

## “Graduating in Paradise”

### Robert of Sorbon and the Importance of Universities in the Middle Ages <sup>\*</sup>

Medieval thought was seeing itself as a school (“scholastic”) thought. This came from the fact that the very idea of « school » was a novelty. More accurately, the new idea was that of university: this recently created type of institution had no equivalent in earlier ages. Admittedly, the schools of Antiquity and the monastic schools of the High Middle Ages were settled in permanent places and either possessed private resources (like Plato’s Academy) or were supported by the political or religious authorities (as the civic and imperial chairs in the Roman Empire, monastic schools in the Middle Ages). But these schools were rather instances of traditional education, that is to say, of personal transmission from master to disciples. The nature of the medieval universities was radically different. They resulted from the grouping of all of the students and teachers present in a city (hence the term *universitas*: the ensemble), united in an intellectual and legal community. They were conceived as a corporations or guilds of sorts, integrated into public life (in some cases as a political counter-force), carrying their own jurisdiction and their own regulations, defining study programs, organizing exercises, examinations, degrees.<sup>1</sup> Our educational system is still shaped by these medieval innovations, as the vocabulary shows it: institutions (universities, colleges, faculty), *curricula* (“liberal arts” as “core curriculum”), degrees (Bachelor of Arts, master, doctorate), processes of teaching and the literary genres (*lectiones*/lessons, text readings, commentaries). The sense of being a community and the constant exercises of discussion such as the *disputations* favored an intensification of researches, a progress of knowledge in all directions. Marked as it may have been by brilliant individuals, or by particular groups such as the mendicant Orders, the medieval university was a

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<sup>1</sup> See Le Goff 1985, p. 82-86.

place of collective thought, of perpetual debate and intellectual effervescence *par excellence*.<sup>2</sup> No similar organization was found elsewhere, in Islamic or Byzantine lands, and some attribute to this creation the intellectual impetus—and soon the lead—that would be the West's.

## I

Before observing the consequences of the pervading new way studying in a sermon by Robert of Sermon, let me remind a few essential facts about the origins and characteristics of this medieval invention. Universities appeared nearly simultaneously in Bologna, Paris and Oxford in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Their emergence does not constitute a rupture. Rather, it is the end result of the scholarly growth of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Paris where a swarm of students from different countries was rapidly multiplying, attracted by the reputation of its instruction in philosophy and theology.<sup>3</sup> This expansion called for a new organization of the studies. The meeting of several favorable factors made such a move possible. Among these factors, we may mention on the one hand a major extension of available scientific and philosophical texts (imported from the Arab and Byzantine worlds); on the other, an increasing social demand for high level instruction, due to the densification of the administrative, civil, and ecclesiastical structures of national states or of the Church in the process of a stronger centralization. In addition, different powers with different agenda concurred at one point for creating the new institution: in Paris case, the King of France Philip II Augustus, the Pope (especially Innocent III), and of course the scholars themselves.<sup>4</sup> As far as Paris is concerned, the first mentions of a *universitas*, *communitas*, *societas*, *consortium*, appear between 1205 and 1210.<sup>5</sup> Michaud-Quantin has shown that there developed around this time, in urban settings, a

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Verger 1999, p. 73 : « The medieval doctor was worlds from the cloistered, solitary thinker », by reason of the many exercises and official acts carried out in common.

<sup>3</sup> See Le Goff 1985, p.24-25. Cf. J. Verger 1995, p.2 sq. “Teachers and students had become numerous enough to constitute, within the Parisian population, a group of its own, weighing in with its own increasingly weighty influence and beginning to become conscious of its specificity – as distinct from the people, the bourgeois, as well as from the clergy proper.”

<sup>4</sup> See Verger 1995, p. 20-30, P. Nardi in De Ridder-Symoens 1992, P.77-96.

<sup>5</sup> The oldest extant statutes are those accorded in 1215 by the pontifical legate Robert de Courçon, but by 1212-1213 “the university, experiencing at this time its first confrontation with the Chancellor, conducted itself like a solid institution” (J. Verger 1995, p.9). The pontifical Bull *Parens scientiarum* (April 13 1231) validated its organization and constituted the university's “Great Charter” of sorts.

general aspiration of people practicing a same activity to regroup into professional associations (guilds) in order to free themselves from the old vertical connections of feudal personal dependence. This movement touched many aspects of political, economic, religious and cultural life. The same desire for autonomy presided over the foundation of universities. In order to emancipate themselves from the tutelage of the local ecclesiastical authorities—which were rather conservative and disfavored intellectual and pedagogical innovations—the scholars skillfully instituted a system which was protected by external authorities (the Papacy, the kingship), but which was monopolistic, self-run and based on co-option. Basically, the university was a sort of federation of previously existing schools, which united better to defend their interests. The scholars incontestably acquired a certain independence. They even practiced a sort of internal democracy, since the officers and representatives were elected at each level, up to the chief office (*rector*), and they remained under the control of the elective assemblies.<sup>6</sup> —It is true, however, that at the same time, this institutionalization of instruction allowed for better control on the part of the authorities, for example over the content of instruction: the setting up of the university was brimming with potential contradictions.<sup>7</sup>

