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“God (fore)knows it all. Leonard Lessius and Luis de Molina: a silent story in the Age of intra-Jesuit soteriological debates (1580s-1610s)”

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Dupont A., François W., Leemans J.

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God (fore)knows it all

Leonard Lessius reading Luis de Molina in the age of intra-Jesuit soteriological debates (1580s-1610s)

“P. Leonardus Lessius, clarissimum inter aevi sui theologos lumen”¹.
(From a 17th century manuscript *Vita* of Lessius)

“Lessius complained that he was accused of destroying Augustine’s doctrine [...]”².
(Mathijs Lamberigts, 2018)

I. A JESUIT IN DISTRESS FOR SALVATION: LEONARD LESSIUS (1554-1623)

There has always been a rumor, in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Leuven, that the Jesuit theologian Leonard Lessius (1554-1623) was a liar. The rumor is still alive in the corridors of the Faculty, whispered by eminent authorities in the field. This piece of gossip will be our starting point: was Leonard Lessius a liar? Although Lessius – a professor of theology at the Jesuit College in Leuven in the 1580s – had friends among the theologians of the University, it would not be surprising if, after 1587, there was bad blood between him and some of the Leuven academics. The Jesuits established themselves in Leuven with the foundation of the College in 1542 at the invitation of Ruard Tapper (1487-1559), a Faculty professor and adherent of old-school Augustino-Thomism, who left space for humans to influence their salvation through good works³. Rivalry between the Jesuit College and the Faculty of Theology did not arise until several years later. The Jesuits established an alternative education system in Leuven, mostly based on Thomism (with some variation during Roberto Bellarmino’s time teaching, as we will see), rather than strict Augustinism⁴. However, besides their ambition to offer a competing circuit of philosophical and, eventually, theological

¹ Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (from now on ARSI), *Vitae* 134, f. 1. See also ARSI, *Vitae* 24 and KADOC (Documentation and research centre on religion, culture and society, APDOCUM1, Fonds Alfred Poncelet, Documents & Notes, Jesuites IX.2, 1, 5, 6, n. 5, *Lessii Elogium*. Probably, the *Vita*’s author has to be identified with Joseph de Jouvancy SJ (1643-1719), a Jesuit historian who, at the end of the 17th century, had been summoned to Rome to continue the writing of F. Sacchini’s *Historia Societatis Jesu*. A further volume of the *Historia (pars quinta, tomus posterior, Ab anno Christi MDXCI ad MDCXVI*, Roma 1710), which dealt with the period 1591-1616, was published and then condemned by the Parliament in Paris in 1713.

² M. LAMBERIGTS, *The Dispute between the Louvain Faculty of Theology and the Jesuits (1587-1588). Solus Augustinus versus Thomist Positions*, in B. DAHLKE – B. KNORN (eds.), *Eine Autorität für die Dogmatik? Thomas von Aquin in der Neuzeit. Festschrift für Leonhard Hell*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, Herder, 2018, pp. 32-46, here p. 39. Lessius complained about being accused of refusing Augustine’s theology in a letter to Roberto Bellarmino, as quoted by Lamberigts. See *Lessius to Bellarmino*, 29 May 1587 in X.-M. LE BACHELET, *Bellarmin avant son Cardinalat. 1542-1598. Correspondance et documents*, Paris, Gabriel Beauchesne, 1911, p. 147.

³ LAMBERIGTS, *The dispute*, p. 32. See also M. SCHRAMA, *Ruard Tapper und die Möglichkeit gute Werke zu verrichten: Non omnia opera hominis mala*, in M. LAMBERIGTS – L. KENIS (eds.), *L’augustinisme à l’ancienne Faculté de théologie de Leuven*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 1994, pp. 63-98.

⁴ On the Faculty of Theology at the University of Leuven, and the theology taught there, see, for example, Bruno Boute, *Academic Interests and Catholic Confessionalisation: The Leuven Privileges of Nomination to Ecclesiastical Benefices* (Brill: Leiden, 2010) and the aforementioned volume *L’augustinisme*. On the Jesuits in the Low Countries see R. FAESEN – L. KENIS (eds.), *The Jesuits of the Low Countries: identity and impact (1540-1773)*, Leuven, Peeters, 2012, especially J. ROEGIERS, *Awkward Neighbours: The Leuven Faculty of Theology and the Jesuit College (1542-1773)*, pp. 153-175.

studies, with the concomitant right to confer academic degrees, the major apple of discord during Lessius' years as a professor of theology was soteriology, namely the theology of salvation or the doctrine of predestination, grace, and free will. This is a crucial point in Catholic theology, *a fortiori* after the Protestant schism, and especially in a border land where Catholics and Calvinists lived close to each other⁵.

It is well known that, since mid-16th century, leading theologians at Leuven's Faculty of Theology adhered to strict Augustinism, and these theologians especially highlighted the second stage in Augustine's – the *doctor Gratiae* – production: the doctrine which strongly emphasized the irresistible, necessary action of the divine grace and predestination, rather than focusing on human beings' contribution to the economy of salvation (viz. to their own salvation) by means of their free will. Certainly, before the Pelagian dispute, Augustine was far more willing to accept the role of free will in soteriology, but after the British monk Pelagius (360-420) propounded a doctrine according to which human beings could start the salvation process by their own free will without the need of God's grace, the situation changed, and Augustine focused on God's sovereign authority rather than human beings' actions.

