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Article

2022

Published version

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How to cite

ZAHND, Ueli. Martin Bucer's first theological program and the late medieval concept of "states of perfection". In: *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 2022, vol. 96, n° 1-3, p. 197–217. doi: 10.4000/rsr.11970

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch//unige:162650>

Publication DOI: [10.4000/rsr.11970](https://doi.org/10.4000/rsr.11970)

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Martin Bucer's First Theological Program and the Late Medieval Concept of "States of Perfection"

When Martin Bucer arrived in Strasbourg in 1523 at the age of thirty-one, he was already looking back on a checkered career.¹ At the age of 15, he had joined the Dominican Order, which had provided him with a solid education and allowed him to study in Heidelberg, but his interest first in the new humanistic spirit, and then his personal encounter with Martin Luther on the occasion of the latter's Heidelberg Disputation, had led him to be released from his vows in 1521. Now a secular priest, he entered the service of Franz von Sickingen, a powerful imperial knight who had declared a feud not only with the Dominicans of Cologne but also with the bishop of Trier and who wanted to use the momentum of the early Reformation to politically strengthen the nobility against the imperial princes. Sickingen was therefore little bothered that Bucer openly broke in 1522 with the status of being a priest, too, and married the former nun Elisabeth

¹ On the young Bucer's career, see, in general, M. GRESCHAT, *Martin Bucer. A Reformer and His Times*, trans. by S. E. Buckwalter, Louisville, Westminster John Know Press, 2004, p. 1-45; W. VAN'T SPIJKER, *The Ecclesiastical Offices in the Thought of Martin Bucer*, trans. by J. Vriend and L. D. Bierma (Studies in medieval and Reformation thought 57), Leiden, Brill, 1996, p. 7-112; and N. SCOTT AMOS, *Bucer, Ephesians and Biblical Humanism. The Exegete as Theologian* (Studies in Early Modern Religious Tradition, Culture and Society 7), Cham, Springer international Publishing, 2015, p. 81-87. More specifically for what follows, see M. GRESCHAT, "Die Anfänge der reformatorischen Theologie Martin Bucers", in: ID. – J. F. G. GOETERS (ed.) *Reformation und Humanismus. Robert Stupperich zum 65. Geburtstag*, Witten, Luther Verlag, 1969, p. 124-140; and ID., "Martin Bucer als Dominikanermönch", in: M. DE KROON – F. KRÜGER (ed.), *Bucer und seine Zeit. Forschungsbeiträge und Bibliographie* (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz 80), Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1976, p. 30-53.

Silbereisen.² Yet, since Sickingen's enterprise resulted in an open but hopeless war, which was quickly to be regarded as a revolt and ended with Sickingen's death, Bucer having eventually tried to abscond to Weissenburg as a preacher, was excommunicated there in the spring of 1523. It was as a priest who had resigned from his vows and got married, who was not only excommunicated but also considered a partisan of Sickingen, that Bucer tried thus to settle in Strasbourg with his wife in May 1523.

It is hardly surprising that the Strasbourg council had certain reservations about this new arrival. Although Bucer was allowed—against the will of the local bishop—to stay in the city, his request to have permission to preach and teach in public went unheard. At least the council had him explain his theological views to some members, and encouraged by this open ear—and possibly even at the behest of the council³—Bucer published some writings as late as the summer of 1523 in which he tried to explain the legitimacy of his theological views and of the way he led his life: the *Verantwortung*, a defense, among others, of his marriage⁴, the *Summary*, a synthesis of the sermons he had preached in Weissenburg⁵, and a booklet with the somewhat cumbersome title *Das ym selbs niemant, sondern anderen leben soll, und wie der Mensch dahin kummen mög* (*That No One Should Live for Himself but for Others, and How Man May Attain This*).⁶

² On Elisabeth Silbereisen, see D. ELBERT, "Bürgertochter, Klosterfrau, Reformatorin Elisabeth Bucer, geborene Silbereisen (um 1495–1541)", in: E.-M. BACHELER – P. ZIEGLER (ed.), *Auf zur Reformation. Selbstbewusst, mutig, fromm – Frauen gestalten Veränderung* (Edition Evangelisches Gemeindeblatt), Stuttgart, Verlag und Buchhandlung der Evangelischen Gesellschaft, 2016, p. 84–104.

³ This is at least the suggestion, not endorsed by later research, of H. STROHL, "Martin Bucer: Traité de l'Amour du Prochain", *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 27, 1947, p. 141–213 (p. 143; the article contains a French translation the *Das ym selbs* described below and was republished as Martin Bucer, *Traité de l'Amour du Prochain. Traduction, introduction et notes par Henri Strohl*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1949).

⁴ *Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. by R. Stupperich, Gütersloh, G. Mohn, 1960, p. 156–184 (hereafter *BDS*); see on these early writings GRESCHAT, *Martin Bucer*, p. 56–59.

⁵ *BDS* 1, p. 79–147.

⁶ *BDS* 1, p. 44–67. There is a rather free English translation by P. T. Fuhrmann, *Instruction in Christian Love (1523) by Martin Bucer, the Reformer*, Richmond (VA), John

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It is this last work in particular that has been attracting scholarly interest from the start.⁷ This small booklet—in the only contemporary edition it consists of just 16 folios—is divided into two parts: the first describes the divine order, according to which God created the world, but which was then disturbed by the Fall, so that the second part describes how humans may return to this first order. Therefore, while the other two writings from the summer of 1523 mainly look back and provide information about Bucer's early activities, the *Das ym selbs* is the first systematic outline of Bucer's teaching, in which he sketched the basic theological contours of what he intended to teach and preach in Strasbourg. Given its more systematic approach, it is no coincidence that this early writing in particular has been studied to look for the first imprints and the earliest influences on Bucer's thinking, and while it has been shown that it bears unmistakable influences from Martin Luther's early writings and his *On the liberty of a Christian* of 1520 in particular,⁸ it has also been argued that Bucer's small work is influenced by Thomas Aquinas,⁹ the Dominican Order's champion, whom Bucer must have known and studied intensively during his time as a Dominican friar.¹⁰ In particular, it has been

Knox Press, 1952. The translations in this article try to follow more closely the German original. For a French translation, see above n. 3.

