

DEVOTIO MODERNA AND ERASMUS: TRANSFORMING PIETY

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The relationship between Erasmus of Rotterdam and the religious movement called the Devotio Moderna, especially the latter's relevance to Erasmian piety, has been a somewhat contentious historiographical issue. This thesis examines that relationship, and asserts that the Devotio Moderna was a crucial formative aspect of Erasmus' religiosity. However, its relevance ought not be overstated, due to the humanist's significant developments away from his spiritual forerunners.

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INTRODUCTION: HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE MODERN-DAY DEVOTION, ERASMUS, AND REFORMATION SOCIAL HISTORY

Through their religious exercises these people make a good appearance on the outside among simple people, but that is of as little profit to them, in Christ's own words, as the external gleam of sepulchers which on the inside are full of worms and stench—and so it is with these people.¹

Most [monks and religious] rely so much on their ceremonies and petty man-made traditions that they suppose heaven alone will hardly be enough to reward merits such as theirs. They never think of the time to come when Christ will scorn all this and enforce his own rule, that of charity.²

These quotes, disparaging the religious practice of the church's most visible members, were made by two men living a century apart. The first comes from a sermon by a Dutch deacon named Geert Grote, who died in 1384. This man inspired a generation of women and men in the Low Countries to pursue personal holiness with a zeal for interior prayer and individual improvement, outside of the strictures of formal religious life. The associated movement, a mixture of lay and clerical persons, became known in its own time as the *Devotio Moderna*, or Modern-Day Devotion. They lived in common, wrote Latin and vernacular devotional literature, and were held suspect by many urban and ecclesial authorities for many decades due to their legally ambiguous status in the medieval order.

The second quote comes from Erasmus of Rotterdam in his most famous work, *Praise of Folly*, published in 1511. The courts of Europe held this man in esteem for his advocacy of humanist learning and, when the reformation of the church emerged as a violent force of political and cultural change, he was both blamed and praised as its cause. The popularity of Erasmus' writings was remarkably universal in the 1510s and remained high in the decades following, his

¹ Geert Grote, "A Sermon Addressed to the Laity," in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, trans. John Van Engen (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 93.

² Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), 97-98.

many volumes published and republished throughout western Europe, provoking a wide range of reactions. By advocating humanist learning and reform of the church in light of it, Erasmus brought together currents of classical rhetoric, pedagogy, and textual criticism to offer a vision of a more scriptural and refined Christian society.

The historical relationship between Erasmus and Grote has been a minor quibble among historians of both figures for the past century. Works on Erasmus have emerged steadily over the years, while the Modern-Day Devout have only seen small waves of literature emerge every few decades. With each wave came an assertion about the relevance or irrelevance of the movement to the Reformation at large, and especially to Erasmus, due to his association with the movement early in his life. Meanwhile, biographies of Erasmus and analyses of his work are inconsistent in their evaluations of the Devout's historical impact on the sixteenth-century humanist. Given that there is now renewed interest in late-medieval religion in the academy, it is fitting to revisit this question with a more direct, comparative reading of Devout texts and Erasmus, with an eye to their real historical relationships. This could be a topic fitting for a much longer, more disciplined work. This thesis therefore only assumes a modest comparison of, first, the historical relationship of Erasmus to the Devout, and second, a textual comparison of their core religious values. Without much boldness, it will be asserted in the following pages that the Devout did have a tangible and relevant impact on Erasmus' worldview which ought to be taken into account in any reading of his role as a Reformation figure. The Devout were not, however, the sole or even most important influence on Erasmus as a reformer, as he transformed their particular religiosity into a much more universal (one might even say cosmopolitan or bourgeois) conception of the faith and its institutions.

The Modern-Day Devotion is best contextualized in what is called Observant Reform,

which began in the early-fourteenth century, around the centennial of the Dominicans and Franciscans' respective founding. One hundred years of successive leadership and growth brought the same challenges that waves of previous religious reformers faced: a battle for the uniformity of communities and adherence to their founding statutes. Anxiety over the need for reform can be found in the general meetings of the orders around this time, as well as in papal decrees. However, the Western Schism was the catalyst for a broader and more innovative movement of reform. The devolution of the church into papal factions and a perception of ecclesiastical decline compelled religious leaders to restore order and integrity to their religious and local communities.³ Rather than succumb to some kind of religious decadence, as the era was stereotypically represented, late-fourteenth century religious leaders developed new ways of reinterpreting their respective orders' *regula*, and vigorously promoted their (re)application. As the movement progressed into the fifteenth century, it rapidly expanded from a push within orders to a broader historical phenomenon of Christian renewal. Mendicant preachers took its core tenants to the streets and produced firebrands from Bernard of Siena to Savonarola. Their immediate situations and priorities changed, but all exhorted their hearers to a life of penance, conversion, and a turn away from the perceived corruption of the church's institutions.

