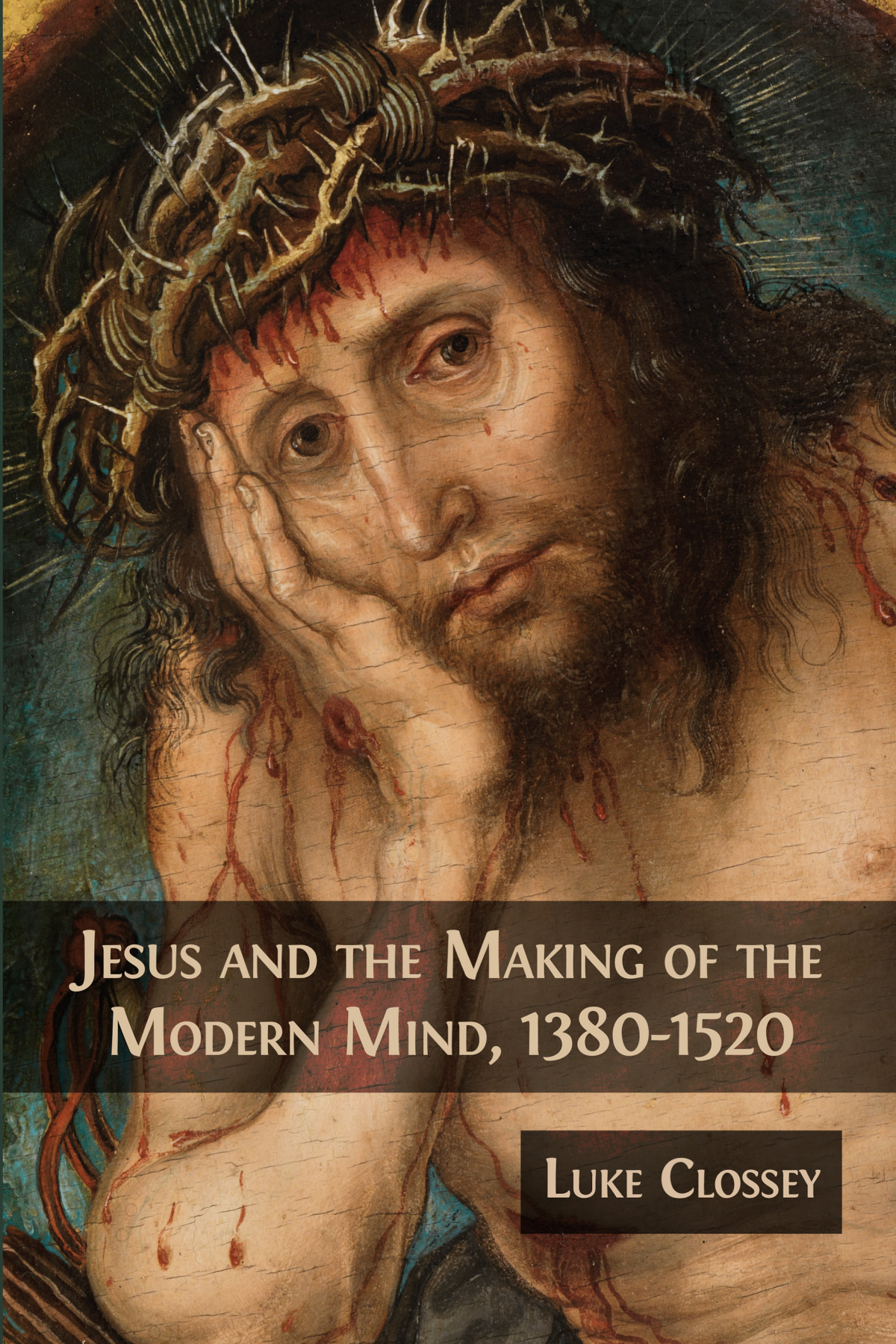

Jesus and the Making of the Modern Mind, 1380-1520

Luke Clossey

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-818-0

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-957-7

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-001-9

ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-305-5

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-307-9

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0371

Cover image: Albrecht Dürer, *Christ as Man of Sorrows* (ca. 1492–93), Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, https://www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de/kunstwerke/Albrecht-D%C3%BCrer/Christus-als-Schmerzensmann/4CF6CD9D45DD6B1AC91CECAE9EC57F44/

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12. Ways of Knowing

In 1498, Florence was struggling with uncertainty. Its population held strong but opposing opinions on the righteousness of the influential Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98). A consensus gradually emerged around how to determine the truth of Savonarola's claims to speak with the authority of Jesus. Because both sides' deep ken saw a connection between truth and divine favour, they agreed that a Dominican and a Franciscan, one representing each side, would walk through a bonfire. If Savonarola was correct, God would preserve his stand-in's life. A fiery twenty-five-metre gamut was prepared in the central square, and the rules were negotiated. Liturgical vestments, underwear, and genitals were inspected for possible enchantment. No crucifix could be carried into the flames, nor any consecrated hosts—although the two sides disagreed on whether flames could endanger the actual body of Jesus. Savonarola himself was made to watch from a distance, too far to cast protective spells. After hours of delay, a violent thunderstorm cut the proceedings short. Witnesses' deep ken saw significance in storm, although no agreement emerged as to whether its origins were divine or diabolic.[1] Could there be an alternative to the search for certainty?

This chapter tells the story of how some members of the Jesus cult learned to stop worrying and embrace the probable. A messy plain-ken probabilism came to be an acceptable, and, subsequently, mainstream, answer to uncertainty. Admittedly, there were no philosophical knockouts, but we do see a palpable shift in the popularity and acceptance of the probable. This chapter also describes a particular plain-ken vision of history, a messy world of contingency that arose between what was necessarily true and what was impossible.

1 Luca Landucci, *Diario fiorentino dal 1450 al 1516*, ed. Iodoco Del Badia (Florence: Sansoni, 1883), 168–69; Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 226–28; Joseph Schnitzer, *Savonarola und die Feuerprobe* (Munich: J. J. Lentner'schen, 1904).

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0371.12

Bridget of Sweden and the Quest for Truth

Truth is the business of prophets. Dozens of times in the Gospels Jesus prefaces his own declarations with "amen," or, in John, "amen amen." In the Hebrew Bible, "amen" responds to a prophecy, blessing, or curse, to affirm that utterance's truth: "It is true" or "May it be true." The Hebrew word entered the Greek language and Bible, whence it entered the medieval Latin language and the Vulgate. The Wycliffe Bible translates that "amen" as "truly" ("treuli"). In the King James Version (1604–11), "amen" became "verily," an iconic token of how many today imagine Jesus's speech patterns. In modern vernacular English "really" can be a throw-away intensifying particle ("That's really cool"), or, in the right context, with the right emphasis, can still serve as an assertion of truth ("He really said…"). My modern ears gloss over those "verily"s as a superficial decoration; traditional ears might have heard better.