⁷ F. H. MEADOWS, *The Early Eucharistic Theology of Martin Bucer*, PhD Thesis, McGill University, 1965, p. 14-38 (available on <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/3x816qq94k>); J. MÜLLER, *Martin Bucers Hermeneutik*, Gütersloh, G. Mohn, 1965, p. 16-21; and GRESCHAT, *Martin Bucer*, p. 56-58. See also W. VAN'T SPIJKER, "Bucer's Doctrinal Legacy as Formulated in his Last Three Wills and Testaments", *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 3, 2001, p. 152-166 (p. 154).

⁸ The cumbersome title of the writing may even be a direct reference to a passage from Luther's treatise, see Robert Stupperich's Introduction in *BDS* 1, p. 38; STROHL, "Traité de l'Amour du Prochain", p. 145 with n. 3; and VAN'T SPIJKER, *The Ecclesiastical Offices*, p. 86. But see also ERASMUS, *Enchiridion militis christiani* VI, in: J. DOMAŃSKI – R. MARCEL (ed.), *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, vol. 8, Leiden, Brill, 2016, p. 57-393 (p. 234-235), discussed in M. GRESCHAT, "Der Ansatz der Theologie Martin Bucers", *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 103, 1978, p. 86.

⁹ L. LEIJSEN, "Martin Bucer und Thomas von Aquin", *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 55, 1979, p. 265-296 (p. 278.290); MÜLLER, *Bucers Hermeneutik*, p. 20; STUPPERICH, "Einleitung", p. 34-35.

¹⁰ Besides the literature cited above, see G. HAMMANN, *Entre la secte et la cité. Le projet d'Église du Réformateur Martin Bucer (1491-1551)* (Histoire et société 3), Geneva, Labor et fides, 1981, p. 391-392; A. NOBLESSE-ROCHER, "Le nom et l'être de Dieu (Exode 3, 14)

repeatedly argued that the two-stage structure of the booklet is in far-reaching agreement with Thomas' *Summa theologiae*, because Thomas, too, begins with God and creation and only then treats the return of rational creatures to God as their goal.¹¹

This parallel remains questionable, however, if only because the significance of Thomas' *Summa* in the theology of the late Middle Ages has been generally overestimated.¹² More critical is the fact that the same theological structure leading from the doctrine of God and creation to ethics and redemption can already be found in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and thus in any of the countless *Sentences* compendia of the late Middle Ages. While there are structural peculiarities of the *Summa* compared to the *Sentences*, they consist in the doctrine of God and the doctrine of virtue, both of which are topics that play no role in Bucer's small work, so that it at best can be argued that, regarding the structure, Bucer simply chose a very common medieval approach.¹³

Possible models and influences of this writing have therefore to be found elsewhere than in its structure, and there is one telling point in particular which has received little attention so far. For it seems that Bucer was aware of the cumbersomeness in the chosen title, so he provided a more precise account in a preface to the work which specified—after alluding to the actual title—that the essay was “about living not for ourselves but for our neighbor, and how we

selon Thomas d'Aquin et Martin Bucer”, *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 81, 2001, p. 425-447; D. C. STEINMETZ, *Calvin in Context*, Oxford University Press, 2010², p. 144-148; and J. J. BALLOR, “Deformation and Reformation: Thomas Aquinas and the Rise of Protestant Scholasticism”, in: M. SVENSSON – D. VANDRUNEN (ed.), *Aquinas Among the Protestants*, Oxford, Willey Blackwell, 2018, p. 27-48 (p. 35-36).

¹¹ LEIJSSSEN, “Bucer und Thomas”, p. 278; GRESCHAT, “Ansatz der Theologie”, p. 89; ID., *Martin Bucer*, p. 68; NOBLESSE-ROCHER, “Le nom et l'être de Dieu”, p. 441; ID., “Die Rezeption mittelalterlicher Theologen in Martin Bucers Abendmahlskonzeption der Jahre nach 1530”, in: M. ARNOLD – B. HAMM (ed.), *Martin Bucer zwischen Luther und Zwingli* (Spätmittelalter und Reformation. Neue Reihe 23), Tübingen, M. Siebeck, 2003, p. 67-83 (p. 68).

¹² See most recently U. ZAHND, “The Genesis of a Genre? Late Medieval Commentaries on the ‘Summa Theologiae’”, in: L. LANZA – M. TOSTE (ed.), *Summistae: The Commentary Tradition on Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae (15th-18th Century)* (Ancient and Medieval Philosophy 58), Leuven, University Press, 2021, p. 127-158.

¹³ See also AMOS, *Bucer, Ephesians and Biblical Humanism*, p. 84, who suggests the Apostle's Creed as an even more general model of this structure.

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might get there, that is: *zum Stand der Volkummenheit, die uns hie möglich ist.*¹⁴ Bucer wrote his booklet in German, but if one reads this apposition with Latin glasses, it becomes clear that Bucer wanted to present here a treatise *De statu perfectionis*—on the state of perfection.¹⁵

For a late medieval reader, this was nothing unusual at all. Treatises on the state of perfection were so numerous in the literature of the time that they almost form a genre of their own: they came into vogue in the thirteenth century in the debates between mendicant orders, other orders, and secular priests disputing about the institutional setting in which the highest degree of perfection in this world could be achieved. No other than Thomas Aquinas contributed to this discussion with, among others, a treatise *De perfectione spiritualis vitae*—on the perfection of spiritual life.¹⁶ In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the discussion increasingly left this narrow institutional framework and gained importance in mystical circles and especially in the periphery of the *devotio moderna*, but remained part of a scholastically inspired debate.¹⁷

In what follows, therefore, I propose to read Bucer's writing in the light of this specific late medieval tradition, in which Bucer quite obviously placed himself. To this end, in a first step, I will introduce Bucer's treatise in more detail. In a second, I will then discuss three medieval works from this *De perfectione*-tradition: the aforementioned treatise by Thomas, an early work on the subject by Jean Gerson, and finally a work from the environment of the Charterhouse of Basel

¹⁴ *BDS* 1, p. 44, l. 23-24.

