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Devotio Moderna: The Cornerstone of the Reformation

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DEVOTIO MODERNA
THE CORNERSTONE OF THE REFORMATION

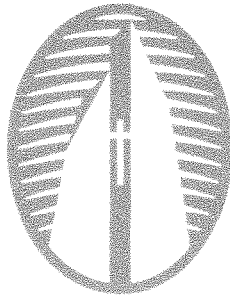
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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.

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ABSTRACT

Standing up to the ecclesiastical institutions of the late fourteenth century, the *Devotio Moderna* formed in the hopes of reforming the Catholic church. By comprehensively reviewing the *Devotio Moderna*, this thesis explores the question; was the Protestant Reformation possible without the steady and penetrating influence the Devout Brothers and Sisters?

In contrast to the schismatic Reformation arriving a century later, this reformation pursued spiritual renewal for both laity and clergy. The movement achieved a measure of success, but in a manner the founders might not have anticipated. The Devout Brothers and Sisters lived in stark contrast to the failing Church; thus, the movement became a beacon of hope for a society growing increasingly disenchanted. The preconditions necessary to precipitate the Protestant Reformation rest in the whole of the *Devotio Moderna* movement. In addition, the Devout produced significant writers: Erasmus, Thomas á Kempis, Wessel Gansfort, and Gerard Zerbolt. Their works directly influenced the fundamental philosophies of the sixteenth Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Established in the last years of the fourteenth century and enduring well over a century, the Devotio Moderna¹ spread rapidly wherever German and Dutch were spoken.² The cities of Deventer and Zwolle were the two centers of the Devout³ households, and for the duration of the movement, nearly all subsequent households sprung out of these first two households. It addressed dismal social and religious conditions⁴ and restored “the authentic *religio christiana*, the community of heart, mind, and property found in early Christian Jerusalem.”⁵ The Modern Devotion was noteworthy in that it prepared the way for the Protestant Reformation as well as the Catholic Counter Reformation. This thesis will reveal a Protestant Reformation standing on the contributions of the Modern Devotion.

¹ Literally translation is “*present-day devotion*” see Kenneth Albert Strand, *Essays on the Northern Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1968), 9.

² Wybren Scheepisma, *Women, the Book, and the Godly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference, 1993; 'for Hereby I Hope to Rouse Some to Piety': Books of Sisters from Convents and Sister-Houses Associated with the Devotio Moderna in the Low-Countries*, ed. Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1995), 27.

³ Also known as the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.

⁴ The medieval Church had lowered its standards to the point that it no longer was necessary for laypeople to live their lives according to the ethical standards set forth in the Gospels. It was at this point in history that mediators of grace were being introduced in order to convey the promise of salvation. Through the use of mediators of grace, such as the saints and the implementation of the sacramental rituals through the mass, the lines were permanently blurred between magic and the mysterious powers of the Divine. In the end, a line had been crossed where the laity viewed the church as ‘manipulators’ of God, where an increasingly passive person, who lacked sufficient faith in God, was not without a remedy – the sacramental system could be used to obtain what the deity may or may not desire to yield. This is a harsh view, but it is intriguing and potentially important for understanding the preconditions necessary for Geert Grotes’ desire to reform his church and for the forthcoming Protestant schism. For more detail see: Lutz Kaelber, *Schools of Asceticism: Ideology and Organization in Medieval Religious Communities* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 101-102.

⁵ John Van Engen, *Schriftlichkeit Und Lebenspraxis Im Mittelalter: Erfassen, Bewahren, Verändern: (Akten Des Internationalen Kolloquiums 8.-10. Juni 1995); Managing the Common Life: The Brothers at Deventer and the Codex of the Household*, ed. Hagen Keller, Christel Meier, and Thomas Scharff, *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften*; Bd. 76 (München: W. Fink, 1999).

The movement consisted of four strands, as for size, the Sisters of the Common Life was the greatest. They did not take religious vows but lived together as a semi-monastic community practicing mystical contemplative spirituality. The second is the counterpart to the Sisters of the Common Life – The Brothers of the Common life. Like the Sisters, they lived communally in houses consisting of priests, or priests in training, clerics, along with a few common lay brethren.⁶ Formed by the early leaders to offer protection to the vulnerable Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, the third is the Augustinian monastic order called the Chapter of Windesheim. The fourth strand is the female monastic counterpart to the third – called the Canonesses of Windesheim.⁷

Nikolas Staubach presents an excellent description of key distinctives credited to the Movement: they promoted lay piety, independently (apart from the Church officials), read translated Scripture in the vernacular and emphasized ‘inner’ spiritual development over and above religiosity.⁸ Staubach goes on to say that the *Devotio Moderna* has traditionally been interpreted as Christian Humanism; and as such, prepared the way for the reformation.⁹ Finally, the Devout rejected scholastic dialectics and speculation, replacing it with an emphasis on personal piety such as a practical love that flowed out of ‘spirituality of the heart’.¹⁰

⁶ Scheepsma, 29.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nikolaus Staubach, *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists; Two Volumes*, ed. Irena Dorota Backus (Leiden u.a.: Brill, 1997), 406.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Thesis Presentation

This research will attempt to demonstrate the crucial foundations of the Reformation contained in the movement called the *Devotio Moderna*. Geert Grote is generally viewed as the founder of the Movement. However, it should be noted that some recent scholars have challenged Grote's honorary position in favor of John Ruusbroec, a French Brabant mystic. By no means will this author attempt to settle the contested founders, but there will be an attempt to reveal and un-pack as much of the evidence for both sides of the argument as is possible.

Chapter three will take a broad view of the movement. For instance, what forces brought about the need for the Movement as well as the opposing forces challenging its right to exist? This area is complex, but of special importance were the social conditions of Europe. It was this newly emerging economy that blossomed into unprecedented prosperity that set the stage for an enlightened and spiritually thirsty population. Also included is a section on the Devout sisters and the great contribution they made to the Movement.

In addition, chapter three examines some of the important people that directly contributed to the Devout's literature, or were products of their system of education. Among these distinguished people were a famous humanist philosopher named Erasmus, important mystics Wessel Gansfort and Thomas à Kempis, and even a Priest in training who would someday become a very important Protestant — Martin Luther.

Overview of Prior Research

In the past, historians tended to condense the Devotio Moderna into two streams of thought.¹¹

The first actively sought connections with Humanism, the Renaissance, and ultimately the Reformation. The other defined the Movement as a Catholic Church renewal movement that stayed well within the traditional bounds of medieval contemplative spirituality. There are other ways to partition the scholarship as well. The Dutch perspective has tended to champion the Devotio Moderna as a spiritual renewal movement that made important contributions to educational reform while the German perspective tends to view the Movement as a central precursor to the Reformation. In addition, the first generation of scholars can be divided into Northern Protestants, e.g. R.R. Post and Southern Catholics, e.g. A.G. Weiler.¹² Flemish speaking Willem Lourdaux lays claim to the group's origin for the Belgians, by declaring John Ruusbroec, a Brabant mystic, the true philosophical and inspirational source of the Movement.¹³

¹¹ John H. Van Engen, *Serta Devota: In Memoriam Guillelmi Lourdaux; a Brabantine Perspective on the Origins of the Modern Devotion: The First Book of Petrus Impius's Compendium Decursus Temporum Monasterii Christifere Bethleemitice Peurpere*, ed. W. Lourdaux and Werner Verbeke, Mediaevalia Lovaniensia; Ser. 1, Studia 20-21 (Leuven: University Press, 1992), 3.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 3-4.

Early Scholars

R.R. Post

Unfortunately, there are only a few comprehensive works devoted to this subject translated into or written in English. The most authoritative is R.R. Post.¹⁴ In his text, Post attempts to address some broad questions; mainly, what is the relationship between the Modern Devotion to Humanism and to the Reformation, and to what extent did the Devout contribute to and/or influence the new humanistic educational methods for teaching youth? In addition, Post ponders the relationship between Humanism and the Reformation.

A troubling pattern to his writing style is the tendency to present impressive facts then proceed to eloquently dismiss their importance thereafter. For instance, in regards to Humanism, Post dismisses the potential for significant influence, simply because so few of the Community participated in the universities where, he believes, the new age of humanistic optimism was most significantly disseminated.¹⁵ Post was resistant to the idea that Erasmus could have been fundamentally influenced by the Devout's philosophy. As this research will show, the evidence in support of a dynamic relationship between Humanism and the Reformation should logically lead to a conclusion contrary to his. Namely, Post dismisses the likelihood that the Modern Devotion could have influenced Erasmus; or that Erasmus could have contributed to the Modern Devout.¹⁶ However, recent scholarship is reconsidering Post's minimalist conclusions, and is open to the possibility that both Erasmus and the Devout influenced each other respectively.

¹⁴ Aside from Albert Hyma's works published in the early twentieth century, cf. R.R. Post's work, translated from Dutch to English, is the most comprehensive work on the subject accessible for this theses. Had I been able to read Dutch or German, the range of primary and secondary authors would have increased substantially. Thus, Post is used extensively throughout the paper. R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion. Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, V. 3 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968).

¹⁵ Ibid., 677.

¹⁶ Ibid., 658-676.

Furthermore, Post moves Erasmus out of the Catholic sphere of influence and into a quasi-independent state, where he mysteriously gains knowledge entirely on his own, despite living and studying in the midst of the Movement for a number of years.¹⁷ Could this be a Protestant bias?¹⁸ Post cannot place Erasmus in the Protestant camp since they did not exist to date; and Erasmus is subsequently exposed and rejected by Luther as a traitor to the cause he helped bring about. Apparently, Post's over-all position does opens the possibility that he did not want the Devout movement / Catholic church (albeit a reform movement within the Catholic Church), to play a prominent role in the forces that ultimately brought about success to Luther's Protest. R.R. Post, like his predecessors, neglected to research the greater half of the movement, the Sisters, and thus overlooked their significance – he described the impact of the Sisters as “passive”.¹⁹ This is unfortunate, for had it been left to the men, Grote might have never found recruits to fill his home of Spiritual Devouts. It was largely the women of the era who desperately yearned for spiritual renewal. However, credit should be given for his acknowledgment of the fact that past historians have neglected the Sisters as well.²⁰ It is clear that Post is, in fact, only partially aware of the volumes of literature produced by the Sisters. Wybren Scheepisma attests to the utter lack of historical attention given the Sisters when he writes, “the so-called ‘Modern Devotion’, which had a major influence upon religious life in Europe in the later Middle Ages...was particularly popular with women, thousands of whom

¹⁷ Ibid., 392-398.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹⁹ Ibid., 259, 497. Post claims that the Sisters are “passive” members because they did not (or were not allowed) to perform the important elements of the Movement such as preaching to outsiders, exercising religious influence in the outside world, or writing religious treatises. Their only claim to non-passivity is they put into practice the teaching of their founder Geert Groote. ff. 48-56.

²⁰ Ibid., 259.

were attracted to it; but until now there has been no study of the women who played a part in the movement.”²¹

In summary, after a most amazing display of comprehensive study, Post uses the word ‘may’ to cautiously suggest the possibility that the entire movement was crucial to the forthcoming ‘reaction’ called the Reformation:

They may indeed have propagated the *contemptus mundi* over too wide a field, permeating religious life with a pessimism, against which the optimism of the Renaissance and the evangelical freedom of the reformation came as a reaction.²²

In other words, society became disillusioned with the church due to the efforts of the Devout. The product of the disillusionment produced the Protestant Reformation.

Albert Hyma

An early twentieth century historian, Hyma, promoted the Devotio Moderna as “the” Christian Renaissance;²³ claiming that, by the fourteenth century true Christian spirituality had all but disappeared to the margins society.²⁴

He points out that prior to the development of contemporary Devotio Moderna theories, the Italian Renaissance had been widely credited for educational reform. Hyma confronts this concept by showing how in the middle of the fifteenth century the Low Countries had a unique privilege of being located in the center of world commerce. Not to discount Paris or London, the cities of Antwerp and Brussels funneled enormous wealth to the Low Countries. And for a brief period in history, nearly all of the major routes of commerce converged on these two cities.

²¹ Wybren Scheepma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), ii.

²² Post, 680.

²³ Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance; a History of The "Devotio Moderna"*, 2d ed. (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), v.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

According to Hyma, this so called 'total convergence' had never happened, before or since, in any parts throughout the world. Therefore, the Low Countries became a beacon of wealth and power ebbing and flowing over the whole of Europe. Hyma's point is this, the term Christian Renaissance should be synonymous with the Modern Devout Movement, and due to the Movement's location and fortunate timing, their influence spread rapidly throughout all of Europe.²⁵

Of particular interest to this study is Hyma's comparison of the theology of the Roman Catholic Christian Renaissance to Lutheranism. He defines Luther's theology as a position that begins in faith and ends in love as a result of that perfect faith.²⁶ Whereby almost the exact opposite is true for the Renaissance position; here faith flows out of love, for love is supreme.²⁷ Early leaders of the *Devotio Moderna*: Groote, Radewijns, Zerbolt, as well as a Mid-Movement author, Thomas à Kempis, all proclaimed perfect love (as apposed to perfect faith) as the highest good.²⁸ Hyma points out that Luther is deviating from the Christian Renaissance by emphasizing 'faith' and 'Paul' at the expense of 'love' and 'Christ'.²⁹

The early Protestants tended to use the Gospel as a weapon against their perceived enemy, the Catholic Church. Basing their actions on Luther's notion of 'justification by faith,' Luther's proponents proclaimed themselves "evangelicals".³⁰ Seldom, if ever, did early evangelicals generate acts of loving kindness as by-products of their perfect faith. Utilizing both words and deeds, both sides mutually desired to silence the other for their perceived faults.³¹ The use of violent tactics were a significant departure from the supreme love of the Christian

²⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

²⁶ Ibid., 326.

²⁷ Ibid., 326-327.

²⁸ Hyma, 326.

²⁹ Ibid., 327.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Renaissance or the perfect faith of Luther. The point is, the Modern Devotion was, first and foremost, a gospel of moderation and love for humanity. Outwardly, they stayed within themselves and resisted rocking the boat, but underneath it all, they stood up against the Church, moving it toward substantial renewal.³²

The Devout sincerely believed in original sin, yet this belief was balanced by a hope in the certain 'rise' of humanity. Thus, Hyma claims that Martin Luther had a great admiration for both Gerard Groote and Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen. In addition, Luther admired the *Imitation of Christ* and the *Spiritual Ascensions* written by Zerbolt.³³ In the *Spiritual Ascensions*, Zerbolt saw man as original at the heights and then fallen and deprived, but the state of depravity is not totally without hope, for man can ascend back to the original heights. This is where God truly desires us all to be.³⁴ But according to Hyma, Luther seems to have misunderstood Zerbolt on this one point concerning the depravity of man. According to Luther, man is totally depraved with no hope of doing any thing concerning his fallen state. Except for the grace of God, man is doomed. Again, the Devout would agree as seen in from the pen of Zerbolt:³⁵

...we are no longer what we were intended to be, have lost our way, forsaken and forgotten "the mountain," our home, and live in "the valley" of another and distant land. Therefore, a "great labor" is necessary in order to return. In truth, the distance between the valley of tears where you are now established and the place in which the Lord once placed you, namely the state of your uprightness, is great and beyond measuring. And that is why a great ascending is necessary, or rather, in fact, many ascendings. There is a need for a great labor, if you wish to return to that place...³⁶

³² By offering a path of contemplative spirituality for the common lay person, the movement undermined the importance of Mass as well as the role of the Priest. For that reason and other points as well, (these will be covered at length in the body of this work), the movement can be credited with ushering in key reforms for the Church.