Although the mendicant orders were most prominent in the movement, Observant Reform was not a mendicant-only phenomenon. The so-called Modern-Day Devotion was one of the most powerful expressions of reform in the Low Countries, emerging from the same climate of religious renewal and fervor within a politically fragmented church.⁴ Geert Grote founded the

³ James D. Mixson, introduction to *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond*, ed. James Mixson and Bert Roest, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill N.V.), 3-4. The pontificate of Benedict XII was particularly concerned with the regulation and reform of religious orders.

⁴ The translation used of *devotio moderna* and the term for its adherents are John Van Engen's.

movement in the 1370s: in midlife this Dutch prebendary scholar withdrew from a life of relative luxury to live near a Carthusian monastery. After years of self-examination and visits to a community of hermits outside Brussels, he resolved—rather than vowed—to live a converted life of strict, pious austerity. Grote renounced scholarly pursuits, benefice-seeking, and any laxity in praying the divine office or observing the liturgical cycle. All of this may have been expected from a determined religious novice: however, besides ordination to the diaconate for the sake of a preaching license, Grote was never formally a religious nor a prominent member of the clerical estate. He made a point of asserting his personal conversion within the context of a lay person's estate, resolving to God and God alone to live the way that he did and encourage others to follow suit. In less than a decade, he founded a home for pious widows and virgins to live out a life of religious observance, and soon after his death, "Master Geert's" followers succeeded in expanding his vision to include non-religious persons of both sexes. Some quickly regularized their situation in the ecclesiastical structure, with the Augustinian Windesheim Congregation being founded by some of Grote's followers in 1387, shortly after his death. Those who did not regularize constituted themselves as the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life: unmarried men and women living together in a superior's house, working, praying, and owning all things in common. Male members included secular clergy, while some members of both sexes were consecrated tertiaries of an order, others not. All assumed a life of pious conversion, undeniably catholic in their personal theological practice, but unique in that they insisted upon their right to do so outside of the legal structures of the formal religious orders.⁵

What made the Modern-Day Devout modern and unique may not be immediately

⁵ John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 11-13, 45-48.

apparent to us in the present day. The Devout offered no substantial challenges or contributions to the theological disputes of the era. They participated in the sacraments and liturgical life of the church, the same as their neighbors. They did not renounce or deny the efficacy of popular devotions and cults. However, all of these were secondary in importance to the spirituality of the Devout, as will be later shown. The most important aspect of their piety was the daily renewal of the pious persons' commitment to convert themselves to the mandates of the Gospel as they understood them in their immediate place. This is to say that, for the Devout, masses heard and rosaries said were irrelevant if they did not come from a conscious decision to conform oneself to the life of the church, *and* seek a tangible improvement in their personal habits from that life. In Devout spirituality, being a Christian began and ended with the individual's encounter with the words of Jesus. This form of devotion had many precedents in the history of the church up to that point, as their choices of spiritual reading (also discussed later) demonstrated. Personal conversion, the importance of the word in scripture, and so on were not foreign to the Devout's contemporaries in the church; it was the intensity of the Devout's emphasis on these things that was quite new, especially the impact it had on their assumed place in the tightly regulated urban space of fifteenth century western Europe. For the "ordinary" Christian at this time, the matter of the faith was essentially participation in the sacraments and the liturgical year. While theologies focused on personal conversion could be found readily in the traditions of hermits, monastics, and other contemplative writers, the priorities of the Devout were not immediately present in the religious praxis of the time. The priority of church life in the context of parishes and many religious orders focused on the liturgical action of the community and basic adherence to church and cultural precepts. If the focal point of a non-contemplative person's faith was gatherings in

the parish church and at shrines, for the Devout it was the Bible and their own hearts.⁶ Making such the focal point of one's faith may not have been odd for a hermit or a Carthusian monk, but it was very odd to find in a large number of ordinary laymen and women living in cities.

Erasmus of Rotterdam was educated and entered monastic life at the height of the Devotion's presence and influence. As the monk—more properly called a “canon,” according to his Augustinian order and their place in ecclesial law—established himself into a formidable man-of-letters and voice for reform, he espoused a religiosity stripped of the formal and law-laden piety of his day. Erasmus rejected as unfitting for himself the rules of his monastic vocation, and publicly exhorted his readers to reorient the practice of their religion away from the law and toward the spirit. Everything about being a Christian required a kind of personal purification: an interior conversion by each member of the faithful to act out their piety consciously and effectively, rather than simply perform it for law and custom's sake. The echoes of Devout piety are obvious. Erasmus found even the most solemn aspects of the faith meaningless if the faithful did not properly recognize its higher, spiritual significance.