¹⁵ Both the editor of *BDS* 1 (p. 36 and 44 with n. 7) and VAN'T SPIJKER, *The Ecclesiastical Offices*, p. 87 note this reference to the medieval doctrine of *status perfectionis*, without seeing, however, that Bucer intends here to enter in productive discussion with a whole literary genre.

¹⁶ Edited by H.-F. Dondaine, in: *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita [Editio Leonina]*, vol. 40: *Opuscula*, t. 2, Romae, Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1970, p. B69-B111. See R. CESSARIO, *The Godly Image. Christian Satisfaction in Aquinas* (Sacra doctrina), Washington (DC), The Catholic University of America Press, 2020, p. 29-33 and 137-144.

¹⁷ See N. STAUBACH, "*Christiana perfectio und evangelica libertas. Die Krise des christlichen Lebensideals zwischen Devotio moderna und Reformation*", in: ID. (ed.), *Exemplaris Imago. Ideale in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Tradition, Reform, Innovation 15), Frankfurt, P. Lang, 2012, p. 229-282.

from the second half of the 15th century. In conclusion this will have allowed me to delineate, more precisely than by mere cursory allusions to the *Summa theologiae*, the extent to which Bucer continued to inscribe the late medieval tradition, but also demonstrated theological independence in this early phase of his work.

I. Martin Bucer, *Das ym selbs* (1523)

As already mentioned, Bucer's treatise consists of two parts. In the first, he explains in the terms of a theology of creation why human beings should not live for themselves and how it came that they nevertheless live so, and in the second, he shows how human beings can overcome their corrupted state and return to their original purpose of living for others. In the first part, Bucer draws his main argument from the final goal God had inscribed in creation from the beginning and that consists of God himself: quoting Proverbs 16:4, Bucer states that "God has created every thing for his own sake," and he immediately concludes from this: "hence, all things should be oriented toward him and be at his service."¹⁸ In the following pages Bucer develops this statement and conclusion further and expands it especially with regard to Genesis 1:28, that is, the "dominion mandate". According to this mandate, creation is not only in God's service, but rather within creation things are also at each other's service. Bucer concludes: "It is now clear how all other creatures serve humans. But humans serve them in turn by using them, as God has ordered. For the honor and glory of every thing is when it is used for what it was made."¹⁹ The basic purpose of every creature consists in being here for something else, be it to serve other creatures or, more fundamentally, to serve God. As a consequence, it is obvious for Bucer that the

¹⁸ *BDS* 1, p. 45, l. 23-24: "Gott hat alle ding umb seint willen geschaffen. Darumb solten sye alle uff yn gericht und ym dienstlich sin." The editor of *BDS* 1 refers to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.44, 4 as a possible model of this passage; much closer (and more prominent) are, however, Thomas' *Sentences commentary* I, 1.2.1, sc. 2, and also *De veritate* 22, 2 (Bucer had a copy of it, see *BDS* 1, p. 282). See also below, n. 20.

¹⁹ *BDS* 1, p. 47, l. 8-11.

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true destiny for a human being is also to be here for something else and hence to live for others.

The example of non-human creatures finding their fulfillment in being appropriately used shows to what extent Bucer thinks here in line with a teleological approach, where the end defines the essence of a thing and where a thing finds its perfection when it is realized according to its end.²⁰ But Bucer does not yet speak about such perfection. Building on this logic of creation, he rather continues to substantiate his argument with man's creation in the image and likeness of God, but also with the creation of Eve,²¹ since the caring love human beings are able to show to each other and to their children reflects the spiritual love of God to his creation and creatures. Charity²² as the intrinsic affect of investing oneself for the sake of someone else, becomes thus the fundamental constituent of the creation and its goal. It is ingrained in the very nature of things, and it was part of the natural state of the creation—at least before the Fall.

With the Fall, however, things changed profoundly. It was with the Fall that humans forgot about their original orientation toward others and introduced self-interest and selfishness. While humanity's upright use of creation had been a way to help other creatures fulfill their purpose, the selfish postlapsarian use changed the entire relationship not only between humans and God, but also between humans and the rest of creation. "Together with the cognition of God, we have also lost the cognition of creatures, and since we don't want to live at his service, with due right his creatures were withdrawn from our service."²³

It is noteworthy, however, that for Bucer, the Fall does not seem to have been an essential alteration of mankind, but only some kind

²⁰ On the possible Pseudo-Dionysian inspiration of Bucer's view of creation, see E. M. PARKER, "Saint Dionysius: Martin Bucer's Transformation of the Pseudo-Areopagite", in: G. W. JENKINS *et al.* (ed.), *From Rome to Zurich, between Ignatius and Vermigli. Essays in Honor of John Patrick Donnelly, SJ*, Leiden, Brill, 2017, p. 121-145.

²¹ *BDS* 1, p. 48.

²² On the role of charity in Bucer (and as compared to Thomas), see GRESCHAT, "Ansatz der Theologie", p. 82-84. Further research would have to be done to see if Bucer already inspired, in this regard, the young Katherine Schütz Zell, see C. METHUEN, "Preaching the Gospel through Love of Neighbour: The Ministry of Katharina Schütz Zell", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61, 2010, p. 707-728.