³³ Hyma contends that the *Imitation* was written by Zerbolt, not Thomas a Kempis. He does present some evidence for his conclusion, cf. Albert Hyma, *The Brethren of the Common Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 166-169.

³⁴ John H. Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 245.

³⁵ ff. 64-65.

³⁶ Ross Fuller, *The Brotherhood of the Common Life and Its Influence*, Suny Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 116-117.

Zerbolt claims that we all begin in a fallen state, but that God does not intend for us to stay there forever; there is much work that can be done to draw near to God.

Contemporary Scholars

Wybren Scheepsma

Wybren Scheepsma is attempting to fill in a crucial gap in Modern Devotion studies – the female members of the Modern Devotion. Wybren believes, as do most historians, that the Devout Movement had “a major influence upon religious life in Europe.”³⁷ She promotes the view that women are the primary contributors to nearly all religious reform movements throughout much of Europe’s history. For instance, thanks to the initiative of women, a number of important medieval reform movements took place, among them are the thirteenth century female convents made up of women called the Premonstratensians, and the Cistercians. It should be noted that other established orders, such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, received women as well. However, the Beguines were especially important for the Devout. They were similar in a number of ways: the lay group of women who took no formal vows, lived in community, and practiced a contemplative life of prayer, celibacy, and service to the world.³⁸ The Beguines flourished in Northwestern Europe, so much so, they attracted the attention of Church authorities who brutally persecuted them during the Inquisition.³⁹ In the early fifteenth century, officials noted how alike the two groups were, and proceeded to use the Beguines as an offensive weapon

³⁷ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, i.

³⁸ John R. Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 168.

³⁹ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, 3.

against the Movement, accusing the Devout of slipping into heresy, just as the Beguines had been accused of.⁴⁰

John Van Engen

Another contemporary historian concentrating on the *Devotio Moderna* is John Van Engen who points out that past studies of the Movement attempted to find linkages between Humanism, the Renaissance, and the Reformation by focusing largely on the theological and philosophical aspects of the moment. While this was not altogether inappropriate, in Engen's own words, those studies have redefined the movement using a:

functional description, namely, that the movement had its common thrust in the search for a new meditation technique for the working classes, directed toward the reformation of the soul and the rejuvenation of the spirit as the basis for renewal of the communal life, whether within or outside monastic walls.⁴¹

According to Engen, the key to evaluating the Movement is to understand how the group went about the renewal of the soul – for the cleric and lay person alike. Engen states that most scholarship of the Devout has focused on the tension between the Church and the Movement. Few scholars focused on the mechanisms needed to function as a social commune in the late-medieval period. The Devout's ability, and hard won right to exist in the unconventional form, was no small achievement.⁴² And by pursuing a somewhat covert spiritual strategy that affected the monastic system from the inside, the movement won over a large number of existing monastic houses as well. The key to this internal monastic reform method was a program that

⁴⁰ Geert Warner, *Saints, Scholars, and Politicians: Gender as a Tool in Medieval Studies: Festschrift in Honour of Anneke Mulder-Bakker on the Occasion of Her Sixty-Fifth Birthday: Tleven Ons Heren Jhesu Christi: Female Readers and Dutch Devotional Literature in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Mathilde van Dijk, Renée Nip, and Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Medieval Church Studies*; 15 (Turnhout Abingdon: Brepols; Marston distributor, 2005), 35.

⁴¹ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 2.

⁴² Engen, 111.

left intact the external structures of taking vows to the order as well as continuing to participate in communal sacramental activities.⁴³

Finally, Engen points out that during the fifteenth century, an important classroom reaction against scholastic rules paradoxically inhibited logic and open debate. And since the monastic system ran the educational programs, a humanism centered anti-intellectual (scholastic based) reaction, could not have taken place without the interior transformations inside the monastic walls throughout Europe. Thus, we have yet another reason to be grateful for the reforming work performed by the Modern Devotion – one that began a century before the most commonly recognized starting point for the Reformation.

Scholars have made the point that the movement ultimately failed and died out around the time Humanism and the Reformation became dominant forces. Yet, Engen confronts this point noting no movement or rejuvenation has experienced true and lasting “long term ‘success,’ including Christianity itself.”⁴⁴ Engen reveals the survival of remnants of the *Devotio Moderna* in later movements using new names like Jansenism/Puritanism, and the reappearance of “reform Catholicism” that included a great number of newly formed Monastic foundations.⁴⁵ final point is that perhaps the greatest contribution of the Devout is how successful they were in confronting the ‘professional’ realm of religion.⁴⁶

⁴³ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁵ Fuller, xiii.

⁴⁶ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 3.

Ross Fuller

Another contemporary scholar is Ross Fuller. In his perspective, what lies at the center of the Movement is a philosophical under-girding that joins action to contemplation. Consequently, Fuller attributes the Modern Devout as the vital element necessary for the world to have moved from Catholic Spirituality to Protestantism. What was important for the Devout was their spirituality lived out in the context of their daily lives. Sanctification was not an abstract set of religious doctrines to be known and believed; rather, the Devout practiced contemplative spirituality to nurture and mature the inner life, yet allowed that inner-life to affect their interaction with the outside world. The Devout pursued a life in harmony, one that balanced the two worlds of 'action' and 'contemplation.' It was, in fact, a bridge for the enclosed monastery to the world, as well as a link for the lay Christian to the Church.⁴⁷

According to Fuller, the Modern Devout had modeled themselves after the teaching of the Desert Fathers and joined their inner faith with an active life, seen most clearly in their efforts in the realm of education. According to Fuller, the Devout were essential participants in a gradual transition process where the 'monk' was being supplanted by the lay person. Technically, the movement faded away in the early sixteenth century, but remnants of their 'work' can be recognized in congregations of reformed Observant Canons, the Carthusian and Bridgettine Orders, as well as the Jesuits, and lay Christianity overall.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Fuller, xx.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Summary: Reformation Links

On October 31, 1517, Luther pinned 95 statements intended for disputation. In so doing, this Catholic priest became the spark that lit a large amount of ‘fuel,’ rapidly engulfing much of Europe. With a major schism between the Protestant and Catholic Churches as well as four centuries of continuous splintering among the Protestant and Anabaptists, the ‘heat,’ even today, continues to warm us all.

For centuries leading up to Luther’s great day of Reformation, an immense amount of resentment, frustration, if not outright contempt, for the Church had been building, stick by stick—a ‘fuel’ waiting for fire. Perhaps Martin Luther suspected what was about to take place, but evidence and logic suggest otherwise.⁴⁹ Luther would have known of the numerous reform attempts over the centuries where, time after time, the results were nearly the same – a terrible death for unfortunate reformers now labeled as heretics, or the eventual usurpation of the movement into an obedient, if not complacent, canonical order. However, in the final century leading to the Reformation, there is a remarkable exception to this unfortunate formula of death or capitulation, a Church renewal movement named the *Devotio Moderna*.⁵⁰

Without the contributions of this amazing collective, European society would have been spiritually and morally ill-prepared for Luther’s spark. As he lay on his deathbed in the year 1442, an early leader of the Devout, John Vos of Heusden, proclaimed that:

⁴⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 1st American ed. (New York: Viking, 2004), 123.

⁵⁰ The name attributed to this movement varies, depending on a variety of factors. Two of the most common names used the entire movement are Latin version: *Devotio Moderna*, and the English version: *The Modern Devotion*. However, for the sake of readability and to reduce redundancy, I will use the above names and a variety of others as well. The names that follow refer to different parts of the same overall movement: Devout, Brethren, Sisters, Brothers, Sisters of the Common Life, Brothers of the Common Life, Devotionalists, Canonesses of Windeshiem, and the Canon’s of Windeshiem.

Groote (sic) was the first father of this our reformation, the source and origin of the Devotio Moderna; he was an apostle in his country who kindled the fires of religious fervor in the cold hearts of men, and drew them to God.⁵¹

For without Grote founding the true beginning of the Reformation, Luther's work might have been like a spark to damp moss, with no chance whatsoever of lighting such a fire sufficient for final and lasting reform.

While the Guttenberg printing invention was obviously important, it is 'what' the presses were printing in massive quantities during the generations preceding the Reformation that made it all possible. In multiple ways, indirect and direct, the Devout delivered a massive amount of spiritual yearning needed for complete and utter social upheaval. All that was needed was a "Luther" to arrive and light the flames of revolt. It is not my desire to take away any significance of Martin's contribution to the Protestant Reformation, but I do want the reader to at least consider an alternative starting point for the Reformation; or better yet, call the Modern Devotion the beginning of the Reformation and Luther's event the 'Reformation Climax' if you will. The Devout were an ingenious movement resulting in raised hopes and expectations of both laity and clerics alike.

Throughout the Low Countries of Europe, scores of young and old, men and women, rich and poor, educated or not, along with canonical monks and nuns were swept into the arms of the Devout. If one were to count the actual members that participated in the movement, it would not be all that impressive. For the male side of the movement, some estimates claim around thirty-four households in Holland, eleven in the Rhineland and Westphalia. While the women can boast three times the number of households.⁵²

⁵¹ Strand, 9-10.

⁵² R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, The Pelican History of the Church; 2 (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1981), 338.

In terms of pure philosophy, scholars correctly point out how the movement borrowed heavily from others. The founder of the movement, Gerhard Groote stood on the shoulders of: the Rhineland mystic Eckhart, the Carthusian Order, and the Brabant wisdom of John Ruusbroec. However, there was creative genius at work by Gerhard and the other early leaders, Gerard Zerbolt and Florens Radewijns. The movement placed emphasis on the intimate mystical experience of spiritual communion with God by stressing the spirituality the Church had diminished, while the Mass and the Priest were not as important. Being raised an Anabaptist, I understand the importance of piety, especially in regards to the symbolic act of communion stressed by Mennonite tradition. This paper will only briefly explore the possibilities of a connection between the Anabaptist and the Devout; the Radical Reformation is too great a departure from the primary thesis of this paper; yet, it cannot be overlooked entirely.

The Devout movement itself is a unique semi-monastic structure of households, both in how it strategically organized its growth and in the structure of the rules for daily life. The movement thwarted a legal system pressed to obliterate the group almost from the onset.⁵³ The quest to survive prompted the early Devout leaders to create legal structures for growth and household rules that, not only served the functional needs of the members, but provided a ready defense when the inevitable attacks arrived. Looking at its structure, the movement outwardly proclaimed to be moderate, but inwardly the movement struck serious blows to the heart of the Catholic hierarchical system of power and control. Somehow, the movement managed to gain the approval of the Pope, yet the threat they presented was never lost to local parish clerics and civil authorities who stood to lose a great deal in terms of income and control.

Preceding the Reformation, was a Western society rapidly changing. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witness an abundance of social upheaval as the Dark Ages began to wane and

⁵³ Ibid., 337.

the Renaissance begins to emerge. Certainly the general forces of the Renaissance had a significant effect on the sphere of influence of the Devout. Yet, it is important to note the nature of the Renaissance that maintained a religious tone in the northern countries while the southern regions, such as Italy, tended to express itself in the arts and humanities.

In short, the overarching mood of the century preceding the Reformation can be summed up with one word,⁵⁴ Humanism.⁵⁵ And at the center of this new philosophy of optimism was Desiderius Erasmus, a household resident of the Devout.

⁵⁴ This text defines the term humanism as it was used in the Renaissance beginning in the late fourteenth century—Renaissance humanism promotes a positive world view and the dignity of mankind.

⁵⁵ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 349.

CHAPTER TWO

Geert Grote

Biography

The Formative Years

The christocentric ascetic reform movement was born out of the efforts of a Catholic deacon named Gerard Grote of Deventure (1340 – 84). He remained true to his passions and refused the priesthood in preference to a committed life pursuing spiritual renewal for his beloved, yet deeply troubled, Church.

Born in the old city of Deventer located in the eastern reaches of the diocese of Utrecht, Werner Grote and Heylwig van der Basselen gave birth to their only child.⁵⁶ Unlike most other cities in the region, Deventure had managed to elude the attention of the Vikings and their destructive raids. Over time, the city became an important center of trade and the locus of church administration for the region. Consequently, the city contained a bounty of high cultural development, such as the school of St. Lebuines – the preeminent educational facility throughout the Middle Ages.⁵⁷

Gerard's father, Werner Grote was elected to the position chief magistrate (or burgomaster) of the city of Deventure. However, the corruption of the entire magistrate system ate away at Werner, resulting in the resignation of his post. Years later the city re-elected

⁵⁶ Theodore P. Van Zijl, *Gerard Groote: Ascetic and Reformer, 1340-1384* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ of America Pr, 1963), 31.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

Werner, but in order to preserve his conscience, he refused to serve.⁵⁸ How fortunate it was for Geert to be raised in the influence of his father's admirable morals. Thus, filled with an idealistic sense for justice and a preference for the practical over the speculative, Geert was primed to be a courageous leader of his people.⁵⁹ His parents loved Geert and pampered him with the finest education available. At age ten, both parents died of the plague leaving him an orphan, but a relatively rich orphan nevertheless. His uncle, John van Ockenbroeck, became Geert's guardian, and instead of private tutors, Geert was sent to the local chapter school to study the typical regimen of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic.⁶⁰ Five years later, at age fifteen, he was sent to the University of Paris.

The diverse campus of the University of Paris enrolled students mainly from the countries of northern and eastern Europe.⁶¹ Other than a few mandatory books, students were free to read whatever they desired and choose their lectures with little interference.⁶² The precise details of Grote's studies are not known, but there is a good bit known about the University during the years of his studies. There was Albert of Saxony who demonstrated that the movement of stars was not, in fact, caused by angelic intervention; and Thimo the Jew deciphered the rainbow and the accompanying theory of light. Finally, there was Nicholas Oresme, whose important concepts enabled the later work of Copernicus and Descartes.⁶³

After studying at the University for two years, Geert received a Bachelor of Arts degree. A year later in 1358, he earned a Master of Arts degree as well. Shortly thereafter, Geert returned to Deventer where he showed off his astounding intellect by participating in public

⁵⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁶¹ Ibid., 40.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

disputations and presented a number of lectures.⁶⁴ At this time, Geert was viewed as arrogant in his manners as he flaunted his wealth by wearing costly clothing when participating in lectures or disputations.⁶⁵ After a brief stay at Deventure, Geert traveled to Cologne and then on to the University of Prague where he continued to lecture. At Prague, Grote met the man who would assume the leadership of the Movement upon his death, Florens Radewijns.⁶⁶

Grote continued to study during these post graduate years of traveling and lecturing. He delved deeply into the black arts of magic. He believed, as did most of his peers, the spirits were well-informed, and that “science naturals” held many secrets.⁶⁷ Therefore, the spirits might release their secrets to a skilled practitioner.

