



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Send out your light and your truth, that I may live always near to you, my God. Let me feel your love, that I may be, as it were, already in heaven, that I may do my work as the angels do theirs; and let me be ready for every work, ready to go out or go in, to stay or depart, just as you direct.

Lord, let me have no will of my own, or consider my true happiness as depending in the smallest degree on anything that happens to me outwardly, but as consisting totally in conformity to your will.

--Henry Martyn

Week #13a: Mystical Theology and Spiritual Discernment in Jean Gerson

Gerson's Life

Jean le Charlier de Gerson

- Born Dec. 14, 1363
- In 1396, became chancellor of the University of Paris.
- Influenced by Bonaventure (whom he took as his model) and the Victorines (Hugo and Richard of St. Victor), so carries forward certain elements of Augustinian voluntarism and love-mysticism.
- In accordance with the Nominalism of his friend and predecessor Pierre d'Ailly (d. 1420), Gerson rejected the search for a speculative support for the truth of the faith (which had been central to earlier scholasticism), presupposing a greater distinction and separation between faith and reason.
- He promoted
 - the reform of both the Church and theological studies,
 - emphasizing the need for
 - a thorough study of Scripture in its literal sense (which in some ways laid the groundwork for the Reformation), as well as
 - a pattern of systematic, critical discernment to be used in evaluating claims made about religious experience, making some important observations about the psychological basis for religious experience.
 - In this way he hoped to make theology more accessible to the people and more closely correlated with the practice of the Christian life.
- Gerson died in Lyon (France) in 1429.

Reason Alone Is Insufficient for Union with God

- Physical metaphors applied to God (=reflection upon God in systematic/dogmatic theology) all have their limits, which is why the intellect/reason alone cannot draw near to God and be united to God. Indeed when the intellect is overemphasized, an arid intellectualism results.
- This is why the actual experience of God is necessary.
 - This occurs when those affective powers within us that are most capable of perfection in external relationships (i.e. love) are touched by the divine working of the Holy Spirit (which enters one's life and begins its work in baptism).

Gerson's Psychology

- To understand how God extends to us divine grace and transforms us, it is useful to say something about our nature, the powers the soul has and how these are used (and transformed) in relation to what is outside itself.
- We may distinguish three different levels in the soul, each of which has both a cognitive and an affective component. The cognitive and affective components are related to one another in that the latter is an affective reaction to the corresponding cognitive power. (These corresponding powers reinforce one another and, at the highest level, can coalesce, much as light and heat can.):

(1) The level of the bodily senses (lacks orientation toward a non-physical goal)

- (a) cognitive--one can come to know what is perceptible by the senses (*cogitatio*)
 - (i) perceiving outward objects
 - (ii) perceiving the sensations associated with the five bodily senses
 - (iii) manipulating the representations of these things which have been retained in memory
- (b) affective--sensual desire (*sensualitas*), i.e. that form of desire which is common to animals and is set in motion by that form of understanding/awareness which is associated with the senses alone (e.g. the hungry dog sees that a steak is available and salivates).
 - (i) Bodily desire=*cupido, libido, concupiscentia*

(2) The level of reasoning (*ratio*)(the level of planning and applied effort within the non-bodily aspect of one's life)

- (a) cognitive--those powers of mind which require no bodily organ to complete their task
 - (i) deducing a conclusion from its premises ("It is good for a middle-aged person to exercise; I am a middle-aged person; therefore it is good for me to exercise")
 - (ii) moving from perceptible things to imperceptible things (e.g. abstraction)
 - (iii) this is also the level at which meditation (*meditatio*) occurs
- (b) affective--rational desire, which is set in motion by the reason's cognitive act of apprehending (i.e. wanting to exercise, given the prior conclusion reached above in 2.a.i). This is the level at which will (or at least will related to choice)

and liberty ("free will") operate, since the will supposes a prior knowledge of the thing willed or wanted.

(i) This is the level at which

- sorrow for sin (*contritio*),
- remorse arising from knowledge of one's guilt (*compunctio*),
- weeping over one's sins,
- prayer (*oratio*) (at least prayer that uses words and sense-images) and
- other forms of ordinary devotion (*devotio*) occur.