²³ *BDS* 1, p. 49, l. 22-25.

of disorientation and misalignment with one's own interests instead of the needs of others. It seems to remain possible, as a consequence, to reorientate human beings and to lead them back, in doing so, to their original destiny.²⁴ This is where Bucer finally introduces the notion of perfection, for perfection, it seems, is something that remains attainable in this life. Quoting the Golden Rule according to Matthew 7,12, Bucer explains that

by our very nature we are so minded that we wish every man to do us good, and no man to do us evil. Hence, if our life should be put in the right order to which the Law and the Prophets point, we should do the same to others, that is, do them good. Were we able to do that, we would already be perfect.²⁵

At the moment, this perfection remains an unaccomplished ideal, but the direction to take seems clear:

How to love oneself is evident to everyone. But if somebody wishes to follow Christ, that is, to be brought from his wicked nature to the regular state and nature, he has to take all that love that, because of his poisoned nature, he has for himself, and put it on his neighbor.²⁶

Given this obvious direction to follow, Bucer is even able to distinguish different states of perfection. He says: "From this it follows that the best and most perfect and blessed state on earth is that in which one serves most usefully and profitably his neighbor."²⁷ Accordingly, Bucer can define two further criteria to distinguish which is this most perfect state: given their greater use to neighbors, he

²⁴ See GRESCHAT, "Anfänge der reformatorischen Theologie", p. 134-135, LEIJSEN, "Bucer und Thomas", p. 291.

²⁵ BDS 1, p. 51, l. 10-15: "Wir seind von art und natur also gesynnt, das wir wo^elten, yederman tha^t uns gu^ots und niemant bo^oß. also so in rechte ordnung unser leben gestelt werden soll, das das gesatz und phropheten anzeigt, mu^essen wir der massen auch ym thuⁿ, nemlich yederman gu^ots. welchs, so wir thuⁿ kündten, weren wir schon volkommen."

²⁶ BDS 1, p. 51, l. 16-21: "Wie sich selb ein yeder lieb hat, ist ye einem yeglichen kundtlich. Nun will er Christo nachkommen, das ist von seim verkerten wesen wider in rechten stand und wesen brocht werden, mu^oß er alle dieselbig lieb, so er uß gesu^och der vergiffen natur uff sich selb hat, von ym nemen und uff den nechsten legen."

²⁷ BDS 1, p. 51, l. 32-34. On the primacy of this *charitas ordinata a proximo* see already GRESCHAT, "Anfänge der reformatorischen Theologie", p. 137-138, and ID., "Ansatz der Theologie", p. 81.

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concludes that “a spiritual service is superior to a corporeal one, and a service to the community is superior to one rendered to an individual”, so that he ends up establishing, by means of these two criteria, a hierarchy of different statuses of perfection in this world. At the top is “the office of apostles which does not serve particular men, but the community, and does not serve with corporeal, but with spiritual means.”²⁸ Next come the civil authorities that do not provide a spiritual service, but still a service to the community,²⁹ and then come the normal people with their daily, corporeal professions that serve particular goals, but that still can be further segmented according to their use for others.³⁰

Based on the concept of charity and of the love of neighbors, Bucer thus thinks in hierarchical terms of clearly distinguishable states of perfection. But this order is only a theoretical one, for it stands in sharp contrast to what Bucer finds realized in his surroundings. He notes that, instead of striving for the benefit of others to the point of self-abandonment, the actual holders of an apostolic office strive for their own goods and well-being, so that they do not belong, in fact, to the most perfect state, but they have fallen and “lie now in the lowest, most disgraceful and diabolical state and very damned antichristian nature.”³¹ It is not any better, in Bucer’s eyes, with the civic authorities that only work for their own enrichment and profit,³² and with any other profession where people seek exclusively their own gain. Obviously, the theoretical states of perfection have nothing to do with the actual state of the world.³³

²⁸ *BDS* 1, p. 51, l. 34-39.

²⁹ *BDS* 1, p. 55.

³⁰ *BDS* 1, p. 58: while appreciating farmers, Bucer criticizes merchants in particular, who “want to become rich without working”, see VAN’T SPIJKER, *The Ecclesiastical Offices*, p. 88-89.

³¹ *BDS* 1, p. 54, l. 13-14; see also *BDS* 1, p. 59, l. 1-3.

³² *BDS* 1, p. 57-58.

³³ If VAN’T SPIJKER, *The Ecclesiastical Offices*, p. 89, argues, that Bucer’s exposition “by no means implies the recognition of the supremacy of the spiritual state”, this is only true in light of the actual state of the world: since Bucer clearly holds that there are degrees in the value of occupations according to their use for others, in an ideal world where everybody pursues his trade in pure love of neighbor, the spiritual office would be at the top. As will become clear below, this insistence on a theoretical hierarchy seems to be a repercussion precisely of the *De perfectione* tradition Bucer

With this diagnosis of a discrepancy between the theoretical and the realized states of perfection, Bucer finally proceeds to the second, much shorter part of his treatise. Here he wants to explain “how we can return to such a life that we live as we were first created, not for ourselves, but for the benefit of others and for the praise of God”,³⁴ and only here does Bucer begin to take up elements that we would consider typically Protestant. Indeed, Bucer makes it unmistakably clear right at the beginning of this second part that such a return can be brought about by faith alone.³⁵ This faith is first and foremost faith in Christ. It consists “in the complete trust that through his blood he has restored [mankind] to the reconciliation and grace of the Father, whereupon through his Spirit there follows again the original order toward all creatures.”³⁶ Entirely in the spirit of Luther’s *On the freedom of a Christian*,³⁷ the restoration of this original orientation is therefore a re-action that takes place in the believers themselves as a necessary response of gratitude for the experienced grace: “Indeed, if we would only believe that such renewal, reconciling, and restoring also reaches us, undoubtedly the spirit of true love would befall us, which by no means considers and seeks its own, but in all things the welfare of the neighbor.”³⁸ Moreover, like Luther, Bucer understands the experience of this love in the mystical terminology of an effusion:³⁹ “we henceforth effuse ourselves and enter altogether into the service of all men for the pleasure and praise of our heavenly all-loving Father”, “for the nature of true goodness is not able to keep itself to itself, but must pour itself out as far as it is able.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, Bucer

answers to with his tract. See also PARKER, “Transformation of the Pseudo-Areopagite”, p. 131-133.

³⁴ BDS 1, p. 59, l. 28-29.

³⁵ BDS 1, p. 59, l. 30-60, l. 1: “Und das ichs mit kurzem anzeyg, bringt uns solchs allein der Glaub zu^owegen.”

