



Complaints of a celebrated theologian about the fourteenth century university: Jean Gerson's critiques towards the masters and students of his time

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ABSTRACT. With emphasis on personal and official epistolary writings, this paper seeks to examine how a fifteenth-century theologian, the prominent chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson (1363-1429), reflected on the situation of that university, pointing out its ways and redefining or reaffirming its role in the Christian West. Based on letters addressed to authorities, fellow theologians and friends linked to such an environment, this article explores the main points about institutional and political barriers, the weaknesses of the knowledge produced there and, above all, the behavior of teachers and students who, according to the chancellor, prevented the University from fully exercise its function for the benefit of the Christian community. In short, the complaints of a doctor in theology about behaviors worthy of reprimand regarding the relationship of his peers with knowledge and his expectations about the university of his time are scanned.

Keywords: university of Paris; fifteenth century; Jean Gerson; faculty of theology; changeable masters; licentious students.

Queixas de um célebre teólogo sobre a universidade quatrocentista: as críticas de Jean Gerson sobre os mestres e alunos do seu tempo

RESUMO. Com ênfase nos escritos epistolares pessoais e oficiais, este trabalho procura examinar como um teólogo do século XV, o proeminente chanceler da Universidade de Paris, Jean Gerson (1363-1429), refletiu sobre a situação desta universidade com a finalidade de apontar seus descaminhos e redefinir ou reafirmar o seu papel no Ocidente cristão. A partir de cartas endereçadas a autoridades, a colegas teólogos e a amigos ligados a tal ambiente, este artigo explora os principais apontamentos acerca das barreiras de ordem institucional e política, das fragilidades do saber ali produzido e, sobretudo, acerca das condutas de professores e estudantes que, segundo o chanceler, impediam que a Universidade exercesse plenamente sua função em benefício da comunidade cristã. São esmiuçados, em suma, os desabafos de um doutor em teologia sobre os comportamentos dignos de reprimenda no que concerne à relação dos seus coetâneos com o saber e as suas expectativas sobre a universidade do seu tempo.

Palavras-chave: universidade de Paris; século XV; Jean Gerson; faculdade de teologia; mestres inconstantes; estudantes desregrados.

Quejas de un célebre teólogo sobre la universidad del siglo XIV: Las críticas de Jean Gerson a los maestros y estudiantes de su tiempo

RESUMEN. Con énfasis en los escritos epistolares personales y oficiales, este artículo busca examinar cómo un teólogo del siglo XV, el destacado canciller de la Universidad de París, Jean Gerson (1363-1429), reflexionó sobre la situación de esta universidad para señalar sus desventuras y redefinir y reafirmar su papel en el Occidente cristiano. A partir de cartas dirigidas a las autoridades, compañeros teólogos y amigos vinculados a este entorno, este artículo explora los puntos principales sobre las barreras institucionales y políticas, las debilidades del conocimiento allí producido y, sobre todo, acerca de la conducta de docentes y estudiantes que, según el canciller, impidieron que la Universidad ejerciera plenamente su función en beneficio de la comunidad cristiana. En resumen, se exploran las quejas de un doctor en teología sobre los comportamientos dignos de reprimenda con respecto a la relación de sus contemporáneos con el conocimiento y sus expectativas sobre la universidad de su tiempo.

Palabras-clave: universidad de París; siglo XV; Jean Gerson; facultad de teología; maestros inconstantes; estudiantes licenciosos.

Introduction¹

Since the mid-fourteenth century, advancing through the sixteenth century, private or official correspondence, with administrative, artistic or communicative function, prospered throughout the various European kingdoms (Murphy, 1986), echoing the prestige it had enjoyed before the thirteenth century. The most diverse types of writers resorted to the genre, reviving the classical rhetorical tradition but easing the rules of inherited epistolary writing (*ars dictaminis*) (Constable, 1976; Kong, 2010). The art of letter writing, systematized and regulated in treatises, gained new forms and content, making room for the expression of spiritual unrest, deliberation, reflection on the contemporary occurrences, and partly for particular forms of expression. In addition to serving the papal and royal administration², the letters performed, among other functions, to clarify, admonish, counsel, rebuke, or censor. The vehicle proved to be fruitful for its prestige as well as its qualities. The letters were designed to be made public in some way - including through reading to the addressee - and, moreover, allowed, as we shall see below, to express to a certain extent personal anguish, but with a moralizing purpose (Kong, 2010). Likewise, the epistles could be addressed to the most varied recipients, such as the king, the pope, relatives, friends, corporations, among many others.

It was by making use of this genre that the French theologian Jean Gerson (1363-1429), appointed chancellor³ of the University of Paris in 1395, expressed his feelings and concerns about the circumstances of his time. Gerson explored its potential by writing to multiple recipients, such as to his friend and predecessor Pierre D'Ailly, to colleagues at the College of Navarre (Guenée, 1987; Vial, 2006)⁴, to theologians, superiors of a certain order, ecclesiastics, relatives - such as brothers removed to the monastic life and sisters to be oriented to the spiritual life -, undetermined recipients, friends, the corporation of teachers and students of his own university. Diverse were the addressees, diverse were the functions of his letters. A small mapping shows that, between personal and public messages, the genre has allowed him to: evaluate and critique books or ideas made known in his time; express his affections despite the recognized limits of words; to comfort the afflicted; advise conducts and ways of the spiritual life; instruct the neophytes; and warn colleagues.