Suffice it to say that if there were ever a prototypical “Renaissance Man” during the Renaissance, Geert was it. He was proficient in astrology, medicine, liberal arts, law, and theology; and known to stand his ground with noted experts. For instance, he was purported to have won a disputation against a famed astrologist\magician.⁶⁸ It should be noted that Geert admitted to knowing a great deal of the dark arts, but denied practicing the “...magical frivolities.”⁶⁹ It is interesting that long after his death, Geert’s foray into magic caused some consternation among the Devout leaders. But in the end, Grote made a public display in his hometown of Deventure where he burnt his books of magic, and many other books as well, and did an appropriate penance for whatever sins he had committed with the devil’s magic.⁷⁰

Geert’s faults before his conversion are well documented and perhaps not exaggerated.

Many of the devout biographers during this era were members of the *Devotio Moderna*

⁶⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 53.

community. Asceticism was a key component of the Movement's guiding principles; thus, it is possible those early biographers attempted to make Geert appear greater by showing more contempt for his former self than was actually the case.⁷¹ The ascetic device of self-contempt will be covered in greater detail in the next section addressing Grote's philosophy.⁷² Included in the list of self-contempt offenses were his two prebends⁷³ achieved shortly before his spiritual conversion. And even though the prebends entitled him to a generous share of Church income, money was not the primary reason for his pursuit of the entitlement – Geert wanted fame, and many of his actions brought him ever closer to his quest.⁷⁴

Conversion

The precise date of Grote's conversion is not known, but in September of 1374, two years after achieving his second benefice, Geert converted his home into a community for poor women with spiritual desires. Thus, sometime between 1372 and 1374 Geert adopted a new world view.

What caused his change of heart will never be known precisely, but some of the stories connected to his conversion are interesting. While studying at Prague, a hermit confronted Grote with vivid scenes of his destination in Hell if he did not change his ways to save his soul.⁷⁵ This and other confrontations with friends and associates had an affect on Geert, but what appears to complete the conversion was a near deathbed experience.

⁷¹ Ibid., 57-62.

⁷² ff. 27.

⁷³ A *prebend* is a permanent rite to a share in the revenues of the cathedral of a particular chapter – in Grote's instance, the Dutch chapter of Ultrect.

⁷⁴ The income entitled to Grote was potentially large, but he received very little of the prebend funds before he abdicated them around 1374. cf. Van Zijl, 66-67.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 74.

Geert became desperately ill; thus, a priest was summoned to administer the last rites. This priest knew of Grote's affection for the black arts and demanded that he promise to burn all his magic books before he receive the last rites. Grote was reluctant to do so, for he believed, his future prosperity was dependant on those very books. Plus, Grote loved books with fervent passion. So he refused the request and the priest reciprocated accordingly — Geert was destined for Hell if he were to die that day. This thought apparently stirred for only a bit; since, the prior was called back to his bedside. Grote rationalized, death was close by, what good would books do when he was in Hell. So he relented and renounced his magic literature to the fire and received the final Communion.⁷⁶ But Geert did not die that day; accounts have him rising from his bed a new man prepared, motivated, and committed for the work of God — once and for all.⁷⁷

From this point on, Geert dressed simply, ate common food and most importantly, ended his pursuit of fame. He became a center of humiliating gossip as people tried to comprehend the old Geert: who was rich, proud, and full of vanity to the new Geert: who was poor, meek, and spiritually contemplative.⁷⁸ Amazingly, he began to give away wealth. He relinquished both prebends and granted the Carthusians of Monnikhuizen a significant portion of his estate. But perhaps his most noteworthy gift was the deeding of his childhood home (a grand mansion) to the City of Deventure. The Deed contained instructions to turn his home into a hospice for poor women who sought shelter and wished to serve God. The clause in the deed, “who wish to serve God,” became the signature phrase for the movement — but the actual idea of a ‘reform’ movement had not yet been conceived by Grote, for he was on a spiritual quest to renew his mind and body, something a few of his friends, and especially his relatives, took exception to.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid., 82-83.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 100.

They questioned why his benefices could not have been preserved for a future nephew or other worthy family member? But Grote had had enough of simony and nepotism, when he replied: “Why would I give you something that I do not consider useful for myself?”⁸⁰

Vital Influences

As far as Grote’s reforming philosophy is concerned, the event stemming immediately after his conversion is especially important. He was determined to reform the Church, but just how he would accomplish his quest was not yet fully understood. The ideas of Jan van Ruusbroec along with the contemplative lives of the Carthusian monks appear to have played important roles in shaping his ultimate philosophy.

Carthusians of Monnikhuizen

Geert’s first move in his quest for spiritual rebirth took him to his friends at Monnikhuizen, a Carthusian (Chartreuse) Order that needed no reform—a rarity for his time, and most likely, the reason he gave himself over to their influence.⁸¹ And while he remained a guest, for all practical purposes, he was one of them as he worked, prayed, and fasted along with his brothers of solitude. It was at this point in time that Grote formed a new world view, a spiritual philosophy

⁸⁰ Ibid., 101.

⁸¹ The Chartreuse are considered distinctive from nearly all other established orders in that they were able to utilize the ideal of the desert in a formal monastic setting; consequently, it was one of the few Monastic orders that escaped the attention of the reformers. C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Longman, 1989), 161.

of practical piety stressing ascetical practice. While living in his Carthusian cell, Grote practiced abstinence while wearing a penitential garment beneath his habit.⁸²

During his stay, Grote began to recognize a desire and talent to preach the Gospel. He then expressed a wish to withdraw fully into the Order's deepest cell with the intention to remain permanently estranged from the world. But the Carthusians would have none of it and insisted that he go back out as a light unto the world using his newly discovered passion to preach.⁸³ And while the Carthusians loved Geert and wanted him to stay, their love for the Church was even greater. So they sent him away hoping he could save an obviously failing Church.⁸⁴ In the end, Grote agreed that to stay would be selfish. He determined that returning to the world would serve as penance for the prior immorality of his affluent life.⁸⁵ It was at this point that Geert formed a new worldview by writing his *Conclusa*. In this work, Geert forms a number of resolutions that fit well with the Carthusian spirituality.⁸⁶

After these three years of practicing the ways of the Carthusians, Geert briefly returned to his hometown of Deventure, and then on to Paris to buy more books intended to advance his journey in spiritual formation. He then traveled on to visit John Ruusbroec, a Brabant mystic who was beginning to make an impression on Geert.⁸⁷

⁸² Van Zijl, 104.

⁸³ Van Zijl, 119.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 122.

Brabant Mysticism

Why Groote traveled to Groenendall to see Jan van Ruusbroec⁸⁸ is made clearer when one understands how the Carthusians were admirers of Ruusbroec's philosophy. At one point, a Carthusian monk attempted to preserve Ruusbroec's works in manuscript form. The manuscript was never finished, but the monk was able to write a prologue where he introduced the writings of Ruusbroec and elaborated on his visit to the Carthusian monastery at Herne around 1360.⁸⁹ Ruusbroec is said to have been a simple chaplain living in an urban setting who, for whatever reason, began to record his mystical experiences in the form of treatises. In contrast to typical mystical genres filled with delightful scents of orchards and honey, Ruusbroec's mystical imagery uses the intense life of the city to reveal his spiritual thoughts.⁹⁰ The other important aspect to Ruusbroec's writings is that he went against tradition and wrote in the vernacular. Interestingly, he cared little for his personal appearance and dressed as a simple hermit, something that must have given Groote a bit of vindicated satisfaction in seeing him this way during his visit to Groenendall.

The most important work of the Brabant mystic is entitled *The Spiritual Espousals*. Geert Grote so admired the text that he translated the Dutch text into Latin and persuaded many of his friends to read it.⁹¹ In his text, Ruusbroec reveals the entire lifespan of a spiritual journey. In what was to become a classic in mystical spirituality, the author presented three stages of life for spiritual growth: the active, the interior, and the contemplative. In the active, Ruusbroec

⁸⁸ John of Ruusbroec was a chaplain who left his church in Brussels to form a new community in northern France in a section of woodland called Groenendael. This new Brabant community became a model for monastic reform. According to Thomas of Kempen, the Devout Windeshiem monasteries are direct descendants of Ruusbroec's reforming monastery. cf. Peter A. Dykema and Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, V. 51 (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1993).

⁸⁹ Paul Verdeyen, *Ruusbroec and His Mysticism*, trans. A. Lefevere (Turnout: Liturgical Press, 1994), 11.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

presented the necessity for the moral growth of the soul during one's active life. Next, he presented the interior life as practiced by 'one who desires God by turning inward.' Growth in the interior life is a journey into the depths of the soul, where the spirit of the heart directs the journey to an encounter with God.⁹² Ruusbroec was deliberate in the definition of a moral man in contrast to an interior man.⁹³ When one is moral, good works are built up like a treasure intended for the adornment of one's house. If left unchecked, good works evolve into a slave like pursuit of perfection which then leads to justification through works. The consequence of the simple moral life is that nearly all attention is paid to one's service with almost no attention given to the service of God. To confront the moral life, the internal life draws attention to the presence of Christ in one's soul. Devotion to the interior life will lead a person to spiritual communion where the presence of God is realized in the soul of the devout as a spiritual encounter. This then leads to the third stage of growth where one spends a lifetime in perfect contemplation with God – Ruusbroec admits that perfection is nearly impossible to achieve in its fullness.

In addition to his analysis of the spiritual journey, the Trinity played an important part in Ruusbroec's philosophy. In the Trinity, he envisioned a community where all three aspects of God were in communion with each other. According to Ruusbroec, a spiritual person would be in rhythm with the Trinity by practicing the common life or communal life as witnessed by Christ himself. This was a key and fundamental concept that the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life took to heart, for just as Christ lived out his life for the benefit of the world, so too must the one, who lives in community, be concerned for the welfare of everyone else.⁹⁴ The goal of a contemplative life in the Ruusbroec's community was to live in a sort of duality with God.

⁹² Ibid., 26.

⁹³ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 115.

Here the communal person is entirely subservient to God's will, by living in a continuous state of contemplation of inward journeying to the heart's soul; which in turn, leads one to reach out to the world as if one were a gift from God. This going into the depths of one's soul only to emerge into community is conveyed by Ruusbroec as a sort of rhythm with God.

On the surface Grote and Ruusbroec seem to be unlikely friends, both engaging in a sort of kataphatic vs. apophatic tension. Grote gave up his posh life for a commitment of ascetic service to God; whereas, Ruusbroec viewed God as a source of earthly contentment and permanent peace in heaven.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the friendship worked and Grote eagerly promoted Ruusbroec's writings throughout the Devout communities. Consequently, much of Ruusbroec's teachings penetrated deep into the Devout literature—especially in the Devout community's practical handbook, *The Imitation of Christ*.⁹⁶

Philosophy

While his practice of spiritual life resembled Carthusian principles, Geert's philosophy was more aligned with Augustinian standards because of his anti-scholastic attitude.⁹⁷ In addition, he nurtured a Christ centered orthodox framework while remaining a loyal subject to the Catholic Church.⁹⁸

For the typical lay citizen, the fourteenth century church of Grote's era was dismal. And the young Grote, having reached to top echelons of ecclesiastical hierarchy, was perfectly

⁹⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁹⁷ Van Zijl, 116.

⁹⁸ Norman Rufus Colin Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 168.

positioned to reap the rich rewards from a Church structured for esthetic materialism and spiritual formalism. But for the lay person, the Catholic religious experience could be interpreted as passive. It was a formal event where the individual practiced the external rituals but had little opportunity to express an inner faith as a person in relationship with the Creator God.⁹⁹ Furthermore, many local community chapels had evolved into lavish displays of luxury; all purportedly built in obedient reverence to the Lord. Logically and in reaction to the above, people were seeking more than the outward promises of an increasingly corrupt church – Grote understood this as he developed his process of devotion.

He began with a philosophical system of freedom to pursue a deep spirituality of the heart where the Gospel of Christ could be explored to the inner reaches of the soul through a disciplined practice of abundant reading coupled with meditation.¹⁰⁰ He based his teaching on the fundamental meditative structure of Benedict's *lectio divina* and expanded the practice to include a greater role for spiritual discoveries and the recording of those discoveries through the discipline of personal journaling. While the use of *lectio divina* as a means to reform the Church was not new, utilizing the vernacular, both in the translation of the biblical text and in the public dissemination of personal spiritual journals was a unique feature introduced by the movement.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the movement used its own pious spiritual materials to systematically publish renewal literature intended for mass consumption. They strategically exploited the vernacular languages in: Middle Dutch, German, and others depending on the language the community

⁹⁹ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ André Vauchez and Daniel Ethan Bornstein, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 25.

¹⁰¹ Gordon Leff and others, *The Medieval Church: Universities, Heresy, and the Religious Life: Essays in Honour of Gordon Leff*, Studies in Church History. Subsidia; 11 (Woodbridge: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by the Boydell Press, 1999), 144.

spoke.¹⁰² An important feature of Grote's philosophy was the participation in communal life without the taking of vows.

Grote's philosophy appears to have sprung out of the ideals of earlier monastic movements such as the Canons Regular and the regular orders such as the Carthusians. The Carthusian's spiritual efforts were directed toward the reformation of the soul and the rejuvenation of the spirit.¹⁰³ The connection with the Carthusians and Grote is logical, for in his quest for Catholic Church renewal he strove for comprehensive reform, both in the monasteries and in the outer world of the parish community as well. In spite of Gerard's independent wealth and high level of education, he turned his back on the popular ideals of the day, such as speculative mysticism and scholasticism. Instead, Grote promoted a practical faith containing the practice of simplicity, compassion, and self-denial similar to that of Christ and the Apostles.¹⁰⁴ The key to understating Grote's spirituality is to know that a convert was required to sincerely commit to a life of disciplined devotion. This stands in contrast to most communities up to that time that had devolved into the sharing of wealth and goods and little emphasis on much else. Early on, Grote forbid the sharing of resources by the women living in his home as each person was required to earn her own keep. However, this changed as time went by, but the ideal was never entirely lost by the movement.

A unique feature of Devout spirituality is that it did not form its identity at the expense of something else.¹⁰⁵ Instead, it was fundamentally a positive movement that formed a

¹⁰² John H. Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 11.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁴ Steven E. Ozment, *The Age of Reform (1250-1550): An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 96-98.

¹⁰⁵ Near the end of his life and at the height of his preaching, Groote directly confronted the church for its shortfalls. But these actions are a separate issue from the makeup of the movement as a whole, which was primarily positive.

concentrated emphasis on key elements already part of long-standing traditions.¹⁰⁶ For the Modern Devout, truth was not radically altered. For instance, the life and passion of Christ was emphasized to such a degree that nearly all other aspects of spirituality were comparatively diminished. In contrast, Luther's reformation derived its momentum through direct confrontation, and at times, the rejection of basic elements of truth held dear by the Catholic Church, e.g. transubstantiation of the Eucharist, Confession, as well as prayer *with* the Saints.