In the 1580s, Leuven hosted a sort of new Pelagian dispute, which we might more properly call Lessian dispute. In fact, when the notebooks of Lessius' students fell into the hands of some Faculty theologians, the latter saw with horror a clear hint of Pelagianism, along with Semi-Pelagianism, in the Jesuit's teachings⁶. Accusations of having revitalized Pelagius' heresy poured in. Lessius, in response, took the opportunity to charge Michael Baius and the Faculty theologians with Calvinism. Serious allegations were exchanged by the parties in a series of documents, of which several copies remain or have been published⁷. The dispute, including two censures of Lessius' doctrine by the

⁵ On the idea of borderland Catholicism see classical article by P. CHAUNU, *Jansénisme et frontière de catholicité (XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles). À propos du Jansénisme lorrain*, in *Revue Historique* 227 (1962): 115-138.

⁶ It is worth clarifying some details about Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. Pelagianism – which never existed as an organized group, but rather as a systematic doctrine it was a construction of its opponents – refers to the teaching of Pelagius (360-420), who recognized and promoted the natural merits of human free will in the economy of salvation, and was strongly opposed by Augustine, who prioritized God's grace. The term Semi-Pelagianism, furthermore, is misleading. In fact, it was forged in the 16th century to describe the teachings of some 5th century Provençal monks and theologians (e.g. Faustus of Riez or Cassian), due to the fact that these authors encouraged the use of free will and preserved the goodness of human nature after the Fall, at least to a certain degree. In reality these theologians opposed Pelagius' doctrine, and were even considered friends by Augustine who engaged in a vigorous campaign against Pelagius. On these matters see studies by M. LAMBERIGTS, for example *Pelagius and Pelagians*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 258-279; *Recent research into Pelagianism with particular emphasis on the role of Julian of Aelclanum*, in *Augustiniana* 52 (2002), no. 2: 175-198; *Reception of Augustine during His Lifetime*, in *Augustine in Context*, T. TOOM (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 230-237. See also J.-L. QUANTIN, *Histoire de la grâce. 'Semi-pélagiens' et 'prédestinatiens' dans l'érudition ecclésiastique du XVII^e siècle*, T. WALLNIG et al. (eds.), *Europäische Geschichtskulturen um 1700 zwischen Gelehrsamkeit, Politik und Konfession*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012 and D. OGLIARI, *Gratia et certamen. The Relationship between Grace and Free Will in the Discussion of Augustine with the So-Called Semipelagians*, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 169, Leuven, Peeters, 2003.

⁷ Records of the dispute are preserved in the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (ACDF), St.St. e 7-c and ARSI, Fl. Belg. 72, I-II. Several documents have also been published in L. de MEYER, *Historiae controversiarum de dovinae gratiae auxiliis subsummum pontificibus Sixto V. Clemente VIII. Paulo V. Ab objectionibus R.P. Hyacinthi Serry vindicatae libri tres*, Bruxelles, A. Claudinot, 1715 and J.-H. SERRY, *Historiae congregationum de auxiliis divinae gratiae sub summum pontificibus Clemente VIII. et Paulo V. in quatuor libros distribuita*, Antwerp, Sumptibus societatis, 1709. On the Leuven controversies or, more generally, the intra-Catholic theological debate after the Council of Trent, see W. FRANÇOIS – A. GERACE, *The Doctrine of Justification and the Rise of Pluralism in the Post-Tridentine Catholic Church*, in *More than Luther: The Reformation and the Rise of Pluralism in Europe*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019, 9-40; E.J.M. EIJL., *La controverse louvaniste autor de la grâce et du libre arbitre à la fin du XVI^e siècle*, in *L'augustinisme*, 207-282; LAMBERIGTS, *The Dispute*.

University of Leuven and, later, Douai, eventually came to nothing, and after a papal intervention no condemnations were made. Arguably, Lessius remained convinced that, first, the Leuven theologians' doctrine were hiding some Calvinist tendencies, and, second – as Lessius energetically claimed in letters to Jesuit theologian Roberto Bellarmino – that their doctrine was influenced by the aforementioned Leuven professor Baius' already censored theories (although, in reality, several Leuven academics had already distanced themselves from Baius' theology). The theologians of the Faculty maintained the belief that Lessius' teaching represented the new rise of the old, condemned theology of Pelagianism (plus Semi-Pelagianism). Moreover, Lessius' thought, which seemed in opposition to Augustine's doctrine, was even considered an obstacle for reconverting Protestants, who were much more open to Augustine than to Scholastic authors and were certainly completely strangers to the idea of free will as proposed by Lessius⁸.

Without diving too deep into this intricate matter, it is sufficient to mention that the core of the problem was Lessius' claim that God's predestination of human beings was based on his foreknowledge of human merits and free actions, a predestination that happened, according to the Jesuit, *ex meritis praevisis*, namely after and due to God's prescience of human merits. It is extremely clear how, in such a theological system, God's sovereign authority and predestination of beings grew weak, as the power of being elected to be saved seemed to rest in human hands. Lessius' doctrine is much more complex and also states that, although the predestination to salvation and eternal life (i.e. to glory) happens after the prevision of merits, the act of predestining human beings to the divine grace necessary to be saved happens exclusively due to God's arbitrary authority. However, even such a statement did not help Lessius very much in his self-defense, as the Jesuit also maintained that the same grace and divine aid is provided to all human beings equally (this is the idea of *sufficient grace*), and that human beings' free will and consent are the only forces able to activate God's grace and make it efficacious⁹. Grace, therefore, would not be irresistible, and human beings would be the first architects of their own fortune. As a Christian humanist, Lessius seems to propound the traditional idea of *homo faber suae fortunae* even in the context of soteriology, with the help of God's providence¹⁰.