Without losing sight of the rules of epistolary writing, of *ars dictaminis*, which were spread by treaties and taught in European schools - first in Italy, but then beyond the Alps, in France, England and Germany⁻⁵, the chancellor played at various embarrassing points of his time, giving special space in his epistolary reflections to the one he allegorized as the 'daughter of the king', the University of Paris. In a sermon after the council that thwarted efforts to end the Church Schism, the 1409 Pisa Council - which resulted in the election of three popes - (Swanson, 2002; Oakley, 2003), he exalted the royal tutelage of the University. The French theologian, proclaiming the ideal of reform that he pursued at the end of his life, attributed to it the noble missions of 'seeking peace' - in support of the rulers - and combating tyranny (Gerson, 1960) - corrupt governments, not conducted for the common good (Senellart, 2006)⁶. To that university, which he described as composed of sages and endowed with members from 'all over the world'⁷, he recognized the potential of teaching truth, nurturing knowledge, and pointing the way to universal peace (Gerson, 1960). At this moment in his life, he reinforced the universal mission, reforming and in agreement with that of the papacy, reserved for this institution, namely the guidance of both spiritual order and temporal life, of kingdoms, and of the whole of Christendom (Gilli, Verger, & Le Brévec, 2007; Verger, 2008).

However, before devoting himself to these praises to present it as a reformer of itself, of the Church, and of society, the celebrated scholar took a deep critical appraisal of the course the institution had taken at the turn of the fourteenth century to the XV. In 1399, at the age of 36, Gerson imposed to himself an exile in the city of Bruges, justified by illnesses that weakened him and the weariness of his position. Part of the

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² The letters were consolidated as a basis of ecclesiastical and secular bureaucracy (Perelman, 1991).

³ In Paris, the chancellor of the Notre-Dame chapter also ran the university schools. Elsewhere, the chancellor was often the bishop's own official representative. For a detailed analysis of the roles and increasing reinforcement of the chancellor's role in medieval universities by kings, as well as the distinction from deans, see Gieysztor (1996).

⁴ A native of the diocese of Reims, Jean Gerson (Jean Charlier) entered the College of Navarre in 1377, where he acquired his license in arts and became a master in 1392. In the reign of Charles VI, the College enjoyed a high position and reputation within the University of Paris, with several of its masters and doctors appointed to the university chancellery.

⁵ In particular, according to Murphy (1986), in the regions dominated by *stadium generale* of Paris.

⁶ John of Salisbury speaks of forms of ecclesiastical tyranny, while Saint Thomas Aquinas tends to think of tyranny above all as a form of corruption of royal power.

⁷ All quotations from excerpts from the primary documentation are translated by the authors.

personal correspondence exchanged during this withdrawal, which would last until the following year, summarizes a personal lament, in which the theologian exposes the moral and devotional conflict generated by the demands of the office of rector, for which he did not feel fit, given the directions taken by the institution.

In the letters he wrote from his exile from 1399 to 1400, his censorious gaze, clearly regenerating in purpose and manifested by moral judgments punctually grounded in biblical passages and ancient thinkers, the theologian focuses on crucial aspects of the university, including the internal organization, the values of the members of corporations and their relationship with society. At least three angles of the universities that were on the agenda are unraveled by his pen: the place or function of the institution in leading and reforming the kingdom and the Church, in confrontation with the directions it was taking; the interests and attachments of his colleagues; and, finally, the student profile and the disregard of past values.

The mission to reform the kingdom and the Church by the ‘King’s daughter’

During this period of reassessment of the university’s direction, Gerson addressed letters to his master and predecessor Pierre D’Ailly, stating his displeasure about the political relations and worldly impasses that surrounded the institution and hampered its mission. These ‘difficulties and calamities’ experienced in the ‘office of chancellor of the University of Paris’, in addition to oppressing him personally, prevented him from devoting himself to what he deemed essential, knowledge. His grievances made sense at a time when the political division of the Church’s dome reverberated in the University, which saw its contingent of masters and doctors shrink, who, when in favor of the Roman Pope, returned to their original kingdoms in reprisal to the alignment of France and of the University itself with the papacy of Avignon (Pascoe, 1973; Swanson, 2002; Daileader, 2009)⁸. Since its inception, the Schism had produced intense diplomatic activity to convince secular powers and local ecclesiastical representatives in favor of joining one of the popes, deepening existing rivalries and extending to the dioceses and parishes, to the detriment of the pastoral and catechetical action (Daileader, 2009). As chancellor of the University of Paris, Gerson was at the crossroads of the most pronounced political rivalries of the time, and was often forced to make decisions and position himself in light of the obedience, allegiance, and antagonism that weighed upon that institution (Guenée, 1987).