The creation of such an institution, where interests and competences were put in common, induced a qualitative and quantitative jump in the goals of teaching and research. While in the 12<sup>th</sup> century the episcopal schools' function was merely the training of the local clergy, one of the innovations connected with the creation of the three first universities (again: Bologna, Paris, Oxford) is the notion of a universally valid degree (within the limits of Latin Christianity, naturally). This is the *licentia docendi ubique*, the *license* (permission) to teach anywhere. Previously, the *license* had only a local value. From then on, it was affirmed that the most famous universities were depositary of a sort of authority spread across all Christendom. Study, *studium*, was a universal value—of which these universities were the incarnation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> J. Verger 1999, p. 52 : “All in all, university governments in the 13th cen. presented unarguably democratic characteristics. They functioned autonomously at any rate, for the external authorities' possibilities for intervention were very limited. Bishops and chancellors, stripped of most of their prerogatives, had to settle for presiding over certain ceremonies. States did not yet have functionaries specially charged with university affairs. Only pontifical legates could play an important role (...)”.

<sup>7</sup> See Le Goff 1985, p. 80-81

<sup>8</sup> J. Verger 1995, p. 18.

The university therefore came to present itself as a place of excellence and of moral and intellectual authority.<sup>9</sup> Being a doctor tended to become a dignity, not to say a social *status* or even an order (*ordo*, a class, in a social sense), recognizable by signs, notably in the way of dressing (caps, gowns, and other attributes). Aside from academic tests in the strict sense, examinations came to be charged with a symbolism evoking a rite of passage or a dubbing by peers, or at least an induction in a select society.

At first (that is, in the 12<sup>th</sup>-early 13<sup>th</sup> c.), this new social group, for affirming its identity as distinct from that of knights, priests or monks, asserted the inherent value of intellectual *labor*. It defined itself as a consortium of *professional* thinkers.<sup>10</sup> Later, the academics, especially the jurists, sought another sort of social recognition by assimilating themselves into the (minor) nobility.<sup>11</sup> The king of France Francis the 1<sup>st</sup> eventually granted, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the title of knight to all doctors. But the saying “a doctorate is worth knighthood” is older. The claim of being worthy to walk in the same row, at least, with the knights already appears in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> Around the same time, Jacques de Révigny, a professor at Orleans, claimed that “the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. le Goff 1999.

<sup>10</sup> See Le Goff 1985, p 67.-68. We must nevertheless specify with J. Verger 1995, p. 28 (n.84) that this happened not without “showing that it was a matter of a particular type of *labor*, one which kept some of the dignity of asceticism and monastic meditation”: “Sic contemplativi sunt claustrales et scolares ... Laboris vero merces est in presenti cordis illuminatio, in futuro utriusque hominis glorificatio” [Prevostin, in G. Lacombe 1927, p. 199]; Pierre de Blois: “Labor scolasticus ocium est, sed ocium negociosum ... Scolastici namque hominis labor non est in operibus, sed in verbis” [undated letter, in Denifle and Chatelain 1889, n°26, p. 29]. Moreover, the academics never managed to define the nature and value of their work from an economic perspective. On the one hand, there is the idea passed down from pagan and Christian Antiquity that the product of intellectual activity is not susceptible of assimilation to merchandise; knowledge is a gift from God that cannot be sold (the sin of simony), and this is why the third and fourth councils of Latran reaffirmed that the professor should not be paid. To resolve the problem of their subsistence, it was decided to give them prebends, or *beneficia sine cura*: fictionally, the teachers were supposed to take advantage of the leisure of this “sinecure” in order to teach for free. Nevertheless, some academics developed the idea that a distinction needed to be made between the professor’s knowledge, indeed a gift from God, and his work, which deserved compensation. It would therefore be the students who would give the teacher his means of living by giving him their *collectae*. Yet most often these charges were presented in the more seemly form of the *minerval*, a gift offered in return for his teaching: the professor could “accept” but not “demand” money from his pupils. See Le Goff 1985, p.104-108, J. Verger in De Ridder-Symoens 1992, p.151-154.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Verger 1997, p. 213-214.

