INTRODUCTION

Late medieval religion was generally depicted by historians of the first half of the twentieth century as decadent; its theology sterile and played out, its practice superficial and superstitious. For this 'waning' culture, it was sometimes argued, the sixteenth-century Reformation came as a just desert. In the last few decades, however, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have come under increasing scrutiny and it is now becoming apparent that the theology of the period, far from being 'worn out', was of a wide and rich variety, while its piety often displayed a genuine spirituality.[1] Yet there is still considerable obscurity and this is likely to remain until the sermons, tracts and other works, many still in manuscript, of more theologians of the period are edited and examined.

The purpose of the present study is to add another piece to the variegated picture of late medieval religion that is emerging. Its chief focus is on that part of Jean Gerson's teaching intended for the laity, either directly as it appears in his vernacular sermons and tracts, or indirectly as in his Latin works for pastors. This approach will shed light not only on Gerson's own thought and theological positions, but also to some degree on popular mentality. If we cannot often hear 'the voice of the people' in the medieval period, we can at least hear the ideas, attitudes and assumptions they were exposed to from the pulpit and the confessional. We may also discover – though here the ground is rather treacherous, for preachers and moralists frequently work with traditional commonplaces – something about the particular vices, virtues and practices of the day.

With Jean Gerson we are working, not with an obscure cleric, but with one of Europe's most influential churchmen of the early fifteenth century, and no mean theologian, especially in the area of pastoral theology. Despite his very wide interests and the prominent role he played in public life, he was above all a pastor. Concern for the spiritual welfare of the people lies at the centre of almost all his writings and activities. Even his university lectures reveal his preoccupation with *les simples gens*.[2] In these he never treats reflection on dogmas as a purely theoretical activity but constantly keeps before his students' minds their future role as spiritual guides of the people. He himself was a very popular preacher, both in court circles and in parish churches in Paris. In fact, crowds used to follow him from church to church because of his ability to captivate his hearers.[3] An examination

of Gerson's sermons is, then, an examination of material heard by a comparatively large number of people. The same is true of a fair number of Gerson's vernacular tracts, which are extant in a large number of manuscripts.[4] But Gerson's influence stretched well beyond his own lifetime. On the eve of the Reformation many local French councils and synods gave directions to the clergy to use some of Gerson's writings to help them in the pastorate.[5] Even before the end of the fifteenth century there had been six printed editions of his complete works[6] apart from the numerous manuscripts and printed editions of single works or selected groups of his writings that were produced during the century. The stream continued into the sixteenth century and included three more complete editions. Gerson's influence seems to have been particularly strong in German-speaking areas, for the first printed editions were produced in Cologne (1483), Strasburg (1488–9 and 1494), Nuremberg (1489), and Basle (1489).[7] The Strasburg pastor Geiler was strongly influenced by Gerson and translated a number of his works into German and adapted them for preaching to the people. In fact it was Geiler who collected the Gerson manuscripts that formed the material for the 1488–9 Strasburg edition.[8] Biel of Tübingen, too, used Gerson as one of his major authorities,[9] and the chancellor was an important source for John Pupper of Goch in the mid fifteenth century and for Staupitz, Luther's mentor, in the early sixteenth century,[10] while in France Gerson's influence was quite marked in the sermons of Michel Menot.[11] Biel, Geiler and Menot were famous preachers of their day, and so Gerson's influence would thus have spread through them beyond the clergy to the laity. There must have been many other preachers also who used the works of the *doctor Christianissimus* to aid them in the cure of souls, and many pastors who relied on Gerson's opinions in matters relating to sin and confession, judging from the number of extant manuscripts of his works on this topic, and the number of times his name was invoked by later moral theologians.[12] Thus an analysis of Gerson's pastoral teaching is an analysis of what a fair number of the laity, in France and Germany at least, were hearing and reading in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Certainly it is not only the members of the French court, the parishioners of a few Parisian churches and Gerson's sisters, for whom some of the vernacular tracts were originally written, who are involved here.