Given all these details, why could Lessius be considered a liar? Two elements should be mentioned which could cause this rumor to spread, and they both relate to Lessius' relationship with two fellow Jesuits (paradoxically!): the already mentioned Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621) – who would soon

⁸ When exploring anti-Protestant doctrines in the Age of Counter-Reformation and Catholic revival, we must consider that two diametrically opposed strategies were applied by Catholic authors, depending on their own theological sensibility: on the one hand, Augustinian doctrines were often considered the easiest way to re-convert the Protestants (already by Baius, as he wrote in a letter to Pius V; and by the Leuven theologians. See M. BAIUS, *Apologia Summo Pontifici Pio V*, in Gabriel Gerberon *Michaelis Baii, celeberrimi in Lovaniensi Academia Theologi Opera [...]*, “Baiana,” II, Cologne, Balthasar Ab Egmont & Soc. 1696, p. 79; on the other hand, Jesuit theologians such as Lessius believed that strict Augustinian positions, especially concerning predestination, allowed room for forgetting the role of free will in the process of salvation.

⁹ On the relationship between Lessius' doctrine of efficacious Grace and the condemnation of his first published hagiography see D. STANCIU, *The Condemned Biography of Leonardus Lessius and the Debates on the Efficacy of Grace*, in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 91 (2015), no. 2, 257-269 and E. RAI, *Il santo e l'eretico: attribuzione di santità e controversie teologiche nei documenti di Sant'Ufficio e Indice. Il caso di Leonardo Lessio (XVII-XX secolo)*, in *L'inquisizione romana e i suoi archivi. A vent'anni dall'apertura dell'ACDF*, A. CIFRES (ed.), Roma, Gangemi editore, 2019, 205-224.

¹⁰ Lessius' doctrine, as explained by the Jesuit in the late 1580s, is summarized in his *Thirty-four and Six Propositions*. See *Conclusiones de praedestinatione et reprobatione* (known as the *Thirty-four Propositions*) in LE BACHELET, *Bellarmin*, pp. 153-156 and *Six Propositions*, in *ibid.*, pp. 194-198.

be a curial cardinal and was already a major reference figure in the Catholic theological panorama – and Iberian theologian Luis de Molina (1535-1600).

II. LESSIUS AND BELLARMINO

A few paragraphs will suffice to consider Lessius' "understanding" of Bellarmino's theology, which has already been explored in a recent article¹¹, in order to reserve more space and food for thought to the extremely interesting relationships between Lessius' and Luis de Molina's theologies. Lessius tried to make his doctrine coincide with Bellarmino's Augustinian teaching while the latter was a professor in Leuven¹². A vital question is whether Lessius consciously attempted to hide behind Bellarmino's authority or if he simply did not fully understand the doctrine the cardinal-to-be had taught in Leuven at the beginning of his career¹³. In fact, Lessius, in a letter dated 10 December 1588 (one of dozens exchanged between Lessius and Bellarmino during the Leuven controversies), argued that the most contested elements of his doctrine related to efficacious or sufficient grace, "quae questio a V.R. uberius et acrius, quam a me tractata est"¹⁴; a matter, in other words, that Bellarmino had treated even more deeply during his teaching in Leuven. And, Lessius continues, there could be several reasons for which Bellarmino's doctrine had not been censored by the Leuven theologians. For example, "paulo enim ante D. Michael per Bullam Pii V perstrictus fuerat; unde omnes animi erant consternati"¹⁵. The reference to Michael Baius and Pius V's Bull *Ex omnibus afflictionibus* (1567) is clear and makes sense in Lessius' self-defense. In fact, Lessius, identifying his own doctrine with Bellarmino's implied that at the time of Bellarmino's teaching in Leuven, the theologians of the Faculty did not censor him precisely because the Jesuit was a major opponent of Baius' censored doctrine (although Baius was not mentioned in the text of the Bull). In other words, Lessius seems to suggest that, at that time, the Leuven theologians could not afford to attack Bellarmino's 'anti-Baianist' doctrine, for any such effort could pass as an attempt to defend Baius' doctrines, censored by the Pope himself¹⁶. It must also be remembered that Lessius was absolutely sure that Baius – hidden as an old man in the shadows – was the actual hand behind the attacks and censorship targeting him in the 1580s¹⁷. Lessius himself had criticized Baius in 1586, during his courses of theology at the Jesuit College. However, it must be noted that the censorship of Lessius' teachings was prepared and signed by Henricus Gravius (1536-1591), an expert in Augustine's theology, who was an opponent of Baius' theories and even a friend of Lessius. Gravius was probably chosen precisely to safeguard the Faculty from being accused of being influenced by Baius¹⁸.

¹¹ E. RAI, *Ex Meritis Praevisis. Predestination, Grace, and Free Will in intra-Jesuit controversies (1587-1613)*, in *Journal of Early Modern Christianity*, in press 2020.

¹² *Lessius to Bellarmino*, 10 December 1588, in LE BACHELET, *Bellarmino*, pp. 227-231.

¹³ Inconsistencies between Bellarmino's and Lessius' doctrine were stressed by the Leuven theologians. On the topic see L. CEYSSENS, *Bellarmino et Leuven*, in *L'augustinisme*, pp. 179-205.

¹⁴ *Lessius to Bellarmino*, 10 December 1588, in Le Bachelet, *Bellarmino*, p. 229.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ On Bellarmino's positions toward Baius see, for example, M. Biersack, *Bellarmino und die "Causa Baii"*, in *L'augustinisme*, pp. 167-178.

¹⁷ See E.J.M. EIJL, *Les censures des universités d'Alcala et de Salamanque et la censure du Pape Pie V contre Michel Baius (1565-1567)*, in *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 48 (1953), 719-776 and *L'interprétation de la bulle de Pie V portant condamnation de Baius*, in *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 50 (1955), 499-542.