It is the same with the Eucharist: the ritual with which it is celebrated should not be rejected, they say, but in itself it serves no useful purpose or can be positively harmful if it lacks the spiritual element represented by those visible symbols. It represents the death of Christ, which men must express through the mastery and extinction of their bodily passions... This then is how the pious man acts... The crowd, on the other hand, thinks the sacrifice of the mass means no more than crowding as close as possible to the altars, hearing the sound of the words, and watching other small details of such rituals.⁷

⁶ See e.g. the first part of Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 9-368. The most ready and convincing source on how most Latin Christians would have understood and practiced their faith in the fifteenth century. For the contemplative life of hermits, from whom the Devout would take much inspiration without actually assuming hermitical life: *Hermits and Anchorites in England, 1200–1550*, ed. E. A. Jones (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

⁷ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), 131-132. The theological implications of this statement are intriguing, but the content of Erasmus' opinions re: scholastic theology and the Lutheran conflict over the Real Presence are irrelevant to this thesis. Whether or not Erasmus (or the Devout) should be described as “semi-pelagian,” a common interpretation of him in the history of theology, is also irrelevant.

Erasmus asserts that that “spiritual element,” that is the religious value and efficacy for the participating believer, was not automatically present, but had to be felt and appreciated with a conscious intent in the hearts of each individual priest and mass-goer—indeed, of all Christians. Erasmus was emphatic that the common way in which people practiced their faith, whether peasants or the Pope himself, was stifled in its authenticity and endangered people’s salvation by the myriad canons and customs of the church that dominated almost every aspect late-medieval life. The remedy Erasmus proposed was essentially the same as that of Geert Grote and his followers: the individual’s interior conversion from imperfection to perfection, and self-assertion as a disciple of the scriptural and mystical Jesus Christ, rather than their mere obsequiousness to the man-made laws of Christ’s church.

There are concrete historical ties between Erasmus and the Modern-Day Devotion, but it is not an obvious matter that he took his inspiration from them. Instead, Erasmus made a point of distancing himself from the movement as his fame grew. The few times that he addressed the Devout explicitly, he described them as belonging to the same kinds of Christian that he wanted reformed: performative pietists focused too much on fulfilling their own prescriptions rather than meditating on their meaning. This may seem remarkable given the description of the Devout offered thusfar. Erasmus found the renewal he sought in scripture and religious simplicity—not unlike Grote and the first generation of the Devout. The radical structural changes effected by the Reformation toward the end of Erasmus’ life and beyond did not figure in his own vision: he idealized social order and respected the traditional arrangement of the church—laity and religious, led by the presbyterate, episcopate, and Pope. Yet he did not consider the church and society’s present structure as immutable, and eschewed popular acts of devotion and the severity of the law for a religiosity that each person would (in theory) make for themselves according to

their own place and personality, while maintaining the common bonds of baptism and communion with their fellow Christians.

That Erasmus considered the lives of the Devout too rigorous, customary, and ineffectual betrays their shared principles. Both placed the agency of the individual and their personal encounter with Christ at the center of their visions. Both respected the laws and customs of the church while insisting on their inapplicability to every soul, often suffocating people's faiths through rote performance rather than encouraging and enabling their notion of conversion. Both found the source of this conversion in a mix of private and common reading of scripture. However, these fundamentals were expressed in sometimes strikingly different ways. The Devout read Scripture in Latin and even the vernacular, while Erasmus insisted on the alleged purity of its original Greek before any translation could be made. The Devout were scrupulous about not offending ecclesial authorities and obeying established customs wherever possible; Erasmus gained fame for his liberal criticism and mockery of the church hierarchy. The Devout insisted on living in some form of community and expressing *contemptus mundi* with self-isolating behavior; Erasmus believed that Christians could live "in the world" just fine so long as they could cultivate an interior sense of spiritual detachment from sinful and superfluous things (although more literal asceticism was an option and to be admired in the saintly). These differences make it clear that Erasmus was not a practitioner or proponent of the Modern-Day Devotion as those who identified with the movement understood it. However, these differences should not be overstated. The spatial and temporal proximity of Erasmus to the movement and the obvious similarities between their ideals, although expressed in different contexts and superficially at-odds, warrants investigation of how Erasmus should be related to them historically.