The letters show that the position of chancellor was especially delicate with regard to the support of the King of France to the papacy of Avignon and the conciliarist position⁹ of the University, a position that somewhat frustrated both the court and its allied pontiff (Swanson, 2002)¹⁰. With the death of Clement VII in 1394 and the election of his successor Benedict XIII, the ecclesiastical authorities led by the doctors of Paris saw a good opportunity to negotiate the end of the division, presenting the *via cessionis*¹¹ proposal (Daileader, 2009) which demanded the resignation of both Pontiffs, in Avignon and in Rome, Boniface IX. Thus, the theologians representing the University of Paris, standing with equanimity above the dispute and in the face of frustration caused by the Pope’s refusal, voted alongside the bishops at the 1398 Paris Synod for refusal to obey Benedict XIII; rejection that would last until 1403 (Pascoe, 1973). To this impasse that mobilized prelates and the University was added the tension within the temporal power in the reigns of Charles IV to Charles VII, namely the war with the English and the struggles between *armagnacs* and *bourguignons*, supporters of the Dukes of Burgundy and de Orléans, who, considering the inability of the sovereign, deemed insane, began to dispute the command of the kingdom (McGuire, 1998). Gerson, more inclined to a moderate exit to the Schism, and also personally linked to the circle of the Burgundian Duke, who had sponsored him in his career, preferred to abstain from controversy for a period and to step aside for a while and, from Bruges, had the opportunity to reflect on what was going on inside and outside the institution, but involving it.

The persistence of such strife over the first decade of the fifteenth century reverberated within the University and echoed in the knowledge produced there. In this context, Gerson spoke to the king calling for

⁸ Such an exodus also resulted from the Hundred Years War, which made travel difficult, and from quarreling with the mendicants (Wei, 2012).

⁹ The proposal to end the schism by the *via concilii* had among its first supporters theologians of the University of Paris, like Pierre D’Ailly and Henry de Langenstein, from 1379-81. Francis Oakley (2003) points out that in some ways the ‘conciliarist movement’ was a reality early in the schism, although the pressure exerted by the French king on the University of Paris to align it with Clement quickly led to fearful support for such a view. Over time, members of both obediences came to see the Roman and Avignon competitors equally responsible for prolonging the division.

¹⁰ The French king, Charles V, was persuaded by University theologians to accept the *via concilii* proposal, but soon died nullifying the effects of his support. Louis d’Anjou, who takes power, shows strong resistance to the proposal, as his policy was deeply rooted in the alliance with Pope Clement VII; thus, from the 1380s onwards, the University was obliged to obey it and to stifle the conciliarist discussion.

¹¹ Presented in 1394.

‘spiritual peace in the holy Church against schismatic division’; and for the ‘temporal peace in the noble kingdom of France, against uncertain distress’, aggravated after the said Council of Pisa and the scandalous election of a third pontiff, with the complicity of the theologians of the University - who placed themselves as the third weighted element in the decisions. The papal division, which in his letters Gerson calls ‘the odious Schism’, summed up, in short, the earlier difficulties faced by the University in asserting itself as the third power, given the social dissent and political fragmentation. Such a context profoundly affected university institutions, undermining patronage and, even worse, reducing the revenues of colleges and faculties, which were more susceptible to intervention by secular governments and pope interference (Swanson, 2002). On the other hand, by reinforcing the interconnectedness of these powers, there was also the demand by university members for a greater role in Church decisions and civil affairs, with the University of Paris and its faculty of theology as protagonists of the Council of Constance, held between 1378 and 1414. In the realm of ideas, secular and ecclesiastical authorities began to recognize and attach importance to the views of the great university theologians in the context of public debate and the great contemporary questions. Their power of influence was no longer restricted to philosophical matters, but touched on the questions of the conduct of the kingdom, the Church, and the community. Broadening the focus of action that, according to the chancellor himself, would not be something “[...] amazing, because its craft impelled the University to it” (Gerson, 1960, p. 1100)¹².

Defending the leading role of the University of Paris, which was later reiterated more positively, would thus be supported by efforts to convince the temporal and ecclesiastical powers to take the university as its principal advisor and to accept its proposals for a diplomatic outcome for the schism. According to Gerson, theologians should be heard. He thus addressed the royal court explaining why and how it was for the ‘daughter of the king’ and ‘mother of studies’ to ‘seek peace and work for peace’: because, more than anywhere else, “[...] therein are the clerics experienced in the above-mentioned sciences, [...] especially in theology” (Gerson, 1960, p. 772-773)¹³. And before that court he added that “[...] those who slander clerics who preach the truth commit many ills [...]”¹⁴, referring to the princes who did so and risked ignoring the truth and indulging in tyranny (Gerson, 1960, p. 773). For the same purpose, in 1407 Gerson addressed a letter, also signed by Pierre D’Ailly - then Bishop of Cambrai - in which they were disappointed by the pontiff’s intransigence in not accepting the proposed resignation. In this epistolary document, the two theologians suggest renunciation, conceived within the University as the most advantageous way to end the Schism, arguing that this path would be for the unity and joy of Christians. They thus denounced the persistence of pontiffs to the detriment of Christendom’s interests (Gerson, 1998).