Muhammad's prophecy has an even more explicit sense of urgency for reliable signs and truths, especially in connection to Jesus's life and teachings. The Qur'an insists that it creates no doubt, but instead clarifies meaning.[2] People of the Book are told not to "go to excess in your religion" by saying anything untrue about God, or by "overstepping the bonds of truth."[3] Authenticity and genuineness are important. God will question even the truthful as to their sincerity.[4] The Qur'an promises woe to those who intentionally fabricate prophecy.[5] God sent Jesus not only with signs, but with "clear signs"[6]—but some say this is "clearly" sorcery.[7] The Qur'an goes into detail about the alleged death of Jesus: people who assert that Jesus had died "are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him."[8] By the ninth century, Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855) had collected traditions explicitly remembering Jesus speaking in a similar way: he began a Jesus quotation with "In truth I say to you," remarking parenthetically that Jesus "often used to say, 'in truth I say to you.'"[9]

2 "This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God…" (Qur'an 2:2); "These are the verses of the Scripture, a Qur'an that makes things clear" (Qur'an 15:1).
3 Qur'an 4:171; 5:77.
4 Qur'an 33:8.
5 Qur'an 2:79.
6 Qur'an 2:87, 253; 43:63.
7 Qur'an 5:110; 61:6.
8 Qur'an 4:157.
9 Tarif Khalidi, ed., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), 70, 80 (Kh30, 51).

The search for truth is perennial, but has different nuances in varied times and places.

In thirteenth-century England, the jury system developed to deliberate and determine the truth of a legal accusation. The number of jurors on a jury fell from forty-eight (twelve times four) to the more efficient twelve. Their ability to discern truth depended in part on their number's deep-ken consonance with the number of Jesus's disciples.[10] In the Far West in 1400, jurors had a terror of making a mistaken judgment when in a state of doubt. They had many reasons to be fearful. First, it was unwise: the friends of the person you condemned might wage a vendetta against you. Second, it was illegal: both jurors and judges were liable for incorrect judgments. Most dangerously, it was a moral sin: spiritual consequences could hound someone who condemned another despite doubts; this was commonplace in moral theology well into the eighteenth century.[11]

In our period, a number of truth-seekers converged on the revelations of the mystic Bridget of Sweden (ca. 1303–73). Were they real? The canonization process poised to make her a saint raised the stakes. She had claimed a series of visions, experienced since childhood, which, translated into Latin, had became popular throughout the western Far West. In particular, artists valued the new information she could provide about the details of the Nativity. Even in depictions today a glowing Baby Jesus or a blonde Virgin might trace their origins to Bridget's vision that at Jesus's birth "such indescribable light and splendor went out from him that the sun could not be compared to it. The candle that the old man had placed there was giving no light at all, for that divine lustre completely outshone the material lustre of the candle" (see Chapter 14).[12] Her supporters in Italy argued that even "if the entire sacred scripture had been burned," the content of Bridget's revelations would "suffice for the reform of the Catholic faith."[13]

A number of extraordinary circumstances confirmed the truth of these revelations. Jesus had told Bridget that he approved of editorial work in support of the revelation: "I, God, cut words from the forest of my divinity and placed them in your heart. My friends edited and arranged them in books, colouring and adorning them according to the grace given them."[14] In another

10 Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 64.

11 James Q. Whitman, *The Origins of Reasonable Doubt* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2008), 10, 121.

12 Bridget of Sweden, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Denis Searby, ed. Bridget Morris, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006–15), III, 251 (book 7, chapter 21).

13 Codex Falkenberghianus, Lund University Library, MS 21, fol. 109v.

14 Bridget of Sweden, *Extravagant Revelations*, in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Searby, ed. Morris, IV, 219–317 (267) (ch. 49).

revelation, Jesus linked the pains of his Crucifixion to the death threats hurled against Bridget.[15] Throughout the 1370s, a number of critics of her revelations suffered ill health or went insane. Citing his own unworthiness, one of her confessors modestly refused to assist in writing down the revelations, until he was spiritually assaulted; his health returned when he agreed to help.[16] In the next century, Jesus personally assured Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–1438), herself distraught by the continuing debates over Bridget's revelations, that "I tell you truly that every word that is written in Bridget's book is true."[17]

Not everyone was convinced. Henry of Langenstein (ca. 1325–97) expressed doubts in general about these kinds of revelation, and specifically about our ability to recognize them. Admittedly, such new revelations were possible, but they were rare, and many alleged visions were in fact caused by unrelated circumstantial factors, such as the visionaries' physiological conditions or the heavens' astronomical conditions.**18** He therefore opposed Bridget's canonization. At Pisa in 1409, Cardinal Louis Aleman of Arles (ca. 1390–1450) pointed out the "perplexities and ineptitudes" of Bridget's revelations and asked that everyone stop claiming that they were on the same level as the canon.[19]

Much of the debate was gendered. In the 1380s, an anonymous opponent in Perugia expressed his doubts: God was too great to appear to a woman—after all, Paul did not allow women to speak in church.[20] Many theologians, however, saw Bridget's gender as no obstacle to the truth of her revelations, and even as rendering them all the more impressive. In his preface to her revelations Mathias of Linköping (ca. 1300–50) marvelled at how Jesus now spoke to a woman, necessarily by gender "the humble and meek in spirit." Such an unexpected occurrence was more amazing (*stupendius*) than the Incarnation itself.[21] One sermon given at Vadstena (ca. 1410–40) argued that the world had aged so much that Jesus decided to speak to a woman and describe the Crucifixion in terms of

15 Bridget, *Extravagant Revelations*, IV, 236 (ch. 8).

16 Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), 137–38, 154–55.

17 Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B. A. Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1985), 83 (bk. 1, ch. 20).

18 Heinrich von Langenstien, *Unterscheidung der Geister*, ed. Thomas Hohmann (Munich: Artemis, 1977), 56–60.

19 "Sententia contra ordinem nostrum in concilio Basiliensi lata," Uppsala, Universitetsbibliotek, C 31, fol. 31r–32r.

20 The Perugian also pointed out that the revelation's language was too inelegant to be true. We know the Perugian's criticisms through Easton's repudiations. Adam Easton, *Defensorium sanctae Birgittae*, BodL MS Hamilton 7, fol. 229r–31v.

21 Mathias of Linköping, *Prologue*, in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Searby, ed. Morris, I, 47–52 (47).

birth pains.[22] The English Cardinal Adam Easton (ca. 1330–97) explained that women's social and intellectual inferiority to men did not exclude the possibility of revelation to women. In fact, Jesus decided to choose a woman to demonstrate that he was not misogynist. This, Easton explained, was part of Jesus's long-standing strategy to correct the misconception that he preferred male disciples (all twelve were men), a strategy that began when he appeared first to women after the Resurrection. The Gospels recounted Jesus's revelation of his return to the women visiting his empty tomb, news that "exceeds the natural power of a human and only corresponds to infinite power."[23] For Easton, Jesus's revelation of his birth to the female Bridget was therefore easier to believe. Gender works in the plain ken as a kind of *lectio difficilior potior* (see Chapter 11): that Jesus chose the less likely gender makes the revelations more likely to be true.

