds to what one usually understands by the term “theology”, one that reasons by deductions or inductions and starts from the revelations brought by the biblical text, and finally the “mystical theology” that crowns his work. The commentators retain especially two aspects of the mystical theology of Denys: (1) it proceeds essentially by negations; (2) the knowledge which it provides is the product of a “mental extasy” (*excessus mentis*) which transcends the normal operations of the spirit.

Gerson’s treatise fits into this general framework. Let us see now its articulations, progression and method.

## The Structure and Argumentation of Gerson’s Treatise

Gerson’s treatise is divided into a prologue and eight parts, which contain a total of forty-four “considerations” (*consideratio*). Each consideration consists of a thesis accompanied by a short demonstration or explanation. Each part contains between four and eight considerations. The Prologue poses the general question which animates the treatise: “to show if one acquires better the knowledge of God by means of an affect which makes penance (*penitens affectus*) than by means of the intellectual [entering into] research (*intellectus investigans*)”. Such questioning, Gerson writes, aims at bringing all those who have not experienced meditation or ecstasy to understand (or at least to believe in) what the few people who experienced such state of mind say of it (note that Gerson firmly excludes himself from the number of these persons). As in Dionysius, most of the Prologue is taken up with a prayer: Gerson asks God to help him to carry out his work both resolutely and without pride, and to ensure that those who listen to him “are excited not to instruct the intellect alone to such an extent as to leave the affect dry, or even shuddering and smeared with passions.” Interestingly, he concludes by saying that this Prologue is intended to “unearth a place deeply rooted into humility” (*ad fodiendum de profundo humilitatis loco*) that may ensure the soundness of his

(9) I rely on the Greek text available in: *Les Noms divins; La Théologie mystique*, introduction, translation and notes by Ysabel de Andia, Greek text by B. R. Suchla and A. M. Ritter (“Sources chrétiennes 578-579”), Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2016.

(10) See his *Itinerary of the Mind to God*.

(11) Notably in *Celestial Hierarchies*, III.

discourse. The more sublime and mysterious the subjects one deals with, the greater must be the fear and humility of the one who speaks of them.

The first part of the treatise bases itself upon Dionysius in order to show that mystical theology is based on operations that take place “in the innermost, in the hearts of pious minds” (*ad intra in cordibus animorum devotorum*), while symbolic and speculative theologies have their foundation in the “outside” (*extrinsecus*) (*Consideration* [C] 2). The illiterate, the simple ones (*idiotae*) can thus possess a knowledge superior to that of the learned (C3). Gerson distinguishes four categories of people: (a) those who are pious, who have direct experience of the mystery of God and whose judgment does not err; (b) those who are pious but whose judgment may err – and thus, they may occasionally be corrected by the third category of people: (c) the learned, who, without having direct experience of the divine mysteries, have studied the writings that bear witness to these mysteries. But these scholars must also know how to “suspend their judgment and venerate in silence what is unknown to them” (C8). (d) A last category includes the very rare persons who have a double knowledge of God, that of the intellect and that of the affect. Gerson counts St. Augustine, Bonaventura, Hugh of Saint. Victor, and St. Thomas Aquinas among these (C8).

The purpose of the second part is clearly expressed at the beginning of *Consideration* 9: “To acquire a speculative knowledge (*cognitio speculativa*) of mystical theology it is necessary to know the nature of the rational soul (*natura anime rationalis*) as well as its cognitive and affective powers.” Gerson thus engages in an anthropological enterprise (elucidating the nature of the human mind) in order to bring out what is the capacity or power in the mind that is capable of producing mystical knowledge. At the same time, he indicates the nature of his enterprise: to *establish a speculative doctrine of mystical theology*; or to put it another way: to elucidate and formalize by reason a type of knowledge produced by inner experience. From this point of view, it can be said that Gerson’s “mystical theology” aims at founding an epistemology: bringing to light the nature of mystical knowledge.

Gerson’s anthropology is strongly based on the work of Richard of Saint-Victor (110-1162). While insisting that the categories he uses are formal and not real in nature (C9)<sup>(12)</sup>, Gerson distinguishes three cognitive powers: the sensible cognitive power (*vis cognoscitiva sensualis*) which uses the sense organs to know, and which he also sometimes simply calls “imagination” (C12, see also C21 et al.); reason (*ratio*) capable of deduction and abstraction (C11); and “simple intelligence” (*intelligentia simplex*), which receives from God a natural light by which the first principles are made known (C10). In strict parallel<sup>(13)</sup>, he distinguishes three affective faculties: the animal appetite (*appetitus animalis*); the rational appetite (*appetitus rationalis*), which can also be called, according to the perspective one adopts, “will”, “freedom” or “conscience” (C15); and finally *synderesis* (or *synteresis*) the part of the mind which receives from God a natural inclination to the good, as the “simple intelligence” (*intelligentia simplex*), receives from God a natural inclination towards the truth (C14).