³⁶ BDS 1, p. 60, l. 8-11.

³⁷ And already in line with his own interpretation of Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation*, see GRESCHAT, “Anfänge der reformatorischen Theologie”, p. 130.

³⁸ BDS 1, p. 61, l. 1-5.

³⁹ For Luther, see *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* 29, WA 7, 37 | *De libertate christiana*, WA 7, 69.

⁴⁰ BDS 1, p. 61, l. 29-30 and p. 62, l. 27-30. The reference to the Pseudo-Dionysian *bonum est diffusivum sui* is evident, but while it has been noted that Bucer might have found this in Thomas’ *Summa theologiae* I, 5.4 (BDS 1, p. 34, n. 9 and p. 62), one

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concludes that man, renewed in faith, "like a full fountain, must pour out from his goodness, which has now come to him from God the Father through Christ, for the service and welfare of all men."⁴¹

Finally, like Luther, Bucer emphasizes that a believer is placed in the status of servitude by the experience of divine love. He cannot help but be a "perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" as Luther had famously written.⁴² But Bucer is interested in this servanthood from his own perspective. While Luther's starting point was to insist on the sole efficacy of grace and the *uselessness* of good works for the individual believer, Bucer is much more concerned with this outflow of love and thus precisely with the *usefulness* of works, but for others. Accordingly, he explains in more detail how such service to others manifests itself, referring in particular to humility, to obedience to the divine word, and to the confidence that one has received from God all that is necessary for him.⁴³

To sum up, Bucer arrives in his treatise at a description of the true Christian state which is realized in a life of perfect charity. This charity realigns a human being with the original order of creation, but it also establishes its own internal order, so that there are criteria to distinguish different states of this charitable perfection. Because this state is attainable only through faith and through the infusion and effusion of divine charity it brings about, Bucer proves to be an avid reader of Luther and especially of his treatise on Christian freedom. Much more than with Luther, however, Bucer's focus is on the effects of justification rather than on its conditions:⁴⁴ he remains interested

should not forget that Bucer possessed in his early years already a copy of the *De divinis nominibus* with Ficino's commentary, see *BDS* 1, p. 282; see also PARKER, "Transformation of the Pseudo-Areopagite", p. 124.

⁴¹ *BDS* 1, p. 65, l. 21-24: "Wie ein voller brunn mu'sß er von seiner güte, die im nun von gott, dem vatter, durch Christum widerfaren ist, ußthaten zu^o dyenst und wol-fart aller menschen."

⁴² LUTHER, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* 1, WA 7, 21 / *De libertate christiana*, WA 7, 49.

⁴³ *BDS* 1, p. 63-64.

⁴⁴ Bucer's doctrine of justification has mostly been studied with regard to his Commentary on Romans (1536); see, in particular, B. LUGIOYO, *Martin Bucer's Doctrine of Justification. Reformation Theology and Early Modern Irenicism*, Oxford University Press, 2010; and D. C. FINK, "The Doers of the Law Will Be Justified: the Exegetical Origins of Martin Bucer's *Triplex Iustificatio*", *Journal of Theological Studies* 58, 2007,

in the question of individual perfection—just as the medieval tradition in which he inscribes himself. So let us have a closer look at this tradition.

II. The medieval *De perfectione* tradition

As mentioned at the beginning, the medieval tradition of *De perfectione* treatises found its first culmination in the debates between clerics who wanted to clarify what ecclesiastical institution represented the most perfect state to be achieved. Unsurprisingly, each argued for his own standing: secular clerics emphasized the self-abandonment that comes with responsibility for a parish, religious friars stressed the value of vows, and mendicants singled out apostolic poverty as the decisive factor.⁴⁵ There was only agreement among these clerics that the highest state of perfection was, of course, to be found in the spiritual estate. To do so, in the various lines of argumentation that pervaded the debate, one distinction in particular prevailed, namely between virtues that were to be necessarily acquired by all Christians in order to attain eternal life, and those not generally prescribed but merely recommended. This second group of “supererogatory” virtues was called the *consilia*, the recommendations, to which regular clerics were especially committed, for this group of virtues consisted in particular of humility, obedience, chastity and poverty.⁴⁶ Thus, because clerics—and regular clerics in particular—by means of their vows aspired not only to the virtues prescribed to all, but also

p. 485-524. For the extent to which these first outlines of the *Das ym selbs* remained in vigor of what the later Bucer thought, see VAN'T SPIJKER, “Bucer’s Doctrinal Legacy”, p. 158-159.

⁴⁵ For a contextualization of the debate within the first mendicant controversy at the University of Paris see K. L. HUGHES, “Bonaventure’s Defense of Mendicancy”, in: J. HAMMOND *et al.* (ed.), *A Companion to Bonaventure* (Brill’s companions to the Christian tradition 48), Leiden, Brill, 2014, p. 509-541.

⁴⁶ Humility was usually considered to be the foundation of the other three, see HUGHES, “Bonaventure’s Defense”, p. 515, and W. NEWTON, “Aquinas and the Life of the Counsels”, *The Downside Review* 133, 2015, p. 274-298. On the protestant debate on *consilia* see S. MORTIMER, “Counsels of Perfection and Reformation Political Thought”, *The Historical Journal* 62, 2019, p. 311-330.

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to the virtues recommended, they were considered especially qualified to enter the state of perfection.

This brief overview alone makes it clear, that the fundamental logic of the medieval debate was different from that of Bucer's treatise. For here it was a matter of acquiring and enhancing virtues, and this in order to arrive by one's own efforts at a state that can be deemed worthy of salvation. Obviously, this is diametrically opposed to the Reformation doctrine of justification. Nevertheless, some parallels to Bucer's writing become apparent. With the exception of chastity,⁴⁷ his treatise discusses humility, obedience and eventually even poverty (in the form of the confidence to have received everything necessary from God and not to strive for anything else),⁴⁸ which seems to refer back to the teaching of *consilia*. Moreover, Bucer also engaged in the discussion of a hierarchization of states and considered the spiritual state as the most perfect one. Hence, even if he did no longer follow the logic of salvation that can be found in these late medieval treatises, Bucer still seems to have shared some of their concerns. A closer look at a number of these treatises confirms this.