The *via cessionis* was, in this sense, mentioned by Jean Gerson and Pierre D’Ailly as a gift from the University and a reason for contentment especially for “[...] those who have studied and professed divine wisdom [...]”, since it was expected that “[...] its author was a prominent professor of theology [...]”. They proclaim, therefore, in that letter, the fight against those “[...] who say that theologians are useless to the direction of the Church [...]”, pointing to their rarity and importance in such a turbulent period (Gerson, 1998, p. 234). In their view, theologians were the most capable to make judgments about the moral, spiritual, or political quarrels of their day, since they were, in theory, the only ones able to distinguish between true and false doctrines, the only ones who knew the Scriptures and all the Christian heritage responsible for governing the temporal and spiritual order in the world.

Beyond the Schism and secular struggles, theologians justified their role in the consideration of other controversial and highly publicly visible cases; such as the veracity of the visions and prophecies that had become more and more common since the beginning of the Schism, and which, as argued in their treatises by Gerson and other colleagues, should be subject to evaluation by the only morally, intellectually and spiritually skilled specialists, that is, university theologians (Gerson & Boland, 1959; Anderson, 2011). These claimed, therefore, an important place alongside the prelates in the conduct of Christendom, presenting themselves on occasions when relevant subjects were discussed, such as in the papal court that judged Dominican Jean de Monzon, contrary to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. To this court, Gerson reported to have been present, “[...] together with other excellent and most wise men sent as legates

¹² “Nul ne s’endoibtdonnermerveille; quar son office a ce la contraint”.

¹³ “[...] car en ele son clersexpertsez sciences dessusdites plus qu’ailleurs, par especial en theologie [...]”.

¹⁴ “[...] quel mal fontceulxquidiffamentlesclers quando ilzpraichentverité [...]”.

from the University” (Gerson, 1998, p. 188). What he argued for as under the theologian’s own jurisdiction included making administrative and political decisions.

In Gerson’s analysis, the primacy of the University of Paris in solving major impasses should be founded particularly on the leadership of the faculty of theology and its members (Pascoe, 1973). As we shall see below, the University, on the other hand, was not in a position to fully satisfy its chancellor’s wishes, given the internal divisions that hindered its mission.

Wavering, bewildered, bewildering masters

The hindrances to the mission set for the university were not, it follows from his letters, merely driven by external relations. The internal games to which the chancellor draws attention denounce that the masters left something to be desired in relation to what was expected for this conductor of the kingdom and the Christians, as well as in relation to the knowledge that should come from the institution. The first challenge was to overcome the frequent overlaps of particular interests with the interests of the corporation and, above all, the main target of knowledge, the search for truth.

Recalling a biblical passage in which Isaiah warns of the wrong outcomes that might reach those who, on the straight but difficult paths, preferred the misguided, because pleasant¹⁵, deplores the fact that those destined to guide themselves on high principles submitted themselves to flatter and to play tricks (Schmitt, 2005)¹⁶ before those who had power, namely the nobles and the powerful ecclesiastics. The chancellor suggests that like the false prophets in Micah’s history, doctors and preachers of theology would rather please than defend what was right. They forgot the teachings of their predecessors drawn to theology. Thomas Aquinas, for example, divided into two parts the mission of theology, to know God and to stimulate action according to him, that is, he discerned a theoretical theology, committed to the pursuit of God, and a practical theology, guiding life for the good (Celano, 2016). For such a sublime mission, masters disposed to “speak like buffons and animators” did not seem to be prepared, that is, theologians who, unlike assuming the preservation of doctrines as the reason for the university’s existence, were willing to dance according to the music, “[...] altering and varying their songs” (Gerson, 1998, p. 165).

In addition to the lack of principles and firmness in the doctrine he deemed prevalent within educational institutions, Gerson denounced, among the ills involving professors at the fifteenth-century university, all sorts of intrigue and conspiracies motivated by personal interests. If speculation about God demanded peace of mind, the latter was not seen within the walls of the institution. In a letter from the year 1400 to unconfirmed recipients - perhaps Pierre D’Ailly or the Paris chapter - he states that behind the rumors scattered in the corners of the institution lurked sin, the violation of the biblical rule of reciprocity: “Treat others as you would like to be treated” (Matt. 7:12)¹⁷. The religious vocabulary, sin, in conjunction with the medicinal, “[...] rumors that infected the place [...]”, contribute to express the idea of contamination, that is, the practice of defamation or injury was disseminated at the University (Gerson, 1998, p. 162).

As a thinker who addressed himself to those fearing God and advocated an ethic sustained in the Decalogue (Gerson, 1998; Langum, 2016) to describe such an infected university environment that would have forced him into exile, biblical analogies are the often-used resource to address what should not be explicitly said. The reasons for the persecution suffered are not evidenced, however, clues are given about the various pressures that he endured in his office, such as, for example, that he was “[...] forced to favor ‘friends’ [...]” (Gerson, 1998, p. 161) and to see slander running about himself. Among the techniques of attack were the use of his own words against him and personal persecution. The portrayal that he paints and names is, therefore, one to which he did not intend to be dragged, which he defines as “[...] total ruin [...]”, of dilution of faith values (Gerson, 1998, p. 162, emphasis added).