<sup>12</sup> *Siete Partidas* of Alphonse X the Wise (P.II, t.31 §8).

jurist is like the knight of an armless knighthood”.<sup>13</sup> In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries the jurists eagerly assumed the title (invented piecemeal) of “lord of law” (*dominus legum*).<sup>14</sup>

Inasmuch as it was the possession of knowledge that allowed this social group to define itself, the acquisition of knowledge was proposed as an ideal worthy in and of itself. Among the philosophers especially, under the influence of Aristotelian ethics, the idea reemerged that teaching and research could be not merely a means of training for some extrinsic purpose, but also a disinterested end in itself, with intellectual speculation constituting the supreme value.<sup>15</sup> Of course there were complaints that students, especially in civil or canon law, were actually motivated by hope of rapid career advancement in the ecclesiastical administration or in the king’s service. Yet it is also true that “the mastery of knowledge was seen as naturally leading to the exercising of socially legitimate tasks (...)”.<sup>16</sup> As Jean Gerson reckons at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the university was charged with a moral responsibility to the social body: “Some say: into what business is the university getting itself, instead of working and studying in its books? This is too narrow a conception; of what use is science without a practical application (*operatio*)?”<sup>17</sup> The University, he says elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> “is like a guardian placed on a high tower”; it is “daughter of the king,<sup>19</sup> mother of learning, bright sun of France”. The teachings of the various faculties—medicine, arts and law, theology— correspond to the three aspects of life: the corporeal, civil and political, and spiritual. By reason of this completeness, the university had the right and even the duty to “question and to speak in the name of all France, of all the Estates

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<sup>13</sup> « Miles inermis milicie » (see M. Boulet, *Quaestiones Johannis Galli*, Paris, 1944, p.XCVIII).

<sup>14</sup> Whence the eventual abandonment of the idea that an academic is a professional of knowledge, and, regarding the relationship with the students, the rejection of the corporatist model masters-apprentices, in favor of the paternalist models borrowed from the non-popular world: abbot-monk or lord-vassal relations.

<sup>15</sup> See A. de Libera 1991, p.147.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Verger 1997, p. 38. Not only did one study medicine to care for the sick, or law to become a judge or a lawyer, but theology was generally studied, ultimately, for the sake of preaching, defending and propagating the Faith. “The idea of a disinterested culture, having no other end than the blossoming of the personality and the pure enjoyment of knowledge for itself, was foreign to intellectuals of this age. Individual success was not for them a question of education and culture but of faith, of submission to God, of the practice of virtues and works in hope of deserving salvation” (ibid., p. 38).

<sup>17</sup> Gerson, speech from 1405, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. VII/1, p.1145.

<sup>18</sup> Sermon, *Vivat rex*, ibid., p.1137-1185.

<sup>19</sup> It had been called by the King of France his “eldest daughter” since Charles V (1364-1380).

[of the Kingdom]”:<sup>20</sup> “does it not represent the entire Kingdom? —or should I say, the entire world from which came—or might come—unto it so many individuals desirous of acquiring science and wisdom.”

In addition, the university conveyed the myth of the *translatio studii* (transfer of the center of learning). The university was happy to imagine she was the reaping of an immemorial history, the last avatar of a centuries-old institution which passed down from the Hebrews to the Egyptians, from the Egyptians to Athens, Athens to Rome, Rome to Paris. She even was part of Providence’s plan, for her displacement consisted in following the movements of the seat of power decided by God throughout the centuries. The “New Athens” was resurrected in Paris.

Thus, the young university constituted, for its members, a whole world—a horizon and a space for thought and for life, marked with its own beacons. There developed a consciousness of belonging to a single collectivity, an awareness of the specificities of the intellectual profession, an identity that was at once assertive and carefully thought out, a strong claim of a particular mode of work and of existence, a fully assumed calling to knowledge.

Here is for example the representation of the University of Paris held by a rector from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, John of Malines. His discourse is a web of platitudes, but it attests to the lofty idea that this academic had of the intellectual’s calling and status: “Within creation, the noblest creature is man; but man, coming into this world, knows nothing; his mind is a *tabula rasa*; and yet he has in himself according to the well-known first sentence of [Aristotle’s] *Metaphysics* ‘a natural desire to know’, and education’s task is the satisfaction of this innate need for science and wisdom. The instrument *par excellence* of human education is the university – presented not only as a particular, historically situated institution, the University of Paris, but as the perfect, almost timeless actualization of knowledge and learning. The university structure

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Verger 1997, p.150 : « It is Philippe the Fair who was the first to acquire the habit of consulting the university of Paris as a “new sort of authority” [S. Menache, “La naissance d’une source d’autorité : l’université de Paris”, *Revue historique*, 544 (1982), p. 305-372] and to have it examine certain questions, formulate opinions and, ultimately, support royal policy. The Parisian professors had thus to give an opinion in 1303 concerning the conflict between the king and Boniface VIII, and then in 1308 on the Templar affair. This habit did not wear off in the slightest, and until the end of the Hundred Years War the University of Paris played a considerable political role” (declaration of disobedience during the Great Schism, approbation of the treaty of Troyes (1420), of the Anglo-French double monarchy, of the condemnation of Joan of Arc).