1. *Thomas Aquinas, De perfectione spiritualis vitae (1269)*

A first treatise to be briefly examined was written, as already mentioned, by Thomas Aquinas. He composed it in late 1269 in the midst of the mendicant controversy, replying to the invective of a secular cleric⁴⁹ in order to prove to him that "the state of perfection cannot be attained otherwise than by a perpetual commitment [i.e., monastic vows]. Therefore, it is evident that archdeacons and parish priests, as well as candidates for the priesthood before ordination and novices before profession, have not yet reached the state of

⁴⁷ Bucer's treatise could even be read, however, as an opposition to the vow of chastity, see in particular *BDS* 1, p. 46-48.

⁴⁸ See above, at n. 43.

⁴⁹ That is, Gerard of Abbeville, see CESSARIO, *Godly Image*, p. 29-30, and HUGHES, "Bonaventure's Defense", p. 526-527. For a more thorough analysis of the work see U. HORST, *Evangelische Armut und Kirche. Thomas von Aquin und die Armutskontroversen des 13. und beginnenden 14. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1995, p. 63-76.

perfection.”⁵⁰ For our purposes, however, it is not so much this conclusion that is interesting, but rather the way in which Thomas arrives at it. For he too starts, as a matter of course, from a teleological perspective and explains at the very beginning of his treatise that perfection is reached where a thing is realized according to its purpose. And without further ado, he states that “spiritual life consists primarily in charity,” from which he concludes that “he who is perfect in charity is perfect in spiritual life.”⁵¹

Just like Bucer later on, Thomas insists on the fundamental role of charity in order to reach the state of perfection. In the end, this is hardly surprising, since charity is repeatedly emphasized as the most important virtue in the New Testament.⁵² Likewise, Thomas assumes—as a matter of course that he does not even specifically mention here—that, according to Rom 5, charity is infused by the Holy Spirit and therefore cannot be *acquired* by human activity, but at most can be properly used and increased.⁵³ Consequently, in order to justify this correct use and increase, Thomas does not rely on the golden rule as Bucer would, but on the double commandment of love according to Mt 22:

There are two commandments of charity, one pertaining to the love of God, the other to the love of neighbor. These two commandments have a certain order to each other, according to the order of charity. For what we should primarily love out of charity is the supreme good that makes us happy, namely God, while secondarily we should love our neighbor out of charity, with whom we are joined in a certain social bond, in the

⁵⁰ *De perfectione* 23, B98a: *Status perfectionis non habetur nisi cum perpetua obligatione; manifestum est igitur quod archidiaconi et parochiales sacerdotes, et etiam electi ante consecrationem, statum perfectionis nondum sunt adepti, sicut nec novitii in religionibus ante professionem.* For a complete, but not always accurate English translation see F. J. PROCTER, *The Religious State, the Episcopate, and the Priestly Office*, St Louis (MO), B. Herder, 1902 (p. 115). See also the ongoing translation by J. BOLIN, *On the Perfection of Spiritual Life*, <https://www.pathsoflove.com/aquinas/perfection-of-the-spiritual-life.html> (last visited on April 6, 2021).

⁵¹ *De perfectione* 2, B69b.

⁵² See, in particular, 1 Cor 13, cited in *De perfectione* 2, B69b, but also at the end of Bucer's treatise, *BDS* 1, p. 66.

⁵³ See *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae, 24.2. See also GRESCHAT, “Anfänge der reformatorischen Theologie”, p. 132.

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participation of happiness. Hence, what we should love in our neighbor out of charity is to mutually attain beatitude.⁵⁴

In this disposition, two differences from Bucer's approach immediately become clear. First, the love of neighbor is shown to be only a means to the actual end of achieving one's own happiness. Bucer would have rejected this not only because it emphasizes the traditional logic of justification by works, but above all because it is an indirect form of self-interest and thus an expression of a selfish love.⁵⁵ And therein the second difference emerges, for obviously the love of God is much more important to Thomas than the love of neighbor. Accordingly, a large part of the thirty chapters of his treatise deals with the love of God and how it is realized with regard to the individual *consilia*. In the few sections on the love of neighbor that Thomas still offers, it is intriguing that he provides a discussion of how this love is to be valued, referring to two criteria in particular. On the one hand, he says that "the more the love refers to many people, the more the love of neighbor seems to be perfect",⁵⁶ and on the other, he states that "the greater goods we spend on neighbor, the more perfect the love seems to be",⁵⁷ adding immediately that spiritual goods are greater ones than worldly goods. It is thus with the same two criteria with which Bucer would later operate, that Thomas, too, evaluated the perfection of charity, and be it only to come to the aforementioned result that, right after the pope and the bishops, the religious live in the most perfect state.⁵⁸ In contrast to Bucer, this status of

⁵⁴ *De perfectione* 3, B70a: *Sunt enim duo praecepta caritatis, quorum unum pertinet ad dilectionem Dei, aliud ad dilectionem proximi. Quae quidem duo praecepta ordinem quendam ad invicem habent secundum ordinem caritatis. Nam id quod principaliter caritate diligendum est, est summum bonum quod nos beatos facit, scilicet Deus; secundario vero diligendus ex caritate est proximus, qui nobis quodam sociali iure coniungitur in beatitudinis participatione: unde hoc est quod in proximo ex caritate debemus diligere, ut simul ad beatitudinem perveniamus.* See BOLIN, *Perfection of Spiritual Life*, c. 2.

⁵⁵ Bucer stressed this shift from *caritas ordinata a seipso* to *caritas ordinata a proximo* as early as 1519 in open opposition to Thomas, see GRESCHAT, "Ansatz der Theologie", p. 81.

⁵⁶ *De perfectione* 15, B86b.

⁵⁷ *De perfectione* 17, B89a.