Forming out of the common traditions of the Cistercians and Franciscans, the Modern Devout's "truth" was wholly dependent on a Christocentric worldview where a primary emphasis was placed on Christ, nearly all else was diminished by default.¹⁰⁷ For instance, the Devout rarely directly confronted the excesses of wealth displayed by the Church. Instead, they pursued a simplistic life of obedience to Christ and the life he lived. The excesses of the Church are indeed confronted – not with harsh words but with a life lived in stark contrast to the dismal state of the Church. The problem with this approach is that the Church was used to seeing this type of spirituality, but only in the confines of monastic walls. What was new and exciting in this movement was how common folk were being fully integrated into devout communities without the need to become nuns, monks, or priests. And while certain branches of the movement did begin to embrace the enclosure method of monastic life, the preferred life of many Devout households maintained a core principle that all members could be fully spiritual without the taking of formal vows into an Order.

Spiritual renewal was the driving force of the Modern Devotion as it emphasized aspects of Christ.¹⁰⁸ One way to define the Devout's spirituality is to view it as a sort of hybrid, where a

¹⁰⁶ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 25.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Martin Savage and John H. Van Engen, "History, Exempla, and Caritas in the Exordium Magnum" (2000), 25.

¹⁰⁸ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 25.

large variety of literary works such as: Bernard, Bonaventure, Henry of Suso, Ludolf the Carthusian of Saxony, were all incorporated into a unique one of a kind system of belief and practice. Neither the mystical union in the Divine nor the strict 'imitation of Christ' accurately describes Devout spirituality. Instead, new attention must be paid to the passion of Christ and the life he lived. Salvation through Christ is the center of the movement's spirituality, and while mystical union with God was desired, it was how the mystical state was accomplished that is key to Grote's teaching. To assure salvation, one pursued a life modeled after the 'human' Christ, especially the Passion, by living a disciplined life of asceticism coupled with the path of mystical union with God.¹⁰⁹ This type of spirituality took on four key aspects: first, to remember Christ's life. Second, to voluntarily repeat his life in yours or to practically maintain a constant presence of Christ. Third, to be a witness for Christ to the world, and lastly, in all aspects of life, yield the whole of one's recourses to the loving devotion of Christ.¹¹⁰ Practically, the spiritual intention of Grote's philosophy was an attempt to strive for a life of purity by living in Christ; likewise, Christ would reciprocate and live in the Devout.¹¹¹ The rational justification for this model of mutual indwelling spirituality is as follows. Since Christ endured many trials, it was reasonable to expect the same type of struggle for anyone living as Christ.

¹⁰⁹ Post, 315.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 317.

¹¹¹ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 25.

Spiritual Life

Geert loved books and would not give them up; instead, he simply altered the kind of books he would study. Those books consisted of the Gospels and any kind of literature that could fortify the soul.¹¹² As he formed the ideals of the movement, Geert united study and prayer and declared his life for the pursuit of “the imitation of the life of Christ.”¹¹³

Remembering the context of the New Devout is always crucial, for what may now appear trivial, might have been terribly difficult. For a typical parishioner what was most important was to observe the obligatory rights of passage into the church and citizenship. But to the New Devout, what mattered most was to progress in one’s faith and to follow through with real and tangible action. To not act on one’s faith cast spirituality into mere intellectualism, and for that reason, Grote despised the scholastic method promoted by many of the elite schools and the Church as a whole.¹¹⁴

The First Household

In 1374 Geert Grote surrendered all but two rooms of his home to poor single women who sought to live a life of pious spirituality. Only a small space was needed for his lodging and as a staging base for his preaching tours. Geert had a charter drawn up that gave jurisdiction of the household to local town officials. According to the charter, Grote established the rules carefully so as to avoid the disapproving gaze of the Pope. The most important issue at stake was the Pope’s edict against the formation of a spiritual order; thus, Geert clearly forbid it. He believed

¹¹² Van Zijl, 106.

¹¹³ Ibid., 107.

¹¹⁴ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 26.

that inner purity could be gained through manual labor; thus, each occupant worked for her keep, begging was not considered work and was prohibited.¹¹⁵

Monastic in appearance, the New Devout practiced piety through daily solitary contemplative reading of Scripture and the ancient works from the Patristic fathers (Florilegia). But perhaps of equal importance was what was not read, formal theology. Grote fought off the anti-spiritual intellectualism of his day through a creative emphasis on scripture and meditation centered on Christ. It was one thing to think about spiritual “truths”, but if it was not followed up with action out of faith, that “thinking” was folly and void of meaning.¹¹⁶

When Grote gifted his house to poor women, he created a constitution for the household. In it he clearly stated they were not to take vows – in order to avoid becoming a monastic order; thus, those who had previously taken vows in other communities could not join. He went on to state that the foremost reason to live in his home was to simply worship in peace. One could freely leave the society, but once gone, could never return. The members of the household were to be practicing lay members of a local parish church. They should dress as local villagers to distinguish them as regular lay members and not a member of an established order.

Geert established a household matron with authority to run the community as treasurer and to assign work. A common treasury was established and equitably shared with all. Geert expected the matron to be dutifully obeyed. Infractions of the rules could cause a loss of a share of the common treasury. But more serious infractions, such as theft, stubbornness, or excessive fraternizing with men could lead to banishment.¹¹⁷ His rules forbid drunkenness, sex, and encouraged simple attire. He forbid members to travel more than ten miles or remain gone

¹¹⁵ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*.

¹¹⁶ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 26.

¹¹⁷ Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance; a History of The "Devotio Moderna"*, 41-42.

longer than eight days. Over the years, the communities became refined as they added layers of leadership structure such as rectors, procurators, librarians, tailors, and nurses.

Geert forbid begging and attempted to set up the household so as to make such behavior unnecessary. Initially, Grote permitted new members to keep their previously gained wealth but this changed in later years. While living in the society, the current household income earned and expenses incurred, were shared equitably. Each member was to work according to her natural gifts which usually fell into the traditional feminine occupations of the era: general agricultural enterprises, sewing, knitting, weaving, and spinning.¹¹⁸

While each house differed somewhat from all others, there were some general characteristics. How each member lived was strictly regulated, everyone was expected to participate in daily manual labor of some sort, and in most houses, this consisted of menial tasks related to meals and facilities maintenance. With few exceptions, nearly all members performed a few hours of scribal duties such as book copying, or the related tasks of binding and distribution. Furthermore, it was expected that each member attend daily Mass in addition to participating at the local parish church whenever in session. They were instructed to observe the canons and decrees of the saints along with a strict obedience to the practice of contemplative exercises, i.e. fasting, prayer, meditation, and the reading of spiritual works. Thus, based on the rules, the goal of each day was directed to the purity of the heart and a striving to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

Some of the rules took on an ascetic quality, but extreme asceticism was never a primary focus of Grote's philosophy. Mutilation of the flesh was never taught or practiced, yet there was an attitude that promoted a disdain for worldly pleasures and a "fleeing the world" mentality.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹¹⁹ Hyma, *The Brethren of the Common Life*, 142.

More specifically, members were to begin resting around eight and wake around four or five am. A typical day began by reading predetermined scripture along with ample time spent in prayer. Much of the day was spent in silence, unless that is, one felt compelled to extort short prayers or “ejaculations” for the benefit of others in their midst. Relative freedom was granted between supper and bedtime. But at eight pm, all guests were asked to leave and silence was strictly observed for the next fifteen minutes. Then, at exactly eight fifteen, all members were to be in bed — preparing for rest.

Sundays and holidays presented a break with the typical house rules. On these special days, important public outreach initiatives took place. A household might hold vernacular services open to the entire community. In these services, scripture was read in the common tongue followed by an open discussion forum. In the forum, anyone could participate and freely express thoughts and opinions. Yet the tone of the forums had to remain positive and constructive – open hostility and dissention were not allowed. The importance and influence these Sunday and Holiday meetings had on the population at large cannot be understated. Furthermore, people would travel great distances to partake in these open meetings, and while these open forums reached thousands, the determined copying and aggressive circulation of vernacular books to the general public had an even greater force throughout all of Europe.¹²⁰

In order to preserve spiritual purity, unity, and effective discipline, two members from each household were sent to an annual meeting called a “Colloquium.” In addition, each house could expect at least two visits from the primary households of Zwolle and Deventer and all were expected to hold monthly meetings intended to discuss business items related to discipline,

¹²⁰ Ibid., 110-111.

spiritual exercises, as well as general household issues.¹²¹ A typical house attempted to retain at least four priests along with several other types of clergy.

The ritual one endured to join the community and maintain good standing in the household was rife with questions and trials. An aspirant could expect to be examined for attributes related to one's physical abilities in addition to one's mental capacity and county of origin. If a candidate had only minimal negative attributes, and counterbalancing positives, she would be permitted to stay for a brief trial period of around two to three months. Then, if all went well, the stay was extended for another year or so whereupon, at some point, the candidate was proclaimed a Sister of the household. During the early years, members were allowed to hold prior wealth earned; but later on, the rules evolved and members were required to swear, before a notary public with witnesses, the renunciation of all such wealth. Thus, the entirety of a new member, person and property, was ceded to the community, and any subsequent income from the property was to be used first for that member's room and board and then any remainder to be dedicated to charity for the poor.¹²²

While nearly all households practiced the scribal trade for spiritual discipline purposes, there were also a number of practical and evangelical reasons for the practice. The distribution of copied literature to the masses was always a priority. Grote wanted to reform the church and perceived literature and education the best means to achieve this reformation. Thus, through the use of newly copied books in the vernacular, Grote went about the task of educating youth who had aspirations to some day join the ranks of the clergy. The curriculum of these schools included a variety of classic, pagan, and Christian literature. And while he did not totally exclude them, disciplines such as grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, and philosophy diminished in

¹²¹ Ibid., 113.

¹²² Ibid.

importance.¹²³ Grote chose John Cele to succeed him in the task of education. Cele was so successful, he is credited with the revival of youth education for the common person throughout much of Europe.¹²⁴ A number of the schools flourished, such as the school in Deventer, which boasted enrollments as large as two thousand and two hundred pupils.¹²⁵

Summary: Reformation Links

If one uses Geert's pre-conversion life as a representative model of the Church, it is simple to see why there was a general contempt for the Church. For like the Church, Grote was rich, powerful, and arrogant. Except for his superior intelligence, he released it all for the sake of saving his Church. Perhaps his voluntary poverty drew attention his way, making him more popular than could have been achieved had he remained on the former path to a status quo life of prestige and power. The fact is, only after his death did Geert achieve full recognition for his sacrifices. He died out of fame's spotlight with scant evidence that his efforts might precipitate into something special – a crucial movement that started a wave of change and a seed of hope for comprehensive reform of the Church.

Among the scholars, there is a disparity of opinion as to the value and importance of the movement. Was his spiritual philosophy a simple reaction to the negative attributes of scholasticism? Did Gerard compromise the Catholic Church as he pursued a personal, if not a

¹²³ Ibid., 118.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 119.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

selfish, quest for ethical piety?¹²⁶ As this author views it, despite the potential for dark motivations and disreputable intentions, his movement was an important foundation for the forthcoming sixteenth century reformation movements: Protestant, Counter, and Radical. Additionally, while it remains contested, it is increasingly certain that Grote's ideas are, to some degree, imbedded in the works of Rudolf Agricola, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin.¹²⁷ Furthermore, the context of the Modern Devotion should not be overlooked. The preceding centuries had been witness to the Inquisition's chilling climate of fear, as well as a dismal state of Church disharmony if not outright anarchy, such as the three competing Popes, also known as the Western Schism. Ozment refers to this period as "disrepair."¹²⁸

From the 11th through the 14th centuries, an interesting dynamic took place. The Third Order friar of the Mendicants had successfully extended their ascetic views to the entire church body. All the while, numerous parts of the Church were spiraling deep into a moral abyss. The ascetic branches would eventually respond by becoming even more rigorous in their practices. This cyclical dynamic played out over the centuries precipitating amazing feats of penitence like extended pilgrimages, processions, genuflections, repetition of prayers, and bodily mortification.¹²⁹ In light of the climate, Grote chose a method of reform that would avoid attracting the attention of paranoid officials determined to preserve the status quo.

Some critics correctly point out that there was very little original in Grote's philosophy; this chapter may even strengthen such an assertion. Obviously, Grote was heavily influenced by those who came before and even by some of his contemporary peers such as Carthusians,

¹²⁶ Ozment, 17, 97., cf. Albert Hyma, *The "Devotio Moderna" Or Christian Renaissance (1380-1520)* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: The Reformed Press).

¹²⁷ Ozment, 97.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹²⁹ Kenneth Ronald Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism; a Study in Intellectual Origins*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, No. 16 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1974), 50.

Ruusbroec and Meister Eckhart.¹³⁰ This author does not think it possible for any great historical episode to transpire without an equally powerful force of movement in preceding eras preparing the path. No human can escape the worldview they were brought up in. For example, Luther was trained in the Church as a boy and gained a certain worldview from the experience. Whether or not he rejected certain traditions offhand or simply refined and developed them into an ultimate stand against the Church is hard to prove. In fact, very little of Luther's desire for the church was wholly new. Had it not been for events entirely out of his control such as the invention and exploitation of the printing press, the significant rise of Humanism, and the Modern Devout, Luther's great stand against the Church would almost surely have never taken place.

Luther initially wanted to reform the only Church in his purview, the Catholic Church, and because of this, I do not object to his movement being designated a reformation. But that it de-evolved into an outright implosion of the Church is reason enough to refrain from using the term 'reformation'. The consequences of Luther's philosophy delivered upheaval and rebellion. Perhaps there are more appropriate terms for the true consequences of what transpired on the Church – the great Fracture or final Rebellion are harsh, but true to what actually happened to the Christian Church from the sixteenth century into the present.

In an almost rhythmic cycle the Catholic Church had experienced repeated renewals in the centuries leading up to the Reformation.¹³¹ In Grote's era, the church had seemingly found new ways to sink further than ever. Consequently, a desperate culture was emerging, consisting

¹³⁰ Ozment, 96.

¹³¹ For example, in the eleventh century, church renewal took place as it addressed the moral reform of clergy embroiled in simony and celibacy. Furthermore, the twelfth century confronted the overall power of the Pope over the lay church. Tradition was challenged in almost every facet, from attitudes of formal institutions in what Lucein Febvre called 'a profound revolution in religious sentiment' which should be studied in terms of the church, theology, politics, and in a broad context of historical change as part of the search by the people for a religion suited to new spiritual needs shifting social conditions. Lucien Febvre, *Au Coeur Religieux Du Xvie Siècle : Recueil D'articles Parus Dans Diverses Revues*, Bibliothèque Générale De L'ecole Pratique Des Hautes Études. 6e Section. (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1957), 26, 29., cf. Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.

of devout believers whose hopes were continually dashed by the excesses and resistance to change by corrupt ecclesia.¹³² Perhaps if the church had been able to anticipate the Protestants, Grote's movement might have been aggressively promoted instead of merely tolerated, and in the end, left to wither and dissolve into remnants. It should be noted that remnants of the movement are woven into the fabric of much of what is labeled contemporary spirituality. Had the Church embraced the *Devotio Moderna*, could the masses thirst for pure spirituality been quenched enough to affect the timing, veracity, and splintering of the church? It is pure speculation to consider such a proposition, but alas, many people of the late fourteenth and fifteenth century strove for a 'real faith' that promised to fill the deep longings for a spirituality that resided deep within the body, mind, and soul. In a pursuit for piety, the laity wanted to own their spirituality once and for all, and they wanted it now.