replicates the very structure of this knowledge of which it is the well-spring, the gushing fountain. Out of it flow four rivers, as from the Earthly Paradise. The first, from which the others break away, is the college (*facultas*) of Arts; there the three philosophies are taught which in turn give birth to the higher disciplines, Medicine, which flows particularly from Natural Philosophy, Canon Law, son of the Dialectic, and finally Theology, for which the study of Ethics and Metaphysics prepares”.<sup>21</sup>

## II

To such an extent were minds shaped by this scholastic model that, slightly earlier, another academic, Robert of Sorbon, for exhorting his audience to prepare for the Last Judgment, compared the latter to university examinations.

The son of a peasant, Robert became Master in theology, then personal cleric to the king of France Louis IX (social mobility through education – in this case, ecclesiastical – existed even then). As is well known, he founded in 1257, in Paris, a college to house graduate students (masters of arts) who desired to study theology but lacked means.<sup>22</sup> Thus Sorbon, the name of the obscure village where Robert was born, would become illustrious, because of the prominent place that this dormitory for grant beneficiaries (the college of Sorbon, or “la Sorbonne” as one would later say) would come to take in the university in the more distant future.

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<sup>21</sup> Around 1283-84, in his paper writing the Chancellor of Notre-Dame, Philippe de Thoiry (summary by J. Verger 1995, p.82, following Denifle and Chatelain 1889, I, n°515, introduction, p.605-607).

<sup>22</sup> On the life of Robert of Sorbon, see Glorieux 1965, p.11-67. Born October 9 1201, died September 29 1274, he was in his time as reputed a teacher as Thomas Aquinas or Bonaventure, at least according to the surprising report made by William of Nangis (in *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules*, t.XX, Paris, 1840, p.560 B). All that has come down to us is the image of an orator, a pedagogue, a pastor, for his *oeuvre* contains hardly anything but sermons, and treatises on confession, the examination of the conscience, penitence, the Eucharist (*De saporibus*). Canon of Cambrai from 1250, then of Paris from 1258, he was brought into the court of Saint Louis, one of whose confessors he may have become. In any case he benefitted from the King’s help, as well as that of others, for the foundation of his college, of which he was the first head and for which he wrote the statutes. The establishment’s motto, a bit posterior but reflecting the spirit of the institution, was: “Vivere socialiter, et collegialiter, et moraliter, et scholariter”. Similarly, its seal represented a wheel of Fortune (*Sors bona*, a play on words on the founder’s name), with equal teeth mutually intermeshed and moved by the same spring. Furnished with a very beautiful library, organized in a near-monastic fashion, it is possible that Robert wished his establishment to offer a living structure and working conditions inspired by the model of the Parisian monasteries of the Dominicans and Franciscans. It did not, however, have at its disposition its own university chairs, but the grant holders could practice supplementary exercises there—disputes and *collationes*.

In one of his sermons, the *De conscientia*, Robert establishes an audacious parallel between admission to Paradise and academic graduation.<sup>23</sup> The crowning of the university curriculum is his paradigm for preaching about the outcome of the believer's journey.

The choice of comparing the Last Judgment with an exam in due form is rich in historical meaning. Indeed, as soon as the university saw to becoming an autonomous professional organization, it became crucial to her to gain control over the recruitment of her members, so as to reinforce her internal cohesion.<sup>24</sup> This is why one of her first conquests was the organization of regulated exams and the reform of the modalities of the awarding of the *licentia docendi* (the license, or permission, to teach, as we have seen—which was at the time the supreme degree: whoever obtained it was thus called Doctor, and Master (*magister*) if he taught in effect;<sup>25</sup> it was both a MA/MS and a PhD). In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the awarding was at the entire discretion of the Chancellor of the bishop of Paris (or Chancellor of Notre-Dame, the Parisian cathedral). Teaching was within the responsibility of the Church, hence the fact that the schools were submitted to this ecclesiastical authority, with which the academic body was often in conflict. The professors were able to obtain that the Chancellor not confer the degree at candidates who had not been duly tested by a board of examiners—which the Chancellor would preside but where the academics would be represented.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the Chancellor no longer had the right to demand money, nor oaths of personal allegiance from the candidates. Loyalty was to be required only towards the university, whose statutes its members swore to respect. Moreover, in order to counter subsequent attempts by the Chancellor to regain control of the *license*, the academics invented other titles.<sup>27</sup> Before the *license*, a preliminary degree was set for the professors to pre-select, as it were, the candidates that would be later presented to the Chancellor for the license: the *baccalaureatum* (hence the British and American BA/BS). The student who

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<sup>23</sup> According to its editor, F. Chambon (p.IX), the *De conscientia* was at first composed in the form of a sermon, then reworked into a treatise (cf. Glorieux 1965, p.55-56, and N. Bériou 1988, col. 819). It is this second edition which is published. But I will often refer to variants of the first draft, notably of manuscript *a* (BN lat. 3218, fol.162-175), indicated in the notes by Chambon.