Paris Chancellor Jean Gerson (1363–1429) took a particular interest in the truth of revelations, Bridget's and others'. His understanding of truth could be strikingly different from our modern instincts. He remarked that just as a student of the theory of medicine would know more than a mere medical practitioner(!), just as a blind person would have greater cognitive abilities than one with sight(!), so too someone, like himself, who had never observed a mystical experience was better able to assess reports of a mystical experience.[24] Gerson weighed in with helpful questions for discernment: "To whom is the revelation? What does it contain and say? Why is it said to occur? [...] How and from where is it found to come?"[25] True revelation must be consistently true and go beyond what reason or canon already revealed. In a crucial move, Gerson believed that revelation would only happen to someone humble enough to obey the decisions of church officials.[26] In any case, recent revelation should not distract from canon.[27] Gerson compared the scholar assessing purported revelation to a money-changer: demons would attempt to fool the scholar with false accounts, like counterfeit "coins." The money-changer would verify the precious metal in the coin by subjecting it to fire, just as the scholar would apply critical inquiry to a witness's testimony. Where the money-changer awaited

22 "*De sancta Byrgitta,*" Uppsala, Universitetsbibliotek, C 389, fol. 139r–141v.
23 BodL MS Hamilton 7, fol. 229v (art. 1, 10).
24 Jean Gerson, "De theologia mystica lectiones sex," in OC, III, 255. The translation is from Brian Patrick McGuire, "On Mystical Theology: The First and Speculative Treatise [Extracts]," in *Jean Gerson: Early Works*, ed. McGuire (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 262–87 (270–71). See Dyan Elliott, "Seeing Double: Jean Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits, and Joan of Arc," *The American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 26–54.
25 Jean Gerson, "De probatione spirituum," in OC, IX, 180.
26 Jean Gerson, "De distinctione revelationum," in OC, III, 56.
27 Gerson, "De probatione spirituum," 181–82.

strength and the correct colour, the scholar looked for patience and goodwill.[28] In the end, despite developing these guidelines for assessing revelation in general, Gerson drew no conclusions about Bridget's specific revelations. She was canonized in 1391.[29]

The Challenges of Skepticism

Amidst these kinds of debates, a particularly reliable kind of truth held a particular attraction: by our period, Christian and Muslim scholars had both longed for something called "certainty." For them, certainty was an ideal, objective and infallible. It compelled agreement, and could never be proved false.[30] Bonaventure (1221–74) defined certainty as something that "cannot be resisted; to it a man is forced to assent, whether he wants to or not."[31] A key characteristic was that it was all-or-nothing. Just as language police today condemn "more unique" as illogical, these scholars knew that one could not be more certain, or less certain, or certain-ish. Nicholas of Autrecourt (d. 1369) noted that when faced with two "certain" conclusions, "we are no more certain of one than of the other."[32] His contemporary Nicole Oresme (ca. 1320/25–82) made a similar point.[33]

This appreciation for certainty was tempered by an awareness of the difficulty—or even impossibility—of achieving it. While today a "skeptic" might be certain that some assertions could not be true, traditional skepticism was uncertain about everything. The Abrahamic religions had their own native appreciation of uncertainty, further compounded when the Indian tradition of skepticism was imported into the Far West by Alexander the Great's entourage. The Talmud urged care in jurisprudence: imagine chasing two men round a corner, to find one dead and the other with "sword in hand with blood dripping from it." Even in such an obvious case of guilt, it warns, "If this is what ye saw,

28 Gerson, "De distinctione revelationum," 38–40.

29 Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden*, 164–69.

30 Ilkka Kantola, *Probability and Moral Uncertainty in Late Medieval and Early Modern Times* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 1994), 15–19.

31 Bonaventure, *Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Collegium S. Bonaventura, 9 vols. (Florence: Quaracchi, 1893), VI, 243.

32 Nicholas of Autrecourt, *His Correspondence with Master Giles and Bernard of Arezzo*, ed. L. M. de Rijk (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 61.

33 Nicolai Oresme, *Expositio et quaestiones in Aristotelis De anima*, ed. Benoît Patar (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 437 (book 3, question 16). For similar thinking in al-Ghazali, see Farid Jabre, *La notion de certitude selon Ghazali dans ses origines psychologiques et historiques* (Paris: Vrin, 1958), 439. See also Robert Pasnau, *After Certainty: A History of our Epistemic Ideals and Illusions* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 21–45, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198801788.001.0001

ye saw nothing."[34] The standards for certainty were high, and the obstacles obvious. In our period, Jalal-al-Din al-Suyuti (1445–1505) poetically described the inaccessibility of true knowledge, which he compared to "a turbulent ocean the floor of which cannot be reached" or to "a lofty mountain the summit of which cannot be scaled or approached."[35]

Skeptical scholars saw value in critical attacks on the illusion of certainty. Al-Ghazali (ca. 1058–1111) reflected on a book he left at home before going out, and was skeptical about his ability to know its present state with certainty: "I do not know what is at the house at present. All I know is that I have left a book in the house, which is perhaps now a horse that has defiled the library with its urine and its dung..."[36] Peter Abelard (ca. 1079–1142) prized doubt as the origin of investigation, itself the origin of truth.[37] A contemporary described Ibn Khaldun's "love of being contrary in everything" that left him always doubting the truth of things.[38]

In particular, a long-standing anti-intellectual tradition cast doubts on the power of logic. Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390) warned a debate partner that too much intellectualizing would "make us both go insane for casting our eyes into the mysteries of God."[39] The poet Oswald von Wolkenstein (1376/77–1445) sang of his reason being "sick."[40] Martin Luther (1483–1546) referred to reason as the "wife" or the "whore" of the devil.[41]

If logic itself was unreliable, how could one escape the quicksand of skepticism? One traditional escape route was to bring skepticism to bear against skepticism. The chronicler Ranulf Higden (ca. 1280–1364) quoted Jerome (d. 420): "You will find many incredible and unlikely [*non versimilia*] things which nonetheless are true. For nothing of nature is contrary to the Lord." For that

34 *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein, 4 vols. (London: Soncino, 1935), I, 235 (57b).

35 Al-Suyuti, *The Perfect Guide to the Sciences of the Qur'an*, trans. Ḥamid Algar (Reading: Garnet, 2011), xix (his own introduction).

36 Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young UP, 1997), 174.

37 Peter Aberlard, *Sic et non*, in *Opera Omnia*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1855), CLXXVII, col. 1349 (prologue).

38 This is the Egyptian scholar Al-Sakhawi (d. 1497), quoted in Franz Rosenthal, "Ibn Khaldun in his Time," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 18 (1983): 166–78 (168).

39 Gregory of Nazianzus, "Theologica quinta: De Spiritu Sancto," in *Opera quæ exstant omnia II*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 161 vols. (Paris: Migne, 1858), XXXVI, col. 142.

40 Oswald von Wolkenstein, *The Poems of Oswald von Wolkenstein*, trans. Albrecht Classen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 58–59.