¹⁸ LAMBERIGTS, *The dispute*, p. 35.

However, Lessius must have been aware that Bellarmino's original Augustinism (which certainly softened over the years)¹⁹ was very different from his own doctrine, drenched in more-than-Scholasticism, Greek fathers', and contemporary theologians' teachings (a clear Probabilistic attitude), besides having its own characteristic profile. The reader is left with a feeling that Lessius identified the strict Augustinism taught by the Leuven theologians with Baianism (which is incorrect and does not make justice to the plurality of positions taught in Leuven), and that consequently he was biased and could not see any genuine similarities between Bellarmino's teaching and the Augustinism of the Faculty. Or, perhaps, he simply pretended not to. As a general consideration, which emerges from the reading of Lessius' personal and official writings, it must be said that he did not have any scruples of conscience when it came to self-defense, even when diminishing the Jesuit General's harsh critiques of his attitude and works to simple misunderstandings²⁰. It is tempting to define this attitude as 'Lessius' bubble': a safe place where the Jesuit – a moral theologian and jurist accustomed to reflecting upon the use of lies or complex self-defense processes in the juridical world²¹ – entitled himself to use every possible strategy for protection against the attacks that came both from outside and inside the religious order to which he belonged.

Either way, it is possible that Lessius' confusion about the doctrine taught by Bellarmino in Leuven was partially increased by Bellarmino's rejection of the theory of physical predetermination of free will (already in 1591),²² which was at that time propounded by Dominicans, first and foremost by Domingo Bañez in Salamanca (1528-1604), and was considered by Lessius to be very close to the Leuven academics' teachings.²³

Was Lessius, thus, simply lying when defending himself under the umbrella of Bellarmino's theology, or was he genuinely confused, perhaps considering any kind of Augustinian-based theology as essentially the same? We can hardly give a definite answer. Surely, on several occasions, Lessius proved himself capable of being a strategic or even a bold communicator, especially in his relationship with Jesuit superiors. This apparent confusion was surfaced at least one more time, at the publication of Luis de Molina's masterpiece, the *Concordia*.²⁴

III. HOW DID LESSIUS UNDERSTAND MOLINA?

“Dum Romae nihil in controversia nostra dogmatica potest obtineri, ecce tibi defertur ex Lusitania in has oras opus P. Ludovici Molinae de concordia liberi arbitrii cum donis gratiae, praescientia, providentia et praedestinatione; in quo accuratissime omnes illae sententiae quas boni isti viri suis censuris prestrinxerunt, explicantur et defenduntur, adeo

¹⁹ Bellarmino himself admits he once followed the Leuven theologians' doctrine of *auxilium sufficiens*, but he later abandoned it. See *Bellarmino to Lessius*, end of November 1587 in Le Bachelet, *Bellarmino*, pp. 172-175.

²⁰ On the matter, see RAI, *Ex meritis praevisis*, in press 2020.

²¹ On Lessius as a jurist see the numerous studies by Toon van Houdt and Wim Decock, such as T. van HOUT, *Tradition and Renewal in Late Scholastic Economic Thought. The case of Leonardus Lessius (1554-1623)*, in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28 (1998), no. 1, pp. 51-73 and W. DECOCK, *Le marché du mérite: penser le droit et l'économie avec Léonard Lessius*, Le Kremlin-Bicêtre, Zones sensibles, 2019.

²² *Bellarmino to Deckers*, 5 October 1591, in LE BACHELET., *Bellarmino*, p. 311.

²³ *Lessius to Bellarmino*, 29 December 1587 in *ibid.*, pp. 175-177.

²⁴ L. de MOLINA, *De liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, praedestinatione et reprobatione Concordia*, Lisbon: António Ribeiro, 1588. Alfred Freddoso published an English translation of Part IV of the *Concordia* (disputationes 47-53), on divine foreknowledge. See A. FREDDOSO, *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)*, Ithaca, Cornell university Press, 1988.

ut vix in modo loquendi interdum discrepent [...]. Facile vel hinc intelligent fieri non posse ut nostra damnentur, nam opus istud ab Inquisitione Lusitanica est approbatum”.²⁵

Lessius expressed himself in this way (with satisfaction, clearly) in a letter to Bellarmino, dated the 12th of July, 1590, after the appearance of Molina’s treatise that – the title is self-explanatory – focused on the harmony between human free will and God’s grace, providence, and predestination. This was precisely the major apple of discord between Catholics and Reformers, despite varying interpretations within both sides. A burning question indeed, whose answer had to consider – at least within Catholicism – both the sovereign authority of God and the role of human beings and their freedom within the economy of salvation.

The publication of Molina’s *Concordia* was welcomed by Lessius as a reassuring sign, and the final proof of the orthodoxy of his own doctrine. The *Concordia* had been approved by the Portuguese Inquisition, and thus had to be considered safe. Consequently, Lessius’ censored teachings, which the Jesuit made to coincide with Molina’s, had to be considered as orthodox as well²⁶.