With Gerson, too, we are working with a theologian whose complete works have recently been re-edited.[13] Most of the studies of Gerson done before the 1960s were based on the 1706 edition by Ellies du Pin, now known to be defective in numerous ways.[14] The new edition by Glorieux is much better, but is not, unfortunately, a fully critical edition. Nevertheless, in so far as it has taken account of the recent critical editing done by Gersonian scholars,[15] it can be used with confidence for the most part.[16]

Gerson's writings cover a wide variety of topics. In this century the

topics that have so far attracted most attention are his ecclesiology and mysticism. In both areas major studies have been produced.[17] His pastoral theology as a whole has been less explored. Of the older works, J. L. Connolly's *Jean Gerson: Reformer and Mystic*[18] deals with some aspects of his pastoral teaching, but, as the title suggests, its focus is on Gerson's proposals for reform. Connolly's work, moreover, though still valuable, bears traces of the confessional bias that can be detected in many of the older studies on Gerson, as scholars tried to claim this attractive pastor and theologian for their side, by trying to show either that he was a Reformation Protestant manqué or that he was not a thoroughgoing nominalist or conciliarist,[19] and hence a more presentable Catholic.

Of the more recent works, L. Mourin's two books, *Six sermons français inédits de Jean Gerson* and *Jean Gerson, prédicateur français*, are the most valuable. In the former and in several articles,[20] Mourin has produced critical editions of a number of Gerson's sermons. The major contribution of the second book is its attempt to date all the vernacular sermons. Aside from this, Mourin's major focus is on the literary rather than the doctrinal aspects of the sermons, and he does not look at all at the vernacular tracts or pertinent Latin works. L. B. Pascoe's book *Jean Gerson: Principles of Church Reform*[21] is also valuable in that it contains discussions of Gerson's pastoral efforts. However, as it is primarily – and usefully – concerned with disclosing the ideological basis for Gerson's reform programme, its focus is entirely different from that presented here.

Even within the corpus of those writings that are of a direct pastoral importance, that is, sermons and tracts written in French for the laity, and Latin opuscules, sermons, lectures and treatises directed to the clergy on various aspects of pastoral work, Gerson touches on a wide variety of subjects. He writes not only on theological and ethical questions and spirituality, but also about ecclesiastical and secular politics and about numerous social and economic matters. By developing a number of these topics I hope to enable the reader to acquire the flavour of the sort of views being presented to the laity by one late medieval authority on the pastorate.

1
GERSON'S LIFE

Jean Gerson had a very humble beginning. Born on 14 December 1363, in the village of Gerson-lès-Barbey from which he later took his name, he was the eldest of the twelve children of Arnould le Charlier and his wife, Elizabeth.[1] The village lay in Champagne about two miles from the town of Rethel and in the diocese of Rheims. Although the village was ultimately within the overlordship of the Duke of Burgundy, Gerson's father was a tenant on the land of the Benedictine priory of Rethel. He supported his large family of five boys and seven girls by farming. One of the boys, Pierre, died while still a child, but the Charliers were able, though with some financial difficulty, to send the other four sons, all named Jean except for Nicholas, the youngest, to school, where they studied for the priesthood. All but Gerson himself eventually became monks.[2] Only one of Gerson's sisters married. One died as a child and the others remained at home forming for a time an informal pious community under the spiritual direction of their eldest brother, who guided them from afar by means of letters and tracts. Gerson's early formation was clearly in an atmosphere of fervent Christian piety. He makes several references in his letters and other works to the spiritual guidance and instruction afforded his siblings and himself by both his parents,[3] and there is abundant evidence of his mother's piety, spirituality and loving concern for her children in her letter to two of Gerson's brothers.[4] Whatever may have been the general level of Christian formation among the rural and urban populations of France, the Charlier family is an example of profound piety in a peasant milieu. Perhaps their residence in the ambience of a Benedictine priory had a notable effect on their lives.

Gerson probably began his formal education at that priory and then moved to the school attached to the mother house, the Abbey of Saint-Rémy, in Rheims.[5] From there, at the age of fourteen, he went to Paris to study at the university and was enrolled as a member of the College of Navarre, becoming at this time a centre of French humanism and enjoying a prestige equal to that of the Sorbonne.[6] One of his fellow students there was Nicholas de Clamanges, who, together with one of his teachers, Pierre d'Ailly, was to remain on terms of close friendship with Gerson for many years.

In 1381 Gerson received the degree of bachelor of arts and began his

theological instruction. He followed the normal course of studies, attending lectures on the Bible for four years and on the *Sentences* for a further two. In 1387, now a bachelor of theology, Gerson lectured on the Bible for two years and on the *Sentences* for nine months. After this period of apprenticeship he became a *baccalarius formatus* and thereafter was expected to take a leading part in the public activities of the university, for example in disputations and preaching. In 1392, after the usual disputations, he was awarded the licentiate in theology and two years later the doctorate.