41 Martin Luther, "Wider die himmlischen Propheten, 2. Teil," in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 127 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009), XVIII, 164 and "Predigt am 18. Sonntag nach Trinitatis," in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, XXXIV, part 2, 313.

reason, we should be skeptical about skepticism about miracles. Maybe they do happen.[42] Such pure skeptics could, in theory, live a happy life of passionless *apatheia*, unburden by false certainties, to the irritation of other philosophers.

Other scholars developed three new escapes from skepticism, two through Jesus, one through probability.

Jesus as an Escape from Skepticism

Logic and Foolishness

The first escape was to find in Jesus and his religion the compelling certainty they sought. Nicholas of Autrecourt addressed his remarks to an extreme skeptic who does "not know if you are in the sky or on earth," or if the "pope exists," or "whether you have a head." Such a stance would lead to anarchy, because the unreliability of witnesses' testimony would "lead to the destruction of civilian and political life." His ultimate way out was to reason that skepticism would have prevented Jesus's disciples from being certain that Jesus died and rose from the dead. Because that would be impossible, because Jesus's life must be certainly known by its witnesses, skepticism was defeated.[43]

Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola (1470–1533) pursued a similar approach. His 1520 *Examen vanitatis* [Examination of Vanity] drew on the ancient Greek skeptic Sextus Empiricus (fl. ca. 150) to deny any certainty to Aristotle (384–322 BC) and the "invented knowledge" of the Greeks, or to reason more generally. Giovanni Pico, however, had access through Jesus to knowledge that *was* obvious and compelling: God's revelations. Indeed, Giovanni Pico was upset that the Jews could not see something as clear as the sun: "Why do you wait for the sun, you blind ones? The sun is here and shines, but it shines in darkness, and your darkness does not comprehend it." What was that sun? Giovanni Pico had in mind the Genesis (1:16) account of the creation of the sun, which his deep ken identified with Jesus. Thus, we could "prove the same thing through the similarity of metaphor," for just as "the sun did not destroy the firmament, but perfected it," so too "Christ came not to destroy the law, but perfect it."[44]

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42 Ranulf Higden, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden*, ed. Churchill Babington, 9 vols. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1865–86), I, 16.

43 Nicholas of Autrecourt, "Nicholas of Autrecourt on Skepticism about Substance and Causality," in *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*, ed. Gyula Klima, Fritz Allhoff, and Anand Jayprakash Vaidya (Oxford: Blackwell: 2007), 134–42 (136).

44 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Heptaplus*, in *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus*, trans. Douglas Carmichael (New York: Bobbs-Merril, 1965),

Other contemporary thinkers used the brilliance of the sun as a metaphor for undeniable knowledge, and often associated that light with Jesus. The 1491 *Schatzbehalter* [Treasury], composed by the Franciscan preacher Stephan Fridolin (d. 1498), identified Jesus as the way beyond skepticism; his humanity was a "remedy by which the blind were given the light as well as a lesson to make the ones who see understand the truth."[45] Johannes Oecolampadius (d. 1531) wrote that Jesus's disciples saw "clearer than the noon sun, that all is vanity, vanity those things under the sun..."[46]

At the end of our period, Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), praising folly, emphasized the otherworldly "foolishness" of the Christian dispensation, and Jesus's selection of non-intellectual audiences. Erasmus quoted Jesus talking to his Father in the Psalms (69:5): "Thou knowest my foolishness." Noting that in Greek the words for "child" and "wise" were opposite, Erasmus underlined Jesus's pleasure in revelation to children being hidden from the wise (Mt 11:25, Lk 10:21). Jesus "took special delight in little children, women, and fishermen, while the dumb animals who gave him the greatest pleasure were those furthest removed from cleverness and cunning." Although Jesus could have ridden a lion without danger, instead he chose a donkey. Jesus referred to his followers as "sheep" (Mt 25:32–3, Jn 10), an animal Erasmus maligned as maximally stupid. The personified Folly says that Jesus became "something of a fool himself in order to help the folly of mankind, when he assumed the nature of man" and subsequently saved mankind "by the folly of the cross (1 Cor. 1:21) and through his simple, ignorant apostles, to whom he unfailingly preached folly." His teachings encouraged followers to rely on him rather than on their own intelligence.[47] Even in his preface to his New Testament, Erasmus linked Jesus, god made man, to the kind of wisdom "that will render foolish the wisdom of this world."[48]

63–174 (157, 163). He is alluding to Mt 5:17 and Jn 1:5. See Brian Ogren, "The Forty-Nine Gates of Wisdom as Forty-Nine Ways to Christ: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's Heptaplus and Nahmanidean Kabbalah," *Rinascimento* 49 (2009): 27–43.

45 Stephan Fridolin, *Schatzbehalter* (Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1491), fol. a2r. Translation from Almut Breitenbach and Stefan Matter, "Image, Text, and Mind: Franciscan Tertiaries Rewriting Stephan Fridolin's *Schatzbehalter* in the Pütrichkloster in Munich," in *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Antwerp Dialogue*, ed. Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara, and Patricia Stoop (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 297–316 (297–99).

46 Oecolampadius, *De Risu Paschali* (Basel: Frobenius, 1518), 22.

47 Erasmus, "Praise of Folly," in *A Complaint of Peace*, trans. Betty Radice, CWE 27, 147–48.

48 Erasmus, "Paraclesis," in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Jean Leclerc, 10 vols. (Leiden: Lugduni Batavorum Vander, 1703–06), VI.

Similarly, in Florence, Savonarola explained that Jesus "wanted, through the foolishness of the cross, that men be wise; thus leave behind, O wise men, human wisdom; come to the foolishness of Christ, to the foolishness of the cross, which is the true wisdom [...] although to you it seems madness."[49] The Florentine poet Girolamo Benivieni (1453–1542) composed a song, "Non fu mai el più bel solazzo" [Never was there more beautiful solace], which understood going insane for love for Jesus as the "most beautiful solace":

> Come pazzo ogn'huom gridando
> IESV mio la croce prenda
> Ognun gridi com'io grido
> sempre pazzo pazzo pazzo
>
> Like crazy each man crying
> [may] my Jesus take up the cross
> Let each cry as I cry,
> always crazy crazy crazy.[50]

Prayer and Silence

The more radical Jesus-centred escape route from skepticism was to respond to thoughts of doubt by not thinking.[51]

Constantinople and its Patriarch were under siege—but he had a plan. In 1397, during his few months as patriarch, Callistus II Xanthopoulos (d. ca. 1397) breathed carefully some four million times, usually with his mouth shut, and his mind in his nostrils. Why?

The patriarch's passion was hesychasm (ἡσυχασμός, "stillness"), the dwelling in God's silence through the practice of continuous prayer. Callistus was particularly fond of the prayer method of the thirteenth-century Nikephoros, an "Italian"—maybe a Greek from Calabria—monk of Athos

49 Savonarola, "Sermon of April 13, 1491," in *Prediche sopra Giobbe, Volume 2*, ed. Roberto Ridolfi (Rome: A. Belardetti, 1955–74), 280.

50 Girolamo Benivieni, *Opere* (Venice: n.p., 1535), 143r–45r. For music, see Patrick Macey, *Bonfire Songs: Savonarola's Musical Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 83–85.