Over the centuries, Lessius has been frequently identified as a Molinist theologian. However, this statement is not accurate, not least because the issue of chronology. In fact, when Molina’s *Concordia* was published in 1588 – Lessius read it most probably in the first half of 1590 –, Lessius’ doctrine had already been expressed in his course two years earlier, at the Jesuit College in Leuven, and even censored as erroneous, novel, and dangerous by the Leuven theologians in 1587²⁷. The above mentioned letter, moreover, proves that Lessius saw the *Concordia* merely as proof of the righteousness of his teaching. A comparison between the *Concordia* and Lessius’ *De Gratia Efficaci* would likely yield a greater understanding of the similarities and differences between the doctrines of the two Jesuit fathers²⁸. Published many years later, in 1610, *De Gratia Efficaci* systematically expanded Lessius’ doctrine and was partly influenced by Molina’s *Concordia*. Nevertheless, this does not make Lessius a Molinist, as should be clear from these data. However, for considerations of space and also to be consistent with the chronological order, this article will leave *De Gratia Efficaci* behind, in order to focus on Lessius’ original doctrine as it was expressed in a series of official documents – the Thirty-four and the Six Propositions – in the late 1580s. Moreover, it would be interesting to reflect upon the propositions that Molina himself sent to the vertex of the Order, after being criticized, in 1589²⁹.

²⁵ Lessius to Bellarmino, 12 July 1590 in Le Bachelet, *Bellarmin*, pp. 271-274, here p. 272.

²⁶ For a first approach to Molina and his theology see, for example, A. AICHELE, *Luis de Molina: The Metaphysics of Freedom*, in C. CASALINI (ed.), *Jesuit Philosophy on the Eve of Modernity*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019, 297-324; A. AICHELE – M. KAUFMANN (eds.), *A Companion to Luis de Molina*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2013, especially P. DVORAK, *Divine Foreknowledge of Future Contingents and Necessity*, 55-87; A. GERACE, *Luis de Molina’s ‘middle knowledge’: Thomas Stapleton’s ‘antidote’ to John Calvin*, *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 18 (2016), no. 2, 105-122.

²⁷ *Censura Facultatis Theologiae Lovaniensis in assertiones quasdam Rev Patrum Societatis Jesu, exhibita ipsi Societati die XII Septembris 1587 per Bedellum eiusdem Facultatis*, seen in ACDF, St.St. E 7-c, *Controversia inter doctores Lovanienses et Patres Societatis Jesu tempore Xyxti V*, 15r-29v.

²⁸ L. LESSIUS, *De gratia efficaci decretis Divinis libertate arbitrii et praescientia Dei conditionata disputatio apologetica Leonardi Lessii e Societate Iesu S. Theol. in Academia Lovaniensi Professoris. Duae aliae eiusdem auctoris disputationes: altera de praedestinatione et reprobatione angelorum et hominum, altera de praedestinatione Christi*, Antwerp, Moretus, 1610.

²⁹ A comparison between the doctrines presented in the *Concordia* and *De Gratia Efficaci* will be made in a further study in the near future.

The core of the matter, both in terms of the similarities between Molina's and Lessius' doctrines and the harsh criticism of their opponents, lies in the concept of divine foreknowledge or prescience of human merits in the economy of salvation. In other words, both Lessius and Molina earmarked a special place for God's prescience in harmonizing the aforementioned soteriological elements which are the major elements in the theology of salvation: predestination, grace, and free will. Despite the differences between their theologies, both Lessius' and Molina's works were considered dangerous and risky, even within the Society of Jesus, for claiming a peculiar role for God's foreknowledge of merits, and therefore for the contribution of human deeds in soteriology, at the expense of the divine sovereign authority and predestination. Such a view was very dangerous when it came to inter-confessional debates, orthodox readings of the *doctor Gratiae*, and the idea that excessively lenient Jesuit doctrines could hide Pelagianism. We must not underestimate the importance that doctrines of salvation have had in Christian history, especially in the Reformation Era, in order to gain a full understanding of the deep concern that extreme positions raised among orthodox Catholic theologians.

We know that Lessius, after being censored and charged with ancient heresies, immediately contacted Bellarmino to ask his opinion, and to provide for his self-defense. However, when Molina's work was criticized, especially by the aforementioned Domingo Bañez (a congregation *De auxiliis divinae gratiae* would have been summoned to resolve the matter in 1598-1607), Molina acted differently. On January 28th, 1589, in fact, he wrote directly to the Father General Claudio Acquaviva (1543-1615), sending him a series of propositions to be evaluated. Acquaviva turned the document over to Bellarmino, who scribbled his comments in the margins.

Of utmost importance is Molina's idea of divine prescience, which emerges from these propositions. God's predestination depends, Molina writes, on his prescience, *through which (per)* God foresees that human beings, due to their freedom, are going to want something, or are destined to want it (*volituum esse*). This means, therefore, that they are going to act in a certain way, and then God chooses to want the same thing, so that human beings and God share a goal³⁰. The expression *volituum esse* provides some food for thought. In fact, it can be translated with a meaning of intentionality (willing something) or predestination (to be destined to). Initially, the first translation seems the most appropriate, since the expression must be read as a direct consequence of *ex mea libertate*, viz. the idea of free human decisions and intentions. However, when this proposition is contextualized in Molina's broader theology, the meaning is more nuanced. Molina developed, in fact, a detailed and elaborated doctrine taking into account God's counterfactual knowledge, that is to say God's understanding of all possible contingent futures and of any consequences of these different futures³¹.

There is a good chance that Molina used the expression *volituum esse* precisely to keep open these different interpretive possibilities. Certainly, the Jesuit was a major supporter of the value of human will. Concerning free will, in fact, Molina maintains in the first proposition that its use, through which

³⁰ MOLINA, Proposition 6 in *Molina to Acquaviva*, 28 January 1589, in Le Bachelet, *Bellarmin*, 237-239, here p. 238. "Praedestinatio Dei presupponit praescientiam, qua praevidet me ex mea libertate ita volituum esse, et tunc Deus etiam vult ut ego ita velim." Refer to this letter for all Propositions.