¹³² Ozment, 208.

CHAPTER THREE

History and Context

Overview

The Rise

From the early fourteenth century onward, a resurgence of interest in austere mysticism coupled with church reform fervor flowed through the Low Countries. It was the Carthusians who catered to the newfound spiritual thirst, but during the latter half of the same century, it was Geert Grote, the founder of the *Devotio Moderna*, who used the inspiring hospitality of the Carthusians to launch his mission to reform the Church from within.

The *Devotio Moderna* movement has two distinct dates of origin. The first is with Grote, around 1374, when he converted his childhood house into a home for poor pious women. This led to the movement called the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life. The Common Life was oriented for the lay person and provided a communal life style where ordinary lay folk could practice a contemplative spiritual life without the need for vows.

The name *Devotio Moderna* or 'New' Devotion was adapted out of a necessity to avoid any connection to the 'old' scholasticism that had become an intellectual barrier to simple contemplative spirituality.¹³³ The second starting point was the foundation of the Windesheim

¹³³ John Oliver Hand and others, *Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych* (Washington Antwerp Cambridge New Haven: National Gallery of Art;

monastery in 1387. The development of the monastic wing is especially important in that it allowed for a rapid dissemination of the movement throughout the monastic system, especially in Germany and the Netherlands. Emerging out of the Devout monasteries and convents was an innovative way to practice contemplative spirituality. The Windesheim community allowed for deep penetration into the inner workings of the Church as it strove to assist monastic communities in renewal based on a first century Christian ascetic ideal.

It was hoped that the monastic project would aid in protecting the Devout, especially the Sisters, from ecclesiastical attacks. While it worked to some extent, the rapid growth of the movement induced harassment that continued for the duration of the movement. Initial criticism originated from the dioceses of Utrecht where church officials accused the Devout of being like the Beghards and Lollards.¹³⁴ A few decades later, a schism in the Dioceses of Utrecht from 1423 to 1432 precipitated a second wave of attacks when the Dioceses of Utrecht backed a particular candidate for Pope. Unfortunately, located in the Dioceses of Utrecht, the magistrates of the Overijssel region preferred a competing papal candidate. The Devout Movement was forced to take sides and chose to support the Dioceses of Utrecht; in response, the spurned magistrates exerted pressure on the movement by leveling charges against them in hopes they might reconsider. Interestingly, instead of the typical charge of heresy of one sort or another, the scorned magistrates leveled a charge against the Devout by declaring them “too orthodox.”¹³⁵

Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten;
Harvard University Art Museums;
Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

¹³⁴ Van Zijl, 2.

¹³⁵ On the surface a charge of being “too orthodox” is a bit humorous, but it was a serious offense at the time. In force was a standing prohibition against lay people behaving as if they were clergy and against communities behaving as if they were a church.

Nevertheless, the lay Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life refused to capitulate, resulting in harsh retaliation for a number of the Devout communities of the Overijssel region.¹³⁶

The key to knowing the *Devotio Moderna* is to understand their true desire to reform the church. By imitating Christ and practicing personal devotions and disciplines, they hoped to reach out to the world with gestures of kindness and mercy. Much of their benevolence was expressed through their steadfast commitment to the education of the masses and the renewal of the church to its original purpose of Christian love. In their pursuit of educational reform, they utilized religious material as well as classical literature – correct/pure Latin and the common vernaculars.¹³⁷ The practice of placing classic with contemporary literature, as well as utilizing both the Latin and vernacular simultaneously, was an innovative contribution and a cutting edge feature of the movement. A somewhat sloppy form of Latin was used by the clergy as a means to control the masses, keeping them ignorant and dependent on the well-educated clerics who would instruct the laity in the ways of proper living, resulting in an assurance of salvation. It is not difficult to see why the Church might be concerned with the reforming actions of the Devout, so it should come as no surprise that the movement remained in a constant state of tension with the Church.

The Decline

By the mid-fifteenth century, many of the original aspects of the Devout were supplanted with an emerging humanistic philosophy closely related to the emerging Protestant schism.¹³⁸ This period witnessed the start of the permanent downturn of the tertiary movement of Brothers and

¹³⁶ Van Zijl, 2.

¹³⁷ Strand, 53.

¹³⁸ Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance; a History of The "Devotio Moderna"*, 286.

Sisters of the Common Life while the Devotio Moderna's monastic communities were simultaneously peaking—this was true for the Brothers, but even more so for the Sisters. What caused this shift is not well understood, but there is some evidence that nearly seven decades of distrust from both the Church and the civil authorities was finally having a discernable effect. For example, the lay tertiary households were attempting a somewhat risky strategy to relieve outside pressure by moving toward monastic traditions. The Sisters were attempting a middle ground of sorts by remaining un-cloistered without taking vows, yet behaving as if they had. In this way the translation of the *Speculum virginum*, a sort of 'how to' text in the practical ways of religious women to navigate and survive, became a crucial tool.¹³⁹ Without exception, religious women who lived in a tertiary community had to contend with a world where prejudiced men might, and often did, perceive their religious practice as a threat in one way or another. Women had much to gain from a movement that offered relief from centuries of repressed spirituality. Thanks to the dynamic success of the Devout Sisters, the movement generated a reaction from the male patriarchal system striving to maintain status quo. The Modern Devout had a plan that, given enough time, might have worked splendidly to bring about comprehensive and lasting reform to the Church.

External Forces

Never had the world experienced such enormous wealth as that of the Western European economy of the early sixteenth century. Cities had become vibrant centers of growth, yielding

¹³⁹ C. J. Mews, *Listen Daughter: The Speculum Virginum and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke; New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), 20.

better employment for an ever greater number of enthusiastic citizens. Still, the fully functional and unified Church, leading the way to the greater good was, for all practical purposes, a distant pipe dream.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Strand, *The Dawn of Modern Civilization; Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics, Presented to Honor Albert Hyma*, 68.

The Printing Press

It is hard to convey the importance the printing press had on society at large as well as the Devotio Moderna movement. There is little danger of hyperbole in regard to the impact of movable type and the role it played in shaping the world from the mid-fifteenth century on. The new technology had thrust itself onto the throne of humanity and ruled its domain straightaway. Print shops sprung up in the larger urban centers of Germany and Italy, but not long thereafter, shops were pressing ink in many of the minor communities throughout all of Western Europe as well. And while there were some exceptions, many of the Devout communities exploited the new technology at a rapid pace. The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life developed their printing skills to an impressively high level, enabling them to advance their reforming missionary goals more efficiently than ever.

From the very beginning, the movement derived a significant portion of their income by performing the scribal tasks of manuscript copying and illuminating.¹⁴¹ Using their educational reform practices, the Devout were persistent in their evangelical quest to spread the Gospel of Christ. The printing press quickly snuffed out scribal income. In response, the displaced priests and clerics redoubled their efforts in the arena of educational reform.¹⁴² The centers of the Devout movement in Deventer and Zwolle witnessed dramatic achievements in both printing and education. Not among the least was the production of textbooks for educational instruction.¹⁴³ The texts were primarily religious in nature, but included many of the Greek classics actively promoted by the humanists of both the South and North regions.

¹⁴¹ Strand, 53.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 59.

Of significance is the fact that the Devout gave monetary support to four of the earliest presses in Europe.¹⁴⁴ While the true importance of this seed money may never be verified beyond doubt, it would be a mistake to overlook this crucial contribution to the development and exploitation of movable type.¹⁴⁵

The Devout utilized the printing press to enhance the impact on educational and religious reform throughout Europe. Despite the relatively small size of the Devout movement (in terms of the number of members), the effect of their efforts is large indeed.¹⁴⁶ In regard to printing output, the cities where the Devout resided out performed the whole of Europe in the production of classical incunabula. The Devout shops were only a few and scattered through-out the Low Countries and Germany, but they produced a plethora of first run incunabula much of which was printed in the vernacular.

Politics

When Martin Luther unleashed the torrent of debate, the Christian humanists perceived a new friend in their struggle for global reform of European society. Indeed, it was the case at first, when Luther and Erasmus seemed to agree on many of the key issues such as clergy corruption and the idolatrous invocation of saints. But in the end, Erasmus saw no good coming out of a full out rebellion. As was the case for most of the Christian humanists, they were not willing to participate in an outright rebellion against authority. They held a fundamental philosophy that authority was divinely established. Thus, to defy the wishes of the Creator God would most certainly put one's salvation in jeopardy. Luther responded to Erasmus's unwillingness to fully

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 60.

embrace his rebellious protest movement by calling him, “a traitor to the very reform which he, more than any other humanist, had helped instigate.”¹⁴⁷

In the end, Erasmus considered the Protestant Reform a tragedy. This is because his point of view was being lost in a chorus of church rebellion that was expanding with increasing fury. Humanism was essentially a rational world view; thus, Protestants were seen as pursuers of a reckless separation with the Pope. According to the humanists, the Protestants were heading for eternal damnation if they continued down the path of separation with the Church.¹⁴⁸

The Sister Devotees

Thanks to Grote’s preaching and his household full of contemplative women,¹⁴⁹ a new opportunity presented itself to a multitude of lay persons.¹⁵⁰ For nearly the entire Middle Ages, women were comprehensively denied the practice of contemplative spirituality, but now a new path to piety was there for the taking – and many eagerly consumed.¹⁵¹

The Rise

Out-numbering Devout men well over two to one, the success of the female Devout should not be overlooked. Yet, this sub-set of the Devout movement has suffered a comprehensive

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹⁴⁹ Patricia Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 62.

¹⁵⁰ Southern, 309-318.

¹⁵¹ Ranft, 62.

disrespect from their beginning at the end of the fourteenth century to the present.¹⁵² For the first few decades, the Sisters grew rapidly, rising throughout the Low Countries.¹⁵³ While the Devout Sister households varied in size one from another, they should not be assumed small.

Documentation is scarce, but one example of a typical sister-house was in Hertogenbosch. This house recorded over five hundred sisters while simultaneously building an annex in preparation to quarter another two hundred members.¹⁵⁴ Geert likely knew all too well that the few women who sought to live a life of pious spirituality in his home were but a small drop from an immense reservoir of pent up demand. Tapping into this reservoir of female yearning for true contemplative spirituality was a brilliant move and set the stage for nearly seventy years of spectacular growth. The simple fact that Devout Sisters dwarfed men in numbers alone should alert the reader to their significance, because it is doubtful the movement could have begun with men alone. For the most part, men continued to access whatever few contemplative opportunities available. Similar to past responses to religious women throughout the Middle Ages,¹⁵⁵ the Church did not overlook the Devout Women and their prodigious growth.¹⁵⁶

The Devout sisters displayed an amazing work ethic. Sadly, this admirable attribute both helped and hurt, because the women lived in disciplined communities, they were often perceived as a threat by their closest neighbors.¹⁵⁷ They were diligent workers. Utilizing their strict

¹⁵² The source of this quote is one of the few exceptions to this statement, Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, 1.

¹⁵³ Ranft, 86. cf. John Van Engen, *Tradition, Reform, Innovation: Studien Zur Modernität Des Mittelalters* (Frankfurt am Main etc.: Lang, 1999), 54.

¹⁵⁴ Ranft, 86.

¹⁵⁵ Women were left vulnerable to the power of the Church. When a woman performed typical roles such as nurse, midwife, or herbalists within the confines and protection of the monastic walls, she was considered a Christian in the service of the Church and its people. But when a similarly talented practitioner resided in a village nearby to a monastery and perceived to be drawing customers away from the monastic system of care, she was vulnerable to being accused and condemned as an evil witch. The Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/mawomen.stm>, 19 October 2007.

¹⁵⁶ Southern, 318.

¹⁵⁷ Ranft, 86.

discipline made them attractive employees for the local manufacturers which tended to make former, less effective employees, displaced. In an ironic twist, those same disgruntled unemployed workers cried foul, declaring the Devout women as unfair competition.¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, the efficient Sisters were able to independently produce cloth goods for less than the local manufactures. Not surprisingly, complaints from the very same business sector seeking their labor viewed their private enterprises as an economic threat.¹⁵⁹

A Windy Path

The obstacles for women of this era to freely be spiritual practitioners were numerous. Some pressure came from within while additional forces created numerous difficulties. First, the threat of organized persecution drove Devout communities to make difficult decisions. The evidence suggests they often chose to leave the open semi-monastic lay tertiary households for the protection of approved monastic orders. Thus, the tertiary households of Common Sisters, slowly but steadily, adopted the rules of the Franciscans and later the Augustinians. Sadly, the Sister's fall from popularity was as swift as their rise. By the mid-fifteenth century, there were few if any new tertiary households of Devout Sisters, and by the end of the century, nearly all evidence of their existence had vanished.¹⁶⁰

Secondly, as was shown in prior centuries, the Church would approved a female movement only to attack it later on when an impressive rate of growth was re-interpreted as a potential threat. This was especially true for movements with an orientation toward the lay

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

tertiary or semi-cloistered method of conducting community. For example, the Waldensians, a twelfth century Christocentric movement, encouraged both men and women to express all of their gifts including preaching. Both sexes were well trained and had an excellent knowledge of the scriptures. The Lateran Council in 1179 initially embraced the Waldensians along with the Pope who lauded them for their piety. Astonishingly, five short years later, the Waldensians were openly condemned by the same Church that had openly offered its blessing.¹⁶¹

Thirdly, the *Devotio Moderna* attempted to navigate a safe passage into the future. An aspect that made their journey more difficult was the civil town magistrate who would typically be wary of anything new that might threaten or negatively undermine his share of power and income. A household filled with pious lay persons and studying scripture in the native tongue would not likely need many of the services of the parish church system—such a community was generally interpreted in a negative light.

Fourthly, the Devout would sometimes openly question the legitimacy of any aspect of the Church that had not recently experienced reform. In response, civic officials accused the Devout households of zealotry resembling the deviant Beguines and Lollards.¹⁶² Furthermore, when the *Devotio Moderna* moved into a town, the new household was typically forced to make a stand for their right to exist. This was not easy to accomplish due to the blurred lines between the Church and civil authority, and the role each played in maintaining civil order. Thus, when a new religious community settled in, a great deal of consternation and wrangling of hands would take place, especially when the household consisted of women. Moreover, it was not unusual for

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 63-64.

¹⁶² Nikolaus Staubach, *Kirchenreform Von Unten: Gerhard Zerbolt Von Zutphen Und Die Brüder Vom Gemeinsamen Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2004), 46.

local officials to refuse recognition of the new households and even threaten the Devout with inquisitorial investigations—the impact of this type of pressure is serious.¹⁶³

From the outset, Geert had a charter drawn up that gave jurisdiction of the household to local town officials. According to the charter, Grote established the rules carefully so as to avoid the disapproving gaze of the Pope, thus providing a measure of safety for the female household. In addition, Geert believed that inner purity could be gained through manual labor; therefore, each occupant worked for her keep.¹⁶⁴ Interestingly, it did not take long for the poverty requirement to be tossed aside as the group gained popularity. This allowed many wealthy women to join, but who previously were not willing to become poor to do so. This should have been a warning sign for the Devout leadership. The rapid decline of the Devout household in the second half of the fifteenth century can be closely tied to the rise of middle and upper class membership. In addition, the *Devotio Moderna* had aligned itself with established orders that, in the end, were badly in need of reform and renewal. The Devout sisters, who sought a shield from an increasingly hostile Church, were done in by the reputation of their new protectors—the aristocracy and old monastic orders.¹⁶⁵

Grote's Movement began in the late fourteenth century during the later stages of the Inquisition and it was only a matter of time before they fell under its dreaded gaze.¹⁶⁶ Grote responded to the pressure by claiming the term *religio* does limit itself to the clergy, monks, and nuns. If a non-monastic woman is practicing devout service to God while separated from the

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Scheepsmas, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*.