The term *synderesis* goes back to St Jerome (347-420).<sup>(14)</sup> The same author uses the expression “spark of the soul” (*scintilla animae*) or “spark of the conscience” (*scintilla conscientiae*) in an equivalent manner. In

(12) The anti-platonic character of Gerson’s thought has been stressed by many commentators. See for example Alain de Libera, *La philosophie médiévale*, Paris, PUF, 2014 (1993), p.478. Matthieu van der Meer sees at the root of Gerson’s anti-Platonism the fact that the French Chancellor suspects that Plato is aiming at Man’s self-divinization. Gerson would anchor himself into an Augustinism freed from Platonic influences, while Nicholas of Cusa would build upon the Platonic ground of Dionysius’ theology. (See Matthieu van der Meer, “Divus Dionysius: Jean Gerson, Nicholas of Cusa, and the Interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius’s Mystical Theology”, *Viator. Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 44 (2), 2013, pp.323-342.)

(13) “To every cognitive power there is a proportional affective power.” (C13)

(14) The term is problematic. It most likely comes from a faulty manuscript version of the term *syneidēsis* (συνείδησις), which in New Testament Greek refers to the moral awareness of right and wrong.

both cases, Jerome designates this way the remorse of the conscience, active even after original sin. The term is gradually extended to the faculty of recognizing the good, whether this faculty is attributed to the will (Albert the Great) or to reason (Thomas Aquinas).<sup>(15)</sup> Concurrently, the affective (Bonaventura) or cognitive (Aquinas) nature of synderesis remains debated. Still, the question remains to identify the part of the soul that remains incorruptible to the action of sin. One understands how, in Eckhart (who will call it “the little fortress of the soul”), the synderesis ends up designating the place by which the soul participates in the essence of God.

The third part of the treatise is interested in the mode and degree of understanding brought to the human being by each of the six powers previously distinguished. The starting analogy is, for the cognitive powers, that of the light dispensed by the sun, and, for the affective powers, that of the heat dispensed by the same sun (C17). Other analogies (notably those of mirrors disposed in a row, which thus reflect an image that is increasingly blurred) are used to rank the knowledge provided by the different powers (C19). The power proper to mystical theology will necessarily be the one that suffers the least amount of obscurity, corruption or weakening. In the fourth part, Gerson then turns to the acts that the six faculties are capable of performing when the object of their examination or desire is God himself. Gerson, after Hugues of Saint-Victor, distinguishes between cogitation (*cogitatio*), in which the mind is unable to settle down; meditation (*meditatio*) in which the mind turns to God with constancy and effort, and finds fruit therein; and contemplation (*contemplatio*), which “flies everywhere and settles everywhere but with fruit” (C21). Contemplation is the result of the efforts made in meditation, of the ability to abstract oneself from sensible things, and a direct effect of divine grace (these three factors playing in varying proportions) (C24).

In the fifth part, Gerson links cogitation to concupiscence, meditation to devotion and contrition, and contemplation to love (C27). “Contemplation, which is a free and detached consideration” (...) has its corresponding affection located in the soul (*in anima*), a similarly free and detached, pure and abstract love.” (Ibid.) Contemplation understood this way unites the highest cognitive faculty (the simple intellect) and the supreme affective faculty (synderesis): the very act of contemplating is attached to the intellect, but the fruits of this act correspond to the very realm of mystical theology, to the fact of tasting “the wisdom of God hidden in the mystery,” and tasting it “with a priceless and indescribable, ineffable, and surpassing joy.” (ibid.).

Mystical knowledge of God is therefore affective in nature. The sixth part of the work is devoted to the specificity of mystical theology in relation to other modes of theological knowledge: it is not acquired “in the school of the intellect” (*schola intellectus*) but “in the school of religion or of love” (*scola religionis vel amoris*) (C30). Gerson then returns to one of his favorite themes: “Nothing forbids that one speaks to simple people (*simplices*) about the mystical theology which is love and which is acquired by love. On the contrary, those who are wise in their own eyes should be kept away from it.” (C31) The seventh and eighth parts detail how “love ravishes to the beloved and leads to ecstasy” (C36). Here Gerson defines “transformation” (*transformatio*) as “the amorous union of the faculty of the spirit with God (*amorosa unio mentis cum Deo*)” (C41). This is the occasion for him to criticize the thesis defended by Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) in *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage* according to which the soul, united to God, would lose its own being and would become, by participation, the very being of God. He notes, however, that Ruysbroeck would have qualified and restricted this thesis in later

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(15) Cf. Odon Lottin, «La syndérèse chez Albert le Grand et saint Thomas d’Aquin», *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie* 1928 30(17), pp. 18-44; Christian Trottmann, «La syndérèse selon Albert le Grand», Walter Senner et al, *Albertus Magnus, Zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: Neue Zugänge, Aspekte und Perspektiven*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2001, pp.255-273.

writings (C41). Consideration 43 identifies mystical knowledge, love and perfect prayer, repeating that “mystical theology is the knowledge of God made possible by the conjunction of the spirit’s affect with him [God] (*cognitio experimentalis habita de Deo per coniunctionem affectus spiritualis cum edoem*).” And the treatise then ends with a praise of prayer, for prayer makes one able to approach God as a friend (*[Deum] sibi amicum concilians* [C44]), soothes, comes to the aid of the neighbor and of the Church, and frees from all evil.