³¹ A good explanation of the theory of counterfactual and middle knowledge is provided, for example, in K.R. MACGREGOR, *Luis de Molina: The life and theology of the founder of middle knowledge*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan Academic, 2015, especially chapters "Molina's conception of middle knowledge" and "Molina's doctrine of predestination."

human beings are justified (*usus liberi arbitrii, quo justificamur*) partly depends on divine grace, partly on the natural strength of the free will itself (*ex viribus naturalibus ipsius liberi arbitrii*). Part of the role of free will, then, is to either accept or reject God's grace. And, Molina continues, when Paul attributes divine grace entirely to God's own decision, he is referring to the aid that human beings request. Indeed, God provides these aids only to those he chooses, but such help also depends on human freedom to ask for and accept it.

Molina's major accomplishment – besides not being condemned by the Pope during the *De Auxiliis!* – is the introduction and systematic explanation of the concept of *scientia media*, viz. middle knowledge, which is discussed in his *Concordia*.

Scientia media, deeply connected to the divine counterfactual knowledge, represents for Molina the link between the two epistemological moments in God's knowledge³². It stands between on the one hand the natural knowledge and on the other hand the free knowledge. Natural knowledge belongs to God's own omniscient nature, is not dependent on God's creative decree (which happens later), and refers to any necessary truths from a metaphysical perspective (for example, $5+5 = 10$) and to all possible worlds and circumstances (not created yet); while free knowledge depends on God's sovereign will to actualize specific creative possibilities. For instance: "Michael Baius exists" is a true statement, but it depends on God's actual will to create him³³.

Scientia media is thus Molina's explanation of the underlying issue at the heart of his *Concordia*: how God's providence and predestination, on the one hand, and human freedom, on the other, can coexist without any contradiction. *Scientia media* – this is a major element of interest – is *ab aeterno*, viz. it happens before the divine creative process, and it is based on the prevision of the future contingents, in which human beings can act freely, and not necessarily, although God had already foreseen and provided the consequences of any single, possible case. God cannot compel human beings to freely make a decision, although he knows every possible decision taken by people in every possible circumstance of every possible future contingent, and he then decides to actualize one of these possibilities. "This knowledge is antecedent to God's will, in the sense that he knows a particular event, even though he has not (yet) decided whether he will create it or not, or, more accurately, whether he will actualize it or not"³⁴. The difficulty lies in finding a concrete harmony, viz. *concordia* – apologies for the pun – between the idea of *scientia media*, which is a theoretical construction in the logical order that should safeguard human free will, on the one hand, and the undeniable fact that God's choice to actualize a precise scenario, rather than others, involves some absolute predestination and divine sovereign will, on the other. Unlike Lessius, Molina saved himself on the theoretical level. Indeed, on closer inspection the human freedom that is preserved by the concept of *scientia media* is not all that fundamental from a practical point of view, because it is God and God alone who decides which future contingent to actualize. Further study is necessary to determine whether Molina was, in fact, far less radical than Lessius, and saved human freedom only on a logical – rather than practical – level.

³² See, for example, R. GASKIN, *Conditionals of freedom and middle knowledge*, in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (1993), no. 173, 412-430.

³³ In the *Concordia*, see q. 13, a. 14, d. 50. On the threefold nature of divine knowledge in Molina see MACGREGOR, *Luis de Molina*, pp. 91-104.

³⁴ GERACE, *Luis de Molina's 'middle knowledge'*, pp. 114-115. Molina's middle knowledge has been highly criticized. An overview of this criticism has been provided here: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/middlekn/#H1>, accessed on 09 December 2019.

This is exactly how Molina saved himself, showing much more foresight than Lessius. The latter, at least in the official records produced during the Leuven controversies, simply based God's predestination on his foreknowledge of the freely performed merits, without such an articulated theory. Molina, however, made human beings free to act according to their will, not depending on God's sovereign authority, but also made it clear that God had previously seen what would happen in any circumstance, and then authoritatively decided to actualize one of these possible futures.

In his self-defense at the time of the Leuven controversies, Lessius never mentions Molina's *scientia media*. Indeed this would have been impossible, since the Iberian Jesuit had not yet published his treatise. Only several years later would Lessius dedicate an entire chapter of his *De Gratia Efficaci* to the concept of middle knowledge, which – he stated – he usually referred to as *praescientia conditionata*. This will require further investigation, as Lessius' self-defending explanations are better to be taken *cum grano salis*³⁵.

It is in any case fairly clear that Lessius understood the necessity of closing ranks with Molina, for it is undeniable that their doctrines have (important) points in common, particularly regarding God's foreknowledge. This was essential, especially in a period when marked differences emerged even within the Society of Jesus, a concern for Acquaviva, who would eventually publish a strategic decree on efficacious grace (*Decretum de uniformitate doctrinae, praesertim de gratiae efficacitate*, 1613) in order to establish boundaries and preserve a certain unity among Jesuit theologians, and thus defend the Order from external attacks.

Lessius' attitude toward Molina clearly appears in a letter that he sent to Bellarmino in July 1590, in which he formed a common front with Molina in opposition to the Jesuit Gregory of Valencia's (1550-1603) criticism of some elements in both their theologies of grace³⁶. Particularly problematic from Lessius' point of view are: first, the idea that God's preordination has the form of a real predetermination, which could easily flow into physical premotion; and, second – and this is quite typical of Lessius' entire theological system, indeed the Jesuit looked with horror on the idea, diametrically opposed to his own doctrine – that human beings are not able to make God's *gratiam praevenientem* (i.e. the sufficient aid provided by God) efficacious, and that nobody can consent to the divine invitation without a new grace, which would efficaciously make him consent³⁷, an idea that was also hotly debated during the Leuven controversies. That is to say, for Lessius, the worst possible criticism of his views came from those who deprived human beings of any power or abilities in the economy of salvation, even jeopardizing the capabilities of free will and abandoning humanity to a form of predestination and predetermination, which, in Lessius' mind, felt like Protestantism.