¹⁶⁵ Ranft, 95-96.

¹⁶⁶ C. J. Mews, *Listen Daughter: The Speculum Virginum and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke; New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), 247.

world and in the privacy of a house, there is no difference between her and those who take vows, "They are just as religious as the nuns in their convents."¹⁶⁷

A Survival Strategy: the Speculum virginum

The most important issue at stake was the Pope's edict against the formation of a spiritual order; therefore, Geert clearly forbid it. But after the death of Grote, Wermbold von Buscoep founded a female Devout household in Utrecht and in so doing, he continued in Geerts' footsteps by functioning as protector of the female devout. He too, was concerned for the safety and viability of the female households. In response to the ever present threat of official Church repression, Wermold translated into Dutch the Latin manuscript titled *Speculum virginum*. The author of this manuscript is not known for certain, but it is thought to have been created in the later half of the eleventh century.

Produced in response to a period of swift growth of women's religious communities throughout Germany, the *Speculum virginum* served as an aid to a male teacher, often a monk, in charge of religious female students living in tertiary, semi-enclosed communities. Women wanted to join the ranks of men who lived a communal life in imitation of the apostles, *vita apostolica*. Sympathetic monks paved the way for many women to live as recluses next to reformed monasteries. The *Speculum virginum* functioned both as a shield against the harsh drone of critics who wanted to put this type of trend to a swift end, and as a guide to teach religious men how to relate to religious women.¹⁶⁸ Charity and humility through a life of

¹⁶⁷ Davis, 51.

¹⁶⁸ Mews, 59.

simplicity were its twofold ethical emphases along with the contemplative striving for union with God.¹⁶⁹

The new vernacular version was renamed the *Spiegel der Maechden*. This text became a practical how to guide in the practice of faith for the Devotio Moderna female tertiary household. It dealt very little with theological justifications as it presented a well structured focused step-by-step standard for conduct of the female contemplative.^{170 171}

The Writings of the Sisters

Dutch speaking Devout female spirituality flourished throughout the Southern Netherlands from the late fourteenth century through the sixteenth century, enabling thousands of women to freely express contemplative spirituality. The essence of their efforts lay not through the use of fancy intellectual discourse concerning controversial issues, but within their *sisterbooks* lay a treasure of personal piety bursting with practical words of contemplation for the world to touch and be inspired therein.¹⁷²

One of the early leaders of the female Devout movement was a man named Johannes Brinckerinck. In his own words he tips his hat to those in his charge, "When women apply themselves devoutly they often receive more grace and stand in greater 'favour' (sic) with God than men do."¹⁷³ Because of the tremendous growth of the Devout women during the early fifteenth century, the entire movement, both men and women, was propelled into the century

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 20-21.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 257.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁷² Davis, 57.

¹⁷³ Scheepma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, 1.

with tremendous energy and vigor. It was Brinckerinck who introduced a communal life emphasizing the virtues of humility and obedience. But the most important feature of the female Devout households in his charge were the *sisterbooks* written by the women. These books were chronicles of the spiritual life or *viten* where the sisters openly and honestly shared with the world personal religious journeys of humility.¹⁷⁴ Prior to the fifteenth century, the spirituality of many female religious canonesses was expressed as a mystical experience where the goal moved in the direction of mystic consciousness. In contrast, the fifteenth century Devout sisters practiced a new form of religious life. The Diepenveen *sisterbook* was witness to this tendency to diminish, but not to do away all together, the ‘mystic’ phenomena while simultaneously emphasizing the virtues of a more ‘practical’ devotional life of ascetic piety.¹⁷⁵ In contrast to their male counterparts who became married to the new age of humanism, the Female Devout households successfully preserved many of the values set forth by their early leaders.

The Sisters of the Common Life founded many houses throughout Europe. In Deventure and Zwolle, there were five and six households respectively.¹⁷⁶ By the end of the fifteenth century there were more than one hundred houses with most containing anywhere from twenty to four hundred members each – those numbers were more than doubled the Brethren Devout. This is a significant ratio that needs to be pursued more diligently. This writer suspects that the likely broad-ranging societal impact of the *sisterbooks* has been largely overlooked. Furthermore, in the first half of the fifteenth century, it was the female convents and tertiaries who did the heavy lifting for the Devotio Moderna by supplying the vast majority of text

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 152.

¹⁷⁶ Strand, *The Dawn of Modern Civilization; Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics, Presented to Honor Albert Hyma*, 14.

transmissions.¹⁷⁷ And it was the Windesheim Canonesses who took the torch as the primary transmitters of the biblical text from 1450 onward.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, for a variety of reasons, the general population of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was maturing into a disillusioned and increasingly frustrated society, spiritually thirsty and set to pounce on any and all hope for true and lasting reform. Given that, much more credit is due the Sisters of the Devout communities for their important contributions in shaping the European Church of the fifteenth century and beyond.

Did the rise and dramatic success of the Female Devout lead to a climate of ever greater hopes and expectations for the Church? It is hard to argue otherwise. Certainly there was an impact on society that contributed to the Protestant Reformation, but the extent of the contribution cannot be known with precision. Could the rapid collapse of the movement at the end of the fifteenth century add to the pressure for the Church to reform once and for all? While this author confesses to an argument from silence, this author believes that, nevertheless, one should never underestimate the impact and force of a disillusioned society.

Important Figures of the Movement

An exhaustive survey of all figures important to the Devotio Moderna Movement would require an additional thesis. The group emerged at the right time and place in history to maximize its impact on society. Among the thousands who claimed gratitude as members or pupils to the Devout are: Thomas á Kempis, Erasmus, Dringenberg, Hegius, Murmellius, Agricola, Calvin,

¹⁷⁷ Mews, 256.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Loyola, Gerard Zerbolt, Florens Radewizns, Gabriel Biel, Henry Suso, and Wessel Gansfort.¹⁷⁹

Those covered in the following pages are selected for their overall importance to the movement and their relevance to the upcoming Protestant Reformation.

Thomas á Kempis (1380-1471)

One of the most prominent works produced from the movement was a moderate, practical work of pious ascetic spirituality titled the *Imitation of Christ*. Written anonymously in both vernacular and Latin versions, it circulated throughout Europe around 1472 and beyond. The text was a compilation of practical religious philosophy, stressing inward communion and personal prayer, echoed in various writings throughout the entire course of the movement. No less than forty authors have been declared authorship. But most experts proclaim Thomas à Kempis (1379-1471) as the writer responsible for the inspiring text – yet the controversy may never be settled with absolute certainty.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps Thomas should be given credit for final compilation of the text and the entire Movement cited as the original author in-mass.

The text of the *Imitation of Christ* encouraged personal piety while launching a rhetorical assault on the grotesque overindulgence of the Church. Furthermore, the text called for the return to the monastic ideals of poverty coupled with humility.¹⁸¹ Thomas spurned rigorous theology as well as glamorous metaphysics in favor of contemplative meditation. In chapter seven, the author prepares for communion and stresses the importance of inner-devotion:

¹⁷⁹ Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance; a History of The "Devotio Moderna"*, 40.

¹⁸⁰ John Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 8.

¹⁸¹ Cedric Edward Pickford, Alison Adams, and International Arthurian Society. British Branch., *The Changing Face of Arthurian Romance: Essays on Arthurian Prose Romances in Memory of Cedric E. Pickford: A Tribute by the Members of the British Branch of the International Arthurian Society*, Arthurian Studies, 16 (Cambridge Cambridgeshire; Wolfeboro, N.H.: D.S. Brewer, 1986), 62.

CHRIST. It is fitting that a priest be endowed above all else with humility of heart and profound reverence... and with the sacred purpose of giving glory to God. Therefore carefully examine your conscience to the best of your ability, cleansing and purifying it by true contrition and humble confession.... Grieve for your sins in general, and for your besetting sins in particular. And, if time allow, confess to God from the depths of your heart all the misery of your passions.¹⁸²

While the text primarily focused on the inner life, of special importance to this thesis is how the author admonished the readers, both clergy and laity to see how the path to God is found in words of Christ.¹⁸³ And while Thomas did not exclude the Church and the sacramental system, the message is clear that a shift in emphasis was being proclaimed. First the devotion to Christ Jesus, next the Church and its sacraments are used to aid the first.¹⁸⁴

As this author sees it, the *Imitation* is the essence of what the Devout had always yearned for – a perfected reconstruction of their beloved church. Their reformation consisted not of schismatic revolt, but of a redirection aimed solely at a devotion to Christ and away from the vain glorification. If the importance of this text is lost on us today, be assured that the fifteenth century Church officials clearly understood it.

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536)

The secular Italian Renaissance of Southern Europe differed from the Renaissance north of the Alps, also known as the Transalpine Renaissance. This so called “Transalpine Renaissance” combined elements of the Devotio Moderna and the Italian Renaissance.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, the

¹⁸² Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Sherley Price (Harmondsworth,: Penguin Books, 1952), 194.

¹⁸³ Ozment, 97.

¹⁸⁴ Kempis, 12.

¹⁸⁵ Strand, *Essays on the Northern Renaissance*, 19.

humanist Erasmus was born out of the ideals of the Transalpine Renaissance.¹⁸⁶ As Albert Hyma says, “Erasmus has been called the prince of the humanists, but he could just as well be named the king of the Transalpine Renaissance.”¹⁸⁷ “It will not do to say that the Devotio Moderna remained unaltered from generation to generation. Right in the citadel of the movement, so to speak, in the brethren-house at Deventer, some very pious souls became greatly affected by the teachings of the humanists.”¹⁸⁸

The Transalpine Renaissance of the North contained a number of important humanist ties to the Devotio Moderna. Erasmus was the greatest, but others of note were Agricola, Celtis, and Mutain.¹⁸⁹ With almost no exceptions, these and other Christian Humanists shared common attributes with the Devotio Moderna, such as the pursuit of pious non-monastic asceticism, an ascetic activist moralism that insisted on good works coupled with a virtuous life, a tendency to value primitive Christianity over all other norms, and an utter contempt for the deplorable and corrupt conditions of the Church.¹⁹⁰

R.R Post argued that Erasmus gained little from the Devotio Moderna, but other sources challenge his conclusion. It is correct that as a child, Erasmus was sent to Deventer in order to attend school at St. Lebwin's. And even though St. Lebwin was not being run by the Devout at that point in time, Erasmus was known to have experienced a great deal of instruction from the Devout brother Alexander Hegius and other Brethren chaplains as well.¹⁹¹ Just how much influence the Devotio Movement had on Erasmus will always be a point of contention, but scholars agree that two phenomena shaped Erasmus more than all else, the Devotio Moderna and

¹⁸⁶ Strand, *The Dawn of Modern Civilization; Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics, Presented to Honor Albert Hyma*, 20.

¹⁸⁷ Strand, *Essays on the Northern Renaissance*, 19.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸⁹ Ozment, 97.

¹⁹⁰ Davis, 62.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 268.

the Renaissance.¹⁹² The nature of his life and work should be proof enough that Erasmus was deeply inspired by Devout philosophy. In addition, he lived in a monastery that was actively promoting the Devotio Moderna Church reforming ideals.

Before his conversion to a life of service to Christ, Erasmus produced *De Contemptu Mundi*, a work that was primarily humanist in content. Later on, around 1523, Erasmus added a chapter to *De Contemptu* that asserted the Devotio Moderna's ascetic ideals such as the practice of pious contemplation while simultaneously living "in the world."¹⁹³ Erasmus's youthful years find him more aligned with Renaissance humanism. But after his conversion, Christianity takes precedence over the Renaissance. Thanks largely to Erasmus, tremendous pressure was brought to bear on the Church for reform, just in time to be considered a precipitating event leading to the final reforming schism of the Protestants. In as far as modern day trends are concerned, a good number of key scholars have affirmed the linking of Erasmus to the Devotio Moderna.¹⁹⁴

Also of note is Erasmus's position on Church reform. It centered on the health of the institution coupled with the practical nature of being a Christian. His position stood in opposition to the increasingly common attack on the Church's Holy traditions and practices such as the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. This is an important distinction, in that, it parallels precisely with the Devotio Moderna's desire to reform the Church from within – once and for all.¹⁹⁵ Erasmus saw himself as a Christian and poet who wanted nothing more than for humans to reach their God given potential in a peaceful world with the Church leading the way.

¹⁹² Strand, *The Dawn of Modern Civilization; Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics, Presented to Honor Albert Hyma*, 19.

¹⁹³ Davis, 268.

¹⁹⁴ See authors: Pal Mestwerdt C. Thompson, J. Dolan, L. Bouyer, J. Etienne, A. Auer, and K. Oelrich, *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

Anabaptist and Erasmus

Recent scholarship has shown an important relationship between the Anabaptists and Erasmus.¹⁹⁶

The fundamental distinctives related to the pious asceticism of the Anabaptist Movement have their origins with Erasmus and the *Devotio Moderna*. For many Anabaptists, including the scholars Bender and Kreider, the idea of being indebted to a Catholic reform movement is utterly unacceptable. Perhaps this is based on an unfortunate and faulty association with the modern definition of humanism along with a long held prejudice against the Catholic Church in general. Contemporary historians tend to separate Renaissance Humanism from the twentieth century version of humanism, generally considered incompatible with modern faith systems. Key to this view is to understand how Erasmus saw no reason Humanism and Christianity were not entirely one and the same. Furthermore, in contrast to the Secular Humanist Renaissance South of the Alps, the humanism of the Northern Transalpine Christian Renaissance proudly declared an allegiance to Christ. Based on his sacred writings, Erasmus was first and foremost a Christian reformer and, unwittingly, an ideological forerunner to the Anabaptist radical reformation.¹⁹⁷

There is now conclusive evidence uniting the Early Anabaptist leaders to medieval asceticism of the *Devotio Moderna* and Humanistic Christianity as taught by Erasmus. Manz, Reublin, Denck, and Hubmaier all formed their philosophies from their Devout predecessors.¹⁹⁸ Of particular interest is the connection between Erasmus and one of the greatest of the founding fathers of Anabaptism — Conrad Grebel. Both Grebel and Erasmus were in direct contact with each other while being extensively exposed to the reforming ideals of the Devout. Likewise, they both proceeded to promote Devout-like pious ascetic ideals in the form of Christian

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 266.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 271.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 296.

discipleship.¹⁹⁹ The Anabaptist movement, also called the Radical Reformation (emphasis on Reformation), arose in response to the Protestant schism. In addition to the above attributes that can be credited to the *Devotio Moderna*, the Anabaptists developed additional concepts that would have been abhorrent to Erasmus and the Devout such as the rejection of infant baptism. Consequently, the focus of this thesis does not permit extensive pursuit of this topic. Yet it is important to know that certain aspects of the Devout philosophy survived beyond their era.