## The Originality and Posterity of *De Mystica Theologia*

Gerson envisions “mystical theology” as an experiential knowledge of God made possible by the union that the highest form of man’s *affective capacity* achieves with God when the highest form of his *cognitive capacity* is absorbed in contemplation. However, his treatise implicitly gives a second meaning to the term “mystical theology”: it becomes the speculative discipline which, taking seriously the teachings delivered by those who have entered into such an experience, elucidates them as “knowledge about God” in its own right. This knowledge certainly reasons essentially (but not only, insists Gerson in Consideration 2) by negations; it is nevertheless *knowledge* about God. This position has two main implications:

Based on the reading of Dionysius, the tradition was identifying mystical union with the cessation of all acts of thought. Gerson makes the cessation of thought an *operation*, and an operation of an affective nature. Only the most purified (and most powerful) part of man’s affective capacity, i.e., *synderesis*, is capable of producing mystical knowledge. This thesis in a way democratizes mystical knowledge, in the sense that the latter escapes the sole holders of knowledge. A simple man who prays to God purely is a “philosopher”, says Gerson, who defines philosophy as “any science proceeding from experiences” (C3). The primacy given to the theological science of the simple man humbly united to God will be a constant in the later work of Gerson. He thus opposes an intellectualist and elitist conception of the spiritual life that the rediscovery of Greek thought through the intermediary of Arab philosophy had nourished in the Latin Church during the 13th century.

Gerson’s work comes slightly later than the great works of the Flemish and Rhenish mystical schools, and, in some aspects, diverges from them: Gerson could not endorse the idea of *substantial* union between the soul and God. More importantly, his contribution is of a different nature: it consists first of all in making the *affective* knowledge of God the object of a *speculative* knowledge that learned people will have to build humbly on the basis of the testimony of the simple. Mystical theology is thus doubly an “experimental science”: first of all, it is *lived knowledge*, experienced by those who go beyond the stage of meditation to enter into that of contemplation freed from thought; secondly, the testimonies that the latter give of their experience become the very matter upon which to develop reasoned knowledge about God.

Gerson thus attempts to constitute a “science of mysticism”, a project which will mark the whole of the XVI and XVII centuries and will resonate upon theological debates. The so-called Quietist controversy of 1697–99 was the final defeat of those who considered mysticism as an “experimental science”<sup>(16)</sup>, and this defeat contributed to the drying up of the impulse of the Catholic Church in the Counter-Reformation period.<sup>(17)</sup> It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the mystical tradition once again began to nourish theological,

(16) Condemnation of Fénelon by Pope Innocent XII in 1699, under pressure from Louis XIV.

(17) Michel de Certeau remains the author of reference on the mystical figures of these two centuries and on their social and intellectual context. See in particular *La Fable mystique*, Paris, Gallimard (1982 for Volume I, and 2013 for Volume II).

philosophical, anthropological and social debate.<sup>(18)</sup> Until today, a work like that of Gerson continues to mark the “absent presence” of a mystical knowledge that would surpass and question all other modes of knowledge and would do so from the union of humankind’s cognitive capacities with its affective power.

## 中文题目： 让·热尔松与神秘神学的奠基

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**摘要:** 让·热尔松 (1363-1429) 作出的诸多贡献之一, 是决定性地 把灵修神学建设成为了一门 “经验科学”, 使其基础与进路都从教义神学独立出来, 尽管这两个神学领域的最终成果需要保持一致。如同该领域的所有著作一样, 热尔松 写于1402-1423年间的《论神秘神学》也是扎根于托名的狄奥尼修斯的思想, 由此发展出一种有关神秘知识 的认识论, 这种认识论以一种描述人类认知能力与情感能力如何联合运作的人学为基础。在法国 以及更大范围内, 热尔松的工作对神秘主义的现代方法的发展起到了极为重要的作用。

**关键词:** 热尔松、神秘主义、托名的狄奥尼修斯、神秘神学、本性良心 (synderesis)

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(18) From the beginning of the 20th century onwards, a real interest for the mystical discourse has been manifested, and has developed far beyond confessional bases. To quote only a few names in the French-speaking world: Henri Bergson (*Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, 1932), Jean Baruzi (*Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l'expérience mystique*, 1924); Henri Bremond, the historian of spirituality, Joseph Maréchal, the theologian; and, after the Second World War, Jean Orcibal, Michel de Certeau, Jacques Le Brun, and others. These historians and philosophers have contributed to rehabilitate the mystical discourse by revealing its scope and creativity. (See Dominique Salin, *L'Expérience spirituelle et son langage*, Paris, Éditions Facultés jésuites de Paris, 2015). A parallel investigation into the English-speaking world would start with William James, while developing accents slightly different from the current that Gerson initiates and still represents.