This thesis does not attempt to finely distinguish between intellectual, social, cultural, or other historiographical currents in its sources and arguments. As the subject is a man and a movement's respective ideas of how best to be Christian, it necessarily discusses both intellectual and social structures. Yet it may be said that the central question, of how indebted Erasmus' spirituality is to the Modern-Day Devout, is a problem mostly of intellectual history: this thesis' assertions are made mostly by interpreting (dis)continuities between primary source spiritual writings. Nevertheless, the following literature review evaluates both intellectual and social history, especially since the latter was and remains the most common approach for Reformation studies in the academy.

Erasmus has become a decidedly religious figure in the past three decades. Once considered a freethinker of the Reformation and better-known for his contributions to humanist rhetoric than religion itself, he is now more relevant to the theological history of the Reformation than before. Of particular importance are his contributions to advancing a conversion-oriented faith, which bears relevance to both Reformation Catholicism and the development of Protestant confessions. What was originally a Dutch- and German-language endeavor took root in the Anglosphere toward the end of the 1970s, and now a new and vibrant corpus of Erasmian studies exists and continues to have additions made to it.⁸ This historiography admits, to one degree or another, a rehabilitation of Erasmus' understanding of the Christian faith as thoroughly spiritual and theologically relevant to understanding the complexity of the Reformation. Of particular note is that Erasmus not only shared a common root theologically with other Reformation figures that emphasized a life of *conversio*, or constant refinement of the moral-self with the help of God, but also built upon and developed his own understanding of it in a way that proved

⁸ See e.g. *Erasmus Studies*, published bi-annually at Brill.

influential to later spiritual writers.⁹ Erasmus dubbed this the *philosophia Christi*, or “the philosophy of Christ,” an overarching approach to Catholic religion that preferred practical piety and catechesis to high theology.¹⁰ However, Erasmian studies have been largely constrained to the sphere of intellectual history. Meanwhile, the broader history of the Reformation has for several decades now enjoyed fruitful expansion into social and cultural history. Erasmus, an intellectual who wound up largely excluded from the institutions of his day as Europe spiraled into confessional conflict, may not be an obvious subject for social historians. Yet this should not exclude Erasmus from finding some place in the context of Reformation social history. If anything, his relationship with the Modern-Day Devout as it will be explored here is an excellent starting point for integrating Erasmus into the more recent work on his social and cultural milieu. The Devout were a decidedly social, rather than intellectual phenomenon, gaining notoriety for their impact on the Dutch urban sphere of the fifteenth century. Erasmus’ origins in that sphere and his relationship as a young man to people and institutions associated with the Devout impacted the development of his own thought.

Social Reformation history in the United States has been ongoing in its current form since the late-1970s. Thomas A. Brady Jr. traces the emerging subfield’s dimensions in a 1982 volume, edited by the prominent Steven Ozment. At that time, the main approaches to social Reformation history were those of structuralism and more traditional Marxist historical materialism. There was a particular emphasis in the United States on the Weber thesis and a

⁹ For examples of Erasmus’ rehabilitation as a religious and theological figure, see Christine Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); Hilmar M. Pabel, *Erasmus’ Vision of the Church* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 1995), and Erika Rummel, “Theology of Erasmus” in *Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 28-38.

¹⁰ Erasmus first used the term in his *Enchiridion militis Christiani* in 1503, one of his earliest major works, but its essential tenants remained central to his writing for the rest of his life. Later reprintings and personal edits of the *Enchiridion* speak to its enduring relevance for him.

focus on the Reformation as an urban phenomenon.¹¹ Brady asserted at the time that the rigidity of these approaches was giving way to a greater diversity of subjects and the need for a more holistic approach, essentially echoing the sentiment of broader United States social history a decade earlier.¹² He then goes on to recommend analyses of the use of church property, “social theology” or religion in practice, and broader demographic trends as potentially fruitful sources of further research, and a means of escaping the “bogged down” state of the structuralist and Marxist schools. Brady was optimistic that such research would yield an integrated view of the Reformation that transcended confessional or political boundaries.¹³

Two decades later, Mack P. Holt revisited the state of the social history of the Reformation and finds that Brady’s recommendations were taken up but remained highly divergent rather than integrated. While initial trends showed a continued focus on the urban context of the Reformation, expansion into aspects of “social theology” such as sacramental ritual and popular religion proved highly productive.¹⁴ Holt highlighted here the porousness of the social-cultural history divide in Reformation studies: in the same volume as Brady’s chapter, Natalie Zemon Davis (a trailblazer of early-modern cultural history) offered her own evaluation of the need for studies in “popular religion” to expand into a concept of all-encompassing religious cultures.¹⁵ Holt recognized her work and that of similar cultural historians as accomplishing just that over the following twenty years, and that their work went hand-in-hand

¹¹ Thomas J. Brady Jr., “Social History,” in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 164-166.