“[...] Neque etiam, ut videtur, ex utilitate Ecclesiae, cum illae sententiae mentes hominum mire affligant, et difficulter haereticis responderi possit”³⁸.

The above quoted lines perfectly express Lessius' ideas – a pastoral concern and an anti-Protestant intent – when it comes to discussing about the theology of salvation. Strict doctrines of predetermination are, according to the Jesuit, useless for the Church for two reasons: firstly, they

³⁵ LESSIUS, *De Gratia Efficaci*, chapter XIX.

³⁶ *Lessius to Bellarmino*, 12 July 1590 in Le Bachelet, *Bellarmino*, pp. 271-274, here p. 272. See also footnote 4 for information about the *Judicium facultatis theologicae academiae Ingolstadiensis de praedictis [six] propositionibus*, focusing on Lessius' Six Propositions, and signed also by Gregory of Valencia.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

trouble human beings, who feel left without any possibility of contributing to their own salvation; and secondly, it would be much more difficult to respond to the Protestants, because their doctrines, stressing the role of the divine predestination of the elect, are dangerously similar to these Catholic teachings. It is particularly interesting that, on the opposite side of the Catholic spectrum, the Leuven theologians, or strict Augustinian theologians more generally, saw Lessius' theology as even more problematic for reconquering Protestant souls because it smelled of Pelagianism and gave the impression that Catholics subordinated God's grace to human free will. Moreover, Lessius' pastoral concern was not shared by renowned Jesuit peers, such as Bellarmino, who frustratingly commented on Lessius' lenient doctrine that the Jesuit should not console the faithful by claiming that they have the power to contribute to their own salvation in a decisive manner, because nothing is, in reality, in their hands, and Lessius' doctrine, therefore, is misleading³⁹.

“[...] At esset inanis, et deceptoriam consolatio, si doceret esse in manu nostra salutem, quoad meritum gloriae, sed non esse in manu nostra [...]”⁴⁰.

Already in the introduction to the declaration of censorship of Lessius' teachings by the Faculty of Theology, the Leuven academics claimed that the Jesuits considered Augustine's theology of grace to lead to desperation for one's salvation, because it annihilated free will⁴¹.

A important question is whether Molina's doctrine could also be considered misleading. So far it seems that the variations between Molina's and Lessius' teachings, as expressed in the late 1580s, made the necessary difference. We will now deepen our consideration of the matter, finally demonstrating how Lessius should not be considered a Molinist, nor Molina a “Lessian,” and how, despite Lessius' claims, the silent story of intra-Jesuit quarrelling on the issue of predestination and divine foreknowledge has been neglected for years.

IV. MORE UNDEFENDABLE THAN MOLINA? SOME FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Jesuit sources make it clear: Lessius was a constant concern for General Acquaviva, who might also have felt disrespected because of the Jesuit's oblivious attitude. As an illustration, when Acquaviva expressed his disappointment in the publication of Lessius' *De Gratia Efficaci* – without passing through the Jesuit censorship system and despite the papal prohibition on discussing the topic, after the end of the congregation *De Auxiliis* – Lessius simply and boldly minimized the entire matter⁴². A few years earlier, to provide another example, discontent spread within the Jesuit Curia in Rome because of Lessius' seemingly lax moral economy, as expressed in his treatise *De Iustitia et iure*⁴³; however, even in this case it is clear that the Flemish Jesuit did not particularly care about his censors' remarks. This attitude was typical of Lessius, who, as a good Probabilist, was happy to maintain doctrines which were only defended by one author, and, as a rationalist *ante litteram*, made reason, logic, and experience major *auctoritates* to rely on.

³⁹ Bellarmino's dissertation on Lessius' doctrine, in LE BACHELET, *Prédestination*, I, pp. 158-159.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴¹ LAMBERIGTS, *The dispute*, p. 36.

⁴² *Lessius to Acquaviva*, September 1610, in LE BACHELET, *Prédestination*, I, p. 131.

⁴³ ARSI, *Censurae*, 654, III (1603-1631), 1r-49v.

As for Lessius' soteriology, General Acquaviva had a specific concern, namely the fact that Lessius' doctrine was even more problematic, and hard to maintain and defend, than mainstream Molina's⁴⁴. That is to say Molina was considered by the highest authority of the Order to be far more moderate than Lessius, although later their doctrines were frequently identified with each other.

The question, then, is why. This is the million-dollar question, especially since it seems that it has been neglected by most religious historians. And this is quite natural, for Lessius clearly expressed the idea that his theology was the same as Molina's. However, in the early 17th century, Acquaviva felt differently and he felt right. Moreover, although we will not explore this matter here, after the congregation *De Auxiliis* even Bellarmino ceased supporting Lessius and harshly criticized his doctrine, as widely expressed in the *De Gratia Efficaci*, despite having defended it years earlier, during the Leuven controversies⁴⁵.

Several elements deserve to be highlighted in order to understand the entire affair. Firstly, there is an important and yet insufficiently stressed difference between Lessius' and Molina's doctrines. Namely, Molina's *scientia media*, in line with Congruism, works in the following way: God knows and foresees all the counter-factual possibilities, especially the circumstances in which human beings can accept the divine grace. He then decides which future contingent to actualize, and offers thus his grace so that, in those circumstances, it is irresistible; that is to say, human beings cannot deny his grace. We can easily understand, then, why Bellarmino had an easier time defending Molina's *Concordia* than Lessius' doctrine, for Bellarmino himself, despite being much more theologically Augustinian and a defender of the role of God's grace in the economy of salvation, shared the idea that God provided his grace in conditions in which one cannot refuse it, with little emphasis on God's prescience of merits.