⁵⁸ See above, n. 50.

perfection remained restricted for Thomas to a clearly defined religious elite.

2. *Jean Gerson, De consiliis evangelicis et statu perfectionis*
(ca. 1395)

However, there was already a critique of this elitist view in the Middle Ages, otherwise Thomas would not have had to write his treatise in the first place. One of those who, some 120 years later, directly challenged Thomas' model was Jean Gerson, the later influential chancellor of the University of Paris. Towards the end of his studies in the 1390s, he disputed as part of a scholastic exercise the question of knowing "wherein stands, remains and consists the spiritual life of our soul and the perfection of the Christian life."⁵⁹ To this end, he opened his disputation with a so-called fundamental conclusion, that "the vital, essential, intrinsic, and formally perfecting principle of the Christian life is charity together with its commandments."⁶⁰ Unsurprisingly, Gerson, too, placed charity at the center of his reflections on perfection, only to develop from this fundamental conclusion in a typically scholastic manner a whole series of corollaries in constant confrontation with Thomas.⁶¹

A first set of corollaries deals with the significance of *consilia*, and Gerson unequivocally states that they merely contribute as useful instruments to the perfection of the spiritual life, but do not essentially constitute it. As much as we thus continue to stand in the logic of *contributing* to one's perfection, this is a clear opening of the

⁵⁹ JEAN GERSON, *De consiliis evangelicis et statu perfectionis*, in: ID., *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, ed. by P. Glorieux, Paris, 1962, p. 10-26 (p. 10). On the disputation, see L. ABRAMOWSKI, "Johann Gerson, De consiliis evangelicis et statu perfectionis", in: ID. – J. F. GERHARD GOETERS (ed.), *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie der Reformation. Festschrift für Ernst Bizer*, Neukirchener Verlag, 1969, p. 63-78, and D. C. STEINMETZ, "Libertas Christiana: Studies in the Theology of John Pupper of Goch", *Harvard Theological Review* 65, 1972, p. 191-230 (p. 217-230).

⁶⁰ *De consiliis*, 10: *Est igitur conclusio ista fundamentalis: hujusmodi vitale, essenziale, intrinsecum et formaliter perfectivum principium vitae christianae est charitas et ejus mandata.*

⁶¹ However, Thomas is only explicitly mentioned where Gerson agrees with him, so that he gives the impression to be in accordance with Thomas in order to fundamentally oppose him, see ABRAMOWSKI, "De consiliis", p. 65.

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possibilities to *access* the state of perfection. For if the *consilia* do not belong essentially to this state, then it is clear, as Gerson explicitly concludes, “that one who has a family, wife, and children can become essentially perfect in the spiritual and Christian life.”⁶² Gerson underlines this by saying that after all, “perfect men have been found in every state, sex, order and degree”,⁶³ thus introducing nothing less than that difference between a formal state of perfection and an informal perfect way of life to which Bucer would later also refer. And like Bucer, Gerson underscores this difference by referring to the condition of the present priesthood:

Many are and were perfect in the spiritual life who are not in the state of perfection. This is evident from the many married people who are and have been perfect in the Christian life [...]. Likewise, as is unfortunately all too clearly observed, there are many in the state of perfection—whether prelates or religious friars—who are the most imperfect of all, dissolute in conduct of life and morals.⁶⁴

For all that, Gerson did not miss the opportunity to discuss again the question of hierarchy within the spiritual state and to emphasize, again in a clear rejection of Thomas, that the prelates and parish priests stood above the religious orders. After all, the former devoted their whole lives for the spiritual service of the community, and such a common good was better than a private good as pursued by the members of religious orders.⁶⁵ Using the well-known criteria, too, Gerson thus arrived at a conclusion very different from that of Thomas, pointing more strongly in the direction of Bucer's approach: stressing the non-essential role of *consilia* and insisting on the discrepancy between the status and the actual perfection of the spiritual state, Gerson underlined that spiritual perfection could in principle be found in anyone and everyone.

⁶² *De consiliis*, 18.

⁶³ *De consiliis*, 20.

⁶⁴ *De consiliis*, 22: *Multi sunt perfecti et fuerunt in vita spiritali qui non sunt in statu perfectionis. Patet de multis conjugatis qui sunt et fuerunt perfecti in vita christiana [...]. Consimiliter multi, ut pro dolor et clare nimium videre est, sunt in statu perfectionis, praelationis vel religionis omnium imperfectissimi, dissoluti in vita et moribus.*

⁶⁵ *De consiliis*, p. 23f. and 25: *Bonum vero commune divinius est et melius bono privato.*

III. Henricus Arnoldi, *De modo perveniendi ad perfectam Dei et proximi dilectionem* (ca. 1470)

If, therefore, a certain democratization already comes along with Gerson,⁶⁶ this tendency is found even more strongly in the last tract I would like to briefly discuss here. The work is “about the way how one arrives at the true and perfect love of God and of neighbor”,⁶⁷ and it is conceived as a mystical dialogue between an Ego and Christ but bears obvious scholastic traits.⁶⁸ It was written by a certain Henricus Arnoldi, prior of the Charterhouse of Basel, where it was printed as early as 1472.⁶⁹ Even if the treatise therefore originates from the environment of a religious order and has a scholastic undertone, its extended title already makes clear that it is meant to be useful not only to friars, but also to all other confessors of the Catholic faith: “Even though it is for religious and others devoted to piety, it can nevertheless be very useful to the rest of the professors of the Catholic faith. For we are all bound to the love of God and neighbor.”⁷⁰

As a result, the understanding of perfection presented therein is considerably more open. Once again, of course, charity is at its center, but before it comes to dealing with its realization, Arnoldi

⁶⁶ On this notion of ‘democratization’ see already H. A. OBERMAN, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (The Robert Troup Paine Prize-Treatise for the Year 1962), Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 341-343, and with regard to Arnoldi D. MARTIN, “Der ‘Tractat von der Lieb Gots und des Nächsten’ in cgm 790 und 394”, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 108, 1979, p. 258-266.