51 John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2001), 211–18; Dirk Krausmüller, "The Rise of Hesychasm," in *Eastern Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold, Cambridge History of Christianity 5 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006), 101–26; Kallistos Ware, "St. Nikodimus and the Philokalia," in *Mount Athos, the Sacred Bridge: The Spirituality of the Holy Mountain*, ed. Dimitri Conomos and Graham Speake (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 69–122.

who wrote a treatise *On Guarding the Heart* a century before.[52] Nikephoros anticipated that his method could be widely used: he promised an easy, non-demonic way whereby even you, even if you were not naturally inclined towards mystic visions, could experience the divine: "Sit down, recollect your mind, draw it—I am speaking of your mind—in your nostrils; that is the path the breath takes to reach the heart. Drive it, force it to go down to your heart with the air you are breathing in. When it is there, you will see the joy that follows..." The patriarch was not following Nikephoros's straightforward instructions for the mere pleasure, and it was a pleasure, of forcing his mind through his nostrils. That was only preparation, as Nikephoros's instructions explained: "Next you must know that as long as your spirit (νοῦς *nous*) abides there, you must not remain silent nor idle. Have no other occupation or meditation than the cry of 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!' [Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, Υἱὲ τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἐλέησόν με]. Under no circumstances give yourself any rest."[53] He urged his students to not rely on discretion to sort out thoughts, but exclude thoughts entirely for the sake of prayer.[54] This was easier than it sounded: Nikephoros wrote that reading his guide, even a part of his guide, obviated the need for a teacher, even for beginners. In the treatise he wrote with his friend Ignatius, Patriarch Callistus improved this method with a suggestion of his own, to pray with the mouth closed.[55]

This was a kind of liberation technology. The hesychasts struggled against, and transcended over, the eight kinds of disordered thoughts (λογισμοί *logismoi*), which could become rooted as passions—to develop passionlessness (ἀπάθεια *apatheia*), to recover the unity of their own intellects with God, who created them. In contrast, their intellectualist opponents made much of the distinction between rational humans and non-rational animals and herded the hesychasts with the latter.[56] At Athos, the aristocrat Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), a Nikephoros disciple, successfully defended hesychasm in a series of

52 Nikephoros the Monk, *On Sobriety and the Guarding of the Heart*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, CXLVII, 945–66; Antonio Rigo, "Niceforo l'esicasta (XIII sec.): alcune considerazioni sulla vita e sull'opera," in *L'amore del bello, studi sulla Filocalia*, ed. Tomáš Špidlík (Magnano: Qiqajon, 1991), 79–119.

53 E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, trans., *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 32–34; Nikephoros, *On Sobriety*, 961–66.

54 Nikephoros, *On Sobriety*, 964–65.

55 John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, trans. Adele Fiske (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminar, 1974), 128–29.

56 Gregory the Sinaïte, *Discourse on the Transfiguration*, trans. David Balfour (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo, 1990). The Gregories agree that, in Krausmüller's words, "the human faculty for analytical thought can only be saved if it is never activated." Krausmüller, "The Rise of Hesychasm," 99, 109, 113–16, 122; Kallistos

church meetings, in part by misrepresenting its opponents as promoting thought above prayer. Considering knowledge with a plain-ken critical eye, Gregory condemned it as a "profane wisdom," probably promoted by demons, that merely creates "an unstable and easily modified opinion."[57] If the intellectuals' knowledge was knowledge, then only the ignorant would be saved, for, as he explained, "Any word may contest with another word, but what is the word that can contest with life?"[58] The Jesus prayer was better than the mental proliferation of demons and intellectuals. Gregory evoked a "supra-rational knowledge" that "is common to all those who have believed in Christ ... they will be light, and they will see light..."[59] After a series of council debates, Gregory became Archbishop of Thessalonica, and the Constantinople patriarchate was held by a series of hesychasts, up to and including our Callistus in 1397.

One Gregory, Palamas, won the day for hesychasm, and another spread it across the Orthodox world. Encountering the practice at Crete before moving to Athos, Gregory of Sinai (1255–1346) took up Nikephoros's version in particular, although his fears of demonic interference motivated him to include cautionary warnings against attempting this without expert supervision.[60] He condemned intellectuals who opened their rational faculty to corruption from those disordered *logismoi*. What they called Reason was merely a mess of thoughts, inspired by sense perceptions and by demons. The hesychasts, in contrast, had through hesychasm restored their prelapsarian rationality, as long as one did not think in ways called "rational." Rational thinking only worked by avoiding Reason. Real knowledge, he advised, comes from neither cognition and proofs, but from the grace through hesychasm,[61] specifically the "continuous invocation

Ware, "The Jesus Prayer in St. Gregory of Sinai," *Eastern Churches Review* 4 (1972): 3–22.

57 Grégoire Palamas, *Défense des saints hésychastes*, ed. Jean Meyendorff, 2nd ed. (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1973), 27–31 (1.1.9), 242–45 (2.1.9).

58 Quoted in Serafim Joantă, *Treasures of Romanian Christianity: Hesychast Tradition and Culture* (Bégrolles-En-Mauges: CreateSpace, 2013), xxi.

59 Palamas, *Défense des saints hésychastes*, 524–27 (2.3.66). See Krausmüller, "The Rise of Hesychasm," 116–23; Robert E. Sinckewicz, "Gregory Palamas," in *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition*, ed. Carlo Giuseppe Conticello and Vassa Conticello, 2 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), II, 131–37; Rudolf S. Stefec, "Mitteilungen aus Athos-Handschriften," *Wiener Studien* 127 (2014): 121–50, https://doi.org/10.1553/wst127s121; John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. George Lawrence (London: The Faith Press, 1964).

60 Gregory of Sinai, "De errore, ubi et de multis materiis," in Gregory of Palamas, *Opera Omnia*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, CL, col. 1337–42.

61 Gregory of Sinai, "Capita valde utilia per acrostichidem," in Gregory of Palamas, *Opera Omnia*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, CL, col. 1240.

of the name of Jesus."[62] There should be no room for disordered thoughts in your heart, which should be full only of the thought of Jesus.

Through Gregory of Sinai's prayer manuals and many disciples, hesychasm then began to spread throughout the Slavic countries. Bulgarian and Serbian monks translated large numbers of hesychastic texts in the fourteenth century, and an anthology of them, the *Philokalia*, was translated into Romanian or Slavonic in 1382. In Romania, Nicodemus of Tismana (ca. 1320–1406) reformed monasteries to support hesychasm. Maybe Greek, Nicodemus had trained at Athos, and declined offers from Prince Lazar of leadership of the Serbian Church or of the leadership of the Serbs at Athos, instead preferring a career of monastery building in Wallachia and Transylvania (Tismana, Prislop, Vodița, Șaina, Vratna, Monastirica), which concluded in a semi-retirement where he spent weekends in communal prayer at Tismana and weekdays in a nearby cave practicing hesychasm, until he died.[63]

Russia was the farthest frontier of hesychasm. The Russians, lacking the inconvenient deserts that facilitated prayer, pragmatically found an equivalent inconvenience in their vast northern forests. Sergius of Radonezh (1315–92) founded a monastery Lavra of the Holy Trinity, the library of which housed many hesychastic manuscripts, some by Gregory of Sinai, some copied by Sergius himself.[64] The fall of Bulgaria to the Ottomans in the 1390s encouraged a wave of refugee religious fleeing into Russia, and they brought hesychastic ideas with them.[65] Others coming from Athos renewed enthusiasm for hesychasm in Russia through the century. A disciple of Sergius, Nilus of Sora (ca. 1443–1508) had picked up hesychasm on a journey through Palestine and Athos, and returned to Russia to establish a hermitage skete on the Sora River (whence his name) in northern Russia, ten miles from the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery.