<sup>24</sup> J. Verger 1995, p.14.

<sup>25</sup> See J. Verger in De Ridder-Symeons 1992, p. 144-148.

<sup>26</sup> On the examination rules, see Le Goff 1985, p. 86-89, Verger 1995, p.89-91, Weijers 1995 and Lafleur 1995.

<sup>27</sup> See J. Verger 1995, p. 49-51, p.88-97



had passed this exam could become an assistant of sorts to his teacher. At the College of Arts in Paris, he had to respond to the questions of a doctor and demonstrate that he had the competences defined by the program. Then he had to prove, in front of a board of four masters, that he was capable of arguing and of teaching a course. From then on, he was capable of being no longer just a passive auditor, but of intervening in the disputes and of presenting certain lessons. After a few years, he would then obtain the license. As for his *inception* as a teacher, after the *license*, this was not a degree strictly speaking; but the academics decided that only he who had gone through this inaugural ceremony, which consisted in the new *license*-holder's starting to teach in front of his peers, would be a Doctor. As a matter of fact, in this ceremony, the chancellor did not intervene, and this was then a means for the teachers to exercise a supplementary control by validating the *license* granted by the Chancellor.

So, one can see that the idea of exam, present in Robert's sermon, is far from being insignificant. But, in the first place, Robert's choice of his comparison was guided by the Biblical citation that determined his sermon's theme. The preacher was generally preaching on a subject provided by the readings of the day at the mass, and that day one of the Scriptures passages was: *Librum scribat michi ipse qui judicat*, "let him write the book [i.e. the indictment] against me, the very same who judges me" (*Job XXXI, 35*).<sup>28</sup> It is this sentence that justifies the comparison of the Last Judgment with an academic exam: just as during the latter one is questioned on the texts, so during the Judgment one is questioned on a book.

What book is this?<sup>29</sup> According to a symbolism that is well attested in the Bible, it is the book of the conscience, that is, the notebook upon which each of our actions, good or bad, have

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<sup>28</sup> The new version of the Vulgate has : « (...) et librum scribat ipse qui judicat, / ut in humero meo portem illum, et circumdem illum quasi coronam mihi" (XXXI, 35-36): "(...) let him write the book, the very one who judges, in order that on my shoulder I might carry this book, and that I might put it like a crown around my head". The ancient understanding is that the judge is God; but in the modern text, it is rather Job's human interlocutor who is presented as a prosecutor delivering his final accusation.

<sup>29</sup> *De conscientia*, §3, p.3 : Job asks, like a well-prepared and intelligent student ("tamquam providus et sapiens scholaris"), on which text he will be interrogated. The Prophet Daniel (VII, 9), Robert goes on, answers for him: "Antiquus dierum sedit et libri aperti sunt", which the *Gloss* thus explains: "Consciencia et opera singulorum in utraque parte, vel bona vel mala revelantur."

been written down, and in which there are as many pages as there are days we have lived.<sup>30</sup> This book is held open in the presence of the Judge, who asks us to answer for our acts.

Robert of Sorbon was not the first one to exploit this theme. The topic was fairly common throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> century, in the *de conscientia* treatises or in sermons.<sup>31</sup> Conscience was compared to a book that is added to the “book of science”, viz. the Scriptures, and to the “book of experience”, that is, the body. Alan of Lille, for example, said that the *liber conscientiae* is read in the heart, where our faults are written in hideous letters, from which they might however be erased through confession, contrition and the work of satisfaction.<sup>32</sup>

But whereas Alan was actually taking up the ancient theme of “know thyself”, Robert developed the same comparison in the more modern direction of an account of the similarities between the exams in Paris university and the entrance examination to Paradise—their similarities and also of their differences, which made the second of these two tests a good deal more difficult than the first one.

Here are a few samples of Robert’s analogies:

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<sup>30</sup> This book symbolism is ancient (see L. Koep 1954): Babylonian documents attest to the belief that the events that come to pass in the world are written in advance on the tablets of heaven, and are therefore immovably fixed. The Bible inflected this idea in the direction of the irrevocable decrees of God (*Jer.* 22, 30; *Ez.* 2, 9-10; *Dan.* 10, 21; *Apoc.* 5, 1-5 and 10, 2-11). But one also finds the notion of a “register of deeds”, where all the acts of men, good and evil, are written down, for the sake of God’s judgment (*Ps.* 139/8, 16; *Is.* 65, 6; *Dan.* 7, 10; *Apoc.* 20, 12; cf. *Col.* 2, 14): these are the archives of heaven. The heart can be the book where the sins of a man are written (*Jer.* 17, 1), just as the law is also inscribed in the heart (*Rom.* 2, 15). One finds moreover, in the Bible, an idea that does not otherwise figure in the ancient East: that God keeps a book of the living, from which he strikes out those who shall die, the “Book of Life”. Its model is the list, indispensable to the administration for taxes or conscription, of citizens or subjects; the dead were struck from it. See for example *Ex.* 32-33, *Ps.* 68, 28-29: the sinner alone is erased from the Book of God and delivered over to death; *Ez.* 13, 9: the register of the elect; as well as *Mal.* 3, 16; *Is.* 4, 3, *Hebr.* 12, 23, *Luc.* 10, 20, *Apoc.*, 3, 5; 13, 8; 17, 8; 20, 12 and 15; 21, 27: there is a “civil status” in the heavenly Jerusalem, a list that is definitively fixed only once the “Book of Deeds” has been taken into account (*Apoc.* 20, 12). This is why the two books are often confused with the other. St. Augustine (*The City of God* XX, 14) speaks of a book of life of each and all (*liber vitae uniuscuiusque*) as of a certain divine power reminding each of every action he has done. This is also why Robert de Sorbon says that they who get to Paradise will be masters in theology, and will “read” in a great book, the divine book of life, in which all things are consigned, according to *Apocalypse*: “Vidi Librum scriptum intus et fortis” (5, 1).

<sup>31</sup> See J. Leclercq 1964.

<sup>32</sup> Sermon *Memorare nouissima tua*, in M.-Th. D’Alverny 1965, p.267-268, 273.

– At the University of Paris, the candidates would love to be told in advance, by the Chancellor<sup>33</sup> or by one of his counselors, the text on which they will be questioned. And if one of them became so informed, he would be silly not to study it up and down and instead to devote all his efforts to other books.<sup>34</sup> Now, we know on what book we shall be examined on the Last Judgment day: the “book of conscience”, of course. So, “if someone studies other books more than the book of his conscience, this means that he is not serious about graduating in Paradise.”<sup>35</sup>

It seems then that the Paradise examination might be easier, since one knows the subject in advance. But, on the other hand:

– When the Parisian Chancellor questions a candidate, the latter has to answer on seven or eight passages (*lectiones*) of the book, whereas God will want to hear about our Book of Life from beginning to end, and in every detail.<sup>36</sup>

– In addition, at times the Parisian Chancellor would not hear the candidates in person, but would delegate this task. This facilitated the examination for many, who could answer well in front of simple professors but would be terrified and paralyzed before the high-placed figure that the Chancellor is. But then, what will it be like, when they will be examined individually by the “Great Chancellor” (*magnus cancellarius*) in person, and in front of everyone at that (“in plena universitate”)?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The chancellor of Notre-Dame, or, for the Arts examination, the chancellor of the Abbey of Saint-Genevieve: see Verger 1995, p. 92.

<sup>34</sup> *De conscientia*, var. a, p.4 n.18.

<sup>35</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. § 9, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., § 12, p.17. Robert of Sorbon reports the story of a monk he had heard of. This monk had been elected abbot, but the Bishop Guiard de Cambray (who was perhaps Robert’s own master) wanted to verify his knowledge of Latin. The bishop handed him a book and asked him to choose a passage and to translate it. The monk was shaking like a leaf in a strong wind and could barely hold the book in his hands. The bishop: come now, these are not Aristotle’s *Analytics*, nor Gratianus’ *Decree*; it is just a simple prayer book, which you have read quite often. The monk replied that he felt unable to recite even the *Our Father*, as he was too impressed by the knowledgeable bishop, one of the greatest clerics in the world; and he begged him to be examined by an assistant—to which the bishop consented.

– What is more, any wrong answer will be eliminatory. At Paris, even if a cleric correctly answers only three questions out of four, he is admitted to the *license*. But, on Judgment Day, being found wanting on just one question in a thousand is sufficient to be refused.<sup>38</sup>

– Still worse: the failure will be definitive. One will not be offered a second chance. At Paris, when one is flunked (*refutatur*), one can try again after an year—or, adds Robert, the negative verdict is sometimes reversed by appeals, or by gifts, or by favors done for the Chancellor’s entourage or for other examiners! By contrast, when one fails the entrance examination to Paradise, it is for ever, and the decision is irrevocable.<sup>39</sup>

Several circumstances are aggravating, in the case of failing the Paradise examination:

– If one is refused by the Chancellor at Paris, it is unknown to but a few people. By contrast, on Judgment Day the verdict will be rendered in front of the entire world (“*scietur ab omnibus de mundo, quia in plena universitate coram omnibus*”).<sup>40</sup> The embarrassment of those refused shall be infinite, and their shame shall not be erased by time.<sup>41</sup>