While still a young theology student, Gerson served as proctor of the French nation during the academic year 1383–4. In 1388, aged only twenty-four, he rose to prominence when he became a member of the university's embassy that went to Avignon to present to the pope the university's case in favour of the condemnation of the Dominican Jean de Monzon, who had argued against the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. The embassy won its case and the Dominicans were expelled from the university, not to return until 1403. D'Ailly, by now rector of the College of Navarre and chaplain to the king and ambitious for even higher office, was also a member of the delegation. It was almost certainly through d'Ailly's influence that Gerson went to Avignon. Gerson was not only the pupil but the protégé of the rector, and his being a representative of the university in the defence of a doctrine traditionally dear to the hearts of the Parisian masters could only further his career.[7] It was in connection with this affair that Gerson wrote, in 1389, his treatise against Jean de Monzon.[8] Apart from this, no academic writings remain from these early years, but some of the sermons Gerson delivered are extant, of which the earliest is *Quaerite dominum*, preached in French on Ash Wednesday 1389 to the king and court.[9] It was again, no doubt, through the influence of d'Ailly, chancellor of the university by the fall of 1389, that Gerson began to preach at court so early in his career. But he soon established his own reputation as a preacher. Of the twelve or so vernacular sermons that remain from the 1390s almost all were preached before the court.[10] Meanwhile Gerson had acquired a powerful patron in the person of Philip, Duke of Burgundy, whose almoner he had become by 1393. In the same year he was provided by the duke to the deanery of the collegiate church of Saint-Donatien at Bruges, but he visited his benefice only rarely and for the most part his duties were carried out by deputy.[11]

In 1395 Gerson succeeded d'Ailly, now a bishop, as chancellor of the university. He held this office until his death and raised its formerly modest prestige to an entirely new level by his activities and strong personality. Its stature grew with Gerson's.[12] As chancellor, Gerson inevitably became more heavily involved in the initiatives of the university to end the schism, now almost twenty years old. Although a partisan of the *via cessionis* (way of resignation), Gerson opposed the growing movement in the university for withdrawal of obedience, because he feared that such action would

merely enlarge the schism.[13] His efforts proved unavailing and in 1398 a synod of bishops, clergy and university officials voted in favour of withdrawal of obedience. This policy was adopted by the French government but proved a failure as a means of ending the schism. It was not till 1403 and the replacement of Burgundian by Orleanist influence at court that Benedict XIII was again recognised by France.

Gerson seems to have suffered from a crisis of discouragement during this period. He became depressed, and dissatisfied with his public work. He left Paris in June 1399 and went to Bruges, where he remained for a comparatively lengthy period, not returning to Paris until September 1400. The turmoil of mind and despair he felt at this time come across vividly in the letter he sent to Paris in February 1400, giving reasons why he should resign the chancellorship.[14] Each sentence of the first half of the letter begins with 'Cogor' ('I am driven' or 'forced'). He complains of the situation at court, where he feels buffeted by the rival factions and where his words and actions are misconstrued and criticised. 'I am driven by these and similar things to forget to say or to say absentmindedly my masses and prayers.' His university duties are distasteful, for he is forced to confer degrees on ignorant and incapable students and to listen to scandalous doctrines. 'I have to overlook the false doctrines others teach, or with great personal danger protest against them, if indeed one were allowed to protest.' His own sermons are no good, for he has to preach to people who listen only out of vain curiosity. His duties at court and the university force him to neglect the cure of souls and his own spiritual progress. What he wants to do, he says, is to take up a life of quiet contemplation, even if people accuse him of fickleness because he now wants to resign the position he once so assiduously sought. It is a sad – even pathetic – letter.

Somehow Gerson pulled himself out of this depression. His friends from the College of Navarre and the Duke of Burgundy were able to persuade him to return to Paris, though his departure from Bruges was delayed for some months because of physical illness. But he had a burst of mental energy during this time and drew up proposals for the reform of theological studies at Paris. These he presented in a series of letters, the first, dated 1 April, to d'Ailly and the others, written later, to the members of the College of Navarre.[15] His general aim in this quite detailed scheme was to reduce the amount of 'vain' theological speculation that went on in the faculty of theology and to promote the study of the Bible and the 'safe' authors, such as Aquinas, Bonaventure, Richard of St Victor, Bernard and Anselm. He also wanted more attention paid to the moral and spiritual formation of the students and to their training for the tasks of the pastorate.[16] This post-depression period in Bruges proved also very productive in another area that was of concern to Gerson – the religious instruction of ordinary people. It was at Bruges that he wrote, initially for his sisters, the *Montaigne de contemplation*, to be followed, after his return

to Paris, by the *Mendicité spirituelle*, both long treatises on the spiritual life, and extant in numerous manuscripts.[17] The years 1400–1 saw, in fact, the production of a whole series of vernacular tracts aimed at the Christian formation of the *simples gens*. Among these are works on the ten commandments, on temptations, on blasphemy, on scrupulosity, and on mortal and venial sin.[18]