62 Gregory of Sinai, "Accurata Dissertatio de Quiete et Oratione," in Gregory of Palamas, *Opera Omnia*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, CL, col. 1308.

63 Joantă, *Treasures*, xiv, 45–49, 68–71, 77, 88.

64 Epiphanius the Wise, "The Life, Acts and Miracles of Our Revered and Holy Father Abbot Sergius," in *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, ed. George P. Fedotov (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1969), 54–84. See Pierre Kovalevsky, *Saint Sergius and Russian Spirituality*, trans. W. Elias Jones (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976); Kallistos Ware, *Act Out of Stillness: The Influence of Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization* (Toronto: Hellenic Canadian Association of Constantinople and the Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto, 1995), 20–23.

65 John V. A. Fine, Jr., *The Late Medieval Balkans* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 444–45.

Educated and ascetic, Nilus was the last major hesychast in Russia, and was on the losing side at their showdown at the Council of Moscow in 1503.[66]

Probability as an Escape from Skepticism

The third escape from skepticism was to abandon the quest for certainty, to settle for apparent knowledge that was good enough. Unlike the first two escapes, this did not originate in Jesus, but it became the most widespread and enduring, and found many applications to Jesus-related problems.

Scholars largely accepted Aristotle's assertion that different fields or disciplines of knowledge had different possibilities of truth and certainty. "Precision," Aristotle advised, was "not to be sought for alike in all discussions." Indeed, a learned person should "look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits." Some subjects involved matters, premises, and conclusions that were, at best, "for the most part true." In those subjects it would be "foolish" to "demand [...] demonstrative proofs."[67] Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), who knew and cited this passage from Aristotle, popularized a basic division between two kinds of knowledge, *scientia* and *opinio*. In the realm of necessary, timeless, philosophical truths—the deep ken—*scientia* involved demonstrations of certainty that compelled agreement. In the realm of unstable, contingent appearances—the plain ken—*opinio* involved rhetorical strategies designed to exploit the biases of a human audience.[68] Oresme continued this tradition of different fields requiring different criteria: demonstrations of certainty could occur in mathematics, but not in more human fields like ethics.[69]

66 Fedotov, ed., *Treasury*, 100–01; David M. Goldfrank, "Burn, Baby, Burn: Popular Culture and Heresy in Late Medieval Russia," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 31.4 (1998): 17–32; David M. Goldfrank, "Recentering Nil Sorskii: The Evidence from the Sources," *Russian Review* 66 (2007): 359–76, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9434.2007.00448.x; George A. Maloney, ed. and trans., *Nil Sorsky: The Complete Writings* (Mahwah: Christian Press, 2003); George A. Maloney, *Russian Hesychasm: The Spirituality of Nil Sorskij* (Paris: Mouton, 1973).

67 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 4 (I.3 1094b).

68 Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006), 20–22, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511817557. This tradition may have been a mistranslation. The *Ethics* talks of *akribes*, which scholars now describe as precision, but was originally (1240s) translated into Latin as *certum* [that which is fixed]. See Pasnau, *After Certainty*, 31.

69 Nicole Oresme, *De proportionibus proportionum and Ad pauca respicientes*, ed. Edward Grant (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 247–55; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II–II, q. 70, art. 2. See James Franklin, *The Science of Conjecture: Evidence and Probability Before Pascal* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 2001), 140–45.

Pierre d'Ailly (1351–1420) saw this attention to the field of knowledge as the solution to the desire to be certain and the skeptical recognition of certainty's elusiveness.[70] The influential Antoninus of Florence (1389–1459) asserted that in "moral matters, what is required is not the certitude of evidence but rather probable conjecture."[71] In our period, scholarly interest generally shifted from *scientia* to *opinio*, not only in theology, ethics, and law, but in the study of the natural (medical) and social (economic) worlds. This shift was not limited to Christian scholarship: Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (1372–1449) did a meta-analysis of Qur'an studies, and realized that those scholars adopted their tools for evaluating canonical interpretations from the methodology of the field of jurisprudence.[72]

Traditions of Probability

Without recourse to certainty, these messier fields of knowledge sought a kind of truth conceptualized as probability. Our modern "probable" means "likely to happen." In the period under study, probability was very different. The English word comes from the Latin *probare*, to approve, which suggests the traditional meaning: a belief is probable if the proper authorities approve of it. One proves a belief by marshalling the favourable opinions of experts. Indeed, "provable," an etymological cousin of "probable," also descends from *probare*. Again, this concept goes back to Aristotle.[73] In this traditional view, probability and truth were independent of each other. This understanding continued into the

70 Dominik Perler, *Zweifel and Gewissheit: skeptische Debatten im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2013), 188–89.

71 Antoninus of Florence, *Summa theologica* (Venice: Marinus Saracenus, 1487), fol. 53v, 55v, 56r. The language at 53v conforms to that of Johannes Nider. It is not clear who was drawing from whom, or whether both were coming from a common source, perhaps Bernard of Clairvaux. See Johannes Nider, *Die vierundzwanzig goldenen Harfen*, ed. Stefan Abel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 480. Nider used the concept of probability when writing on business ethics, e.g., *De contractibus mercatorum* (Cologne: Konrad Winters, ca. 1479).

72 Alexander Fidora, "Divination and Scientific Prediction: The Epistemology of Prognostic Sciences in Medieval Europe," *Early Science and Medicine* 18 (2013): 517–35, https://doi.org/10.1163/15733823-0186p0002; Pasnau, *After Certainty*, 31. Al-Asqalani quoted in Franz Rosenthal, "Ibn Khaldun in his Time," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 18 (1983): 166–78 (169), https://doi.org/10.1177/002190968301800303

73 Aristotle, *Topics: Books I and VIII, with Excerpts from Related Texts*, trans. Robin Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 1–2 (1.1; 100a–01a). The Greek here is ἔνδοξα, although other Greek terms and concepts are translated into Latin as *probabilia*.

eighteenth century, when the historian Edward Gibbon described one claim as "probable but undoubtedly false."[74]

Boethius (ca. 480–524) shared an example of a probable statement: "If she is a mother, she loves her child." This probability had nothing to do with the number of loving mothers as a percentage of the total number of mothers, as modern probability would. This probability did not deny that some mothers might not love their children. Rather, the statement was probable because most reasonable people would accept it; it resonated with the wise.[75]

This Aristotelian understanding of probability developed in the medieval Muslim and Christian worlds. Islamic scholars for centuries had assessed the strength of specific traditions, based on comparing reported evidence and recognizing the possibility, but unlikelihood, of multiple apparently independent witnesses coordinating their deceit.[76] John of Salisbury (d. 1180) followed the usage of Aristotle: "Probable logic [*logica probabilis*] is concerned with propositions which, to all or to many men, or at least to the wise, seem to be valid."[77] In practice, the qualification of seeming valid to "the wise" faded. Individual scholars, implicitly considering themselves wise, held something to be probable if it seemed, in their eyes, to be valid.