– In addition, he who fails at Paris receives no other punishment than his very failure, while he who fails at the Last Judgment shall be struck with an iron ruler, and shall continue to be pursued and chastised right down to hell, where he shall suffer eternal torment.<sup>42</sup> And he shall not be able to respond like some children do in grammar school. When they are threatened to receive a beating on Sunday if they do not learn their lessons during the week, they reply: “No, I will play, and I don’t care if I am beaten. I shall survive a correction just fine; or else I will run away on Sunday; or maybe pretend to be sick.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., §12, p.17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., §4, p.5. We note that Robert, in a way that is characteristic of medieval culture, supports this idea just as much with citations from the Bible as from Aristotle and Horace.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., § 5, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> This is the occasion of a classic reversal: “A great dishonor and great ridicule shall befall certain Masters of Arts, of Law, of Medicine or of Theology, who do not wish now to study the book of conscience, for they shall not be capable of responding: on Judgment Day, they shall remain mute before everyone” (ibid., §19, p. 25).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., §6, p. 7-8.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., §6, p. 8.

Moreover, there is no way of escaping the Paradise test; it is the mandatory evaluation of a compulsory program:

– The Parisian chancellor does not force anyone to apply for the *license*, on the contrary he is way too overwhelmed by the number of those who want to receive the degree. But God calls to his examination even those who are not willing.<sup>44</sup>

– Everyone, however, would like to enter Paradise. But we must all take the entrance examination, without exception or discrimination,<sup>45</sup> whereas at Paris the degree is sometimes conferred upon illustrious persons without submitting them to an examination (*honoris causa*, as we would say).<sup>46</sup>

Now, in which school is one best prepared to graduating in Paradise, and how should one study? More exactly, in Robert's own terms, "where is this book read (*legitur*)? And by whom should one hear it read?"<sup>47</sup>—"read", meaning "studied": the *lectio*, indeed, before being the material unity that we saw earlier, was the lesson given by the teacher. Inherited from Antiquity, it was one of the pillars of medieval pedagogy, for which intellectual training must be accomplished through the study of established texts. The first task of the teacher in his lesson was to give, aloud in front of the students, a reading (*lectura*) (whence the words *lectio*, *lector*, and the English words lecture, lesson, lecturer) of the text, in order to make it comprehensible by indicating the punctuation with the inflection and suspension of his voice—as a matter of fact, punctuation was not systematically noted before the advent of the printing press.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., §7, p. 9-10 ;

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., var. *a*, p.2 n. 11.

<sup>46</sup> This practice was again a source of conflict between the administrative authority, embodied by the Chancellor of Notre-Dame, and the teaching faculty: cf. J. Verger 1995, p. 72-73.

<sup>47</sup> "Ubi legitur iste liber et a quo audiendus est ?" (*De conscientia*, §16, p.22).

As for the book of conscience, the “lesson” during which it is studied is confession, and the master is of course the confessor.<sup>48</sup> It is thus through the examination of one’s conscience that one is to prepare for the final examination.

Still following the same method of comparison with academic life, Robert of Sorbon then develops some considerations on the necessity of a frequent and careful confession:

– At Paris, someone is not considered a student unless he takes classes at least twice a week. And yet, people claim to be preparing for Paradise who do not confess more than once a year.<sup>49</sup>

– Similarly, one would not consider as a student somebody who does not go to the ordinary lessons, given by the titular professor, but only to the recitations (revisions), or cursory lectures that is, the preparatory lessons given by assistants. Now, too many people do not but “cursorily” (*cursorie*) go to their yearly confession. That is to say, they omit numerous grave sins: “they run through it, and get it over with as quickly as possible, like a cock on burning coals”.<sup>50</sup>

– It is moreover in the student’s interest assiduously to attend his teacher’s school and to make himself known to him. For if, for whatever reason, he is thrown into jail by the city provost marshal, his teacher can go identify him and ask for his release.<sup>51</sup> This incidental remark of Robert’s is an indication of historical importance of one of the reasons for the formation of universities: to shelter the students, particularly when they were foreigners, from arbitrary civil power or from mobbing by the populace. Whether at Paris, at Oxford, or at Bologna, the universities obtained guarantees and privileges that were above all judicial. Insofar as their members were clerics, they fell under the sole jurisdiction of the university’s ecclesiastical court.<sup>52</sup> Another historical element seen here is that the professor, in his school, had maintained

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., §16, p.22-23.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., §17, p.23.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., §18, p.23.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., §18, p.23.