Back in Paris, Gerson began lecturing to the theology students again, attempting in these lectures, which had as their texts verses from St Mark's Gospel, to carry out his plans for theological renewal.[19] This series of lectures continued, with many interruptions, until 1414. He also resumed preaching in the vernacular, but this time his audiences were composed of the people of the parishes of Paris rather than the court, for the bulk of the forty or so extant French sermons that probably date from the first four years of the fifteenth century was delivered to popular rather than courtly congregations.[20] Many of these sermons were preached in the parish of Saint-Jean-en-Grève, to which Gerson was granted the expectation in 1403.[21] He preached in other Parisian churches too, for example in Saint-Severin, Saint-Paul, and Saint-Germain.[22] The population of the parish of Saint-Jean-en-Grève was not composed only of poor people, for the tax rolls show that it contained numbers of officials and business men.[23] Moreover, certain remarks in some of Gerson's sermons preached here indicate an audience that included members of the middle and upper classes.

For the period after 1404 until he left Paris for good in 1415 there are virtually no popular sermons extant and Gerson seems to have returned to his earlier task of preaching before the king and court on special occasions.[24] This does not necessarily mean that he gave up popular preaching altogether, for sermons of this period could well be lost, or perhaps have been delivered only from brief notes that were not thought worth preserving. For the period after 1414 there are no further vernacular sermons of any kind, and after the Council of Constance, where Gerson preached at least ten sermons, there are only two further extant Latin sermons.[25] Nevertheless, Gerson had not fallen silent, as will be seen. The years of his popular preaching also saw the production of some more vernacular tracts, including the *Science de bien mourir*, which proved to be a very popular work, being extant in both French and Latin versions in numerous manuscripts.[26] After 1403 vernacular treatises become sparse.

One of the reasons for the slackening of Gerson's vigorous programme of popular preaching after 1403 was the fact that he became more involved in the movement to end the schism. After the restoration of obedience to Benedict XIII Gerson, with six other masters, left Paris in October 1403, to present a series of requests to the pope at Avignon. This visit to Avignon seems to have disillusioned the chancellor about Benedict's intentions to bring the schism to an end. However, the election of the apparently

well-intentioned Gregory XII as Roman pope in 1406 gave Gerson – and others – new hope that the *via cessionis* would succeed. In March of 1407 a commission, including Gerson and d'Ailly, was sent by the French government to negotiate with both popes. Although absent for over a year the commission failed to achieve the abdication of either. The obvious bankruptcy of the *via cessionis* turned Gerson into a committed supporter of the *via concilii*. In 1409 the dissident cardinals of both papal courts convoked the Council of Pisa, and Gerson wrote several treatises defending this action.[27] Although he did not attend the council himself, he at once adhered to the new pope, Alexander V (1409–10), elected there. This did not, however, end the schism as neither of the other two popes would resign. Eventually the Pisan pope, now John XXIII (1410–15), had to yield to the pressure exerted by the Emperor Sigismund, and convoke the Council of Constance to resolve the situation. In February of 1415 Gerson left Paris for Constance as a delegate of the king, the university and the ecclesiastical province of Sens. His leading role in the council is well known. It was his sermon, *Ambulate*,[28] that was instrumental in calming the anxiety and confusion caused by John XXIII's sudden departure from the council in March 1415. Gerson urged the members to remain in session and produced arguments to justify the legitimacy of the council despite the absence of the pope. His arguments were accepted and eventually the council succeeded in getting rid of the three popes and elected Martin V. Gerson also played an important role in the condemnation of Wyclif and Hus, serving as a member of the commission that interrogated the latter. He also spent a good deal of time at the council working for the condemnation of Jean Petit's justification of tyrannicide, and he became involved in the case against the Dominican Matthew Grabon, who had attacked the Brethren of the Common Life. Grabon held that the practice of Christian perfection should be restricted to members of established orders who professed the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Gerson, by contrast, argued that the practice of Christian perfection was open to all Christians, and not necessarily tied to a life under vows.