Luther and Erasmus

Martin Luther had a close relationship with Erasmus for nearly fifteen years. What tied their relationship together was their mutual concern for the state of the Church and their desire to reform it. Both men had been greatly affected by the *Devotio Moderna*. When addressing the magistrates of Herford, Luther is claimed to have said:

Inasmuch as the Brethren and Sisters were the first to begin the Gospel among you, lead a creditable life, have a decent and well-behaved congregation, and at the same time faithfully teach and hold the pure word, may I affectionately entreat your worships not to permit any dispeace or molestation to befall them, on account of their still wearing the religious dress, and observing old and laudable usages not contrary to the Gospel? For such monasteries and brethren-houses please me beyond measure. Would to God that all monastic institutions were like them! Clergymen, cities, and countries would then be better served, and more prosperous than they now are.²⁰⁰

***Wessel Gansfort* (1419-1489)**

Wessel Gansfort is important to this thesis because Martin Luther declared Wessel important to his beliefs. In 1522 Luther writes:

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Kenneth Albert Strand, *Essays of Luther*, 97.

Behold, a Wessel has appeared... If I had read his works earlier, my enemies might think that Luther (sic) had absorbed everything from Wessel: his spirit is so in accord with mine. But now my joy and courage begin to increase, and I have not the slightest doubt that I have been teaching the truth, since he, living at so different a time, under another sky, in another land, and under such diverse circumstances, is so consistently in accord with me in all things, not only as to substance, but in the use of almost the same words.²⁰¹

Wessel Gansfort was raised as a poor peasant in the town of Groningen and would have only attended a few years of school had it not been for the benevolence of a local woman who funded further studies for the boy.²⁰² Around 1432, Gansfort attended school at Zwolle, the present locus of the Devout Movement. For seventeen years Gansfort lived in a dormitory run by the Devout brothers and proceeded to pass through the eight grades offered. After that, he stayed on as an instructor for the school and became a close friend to Thomas á Kempis, who also had been instructed by the Devout and lived at a nearby monastery.²⁰³ Gansfort went on to study at the University of Cologne and achieved a Master of Arts degree in the year 1452.²⁰⁴ A few years later he reunited with the Brothers of the Common Life at Zwolle.

Just how much influence Wessel Gansfort's ground breaking views on predestination, justification by faith, and the universal priesthood of all believers had on future reformers is impossible to prove. But this writer is not likely to be accused of hyperbole when declaring Gansfort's influence as critically important. It appears that both the Anabaptist and Protestants owe a crucial portion of their philosophical allegiance to Wessel Gansfort and his ideas. His writings introduced the concept of 'believers' baptism' and 'sola scriptura' long before the Reformation declared the concepts as their own. Wessel claimed that participating in the

²⁰¹ Hyma, 191.

²⁰² Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance; a History of The "Devotio Moderna"*, 194.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Hyma, 195.

sacrament of the Eucharist was ‘symbolic’²⁰⁵ of the cross of Christ and human desire to share the burden of Christ.²⁰⁶ As for ‘sola scriptura’, Gansfort emphatically stated that when seeking religious authority, priority must be given to the Holy Scriptures.²⁰⁷ In addition, Gansfort placed a great deal of emphasis on the responsibility of the “individual” to read and interpret the Bible for herself; thus, necessitating the promotion of a vernacular text.

Gerard Zerbolt (1367-1398)

The Brothers of the Common Life produced a number of great writers, but perhaps the greatest of them all is Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen.²⁰⁸ Zerbolt produced a number of works, but the most important is called *De Spiritualibus ascensionibus* or *Spiritual Ascents*. According to R.R. Post, *Spiritual Ascents*, also known as *Spiritual Ascensions*, is the first ever Catholic text devoted primarily to the task of meditation.²⁰⁹ Moreover, Post claims that the Jesuits made this method of meditation “one of the most powerful methods of fostering, heightening and maintaining an extremely devout and effective spiritual life.”²¹⁰ If one wanted to read a text point-by-point that demonstrated the intricacies of how to meditate as a member of a Devout household, this would be the essential text. Every Devout household had a copy and all households read it on a regular basis. Furthermore, this is the text the Devout most eagerly promoted to the outside world—Luther is said to have read the text.²¹¹

²⁰⁵ The term ‘symbolic’ is used extensively by Anabaptist who use the word to neuter mystical aspects of Church tradition including: transubstantiation of the Host, and the Divine sacredness of the baptismal water.

²⁰⁶ Davis, 258.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Post, 326.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 328.

²¹¹ Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 56.

Spiritual Ascents focuses on the key areas: death, judgment, hell/heaven/life, and (with a special emphasis) the passion of Christ.²¹² The overall goal of the text is for man to return to God's intended state of rectitude. There are essentially four assents, or stages, that one must move through to complete this journey. The first stage involves the practice of penance along with a measure of contrition and confession. The second ascent is less direct and takes up nearly half the text. It consists of an attempt to drive out impurity with fear and remorse which is achieved by meditating on subjects related to death, judgment, and hell. To offset the depressing nature of this stage, one must meditate on the life of Christ in order to generate hope – Christ was viewed as the perfected source of ultimate purity and hope.²¹³ The third ascent is a move within the fallen soul. Having been touched by original sin, the soul now requires a reformation. This consists of the vices waging battle with the soul where the soul experiences tremendous temptations in its quest to move towards purity. The fourth and final ascent is a bit of a puzzle and can be described as more of a descent. Paradoxically, the soul moves out of the pious state of meditation and into the public sphere of the outer world. Here self-discipline is exercised to improve the self; in addition, community service is promoted along with 'true' friendship.²¹⁴

Key to understanding this text, and thus the *Devotio Moderna*, is to examine the conclusion of the Zerbolt text –but in fact, the text has no end. It suddenly stops without the anticipated climatic ascent. A typical reader would expect a sort of mystical union with God to complete the journey—but no such event takes place. Instead, the text presents a sort of never ending process of sanctification, a kind of dynamic process of ascent and descent along with a constant purification of the heart.²¹⁵

²¹² Post, 238.

²¹³ Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 57.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 59.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 58.

Summary: Reformation Links

The confusion of dueling Popes, brought to a head in 1378 with the split between Rome and Avignon, handcuffed the Church's ability to apply positive moral pressure on the Western kingdoms.²¹⁶ Nevertheless, thanks to the optimism promoted by the Devout Humanist's of the Northern Renaissance along with the ending of the Great Schism at the council of Constance (1414-18), a unified Church, capable of achieving the Humanist's and Devotio Moderna's high-moral goals, seemed within reach.²¹⁷ The humanists believed that by achieving true reform, the Church could function as a guiding moral compass to the world.²¹⁸ Thanks in large part to the Northern Transalpine Humanists of the Low Countries, of which the Devotio Moderna was closely associated, optimism surged throughout Europe. The key to this optimism was based on the notion a united Church of Europe would be able to insist that the kingdoms cease their disputes and join forces to ward off foreign threats — especially the Turks. Thus, with an enduring peace established from within the continent, coupled with a united force establishing indefinite peace, the West would be free to turn its attention to items of true importance, such as the pursuit of global Christian evangelism.²¹⁹ Hence, the fifteenth century was primed for radical change. Society was growing increasingly irritated with the Church and its broken

²¹⁶ Colin Platt, *The Atlas of Medieval Man* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 193.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

²¹⁸ Strand, *Essays on the Northern Renaissance*, 75.

²¹⁹ Strand, *The Dawn of Modern Civilization; Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics, Presented to Honor Albert Hyma*, 67.

monastic system, and all the while, a vibrant ascetic ideal was on the rise –especially in the regions north of the Alps.²²⁰

While Luther is given proper (if not excessive) recognition for his contribution to the Protestant Reformation, it is becoming increasingly evident that substantial credit is due to the Devout, especially Erasmus the humanist, and the multitude of pious Sisters and Windeshiemer nuns who tilled and seeded the religious soil of Europe. Without their century long nurturing of spirituality, it is difficult to see a society willing to embrace the frenetic sixteenth century Protestant upheaval resulting in the uprooting of over a millennia of Catholic Church traditions. The prior century's effort at addressing the corruption of the church appeared to be reaching a breaking point when Luther came onto the scene. Through the spark of his teaching and works, the Reform movement led by the *Devotio Moderna* suddenly took a turn toward schismatic revolt. By 1521 the Protestants had achieved the upper hand; a full scale abandonment of the Church was underway. Thus, as Davis points out, from this point on, the universal Catholic Church had lost a crucial amount of support. Consequently, a 'Catholic,' non-schismatic reform began to separate itself as a distinct movement from the "Protestant" reform schism.²²¹

Famous people such as Thomas á Kempis and Erasmus are of course important, but their works were of little value without a great portion of the population gaining exposure to their wise words. Thanks in large part to the women of the *Devotio Moderna*, the grassroots movement inspired men and scores of lay women across northeastern Europe to practice contemplative spirituality in the context of the Church. Counter-Reformation aside, the reformation of the Church had been underway for nearly a century before Luther's stand.

²²⁰ Davis, 54.

²²¹ Davis, 294.

The spirit and philosophy of the *Devotio Moderna* had not simply disappeared with the dissolution of the Movement. By the start of the sixteenth century, the members and ex-members of the *Devotio Moderna* numbered in the tens of thousands, many of whom were clerics, priests, educators, civic leaders, scores of lay converts, as well as members of a multitude of reformed monastic orders throughout the Low Countries. The attitude of Europe had been forever altered through the efforts of the Northern Devout Humanists. Frankly, it was the philosophical remnants of the Humanistic *Devotio Moderna* that supplied the Protestants the wisdom and energy required to grow and sustain a final cataclysmic schismatic reform – a reform that had begun at the end of the fourteenth century by the efforts of Geert Grote and the *Devotio Moderna*.²²²

With the onset of the printing press, it is indeed fortunate that the Devout, who saw themselves largely as scribes, did not become discouraged and give up. Instead the community displayed an impressive capacity to rapidly adapt their talents to new strategies. By redoubling their efforts as printing publishers and as educators of the youth, the *Devotio Moderna* delivered one last gift to society – educational reform.

Arriving at a most critical time in history, the importance of the Movement cannot be overstated. Most of the Devout's success is most easily viewed at the local level, but the vision of the *Devotio Moderna* had always been directed to larger systems, even the Pope himself.²²³ And as the fifteenth century neared to an end, so too was the patience of European society—global discouragement was on the rise. But thanks to the *Devotio Moderna*, the energy required to precipitate a great reaction, to the desperately dark chapter in the life of the 'resisting Church',

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., 60-61.

was growing into an enormous pent up reserve of dashed hopes — a heaping pile of dry fuel waiting in anticipation of a spark – Luther’s spark.

The strategy of the Devout was to seek real reform by creating a philosophy of ascetic ideals that reclaimed the core apostolic essence of the church – all the while remaining externally orthodox. Though the movement hoped to reform its religious communities, it displayed no desire for cataclysmic schism – a contrast to the forthcoming Protestants. Melancthon, the converted humanist who became Luther’s proponent, expended a great effort to reconcile the opposing sides. Despite his best attempts, it was not possible; consequently, the reform of the Church was over and the beginning of a Schism was complete.²²⁴

The Catholic Church’s post-Reformation response, the Counter-Reformation, presents a striking resemblance to the fundamental emphasis of the Modern Devotion, with an emphasis on an internal spiritual life with a personal relationship with God.²²⁵ The Modern Devout focused on the strength of the interior. Grote’s simple and pure faith modeled itself after the first century apostles and the perceived unity of the primitive Christian church.

It is difficult to comprehend how Luther’s reformation could expand so quickly and with so much energy without the prior centuries contributions of the Devout Brothers and Sisters. The Devout successfully exploited the printing press as they attacked illiteracy throughout much of Europe. Thanks to the efforts of the Christian Printing houses of the *Devotio Moderna*, Europe’s thirst for spiritual literature was becoming voracious and nearly unquenchable. Pouring out of the *Devotio Moderna*’s presses were large volumes of vernacular literature exposing, for the first time, unvarnished contemplative devotional spirituality to the multitude of

²²⁴ Strand, *The Dawn of Modern Civilization; Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics, Presented to Honor Albert Hyma*, 87.

²²⁵ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, 16.

spiritually starved citizens. This type of contemplative knowledge had been nearly always denied to the common folk, but now, thanks to the Devout, it was at last within their grasp. With the establishment of the printing press firmly rooted all throughout Europe, a mighty tide of public opinion was forming. Here was a tremendous reserve of energy to soon be unleashed through the form of a precipitating polemic thesis posted on a door by Martin Luther at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. What would have happened if only a few people had read his thesis? Would their contents have endured but a brief discussion with a subsequent debate by a few—only to be forgotten as yet another academic exercise by an all knowing elite? This writer proclaims yes, but for the printing press, from the mid-fifteenth century onward, a societal awareness of the dismal state of the Church was growing like wild fire. By posting his thoughts, Martin Luther did nothing original, for had the printing press not been invented and exploited for the prior six decades, especially by the Devout and the humanists, only a localized debate among a few intellectuals would have most likely transpired. But as it was, within a few short days the news of Luther's thoughts had spread throughout all of Europe, and within three years over four thousand copies of his works were sold in a span of only five days — Luther was a superstar. In a few short years, a revolution for reform was underway and had begun to spin out of control.²²⁶

But how could such an event transpire if not for the contributions of the Modern Devout? It was the Devout who, from inside the system, strived to renew the church. Sadly, they were not strong enough to complete their vision of reformation, but with the combined energy of the printing press and Luther's thesis, a greater power than the sum of the individual parts was sufficient to push the Church and society over the edge to a point of no return.

²²⁶ Margaret Aston, *The Fifteenth Century; the Prospect of Europe*, [1st American ed.] (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1968), 76.

Ironically, the key elements of free-speech and free-press that allowed so much of the Renaissance to blossom and flourish throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was in full retreat by the early fifteenth century. Most certainly, Luther's reformation would not have materialized without the presence of free speech during the prior century.

Censorship was a blow to the gut for both the Modern Devotion communities and the Humanists', such as Erasmus, who depended on the printing press and freedom of speech to aid in the spread of the vernacular in their classrooms. Ironically, the Catholic Church, especially the Jesuits, viewed the Modern Devout and Humanists as deviations from orthodoxy. Consequently, censorship was initiated in order to quench further splintering of an already imploding Church. The Church was too late and weak to end the Protestant Schism, but their efforts were successful in confronting the preceding century of progress. Nearly all the societal advances achieved from the brow of the Humanist's and Devotio Moderna's were now in full retreat and in danger of being wiped out entirely.²²⁷ The Devout's passion to promote their version of reform along with an accompanying drive to increase their households had come to an end.²²⁸ While a few Brother-houses and Devout monasteries did survive, most vanished. In his book, Post admits by the sixteenth century, the Devout:

...had lost their driving force..., their propagandist spirit, and, to a certain extent, their original character. Did they, or many of them adopt the ideas of the Reformation? Or were their ideals no longer suited to the changing state of affairs.²²⁹

And even though the outcome was almost certainly not as the Devout founder Geert Grote would have wished, was the Devout's work completed with the onset of Luther's Reformation? The next and final chapter will address this question.