This situation is aggravated by the excessive work without any edifying foundations. The theologian refers to “[...] inane sermons [...]” that consumed his time and brought no fruit (Gerson, 1998, p. 162). He appeals for another biblical passage to express how heavy the task to be carried by one was, when in fact the propensity of the majority was in another direction. It cannot be deduced from certainty what he was

¹⁵ Is 30:10.

¹⁶ The buffoons or tricksters represented the opposite of the esteemed modesty.

¹⁷ Cf. Lk 6.31: “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them”. See: Comissão Teológica Internacional (2008).

referring to. The evidence, however, points out that the predominance of courtesan practices in universities that were little committed to devotion was what bothered him. At a time when university knowledge tended to become increasingly secular (Swanson, 2002), the chancellor worried about careless practices, impediments to attendance at masses, and irregularity in prayer practices. For a convinced thinker that the foundation of Christian ethics was the conjunction of faith and reason (McGinn, 1987), moral standards and the way to teach them should be a matter of long-term care, not hasty teaching. Recalling Timothy - "Lay hands hastily on no one, do not become an accomplice to others' faults" (1 Tim. 5:22) - suggested that current university practices were the opposite of what he deemed advisable to guarantee true knowledge, given the influx of courtier power games and demands for gratitude (Gerson, 1998); impositions that led him to follow a persistent majority in error.

The signs of the predominance of evil and sin, in the theologian's view, manifested themselves in the spread of pernicious dogmas in the field of doctrine and the interests in preserving them in the field of practice. In this context, Jean Gerson recalls Plato's teaching about avoiding places where evil prevails as a way of justifying his departure from the university (Gerson, 1998). The clashes were so common that he was led to "[...] sin [...]", especially since the "[...] custom of the time [...]" was one of favoritism. Promoting the lacking in knowledge or the "[...] morally corrupt [...]" by discarding the "[...] most capable [...]" was a symptom of the current customs in the institution (Gerson, 1998, p. 161), which he could not fight alone¹⁸. The chancellor lamented the new staff at the University for its rusticity. He had to live with them and, following Paul's teachings (Rom. 12:15), he had to understand them, rejoicing with those who rejoiced¹⁹; yet he watched fools advance and felt the risk of degenerating himself amidst this 'depraved nation'²⁰.

In his complaints, other possible causes for the advancement of mediocrity and rusticity in university staff are found in the letter of 1400 to friends of the college of Navarre, namely: the expansion of the university and the consequent impersonality of relations. The ways to influence teachers had become laborious. Writing for each one using the seal of the Chancellery proved to be a Herculean task, since he no longer maintained, with his subordinates, ties of "[...] mutual recognition or closeness" (Gerson, 1998, p. 187). On the other hand, choosing to write to everyone collectively could be in vain, or because it would be ridiculed or accused "[...] of presumption [...]" and of violating rights (Gerson, 1998, p. 187). The literate regrets, therefore, that, for men who were excessively jealous of their knowledge and rights, his advices had become so insulting and even cause for revenge, when it should be a source of elucidation and enlightenment.

His concern about the impermeability of his colleagues is reinforced years later, in a letter to Pierre D'Ailly of 1405, in which he again expresses displeasure at the fact that 'prudent words' were only fruitful when they were in keeping with what one wanted to hear. Supported by the verse of Proverbs, which says that "[...] the fool does not seize the words of prudence unless you say what he is turning over in his heart" (Gerson, 1998, p. 227) (Pv. 18:2), and in the Roman philosopher Apuleius, Gerson drew attention to the obstinacy of some around misconceptions, driven by the lack of control of their "[...] passions and affections" (Gerson, 1998, p. 227-228; Rosenwein, 2015; Langum, 2016)²¹. On the contrary, he praised as virtues indispensable to theologians moderation and modesty, with which the scholastic procedures of debate could be resumed, the so-called 'disputes' which, practiced with temperance, would serve to strengthen the intellect rather than nourish animosities (Gerson, 1998). Such modest behavior, he points out, is that "[...] befits the search for truth, which sharpens and stimulates the mind, renews and kindles study, and also stabilizes the position of truth once falsity in the opposition is revealed" (Gerson, 1998, p. 182).

But it is in the letter of 1400 also to its main interlocutor, Pierre D'Ailly, that he best synthesizes the ills of the university as argument in favor of a general reform. Themes range from the nature of current teachings to the rift between those who should teach. The uselessness of the practiced knowledge is what opens the list of his indignations. Gerson denounces the deviation from the theological foundation of the search for salvation as fruitless, since he identified theology with wisdom and the taking hold of God by

¹⁸ To defend that the one who cannot win should not fight, he supports himself in the book of Ecclesiastical (Eclo 7:6).

¹⁹ "Rejoice with the glad, weep with weepers".

²⁰ "[...] you may be holy and gentle, children of God without sin in a twisted and foolish generation, among whom you are seen as lights in the world" (Fp 2:15).