Although Gerson played a major part in the resolution of the schism by his sermons and writings at Constance and no doubt by work behind the scenes, his role in the formulation of the reform decrees was minimal. This may have been because of his preoccupation with the Petit affair, as Morrall argues, or because he saw reform more in terms of personal, spiritual conversion on the part of clergy and laity than in terms of institutional change, and reduction of papal taxation and control of appointment to benefices, as Pascoe suggests.[29]

It was not, however, only high ecclesiastical affairs that occupied Gerson's attention in the period after 1403. The political situation in France was disturbing and no doubt played its part in reducing the amount of time he could devote to popular preaching and writing. His acceptance

of the patronage of Philip of Burgundy inevitably drew Gerson into the factionalism of French politics and, after the death of Philip in 1404 and the succession of John the Fearless, the rivalry between the Orleanist and Burgundian parties for control of the government of the unfortunate Charles VI was intensified. In 1407 the Duke of Orleans was murdered by agents of Burgundy, and the Parisian theologian Jean Petit was called upon to justify this action on the basis of legitimate tyrannicide. This put Gerson in a difficult position, for he did not approve of the murder but was beholden to the Burgundian house, and above all was anxious for the situation not to deteriorate further. It did, of course, deteriorate and Gerson is found in 1408, in the name of the university, making a fervent plea for reconciliation to the pro-Orleanist court in his discourse *Veniat pax*.[30] He helped organise numerous processions for civil peace in Paris during these years, and he approved the truces, albeit temporary, concluded between the rivals, for example, the peace of Auxerre of 1412. In the pro-Burgundian Cabochien revolt of 1413, however, Gerson's own house in Paris was pillaged. By this time he seems to have abandoned entirely any pro-Burgundian leanings. He had lost his benefice at Bruges in 1411, the Burgundians were expelled from Paris in 1413 and Gerson now made a frontal attack on Petit's doctrine. In September 1413, as university spokesman, he delivered a discourse before the king condemning nine assertions of Petit.[31]

During this decade before the Council of Constance Gerson was also busy with university affairs. A number of graduation addresses delivered by him remain from these years,[32] and two vernacular discourses that indicate the lead which he had to take on occasions when the university's privileges were at stake and the masters suspended their lectures in protest.[33] He was involved, too, in the affairs of the Hôtel-Dieu, whose provisor he became in 1404 and for whom he pleaded financial assistance from the king in a discourse of 1406.[34] In 1404 also he was charged with responsibilities for the choir school of Notre-Dame. He was now involved with seven Parisian schools and he took his responsibilities seriously, as is shown by his numerous Latin writings of this period on the education and confessing of children. Many other writings remain from this decade which reveal Gerson's concern with a wide variety of problems and topics: the role of the Mendicants in parish work, the need for episcopal and parochial reform, the reunion of the Greeks to the Roman church, the cult of St Joseph, mystical theology and the case of the Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck, and numerous doctrinal and moral questions.

After the Council of Constance Gerson still had over ten years of fruitful work ahead of him, though in rather a different milieu. It was not safe for him to return to France after the end of the council, for the Duke of Burgundy was now in charge, following English successes in the war. There was no love lost between the chancellor and the duke after Gerson's

repeated attacks against Petit's justification of the 1407 Burgundian murder of the Duke of Orleans. Instead of returning home Gerson travelled through Bavaria and then went on to Austria, where he stayed with the Abbot of Melk for a while and then went to the University of Vienna at the invitation of Archduke Albert V. In 1419 the situation in France changed dramatically with the murder of the Duke of Burgundy. Gerson now felt he could return to France, if not to Paris. In November 1419, he arrived in Lyons, in territory controlled by the dauphin, and took up residence in the Celestine convent where one of his brothers was prior. He remained here until 1425, when the Archbishop of Lyons asked him to take charge of the choir school of the collegiate church of Saint-Paul. Gerson remained in Lyons until his death in 1429, and this last decade proved to be another very productive literary period. He was by now a recognised authority in pastoral theology and numerous clerics wrote to him, seeking his advice. In his replies to them and in the treatises he wrote during this period Gerson showed his continued interest in theological, mystical and moral questions and in diocesan reform.[35] A particular interest of these years was in astrology and superstition of all kinds, which Gerson strove to combat in a number of treatises,[36] while one of his last writings was in defence of Joan of Arc, whose revelations he was prepared to accept as genuine.[37] He died on 12 July 1429, in his sixty-sixth year, and was buried in a chapel near the church of Saint-Paul.

It had been an exceedingly full life, and a very productive one. Gerson's prodigious literary output – well over 500 extant works – is witness to his energy and dedication.