<sup>52</sup> This is doubtless one of the reasons why, whereas the tendency of schools in the 12th cen. was toward secularization, the *colares*, even when they were specialists in the “arts” (the “philosophers”), ended up

direct and personal authority over his students (the university was actually a federation of schools, as I said), and he was their guarantor.<sup>53</sup>

But those who do not go regularly to the school of confession shall not be sheltered from the provost marshal in Hell once they are incarcerated by him, and they shall remain in this jail. When they call upon the Lord, he will answer: “I do not know you, I do not think you are one of my disciples: I have not seen you in my school but perhaps once in the year, and briefly”.<sup>54</sup>

– Finally, a Parisian cleric would be quite stupid were he to go, for studying the book on which he knows he shall be examined, hear the lessons of the least competent teachers and knowingly ignore the best ones. And yet this is what many do, who choose for themselves the worst confessors they can find. For example, so and so, who has fornicated, will go out and find a priest who himself has a mistress and will therefore be more understanding. Or if he got drunk, he goes to a priest who also likes to frequent the taverns and who will impose for penitence just *Pater noster* to recite.<sup>55</sup>

While Robert, in his comparison of the spiritual with the academic life, speaks mostly from the point of view of students, he nevertheless does not fail to deliver a few interesting historical notes about the teachers (or confessors) and their behavior. Thus, he says, God is not ashamed to teach just a single student,<sup>56</sup> whereas the teachers and preachers full of pride do not

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accepting the status of cleric (while at the same time trying to distinguish themselves from the rest of the clergy) accorded to them by the Church, and validated for example by the King of France in a 1200 charter after a brawl with the police in which several students were killed: he granted them jurisdictional privileges, which made them accountable only before the ecclesiastical courts. The Pontifical Bull of 1231 (*Parens scientiarum*, which put an end to a great two-year strike, again provoked by the violent death of students) added canon privileges to these (major excommunication for anyone who should lay a hand on a cleric). At first, this status protected them physically: it would appear that there were numerous tensions between the population and the turbulent student community. But, obviously, this juridical situation was full of other types of conflict, for it implied a dependence upon the Church and would limit the intellectual autonomy that the arts students otherwise sought. Cf. J. Verger 1995, p.13.

<sup>53</sup> See J. Verger in De Ridder-Symoens 1992, p. 157-159. Yet another historical note : good students, says Robert, prefer to go to teachers who are their compatriots, all other things being equal, since they feel more comfortable asking them questions that might resolve their doubts and misunderstandings: “quia de suis dubitabilibus melius, et facilius, securius possunt ad sibi familiares et amicos magistros recurrere” (*De conscientia*, §26, p. 31).

<sup>54</sup> *De conscientia*, §18, p.23-24.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. §22, p ;27-28.

<sup>56</sup> According to Osée, II, 14: “Ducam eam in solitudinem, et loquar ad cor ejus” (ibid. §21, p. 27).

want to read or preach if it is not before a throng of listeners. Or again, a jealous or presumptuous teacher, or one who fears that his ignorance will be exposed, do not want his students go and listen, after his own lessons, to the lectures or disputes of other professors, rather than remaining idle. Such bad teachers are wicked and worthy of being stripped of their function. And yet this is how some confessors behave: they become irritated when those who have come to them for confession also visit other priests to confess.<sup>57</sup>

As we have just seen, the exhortations of Robert de Sorbon lacked neither in charming simplicity nor in vivid imagery: the Last Judgment seen as the examination at the end of one's studies, God as the Great Chancellor, conscience as a text on the program, the confessor as academic advisor, and amusing details on life at school. A pedagogue, an orator or a preacher always appeals to examples or to frames of reference that are familiar to their audience. Robert's audience was therefore one for whom the university was as much a well established part of their mental landscape as it was a concrete part of their life.<sup>58</sup> The prestige and operation of the university were preponderant enough, in this culture, for it to serve as a model, as a term of comparison in pious exhortations, without committing a crime of divine *lèse-majesté*.

It is true that knowledge, because it was supposed to come ultimately from God, had something sacred about it; school benefited from this aura and could therefore be set up as a paradigm. However, this does not mean that scholarly culture was not, already in this age, fraught with crises. The birth of the university was not to the taste of all. Philip the Chancellor, for example (who occupied academic functions from 1218 to 1236) accused this institution of being at the origin of the decadence of research and teaching. His reasons, put forth in a sermon, might still find an echo today: "Before, when each professor would teach on his own and the very name of the university was unknown, readings and disputes were frequent; there was a zeal for study. But now that you have come together to form a university, the lessons have grown

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., §23, p.29.

<sup>58</sup> Perhaps he preached before students, or colleagues; but university teachers were also called upon to preach in parishes (cf. Glorieux 1965, p.49). We have no indications as to the place or audience of the sermon upon which this treatise is based. It was, however, delivered in Latin and there does not seem to have been any contemporary French version.



rarer, everything is done in haste, teaching has been reduced to very little; the time taken away from lessons is wasted in meetings and discussions”.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Schneyer 1963, cited and trans. by J. Verger 1999, p.30-31.

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