(3) the highest part of the soul which is simple (least complex) and, being the highest, provides an appropriate point of contact for the divine grace of the Spirit to touch down upon the soul. (In fact, this highest part of the soul is sometimes imaged in the medieval writers as a grace-gift of God related to the divine indwelling of the soul and effortless action arising from the stabilizing power of divine grace.)

Awareness is here more direct and immediate than at the lower levels of reasoning or sense:

(a) cognitive--simple intelligence--that higher reason which passively "receives a certain natural light directly from God, in and through which light first principles are recognized as true and most certain" within our finite limits.

(i) This is the level at which contemplation (*contemplatio*) occurs.

(b) affective—*synderesis* (=will informed by reason, which grasps what must be done and plays a role in the working of conscience and in moving us to action by supplying the major [universal] premise in the practical syllogism)--"receives directly from God a certain natural impulse toward the good through which it is influenced to pursue the suggestion of that good which is offered by the apprehension of the simple intelligence" regarding what is true.

Question: If I have a certain knowledge of moral first principles and a certain impulse toward the good, how I can I pursue and love the wrong things.

(i) Answer #1: Knowledge and awareness are dynamic, i.e. they can fade or increase in vividness and force.

- One may not lose inborn knowledge of primary first principles but they apparently can become latent and inactive, like memories that remain but are out of view when one does attend to them .

(ii) Answer #2: Although the *synderesis* may not deny the first moral principles, it may hold itself in suspense by not willing to move toward the good.

Synderesis is the level at which the love (*dilectio*) of God, which draws us out of ourselves (*extatica*) and leads us beyond and above ourselves (*anagogica*) to God, is found.

Note that by the action of the Spirit, this drawing of our highest rational faculties to God can be attained even by people who have not had the leisure to cultivate their reason by means of formal education (a democratic mysticism):

"...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?"

"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 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."

How Spiritual Progress Occurs

- **Repentance and Faith as Prerequisites**

Purgation (=Repentance, Conversion and the Forgiveness of Sins) a Prerequisite for the Spiritual Life

When the powers of the mind are darkened by sin, repentance and reconciliation to God are necessary before one can see the light of heaven:

"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."

- The threat of eternal hellfire advanced as an incentive to repentance: whoever does not repent here with men, will repent with demons in the future. The former kind of sorrow leads to salvation, the latter only to eternal regret.
- Just as the origin of sin was pride (leading to stubborn independence [*singularitas*]), so the foundation of repentance is humility (a willingness to surrender to God and subject oneself to God) that leads on to faith.
- Repentance is a work of the Spirit (citing Ezek. 39:29 concerning repentance, renewal of the covenant and the forgiveness of sins: "And I will not hide my face any more from them when I pour out my Spirit upon them")

Faith as a Prerequisite for Spiritual Progress

Without faith it is impossible to please God; faith operates through love, in time working itself out through deeds, because a faith without works is dead.

This faith can be in the Cross of Christ alone. When asked what the best antidote for temptation was, Gerson answered, "O Cross, hail! My only hope!" Compare also his verse at the end of *De mystica theologia practica*:

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

The Need for Spiritual Gifts of Grace to Stabilize and Confirm One in the True and the Good and Make Possible a Deepening Relationship with God

This gift of grace defined in terms of faith, hope and love.

(a) Faith is a miracle because it involves the embracing of truths which are hidden and not evident to the mind, in some cases even contrary to natural reason, which is why Paul says that faith "is a gift of God...lest anyone should boast." Faith is a disposition to believe the truths of the faith, leading one to assent the truth we find when we hear the word of Christ in the Holy Scriptures (=Scriptures understood in their literal sense) and love and fear God (note the renewal of the affective powers of the soul here).

(b) Hope is that confidence, given by God in the midst of human weakness and suffering, which trusts in the love of God, from which nothing can separate one, allowing one to find quiet and rest even in difficult circumstances.

(c) Love (without which faith and hope are nothing)--works itself out in service of God and neighbor. It purifies one and returns thanks to God by walking in all His commandments without complaint.

The law of God is a sign revealed by God through divine illumination and inspired communication which reveals to human beings what God wants them to do and not to do in order to gain eternal life and avoid damnation.