²¹ Regarding the passions, it is worth remembering that although their physical experience could influence or move the will, and this was the immediate cause of virtuous or vicious action, according to thinkers like Aquinas and Augustine, they were taken as ethically neutral, but actions and thoughts that come from them were qualifiable as good or bad. The value of an emotion depends on its use and the will has the power to make them virtues.

thought, as Augustine taught (Gilson, 2007). By misrepresenting theological principles, his colleagues lost sight of the end to which every virtuous thought should be commanded, so the chancellor never tires of reiterating that terrestrial life was only justified in view of heavenly contemplation, or rather interrogation of the secret things about God, as he argues in his treatise *De mystica theologia* (Gerson, 2008).

In addition to superfluity as a feature of the knowledge of masters at the leading faculty of theology (Asztalos, 1996), this defender of sacred scripture as the unavoidable basis of higher knowledge warned of the tampering of the teachings of Christian authorities, such as Augustine, for example. His argument for the 'fixed rule' (Gerson, 1998) referred to one of the major discussions of his time about the role of experience and rational speculation in reaching the ultimate end of existence. The controversy waged with the Flemish Jan Van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) and other scholars on the ways of access to God is a clear expression of what constituted the fixed rule, which would, if contradicted, result in doctrinal error (Hobbins, 2009). Ruysbroeck defended the possibility of a full absorption of the divine essence by the human in contemplation, reversing into an amalgam between the essence of the human soul and the divine. Such an essential mystical union was one example of deviation from the rule, due precisely to the neglect of theological knowledge of past masters in favor of a doubtful mystical experience (Dupré, 2006; Warnar, 2007).

In the strict context of the university, these violations of the rule would be mainly linked to the contempt or ignorance of the classical Christian texts, as he will insist in detail on the admonitions to students²². The most serious effect of the deviations was the delegitimization of the speech of those for whom he had advocated, as we have seen, the role of drivers of Christendom. Accused of 'dreamers' and averse to the most palpable and moral truths, those who enjoyed the prestige of members of the most prestigious faculty, theologians, were discredited and 'ridiculed by other faculties'. Their knowledge was impenetrable and presumptuous in the eyes of the masters and doctors of the other faculties, so that, contrary to generating interest, they were, from the chancellor's lamentations, considered obsolete and expendable. The effect of this list of indifferent indices of theologians was the weakening of the faith itself, as their main advocates were unable to convince others of God's unity (Verger 2001).

The teachers' inability to convey ideas and ideals was coupled with "[...] blind ignorance or lazy negligence" (Gerson, 1998, p. 186). Both aggravated by the fondness of adulation. Such a combination had deleterious consequences, as weakness did not allow them to fulfill the mission of exemplarity and to correct students, for fear of losing them, for excess of pride, or because they feared that the limits of their knowledge would be unraveled by their pupils and students, leading to deregulation, boldness, and vice — as we shall see later (Gerson, 1998, p. 185-186). Regarding the moral failings of the masters, the theologian also points out the arrogance manifested in contempt for the authorities. Coupled with laziness and excessive appreciation for novelties, this proud disregard for the remarkable writings of the past led to the reckless departure from the essential (Gerson, 1998). The urge for discovery over past things was especially unsettling because it easily contaminated the minds and hearts of young people with superfluities²³. Gerson thus defended, in alert to his colleagues, the attachment to tradition and the past as an inexhaustible source of knowledge, claiming to be small the possibility of innovating in the face of everything that had already been written and with quality. His colleagues, in contrast, especially the younger ones, unaware of this irrefutable truth, were seduced by 'empty talk' and the vain display of scholarship.

Poorly educated, bold and presumptuous students

An institution divided literally between the cross and the sword - or, rather, aware of the disputes involving kings, nobles, and the Church - and disturbed by teachers that neglected God and were fascinated by the rhetorical exercises of self-glorification, could only result in bewildered learners. As far as students are concerned, one of the greatest concerns expressed by the chancellor in his letters was the negative influence of inept masters. In the referred letter from 1400 to his colleagues at the College of Navarre, Gerson refers to the deviations of moral conduct of young people, including 'most basic learning', due to the inconsistency and ignorance of some teachers. Subject to reprehensible moral examples and even wrong

²² It is worth remembering that the teaching of theology was based on comments from the Bible itself and on the study of Catholic dogmas, grounded on the teachings of Patristics, and on the recurrence of the philosophy of classical antiquity. Peter Lombard's four *Sentences*, made in the mid-twelfth century, would remain the basic handbook of theological studies until the fifteenth century (Verger 2001).

²³ The superfluous is identified with the excessive and without moral or religious utility (Casagrande & Vecchio, 2007).

teachings, students would fall into all kinds of defects. Without the ‘rod of correction’ driving them away from vice (Pv22:15) (Gerson, 1998) and bringing them back to virtue, they were infected by inaction, sloth, and were thus led to contradict the substance on the basis of regulations and of courses: the rational pursuit of truth or *amor sciendi* (Rüegg, 1996). Wrong knowledge or lack thereof is combined with immorality. By uniting teachers and students, the scandalous moral life liberated the latter into strife and offense (Pascoe, 1973). Unrestricted and boundless, students were left to their appetites and indulged in the path of vice, for they were not encouraged to cultivate that virtue, prudence, which determines and offers the appropriate means and conditions to reach the appropriate moral end (Celano, 2016), that is, they were deprived of the possibility of improving their reason, since it is this virtue that combines the correct consideration of reason and the rectitude of appetite (Celano, 2016).