⁶⁷ *Tractatus de modo perveniendi ad veram et perfectam Dei et proximi dilectionem. Habens fundamentum ex theologia mistica. Et licet sit pro religiosis et aliis devocioni deditis, multum utilis potest nichilominus deservire et ceteris catholice fidei professoribus. Cum omnes ad dilectionem Dei et proximi teneantur. Editus a quodam cartusiensi ad Dei laudem et aliorum edificacionem*, Basel, Michael Wenssler, 1472. Given that this edition is unfoliated, we simply refer to the chapter numbers.

⁶⁸ In a prologue, Arnoldi explains that his approach is *non directe scolasticus*, but that *aliqua etiam intrans de theologia scolastica*. See, e.g., chapters 2 and 26.

⁶⁹ On Arnoldi, see most recently N. F. PALMER, “Der Basler Kartäuser Heinrich Arnoldi und seine an heilige Frauen gerichteten *Meditationes et orationes*”, in: J. THALI – N. F. PALMER (ed.), *Raum und Medium. Literatur und Kultur in Basel in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020, p. 315-372, with 322-323 on the present tract.

⁷⁰ See above, n. 67.

programmatically states that every Christian, provided he has not committed mortal sin, is already in the state of comprehensive Catholic perfection, namely at least by means of baptismal grace.⁷¹ Accordingly, he emphasizes right in the introductory chapters that a distinction must be made between 'being perfect' and 'being in the state of perfection', which is once again underlined with a reference to unworthy monks and perfect laymen.⁷² Arnoldi, however, draws from this the consequence that the dispute among monks about the superiority of their orders is completely senseless. True perfection, he argues, simply consists in charity, so that regardless of one's status, the one who possesses the greater love is more perfect.⁷³

This willingness to keep access—ultimately to salvation—open to all is found even more clearly when Arnoldi goes on to emphasize much more strongly than his predecessors the gracious character of charity. Starting from 1 John 4:16: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him," he explains that through love God abides in the lover like an inhabitant in his own house and like the Lord in his holy temple. Therefore, he notes that charity emerges directly from grace and is infused, as it were, by the light of grace, and he states that God, through his grace, inspires charity to the deeds of love.⁷⁴ In the sense of a mystical process, and similar to what we would have with Bucer, the infusion is thus to become an effusion, and only here Arnoldi locates the proper contribution a Christian has to make to comply with the late medieval logic of grace: namely, to respond with his own forces in order to grow in this love. Arnoldi even lets the Ego ask why it should grow in charity and love God, and he lets Christ refer in flowery words to God's creation which is so wonderful that He is more than worthy to be honored and loved.⁷⁵ Yet, as close as this focus on charity, grace and creation brings us to Bucer, it again reveals a clear difference: Arnoldi, like Thomas, is concerned above all with the love of God and less with the love of

⁷¹ *De modo perveniendi*, c. 2; see also MARTIN, "Tractat von der Lieb", p. 262.

⁷² *De modo perveniendi*, c. 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*: *Domine, ex verbis tuis hiis elicio quod in sola caritate consistit vera perfectio. Et quod hic dicendus est perfectior qui caritatem habuerit maiorem, etiam licet statum teneat inferiorem.*

⁷⁴ *De modo perveniendi*, c. 6.

⁷⁵ *De modo perveniendi*, c. 13 and 14.

neighbor. In the love of God, the believer is to grow above all in order to contribute his share to the salvific relationship between God and man.



With my remarks on Thomas', Gerson's, and Arnoldi's writings on the state of perfection, I hope to have shown how much Bucer's introducing treatise of 1523 fits into the tradition of late medieval *De perfectione* writings. Some of these medieval influences are obvious: the teleological understanding of perfection, the focus on charity, the role of *consilia*, or the concern to establish a hierarchy of states of perfection are shared as much with this tradition as Bucer joins its internal development of increasingly deessentializing the understanding of status, of criticizing the lack of perfection of the clergy, and of emphasizing the gracious character of charity. But while it is true that several of these elements were already defended by Thomas Aquinas, it has also become clear that Bucer can not simply be compared with the Dominican's theological champion as "his" medieval background, just as differences with Thomas can not simply be dismissed as an anti-scholastic turn in Bucer. Rather, Bucer ranks himself in a current that already in late medieval scholasticism opposed the typical mendicant interpretation of the true state of perfection: his critique of a late medieval position is itself rooted in late medieval thought.

The crucial difference to this medieval tradition as a whole is, of course, that Bucer views all of these elements from the new perspective of Luther's doctrine of grace. But rather than giving up on them, Bucer presents their reinterpretation in the new light, so that one adjustment becomes particularly apparent: because the human response to God's love is no longer relevant to salvation, and because letting this love flow out no longer counts as a good work, Bucer can shift the focus from the love of God to the love of neighbor and, instead of emphasizing the need to please God, emphasize the importance of serving others.

Bucer's choice to present himself in Strasbourg with a treatise inspired by this specific literary tradition of the late Middle Ages thus

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underscores the practical, moral concern of his theology.⁷⁶ However, it would be too simple to understand his treatise merely as a moral supplement to Luther's doctrine of Christian freedom; rather, the treatise remains at the same time a specific contribution to this very late medieval literary tradition from which it draws its inspiration. For it is in this context that it becomes clear in the first place why Luther's teaching was so attractive to a morally interested theologian like Bucer: it is the doctrine of justification by faith alone that frees good works from an economy of salvation; only then are services to one's neighbor truly disinterested and unselfish acts of charity. It becomes thus apparent that Bucer writes his small treatise to the citizens of Strasbourg not to set himself apart from, but to contribute to the late medieval tradition of *De perfectione* treatises, arguing that only with the new theology can charity be perfected and therefore a true state of perfection be achieved.

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⁷⁶ See STROHL, "Traité de l'Amour du Prochain", p. 146-147; GRESCHAT, "Bucer als Dominikanermönch", p. 48; ID., "Anfänge der reformatorischen Theologie", p. 128 and 140.

