

JEAN GERSON (1363-1429) AND THE FORMATION OF GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Yet how difficult and almost impossible it is to grasp the concrete traits of national individuality within the framework of a medieval intellectual history which is only comprehensible as a general European history. How thick lies the covering of a foreign spirit, especially over German life! ⁽¹⁾

The analysis of Jean Gerson's post-mortem influence has brought several surprises over the years. ⁽²⁾ One of them regards the connection between Gerson's legacy and the formation of the emerging German national identity. This article will be concerned with the historical period when, as Gilbert Ouy has put it, "we do not know by whom" gersonian humanism was transmitted during the decades following his death. ⁽³⁾ The present study will argue that during these decades Gerson's legacy was mainly cultivated in Germanic Europe where it inspired a particular type of humanism. This time period will be referred to as Gerson's "Germanic passage," which not only forged Gerson's personal legend but also strongly contributed to the formation of German national identity.

It appears clear that after his death Gerson became more popular in Germanic lands than at home. Indeed, Gerson "could be called the church father of the German spiritual writers of the fifteenth century," ⁽⁴⁾ among whom were remarkable figures like car-

(1) Gerhard RITTER, *Romantic and Revolutionary Elements in German Theology on the Eve of the Reformation*, in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven E. OZMENT, trans. Joyce IRWIN, Chicago, 1971, p. 15-49 (19).

(2) The initial research on this topic was presented in the chapter 6 of my book, *L'âge d'or de la mystique française: de Jean Gerson (1363-1429) à Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (1450?-1536)*, Paris-Milan, 2004. It was completed and modified in my extended article *Gerson's Legacy*, in *A Companion to Gerson*, Brill Academic Publishers, 2006.

(3) Gilbert OUY, *Le collège de Navarre, berceau de l'humanisme français*, in *Actes du 95^e congrès national des sociétés savantes de Reims 1970*, Paris, 1 (1975), p. 275-299 (296-297).

(4) Bernd MOELLER, *Piety in Germany around 1500*, in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, p. 50-75 (58).