- By this God demonstrates his absolute freedom: "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."
 - This is also why revelation (inspired communication) is necessary; unless God should reveal His will, one could not know it by one's reason or created powers alone.
 - This is also why God can choose to forgive ours sins and impute righteousness to us, not being bound by ordinary justice or natural law, for no creaturely act has any intrinsic worth or value apart from the absolute will of God: God does not approve something because it is good; it is good because He approves it. His will is determinative of its value.

- **Coming to Terms with the Limits of the Mind**

Recognizing and Remaining within the Limits of Knowledge Which Are Imposed upon Us:

- Thus, for examples, questions known about the Incarnation cannot be rationally explained by human minds because they depend upon the free will and absolute power of the Creator.
- God is not "bound to act in a given way" such that he "is unable to ordain differently."
- Scholasticism assumes too quickly that once order has been established in the created realm, this places God under a kind of natural necessity to keep acting in a manner consistent with the observed pre-existing order.
 - On the contrary, God remains a totally free agent and anyone who lacks humility and attempts to understand the secret counsels of the divine will (which have not been revealed to us) is like a man who throws himself into an abyss.
 - Our duty is not pursue hidden matters out of vain curiosity but rather to repent and believe the Gospel: "Believe the Gospel and it suffices." This repentance is associated more with the affective powers of the soul than with the investigating intellect.

The Need to Strip Away Inappropriate (Created) Images/Concepts When Contemplating God:

There is a need for abstraction to remove the inappropriate images which flood the mind; stripping away all that is misleading or accidental so that simple knowledge of God's essential nature may be reached. Just as the reason (=2) has a greater power to abstract than the understanding associated with the bodily senses (=1), so also the simple intelligence (=1) has a greater power to abstract than the reason (=2).

Although knowledge is not sufficient to reach God, it is a necessary prerequisite for desire or love, because one cannot desire or love something of which one does not first have at least a minimal knowledge. The *extent* of this knowledge is not relevant, simply that one has the minimal knowledge necessary (of God's name and his various attributes, e.g. his goodness, as being perfect, not dependent upon created things and free from created limits) to pass over into a higher and purer love (not the mere affection of love which grips the senses or the love of the will which is associated with reason, but rather the ecstatic love by which God leads up the higher powers of the soul to Himself).
("Ecstatic love gets in while cognition stands at the door.")

This higher love (exultation and jubilation in God alone) draws one away from that slavish concern with the needs of the body and the cares of life that makes us weak and vulnerable in the face of temptation, so that one rests in God and trusts in and relies upon God alone (quoting Ps.73:26: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" and Col. 3:3: "for you have died , and your life is hid with Christ in God").

"[T]he 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."

"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 come 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."

This higher love purifies the soul, separating the spiritually oriented aspects of the soul from all that is base and sensual, fitting one's spirit for union with the God who is spirit and truth and this union/indwelling in turn purifies and elevates even one's bodily nature:

"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 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."

(This is renovation not an otherworldly abolition of one's bodily nature (for example, once the bodily senses are purified, they become more perceptive of what one's needs truly are.)

A similar purification and elevation of the will (which operates at the level of reason) also takes place, so that one's will is increasingly brought into conformity with the will of God (so that the soul is at rest rather than torn by inner conflict and the will is more easily able to pursue the good):

"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 (Mt. 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 (Mt. 26:39). And so in this way a person is united with God and established in and with Him."

[Commenting on the text "Whoever clings to God is one spirit":]

"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."

(Again this is a renovation rather than an abolition of one's will; the will, as the locus of our freedom, is most free when God's grace is most active.)

Gerson is non-committal as to whether all can attain such a state of contemplation. All are capable of it, but since it depends upon divine grace sent down by a God who is

utterly free and distributes the various gifts of the Spirit as He wills (apart from works and merit), not all will receive it and it is not our place to inquire into this, only to strive to have faith working itself in love and thus be suitable vessel for God's purposes. Not to advance in the Christian life is to regress (quoting Bernard of Clairvaux: *In via Dei non progredi regredi est*).

Ultimately the highest calling is not the contemplative life lived by monks, but rather the mixed life lived by those in the service of the Church, who are in a position to act from the love of God (which they have experienced in contemplation) to love and serve their neighbors and fellow-Christians (compare Walter Hilton). Such a person is ambidextrous in that they function with equal grace in both the contemplative and the active realms, Christ himself being the supreme example of this.