From the corrupt practices of the students, Gerson pointed to the predilection for “[...] argumentative dialectics [...]” (Gerson, 1998, p. 179) or ‘meaningless’ speculative and rational methods, that is, used as ends in themselves, in the way of bad teachers. He denounced such a panorama as the result of the theology’s damaging submission to ancillary science procedures, such as logic, physics, and mathematics, which gained ground over the former, confounding the methods and distorting the former (Asztalos, 1996; Hobbins, 2009). The chancellor pointed out as unacceptable and even shameful “[...] that purely physical or metaphysical matters [...]” and “[...] questions of logic [...]” were not clearly distinguished from “[...] theological terms [...]”; and more, that these auxiliary disciplines should be ends in themselves (Gerson, 1998, p. 181). In the letter of 1400 to his colleagues at the College of Navarre, he strongly recommended that the faculty of theology safeguard its master function of preserving the interests of the faith, without allowing the other faculties to flourish in this territory, as was sadly then seen (Gerson, 1998).

To keep the students away from such widespread errors, the chancellor proclaimed that, despite their “[...] variety according to age, intelligence and character [...]”, which required different kinds of advice, learners of theology should have the ability to consult the texts of the authorities who could teach them by combining the content of the writings with the example of their authors, that is, by reconciling careful reading and good living, “[...] rather than embrace the teaching of one who questions the course of studies” (Gerson, 1998, p. 180). They should therefore seek instruction both in scholastic discussions and in self-education, paying attention to the way of life of those who teach (Gerson, 1998). Therefore, the chancellor was against the current opinion that the basic questions of faith, because they are simpler, ‘ordinary and easy’, prevented the appreciation of ‘subtler’ and higher questions. He therefore prescribed that complex operations be balanced with the study of basic and fundamental texts. Such teachings, indispensable to students and capable of building intellect and affection alike, of uniting theory and practice, were in particular those of Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairaval, Richard of Saint Victor, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, and Thomas Aquinas; theologians who “[...] combined in a clear manner speculative matters with moralizing comparisons” (Gerson, 1998, p. 182). In addition, they offered concrete examples to encourage in following virtues, drawing them from the lives of saints and other writings (Gerson, 1998). In his correspondence with Pierre D’Ailly, he stated, in short, that those in theological formation should “spend their time in useful doctrines and the Bible” (Gerson, 1998, p. 174).

Jean Gerson also pointed out that the lack of appreciation for the founding Christian texts led young theologians to write and read carelessly, to delight in transcribing the “[...] the sooner the better [...]”, making “[...] either superfluous or dead in their core” (Gerson, 1998, p. 179, 192). These violations manifested themselves by altering both the “[...] terms used by the Holy Fathers [...]” and the “[...] language in accord with a fixed rule [...]”, which led to the weakening of what had already been done and accelerated the corruption of the knowledge produced there (Gerson, 1998, pp. 172-173). As a vice for young people, especially, the chancellor points out that they deviated from the study of theologians of the past because they felt “[...] shame and contempt for what is simple and aversion to all humble teaching” (Gerson & Ozment, 1969, p. 29), that is, the teaching that came from the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church. He took advantage of the circumstance to remember that God and truth are simple and one, opposed to the dispersion and vanity inherent in numerous postulates and excesses of eloquence (Gerson, 1960).

The study of the basic texts and the consequent realization of moral practice by the students, conducted by good theologians, would be the foundation of a university free of the harmful effects of curiosity, namely: the dispersion and deviation from what is fundamental. Derived from the greater sin of Pride, the vice of curiosity²⁴ was understood as a form of ‘corruption whereby man rejects the most useful and devout things’

²⁴ Saint Bernard places curiosity as one of the degrees of pride (Schmitt, 2005).

in favor of the less beneficial and not within his reach or 'harmful' to him, explained Gerson in his 1402 treatise *Contra curiositatem studentium*, aimed precisely at those whom he thought most prone to this manifestation of pride, the scholars (Gerson & Ozment, 1969). If pride was considered the root of all evils, curiosity was pointed out as the cause of the great evils of the University, the foundation of attitudes such as "[...] discord, obstinacy, defense of error, love for one's own judgment [...]" or attachment to "[...] wicked thoughts" (Gerson & Ozment, 1969, p. 3). Curiosity engendered disobedience, indiscipline, and idle talk among the young, as well as the diverting of attention to worldly affairs. It thus encouraged vices threatening to contemplation of divine things which could only be remedied by humble study and 'discreet silence'. Thus, the chancellor recommends that the student make himself 'someone who refuses to listen and a mute who does not open his mouth' (Gerson, 1998, p. 183). The target of combat was inquiry beyond what was permitted and not in view of revelation. Discreet silence and a necessary detachment from mundane matters, as well as intermittent rests to foster peace of mind were thus indispensable. Recommendations that aimed, in addition to ensuring the preservation of the purpose of true knowledge, eliminated the then current 'confabulations' and indolences that polluted the university environment, leading to deviation from the essential and waste of time (Gerson, 1998). Such a critique of this particular sin of curiosity was delivered within the University of Paris and beyond not only by Gerson, but by other fellow theologians, especially the Nominalists, to whose voices in this regard the chancellor added his own (Bulrows, 1991).