Such a low bar could sometimes be applied to something as loft as certainty. Aquinas and Bonaventure could both speak of a "probable certainty."[78] This functioned like certainty—one could take action based on it—but was merely probable. Aquinas, for example, noted that in the messy human world certainty (that is, knowledge demonstrative and infallible) was impossible. A certain conclusion could not be derived from uncertain premises. One could not have certain knowledge of what was contingent, non-necessary, and accidental. Consider, he proposed, a situation in which three witnesses' testimonies agreed. We could not be *certain* that this is true, but we pragmatically accept that it was, because their possible collusion was only possible, not probable. Where

74 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 4 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1850), II, 511.

75 The example originates from Cicero (Cic. Inv. 1.46), and was repeated and popularized by Boethius. Boethius, *De topicis differentiis*, trans. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1978), 40.

76 Franklin, *Science of Conjecture*, 121.

77 John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1955), 79 (2.3).

78 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II–II, q. 70, art. 2. See also Thomas Aquinas, *In libros posteriorum Analyticorum expositio*, book 1, lecture 16 and Bonaventure, *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum II*, in *Opera omnia*, 4 vols. (Florence: Quaracchi, 1885), II, 136 (dist. 4, art. 2, quaest. 1).

a deep-ken logic sought certainty, the plain ken accepted probability. Aquinas concluded that "probability is sufficient."[79]

Moving into our period, we see the idea of the "probable" thriving even beyond theology. Jean Buridan (d. ca. 1360) argued that a judge could "well and meritoriously [*bene et meritorie*]" execute an innocent person when "testimony and other legal evidence" showed that "this good man [...] was an evil murderer."[80] This was not a compelling truth, but a justified one. Ranulf Higden considered the assertion that snakes had never inhabited Ireland as being *probabilius* [more probable], which his translator John Trevisa (d. 1402) expansively rendered "more probable and more skilful."[81] Note that both men used the comparative degree, which would have been impossible for certainty, and Trevisa linked probability to skill, namely the ability to find supportive authorities. The imperial ambassador Thomas Ebendorfer (1388–1464) reasoned out that two contradictory statements could both be judged *probabilis* by the same person, as long as each was supported by a party of equally learned scholars. In such cases a new council, or something like it, would have to be called to resolve the issue.[82] Nicholas of Autrecourt argued for a blanket assertion: "It is probable that every thing which appears to be is, and that every thing which appears to be true is true."[83]

The French Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly applied the concept of probability to astrology. One could interpret stars more reliably than one could interpret Biblical prophecy. Even Jesus was influenced by astrology except under exceptional circumstances, "by special privilege, not by nature but rather by grace." He argued that "Christian tradition does not require Jesus's birth to be exempt from astrological influence, just as it does not require Mary to be unable to be warmed by the sun's light." Jesus's direction (Mt 5:17) to "not think that I have come to abolish the Law" applied to astrological law just as much as to

79 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, I–II, q. 105, art. 2 (reply to obj. 8).

80 John Buridan, *In Metaphysicen Aristotelis quaestiones* (Paris: Badius, 1518), fol. 9r (2.1); translation by John Buridan, "John Buridan on Scientific Knowledge," in *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*, ed. Gyula Klima, Fritz Allhoff, and Anand Jayprakash Vaidya (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 143–50 (146).

81 *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden*, I, 338–39. One manuscript has *probabile* instead of *probabilius*.

82 Thomas Ebendorfer, "Denkschrift des Thomas Ebendorfer, Gesandten K. Friedrichs III., über die Notwendigkeit der Berufung eines dritten Konzils," in *Deutsche Reichstagsakten*, ed. Hermann Herre, 12 vols. (Gotha: Perthes, 1914), XV, 803. See Thomas Woelki, *Lodovico Pontano* (*ca. 1409–1439*) (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 195–96, https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004194717.i-936

83 Nicholas of Autrecourt, *Tractatus utilis ad videndum an sermones peripateticorum fuerint demonstrativi*, in J. Reginald O'Donnell, ed., "Nicholas of Autrecourt," *Mediaeval Studies* 1 (1939): 179–280 (228–29) (ch. 6).

Mosaic law.[84] D'Ailly predicted religious revolutions in 1789 and 1915.[85] (The French Revolution and World War One were, in fact, the great disasters for Christianity from a traditional view.) He was cautious: revolution would not occur if the world had ended first, an event the time of which only God knew. The stars also could not explain the nature of revolution; it was the Bible that clarified this as the advent of the Antichrist.[86] Because God could act absolutely, we have to remain skeptical about even the clearest astronomical predictions, because he could, theoretically, defy them.[87]

Gerson's Popularization of Probability

This traditional idea of "sufficient probability" was popularized by d'Ailly's student Gerson, in both his 1418 *De consolatione theologiae* [On the Consolation of Theology][88] and in his consideration of the case of Joan of Arc (ca. 1412–31). Gerson drew from this same Aristotelian tradition of distinguishing between the kinds of knowledge involved in mathematics and those involved in morals.

Gerson approached truth pragmatically. The truth of a book describing the visions of Ermine of Reims (d. 1396) was irrelevant, he argued, since either way it should not be publicized. Gerson quoted Jesus's instructions, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs" (Mt 7:6).[89] Even if authorities confirmed the belief that one could not die on the same day as hearing mass, one should not popularize it widely, especially given its track record of being used in scams.[90] Truth was less important than consequences.

84 Pierre d'Ailly, *Apologetica defensio astronomice veritatis*, in d'Ailly, *Ymago mundi* (Louvain: n.p., 1483), fol. gg6v, gg8rv.

85 Pierre d'Ailly, *Concordantia*, in d'Ailly, *Ymago mundi*, fol. d6v.

86 D'Ailly, *Concordantia*, fol. d6v. See Laura Ackerman Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350–1420* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994), 68, 81, 108–13, 129; Noël Valois, "Un Ouvrage Inédit de Pierre D'ailly: Le *De persecutionibus ecclesiæ*," *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes* 65 (1904): 557–74 (574).

87 Technically he was talking not absolute vs. ordained, but natural astral causality vs. supernatural causality. See William J. Courtenay, "Covenant and Causality in Pierre d'Ailly," *Speculum* 46 (1971): 94–119; Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars*, 9, 125–26.

88 Jean Gerson, "Deconsolatione theologiae," in OC, IX, 230–34.

89 Mt 7:6. Gerson to Jean Morel (ca. 1408), "Ratio primi est ne detur sanctum canibus et margaritae projiciantur ante porcos…," in OC, II, 95. See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812291339

90 Jean Gerson, "Adversus superstitionem in audiendo missam," in OC, X, 141–43. See Daniel Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity Before Print* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 28–29.