²²⁷ Strand, *The Dawn of Modern Civilization; Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics, Presented to Honor Albert Hyma*, 89.

²²⁸ Post, 554.

²²⁹ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Overview

From the first century onward, the desire for reform was nothing new to the Church. Geert Grote instigated a primitive Christian ascetic spiritual ideal hoping to change the Church from within. He promoted the ideal that proclaimed that common people can be just as religious as monks and nuns, providing they are separate from the world and serve God to the best of their abilities.²³⁰ In Geert's own words, he insisted the whole of spirituality offered by the Church be made accessible to everyone who desires to explore it, not just the privileged few:

Truly religious men are not confined by place, time or manner of men. Instead, "all those who live aloof from the world to serve God, who despise temporal honors; leading chaste lives, obedient and poor: they are religious people."²³¹

His words must have been music to the ears of many lay persons and especially women. In a departure with Church tradition, Geert is thrusting the church door wide open, making it relatively easy to enter a religious community without the need for taking vows. For the first time in the history of the church, tens of thousands of ordinary men and women were able to practice pious contemplative spirituality in their native tongue; in effect, a reformation had begun.

²³⁰ Davis, 51.

²³¹ Ibid.

Before the fifteenth century, the Inquisition persecuted many of those who sought reform. The Albinenses and Waldenses were martyred for their attempts as well as radicals like John Wycliffe, John Huss, and Gerolamo Savonarola.²³² However, the Church did make some attempts to reform through a number of fifteenth century Councils, such as the Councils of Pisa, Constance, and Basel.²³³

Throughout church history, much of what was labeled as heresy were religious movements in pursuit of Church reform, much like Luther and the Protestants in the sixteenth century.²³⁴ At the end of the twelfth century, Pope Innocent III broke the pattern of branding all reformers as heretics when he embraced the ideals of poverty of Francis of Assisi and the technique of preaching by Dominic Guzman – both men instigated new mendicant orders called the Franciscans and the Dominicans respectively. Through these new orders a good portion of the desire to reform was channeled and neutralized – for a time.²³⁵

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century placed a great deal of attention on the theological questions related to justification and the assurance of salvation.²³⁶ In contrast, the Devotio Moderna directed their attention to the practical reformation of the monasteries and the spiritual renewal of the Church as a whole.²³⁷ It was a pious movement that reached out to lay persons and especially women. And while the movement acknowledged the importance of many traditions coming before it like the Cistercians and Carthusians, the Devout did not fully embrace

²³² Jack L. Arnold, "The Cause and Results of the Reformation," *III Magazine Online* 1, Number 2 (1999): 1.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, 2.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ David Neff, "CT institute on Evangelicals and Catholics: Do We Still Need the Reformation?" *Christianity Today* 38: December 12 1994 [article on-line]; available from EBSCO Research Databases ATLA issue 20060715, Accession Number: ATLA0000887143; <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/catalog.georgefox.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&dbrfh&AN=ATLA0000887&site-ehost-live&scope-site>, 6.

²³⁷ Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 25.

any one tradition over another. They did not live a life as pure “imitators of Christ” nor did they delve into an intense pursuit of deep mystical union.²³⁸ Instead, the scholar Engen saw the Devout moving towards a more Christocentric faith when he says their, “...emphasis was entirely positive: to have the New Devout live in Christ and Christ in them.”²³⁹

This research has demonstrated how the Protestant Reformation could not have taken place without the reforming contributions of the *Devotio Moderna*. Furthermore, this author is convinced that the Devout movement was a crucial contributor to the ultimate schismatic Protestant Reformation. But with very little evidence directly linking the Devout to the sixteenth century Protestants, the *Devotio Moderna*’s power to effect change was more indirect than had been hoped for.²⁴⁰ With only a few exceptions, Protestants gave little credit to the *Devotio Moderna* as their ultimate source of inspiration.

With that said, it is clear the Devout did influence the foundations of the Church and society as a whole. With strong ties to Erasmus along with the Northern Christian Renaissance, the ideals of *Devotio Moderna* spread over Northern Europe as they changed the attitudes toward the Church like wild fire spurred on by steady winds. The Devout lived a life of silent protest where lay women and men were given the opportunity to exercise a life of sincere inner devotion. Consequently, the light of the Devout shone as a beacon against the darkness of an ailing Church. As Post says, rather than reject the Church, the Devout continued to embrace the Holy Mass and elected to not, “criticize the oral prayers such as the hours, the rosary, the psalms and vigils”²⁴¹ Instead, by the use of meditation, the movement attempted to transform the spiritual exercises from prescribed rituals to activities spurred by an active life lived with, and in,

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ In this case, the term ‘indirect’ is used for there is very little direct evidence linking the Devout to the Protestants.

²⁴¹ Post, 680.

Christ. The key to understanding the importance of the movement lies in Post's claim that too much discontent had been nurtured. For over a century, ordinary men, women, and youth were touched with the ideals of Geert Grote. The movement was a crucial precipitating event that brought about the Protestant reaction.²⁴²

The Protestant Reformation had a clearly defined starting point with the posting of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, but an additional beginning for the reformation of the Church should now be considered as well. For without the raised expectations of ordinary people throughout the Low Countries of Northern Europe, how many might have noticed or cared when Luther made his stand?

Critics' Perspective

In regards to this thesis, there are some obvious issues that a critic would most likely bring to bear. Could the Protestant Reformation have taken place without the preparatory work of the *Devotio Moderna*? Frankly, it is a stretch to boldly proclaim yes or no. For if one agrees with the premise that all events stand on a foundation of history and are wholly dependent on the actions and events of their predecessors, it is necessary to recognize the *Devotio Moderna* in gratitude for the contributions to Church and society as a whole.

But just how much, and to what extent, did the movement impact the Church? To be fair, many other phenomena were simultaneously preparing the soil for the earth shaking reaction to the Roman Church. For instance, the whole of the Renaissance as well as the Gutenberg printing

²⁴² Ibid.

press played major roles in building social unrest that Luther and the Protestants ultimately tapped into. Some might say it is safer to claim the Devout simply joined a tide of events that, together, formed a powerful force of change. But this author believes it would be a mistake to toss the Devout movement into such a vast sea of events. The time has raised the volume on Martin Luther and the Protestants to such a degree much of the underlying factors, that made their protest possible, are but a faint whisper.

More Evidence

The printing press and the *Devotio Moderna* are more closely aligned than a casual observer might assume. This is because the clergy had always been somewhat literate, but now the laity were consuming the printed word for the first time. An important consequence of large masses of common people being exposed to the new abundance of religious literature was a natural tendency to turn inward and piously reflect on one's relationship with the Divine.²⁴³ The Modern Devotion, with their emphasis on personal devotion along with a Christocentric emphasis was a perfect fit for those seeking an outlet for their newfound desire for deeper spirituality.²⁴⁴

If direct evidence is needed to support the thesis that the Reformation depended on the *Devotio Moderna*, Martin Luthers' declaration that his work could be mistaken for Wessel Gansforts'²⁴⁵ should convince the reader as to just how far the influence the Devout had

²⁴³ Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 75.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ ff. 63.

penetrated society.²⁴⁶ In addition to his praise for Gansfort, Gabriel Biel (another great scholar of the Devotio Moderna) taught Martin Luther while serving as the rector of the Brethren of the Common Life at Butzbach.²⁴⁷

An additional similarity of note between the Devotio Moderna and Luther concerns indulgences. Gansfort confronts the need for indulgences when he says, “On him who is returning, or who has returned, to God, nothing ought to be so strictly enjoined as to sin no more, but purely to love God.”²⁴⁸ In other words, indulgences are not needed if one is joined with God in pure love.

And why did Luther’s parents send him to Magdeburg in the first place? There is no answer, but Hyma points out the Brotherhood of the Common Life organized themselves in such a manner so as to be an obvious “protest against the moral decline of the Church by trying to return to the customs in vogue among the early Christians.”²⁴⁹ Whether their influence was large or small, broad or narrow, one thing is certain, the Devout did exist; and they most certainly had an impact then, and to this very day – the Devout brother Thomas á Kempis and his book *The Imitation of Christ*, made certain of that.

²⁴⁶ ff. 60.

²⁴⁷ Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance; a History of The "Devotio Moderna"*, 312.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 313.

Thesis Statement

The Modern Devotion movement was a noteworthy reform movement that prepared the way for the Protestant Reformation as well as the Catholic Counter Reformation.²⁵⁰ This thesis has shown the Protestant Reformation to have been improbable, perhaps impossible, without the contributions of the Devotio Moderna.

Chapter Review: In Defense of the Thesis

In the introduction, we read that without the contributions of this amazing collective, European society would have been spiritually and morally ill-prepared for Luther's words. It was the Devout themselves who might lay claim to the title of "reformation". As an early leader of the Devout, John Vos of Heusden proclaimed, "Groote was the first father of this our reformation, the source and origin of the Devotio Moderna; he was an apostle in his country who kindled the fires of religious fervor in the cold hearts of men, and drew them to God."²⁵¹ Grote was the true beginning of the Reformation. For without the contributions of the Devout, Luther's words would have been as sparks to damp moss, with no chance of lighting a fire whatsoever.

²⁵⁰ The medieval Church had lowered its standards to the point that it was no longer necessary for laypeople to live according to the ethical standards set forth in the Gospels – mediators of grace were being introduced in order to convey the promise of salvation. Through the use of mediators of grace with the saints, and the implementation of the sacramental rituals through the mass, lines were permanently blurred between magic and the mysterious powers of the Divine. In the end, a line had been crossed where the laity viewed the Church as manipulators of God. For instance, an increasingly passive person who lacked sufficient faith in God was not without remedy – now the sacramental system could be used to obtain what the deity may or may not desire to yield. This is a harsh view that is intriguing and potentially important for understanding the preconditions precipitating Geert Grotes' desire for reform, and for the forthcoming Protestant schism. cf. Kaelber, 101-102.

²⁵¹ Strand, *Essays on the Northern Renaissance*, 9-10.

Furthermore, many authors see important contributions by the Devout in the era preceding the Protestant Reformation. The scholar Ross Fuller discerns a philosophical undergirding of the Devout movement that joins action to contemplation. His assertion is the Modern Devout were a vital element necessary for the world to have moved from Catholic Spirituality to Protestantism.²⁵²

The author, Van Engen, points out that during the fifteenth century, an important classroom reaction against scholastic rules inhibited logic and open debate. And since the monastic system, for the most part, ran the educational programs up to that point in time, a humanism centered anti-intellectual (scholastic based) reaction could not have taken place without the interior transformations taking place inside the monastic walls throughout Europe.²⁵³

The contemporary scholar Wybren Scheepsma has recently attempted to fill in a crucial gap in Modern Devotion studies – the female members of the Modern Devotion. Wybren states that the Devout Movement had “a major influence upon religious life in Europe.”²⁵⁴ In addition, Scheepsma promotes a view that women have been the primary contributors to nearly all religious reform movements throughout much of Europe’s history—to that, the Devout sisters are most certainly included.

Chapter two showed us Grote’s inclination to stay within the good graces of the Church in order to reform the Church from within. Doing so kept him from straying too far into the realm of heresy—to do otherwise was, quite literally, a dangerous and deadly affair. Even so,

²⁵² Ross Fuller, *The Brotherhood of the Common Life and Its Influence*, Suny Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 115.

²⁵³ John H. Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 2.

²⁵⁴ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, i.

the influence of the Modern Devotion should not be overlooked, for imbedded in the works of Rudolf Agricola, Erasmus, Luther, and Thomas á Kempis, are the ideas of Geert Grote.²⁵⁵

The scholar Ozment contends that the Modern Devotion held to a kind of “pious contempt for the secular world...”²⁵⁶ The Modern Devotion became a final product of a century’s old stream of restoration type movements which pursued spirituality modeled after the moral and ascetic ideals of the primitive first century church.

Chapter three revealed the Devout as efficient exploiters of the printing press and in so doing, successfully promoted not only the Devotio Moderna ideal, but humanistic principles as well. Furthermore, common parish women who had been overwhelmingly denied the practice of contemplative spirituality had a new and relatively open path to piety via the Devotio Moderna—evidence shows scores of women did just that.²⁵⁷ Through the use of their spiritual journals published in the vernacular intended for mass consumption, it was the personal stories of so many women that inspired a new generation to demand a deeper and practical spirituality from the Church.²⁵⁸

The great scholars of the Devout such as Gerard Zerbolt, Wessel Gansfort, Erasmus, and Thomas á Kempis all produced great works that not only influenced their own generation, but continue to do so even now.

²⁵⁵ Ozment, 97.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 221.

²⁵⁷ Ranft, 62.

²⁵⁸ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings*, 20.

Final Points

It is clear, the Protestant Reformation stood on the shoulders of the Devotio Moderna. The field of the Protestant Reformation was made fertile, tilled, and planted by the determined efforts of the Devout. A hunger for fertile spirituality had spread like a mighty tide throughout the lowlands of Germany and the Netherlands. With only a few exceptions, wherever the Protestant Reformation sprang forth, nearby were the houses, monasteries, and convents of the Devotio Moderna!²⁵⁹ Van Engen describes the essence of this local commonality well when he says:

The Modern Devout seemed both “modern” or “present-day” and “devout” precisely because they shared so many of the concerns and aspirations of other religious individuals in the period of the Great schism and the councils.²⁶⁰

But perhaps of greatest importance is the connection between the early Protestants and the Devout. The greatest of those is Luther — who essentially adopted the entirety of the *Spiritual Ascensions* into his crucial ‘doctrine of justification.’ This author agrees with Van Engen in claiming that Luther is generally misunderstood when his ‘justification by faith’ doctrine is left to stand on its own. Instead, it should be joined with Luther’s ideal that states, “Not to progress is to regress.” – that is the essence of the Devout.²⁶¹

A further parallel with the Protestants and the Devout is contained in the works of Calvin. Contained within this final point is the fundamental key to why the Devout faded away in disfavor and outright contempt issued from the Protestants. Contained in Calvin’s third text called the *Institutes*, lay the key themes of the Devotio Moderna; namely, contempt for the world, a virtual life, a future life, and the benefit of the Divine.²⁶² At times, Calvin used the

²⁵⁹ Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 60.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 61.

²⁶² Ibid.

Devout language verbatim.²⁶³ But nevertheless, a key shift had taken place that put the Devout on the condemned list forever. In his writings, Calvin replaced the Devout philosophy of 'disciplined will' with 'the work of the Holy Spirit through the gratitude of God.'²⁶⁴ In essence, the ability for humans to affect justification had now vanished with the stroke of a pen and the alteration of but a few words. Gone was the guiding principle of the Devout, the discipline of the will, and the ascension to God. As for the Devout and their philosophy, it is a compliment indeed to be used so purposely and extensively by the great Protestants, Luther and Calvin.

Perhaps it is time to rethink the historical foundations of our faith, bowing in gratitude to the theological foundation, the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life/ the *Devotio Moderna*, that allowed for the precipitation of the Protestant Reformation.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

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