However, Lessius' discourse is much less nuanced, and the irresistibility of the divine grace disappears almost completely in his writings during the Leuven controversies. In fact, on the one hand, the crucial element of Lessius' doctrine is God's mere foreknowledge of human merits – but this is prescience, not predestination – without any consideration of the relationship between such merits and any divine preordination. On the other hand, since human consent, directed by free will, is the force tasked with making sufficient grace efficacious, it also follows that God's grace is not irresistible at all. This would have been enough to get Lessius into trouble, but other complications arose in the early 17th century, after Molina's death and the publication of the *De Gratia Efficaci*.

The fact that Lessius' doctrine was defended within the Order, especially by Bellarmino, during the Leuven controversies, but then criticized after the printing of the *De Gratia Efficaci* and, of course, after the end of the *De Auxiliis*, should make us reflect on the Society of Jesus' strategies. Lessius was indeed defended when he – and along with him the entire Order – was under attack by the Leuven theologians. When, more than twenty years later, Lessius published his treatise, however, the Order was no longer under attack, and there was no need to strenuously defend the Flemish Jesuit. Furthermore, the dispute *De Auxiliis* ended with an imposed silence between the parties, and with no condemnation of Molina. The Jesuits, therefore, were keen not to be involved again in such a thorny dispute, even more so given the imposition of silence by the Pope. Lessius went back to the matter precisely because he felt protected by the fact that Molina's doctrine had not been condemned, but he

⁴⁴ Acquaviva to Fléron, 21 August 1610, in LE BACHELET, *Prédestination*, I, p. 105.

⁴⁵ On the matter, see RAI, *Ex meritis praevisis*, in press 2020.

did it in the wrong moment if he hoped to gain the support of his own Order. Moreover, for the already mentioned doctrinal reasons, Lessius' viewpoints could hardly be supported by Acquaviva.

V. CONCLUSION

Early modern Catholic theologians can be roughly divided between supporters of the doctrine *ante merita praevisa* on the one hand, and of *post merita praevisa* (plus the more nuanced doctrine *per propria merita* by Molina) on the other hand, which respectively propound the idea that God predestines human beings to be elected before or after his foreknowledge of their merits (or through one's merits, as in the doctrine of middle knowledge). Further attention, now, should be devoted to the very fine, sophisticated distinction between Lessius' doctrine *post* or *ex meritis praevisis* and Molina's theory *per propria merita*. Lessius' doctrine fall under the umbrella of predestination *after* the prevision of merits (*post merita praevisa*); as for Molina's teaching, it is more complicated, as already suggested. Anyway, both theories distance themselves from doctrines of election *ante merita praevisa*⁴⁶. Historians and theologians do not definitively agree on the real differences between these expressions which stress – with some nuances and differences – God's prescience. The expression *ex meritis praevisis* used by Lessius refers to the time and modality through which God may consider his prevision of human beings' merits (viz. good deeds) in the economy of salvation, and especially in relationship to his predestinatory decrees. In particular, the proposition *ex* may imply a causal meaning: it could thus be read not only as *after* the prevision of merits, but even *due to* such foreknowledge; merits would become, in other words, the concrete reason or ground for God's predestinatory decrees.

As was made clear in a fruitful conversation with Mathijs Lamberigts, most probably the real problem for the opponents of these theories was not the use of the propositions *post* or *ex*, but the idea itself of giving a central role to the foreknowledge of merits, rather than to God's sovereign authority. Besides the fact that Lessius probably meant to express causality even more clearly by means of the preposition *ex*, it is undeniable that in his theory predestination happens after the foreknowledge of merits, chronologically, making such merits the basis or even the reason for the divine election of human beings, and that this doctrine consequently deprives God of his arbitrary, sovereign authority.

Molina's use of the expression *per propria merita*, on the other hand, suggests at least that the Jesuit was trying to protect himself from further attacks, depicting the foreseen merits as a sort of filter in the lens of divine foreknowledge. Predestination passes through the prevision of merits, actually an intricate net of counterfactual and circumstantial knowledge in the logical order, and taking into account the foreseen and irresistible offering of God's grace. When God actualizes one of the foreseen possibilities in the real order of the Creation, he does so on the basis of his own sovereign will, and with the tones of predestination, playing thus full role in human beings' life history.

This huge difference between Molina's and Lessius' doctrines, as expressed in the 1580s-90s, is quite clear, despite Lessius' claim that the two doctrines coincide. A systematic comparison with the more detailed and complex treatise *De Gratia Efficaci* could offer more insights into the matter, but this will be the second chapter of this saga. The world of Church historians and theologians has waited

⁴⁶ In the *Concordia* see, for example, *Q. 23, a. 4-5, d. 1, m.7*: “[...] beatitudo aute non est finis Dei, sed est creaturarum rationalium finis ac premium per propria merita, cooperante gratia, ex ordinatione divina obtinendu, iuxta illud Matth. 19 [...]”

four hundred years to finally understand if Lessius was either in good faith, a liar, or just a smart Jesuit willing to strategically defend himself from attacks, and can certainly wait a bit longer.

Eleonora Rai

Research Unit of History of Church and Theology
Charles Deberiotstraat 26 - box 3101
3000 Leuven
Room: 03.24
eleonora.raai@kuleuven.be