Gerson could freely adopt such a pragmatic stance because he fully divorced probability from truth: "Many false things are probable; indeed [...] some false things are more probable than some true things." Probability was partially independent from error: "A probable thing, if rightly established and duly understood, is not to be called error or erroneous except that the assertion is extended pertinaciously beyond probability's bounds."[91] Gerson believed that certainty was unachievable by humans, "without revelation," and that the quest for it was dangerous, because it led to excessive scruples. Instead of certainty, he sought "probable and moral conjecture," and advised, following Aristotle, that certainty be understood "figuratively."[92]

Gerson encouraged his audience by promoting this idea of "moral certainty."[93] A moral certainty was one based on probability, taken "roughly and figuratively [*grossis et figuralibus*]."[94] A moral certainty was certain except for the slight uncertainty inherent in all knowledge of this kind. It thus represented a high, but incomplete, degree of persuasion.[95]

With Gerson we have the full development of what we might call the "messy world." Gerson saw a particular messiness in human affairs, since "the diversity of human temperament and condition is incomprehensible; not just in many men, but in one and a single one," to say nothing of the "different years, nor months, nor weeks, but even days, and hours, and moments."[96] In the deep ken, astrology could detect subtle consonances, and use those to predict the future. In the plain ken, the messiness of the world, however, made this impossible. Gerson dismissed astrology's apparent ability to make true predictions: "Many more are false; and indeed they say true ones are either by chance [*a casu*] or by the multitude of predictions they make in total."[97]

Let us consider a specific ethical conundrum in this messy world. Could and should a priest celebrate the Eucharist—that is, affect the presence of the body and blood of Jesus—after a nocturnal emission?[98] The mainstream advice was that it would be better if a priest in such circumstances avoided celebrating the

91 Jean Gerson, "De puella Aurelianensi," in OC, IX, 661–62.
92 Jean Gerson, "De contractibus," in OC, IX, 402.
93 Jean Gerson, "De praeparatione ad missam," in OC, IX, 37.
94 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 2–4 (I.3 1094b).
95 Franklin, *Science of Conjecture*, 70, points out that this is dangerous because *certitudo moralis* is not a type of *certitudo*, just as a suspected criminal is not a type of criminal.
96 Jean Gerson, "De perfectione cordis," in OC, VIII, 129.
97 Jean Gerson, "Tricelogium astrologie theologizate," in OC, X, 96.
98 The theological tradition even considered whether Jesus himself had nocturnal emissions. John Kitchen, "Cassian, Nocturnal Emissions, and the Sexuality of Jesus," in *The Seven Deadly Sins From Communities to Individuals*,

Eucharist, unless that avoidance would provoke gossip about the cause. Gerson wrote about this issue at length. If listening to detailed sexual confessions triggered an emission, no sin occurred, but priests should take precautions: avoid hearing confessions before mass, avoid sitting to hear confessions—kneeling is better. Much was uncertain: perhaps a previous sin caused the emission, and perhaps study of the contents of the emission-causing dream would give clues to the previous sin. A polluted priest could be the menstruating woman who was cured by contact with Jesus's clothes (Mt 9:20–22, Mk 5:25–34; Lk 8:43–48): "You suffer bleeding and cannot be cured by doctors," but "touch the most holy host so that you will be purged." Unintended emission of semen might increase chastity, as a virgin's chastity was doubled in the case of rape. Gerson suggested the priest address his thoughts, "Bah, bah on you, thoughts most vile! Go away far from here, at an evil hour you have come; I am occupied with other things, and give you no hearing or seeing; depart, go away from here, O sirens, who are sweet until destruction."[99]

Ultimately, beyond these tactics and speculation, when priests were nervous about the requirement to be in a state of grace while doing the mass, Gerson taught reliance not on certainty, but on moral certainty. That is, priests should strive to do their best without worry.[100] Such a teaching "profits against too many scruples in morals, as they seek a greater certainty than the thing can have" in the absence of extraordinary miraculous revelation. "Moral and probable conjecture," he echoed Aquinas, "suffices."[101]

This was part of Gerson's campaign against over-scrupulousness. He thus alluded to Pope Celestine V's (1215–96) dream of riding to a royal court on a donkey unceremoniously defecating in the street, when the king's voice announced there was no pollution from the feces falling unintentionally from Celestine's "corporeal and irrational ass." Neither fallen feces nor trivial moral details demanded anxiety. Too much scrupulousness could lead to more pollution, Gerson noted, citing Proverbs 30:33: "He that violently bloweth his nose bringeth out blood." After consulting medical doctors, Gerson reassured priestly readers that "no pollution begun and completed in sleep is a mortal

ed. Richard Newhauser (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 71–94, https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004157859.i-312.19

99 Jean Gerson, "De cognitione castitatis," in OC, IX, 60–63; Jean Gerson, "De praeparatione ad missam," 41–48. See Dyan Elliott, "Pollution, Illusion, and Masculine Disarray: Nocturnal Emissions and the Sexuality of the Clergy," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie (Minneapolis, 1997), 9–13.

100 Jean Gerson, "De contractibus," 402. See Hobbins, *Authorship*, 68–69.

101 Jean Gerson, "Collectorium super Magnificat," in OC, VIII, 364–65.

sin."[102] In a plain-ken move, he argued that meaning could not be projected onto an action done without intention.

Gerson's approach made a practical concession in abandoning the quest for certainty in morals. When deep-ken requirements collided with plain-ken doubts, moral certainty allowed you to move forward with confidence, even if you had no real certainty. Armed only with moral certainty, one could perform the mass after involuntary ejaculation, or sentence an accused to death. This same uncertain, reckless confidence may be a key characteristic of our modern mind.

Envoi

Theorists sometimes see the heart of modernity in the existential crises created by the nature of truth and certainty. The thinkers under examination here seem to have faced similar crises, with an even greater sense of danger, of instability and high stakes. Nicholas Love (d. ca. 1424) worried about the "safety" of contemplating Jesus in different ways, finally concluding that a devotion to his humanity was less dangerous than a devotion to his divinity.[103] The fifteenth century saw the development of the idea that one did not need certainty to act—an idea that accepted our existence in this messy world. Good authorities give us probability, and what appeared true could be taken as true, probably.[104] Ethical choices involved multiple viable options, one of which must be chosen even without certainty. Thus, a kind of "neo-philosophy" emerged that was comfortable with using plain-ken opinions and probability to address issues once the domain of deep-ken *scientia*. This position, strangely combining a pessimism about our ability to know with an optimism about our intellectual lives despite that inability, became, and remains, a distinctive quality of Far Western culture and thought, from the Scientific Revolution to the present.

102 Jean Gerson, "De cognitione castitatis," 62; Jean Gerson, "De praeparatione ad missam," 41–50. See Elliott, "Pollution," 11–19.

103 Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 10 (lines 23–25).

104 Hobbins, *Authorship*, 68.