The denunciations of the theologian, disappointed but committed to reverting the scenario, are equally opportunities to counter current vices and virtues to combat them. Against this curiosity and the theoretical inventions that seduced students led by unskilled masters, the most effective weapons were humility and godliness. The first two, which led 'the spirit to dispersion' and malnourished affection by tainting it by passions (Brown, 1987; Gerson, 2008), corresponded to an empty and self-exalting exercise; the last two were the guarantee of preserving the foundation of knowledge: praise to God. A taste for the former fed empty speech and rhetoric, while the science of the value of the latter was a guarantee of a moral practice devoted to the supreme end (Rorem, 1993).

Alongside these daydreams to the detriment of devout scholarship, another enemy gained strength among the students: haste. The fragile instruction of the students, "[...] established too quickly, imperfectly, or ineptly [...]"-, polluted the University's body and led them to arm themselves for "[...] the destruction of the good [...]" (Gerson, 1998, p. 186-187): "[...] clouds carried away by the wind without water, fruitless trees in the fall, twice dead and uprooted" (Jude 12). The concern expressed in this case was no longer with the internal progress of the institution or with the forgetting of the foundations of theology, but with the future damage to the community, given that "[...] the conferring of an academic degree [...]" would not eliminate "[...] evil [...]", but would increase it (Gerson, 1998, p. 187). The failed doctrine was food for the insecurity and lack of solidity of those who would act within the kingdom and within the community. Therefore, in lamenting to his colleagues at the College of Navarre about the deviations of undergraduates to the detriment of the institution and of society as a whole, Gerson synthesized the tendencies that he felt were driving it toward purposes other than those for which had been designed, especially in the case of the faculty of theology.

He warned, on the one hand, of the forgetfulness of faith, of godliness, as the conductor of all knowledge, thus recalling the role of God as the artificer of knowledge and the finality; on the other hand, he recalled that this purpose, manifested in the form of good in the plan of actions, was what guaranteed the virtuous practice to be preserved (Jensen, 2010). In his words, "[...] the most solid and reliable tradition comes not from those who go into argumentative dialectics or those who live base, sordid, and lost lives but from most pious and well-trained men who practice what they preach" (Gerson, 1998, p. 179). Faith, knowledge, and virtuous practice were thus the triad to be learned by the students - as well as cultivated by the masters - for the university to assume and live up to its role as conductor of the kingdom and Christianity. Triad whose foundations, it is worth remembering, were reverential love for God and humility, symbols of the spirit's adherence to the Creator's superiority (Gilson, 2007) and guarantors of the combination of: speculation and good works; speculative capacity and religious sentiment (Burrows, 1991).

Concluding remarks

The letters that Jean Gerson wrote during the first decade of the fifteenth century, when he set out to reflect on the 'mother of studies' - first censoring its directions, then planning its grandiose mission - are, as we have seen, prime sources for understanding, on the one hand, what was expected of universities in

general, the University of Paris above all, and the Faculty of Theology specifically; on the other, to examine the challenges and obstacles faced by these educational institutions at a time when, as a relatively young institution, it had already asserted herself as a fundamental power and partly distorted itself from certain paths to which it had been thought out. The mission reserved for it is defined by the chancellor of as irrefutable greatness, slipping from praise to God to the guarantee of a godly and virtuous society.

In the words of the theologian, the university was “[...] a bright spiritual sun that shines upon the structure of the church, scattering dark shadows of error with its gleaming, pure brilliance” (Gerson, 1998, p. 185). In addition to associating it with light, whose symbolism referred to the divine command through it, he associated it with the food of the earth, through the biblical analogy of the river of paradise, whose four arms were capable of watering the whole face of the earth (Gn 2:10)(Gerson, 1998). But if the mission was large, it was necessary, as the chancellor notes in his early-fifteenth century letters, correction and improvement, as it was well known that it was not “blessed in all its parts” (Gerson, 1998, p. 185). The chancellor diagnoses and then proposes the remedies to bring the University back on its path. With regard to external relations, he recommended that, instead of seeking privileges from the powerful or pleasing them in their illicit demands, it should endeavor to dissolve conflicts, such as those involving the papacy and the interests of the kingdoms. In order to do so, it was necessary to revert from the error teachers who were flattered, indolent, and distorted from the principles of Christian faith and morals. Likewise, it was necessary to take care of the students seduced by superfluities and unprepared to unravel the mysteries of Scripture with due dedication, without fluster and without laziness. The motto for the renewal of the institution, in short, can be summarized by Aristotle’s passage taken up by himself in one of the letters: “[...] be attentive to the demonstrations or statements of those with experience, who are older or prudent” (Gerson, 1998, p. 179) and avoid any form of arrogance. Only then would the ways of wisdom not be entangled.

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