¹² Dwight W. Hoover, “The Diverging Paths of American Urban History,” in *American Quarterly* 20.2 (Supplement Summer 1968), 296–317.

¹³ Brady Jr., 176.

¹⁴ Mack P. Holt, “The Social History of the Reformation: Recent Trends and Future Agendas,” in *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, special issue (Autumn, 2003), 135-138.

¹⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis, “From ‘Popular Religion’ to Religious Cultures,” in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 321-336.

with more typical social histories.¹⁶ Ultimately, Holt did not argue for any stark difference between social and cultural histories of the Reformation and concludes by advocating for greater cooperation between both and theological/intellectual history.¹⁷

Almost twenty years on from Holt's review, we find that the social history of the Reformation has indeed continued along the lines that he advocated: the meeting of social history (heavily informed by cultural history) and the intellectual side of the Reformation has occurred. In the past several years, there is an increasing emphasis on linking the contours of Reformation theology with the transmission and development of religious practice, as well as the formation of confessional boundaries. A significant portion of these studies consists in deemphasizing and critically evaluating the boundaries of pre- and post-Reformation religion. This project began in large part as an intellectual endeavor by Heiko A. Oberman, before finding its way into social history through the work of historians such as Eamon Duffy and Susan Karant-Nunn.¹⁸ In the last two decades or so, their work and that of others has made new and exciting connections between the theological climate of the Reformation period, and the transmission of theology into practice in various social spaces. Of particular importance is the study of sacramental life, especially confession, as well as preaching, catechesis, and the formation and evolution of unique religious societies.

To be clear, Erasmus has not been *utterly* excluded from the social history of the Reformation. His works have offered undeniable insight into the lives and culture of his time. In

¹⁶ Holt, "Social History of the Reformation," 135-138.

¹⁷ Ibid, 140-141.

¹⁸ Heiko A. Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994); Eamon Duffy *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

particular, Erasmus' *Colloquies* have been and remain an excellent source not only for understanding his critiques of religion and society, but for offering a window into the daily life of early-modern people.¹⁹ Queer studies of the Renaissance have also touched upon Erasmus, thanks to his surviving love letters to the canon Servatius Rogerus.²⁰ However, these sources do not concern so much the religious society of Erasmus. It is in that regard that his place in social Reformation history is lacking: there is not much that places him in the context of the Reformation as a social *and* religious phenomenon as it is now being understood by contemporary historians.

Devotio Moderna, meanwhile, has been almost exclusively a subject of social and cultural evaluation, but with much less scholarship overall than that on Erasmus or subjects with more immediate relevance to the Reformation. There was a brief period of early-to-mid twentieth-century intellectual analysis regarding the movement. Albert Hyma, building upon earlier German and Dutch language works from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, asserted that the Devout had a sweeping influence on Erasmus, the Reformation as a whole, and even “modernity” itself. This was undone by the reception of R. R. Post's *The Modern Devotion* of 1968. Post relegated the movement to a historical and geographical corner, considering a noteworthy but ultimately minor patch in the intellectual landscape of the Late Middle Ages, and instead considers it as an example of late-medieval social religion—arguably an early work of late-medieval/Reformation social history.²¹ Successive work in English on the Devout was fairly

¹⁹ See for example editor commentary on the *Colloquies* in the *Collected Works of Erasmus* 39, 40 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997).

²⁰ Forrest Tyler Stevens, “Erasmus's ‘Tigress’: The Language of Friendship, Pleasure, and the Renaissance Letter”. *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994),

²¹ Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance: a History of the “Devotio Moderna”* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Press, 1924); R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968).

sparse for a few decades, until John Van Engen's *Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life*. This work does not reassert the outsized influence granted to the movement by Hyma and his forerunners but offers a more comprehensive and sympathetic evaluation of the movement, its aims, and its effects than Post.

Van Engen's thesis revolves around the notion that the Modern-Day Devout sought what was essentially a privatized approach to their faith by crafting "self-made societies" known in their own time as the Brethren of the Common Life (when Van Engen refers to the male and female communities as a whole, he uses "Brothers and Sisters").²² The driving force of this movement was not based on a wholly new or revolutionary understanding of Christianity, but was rather a particular expression of a long tradition of *conversio*, reacting against the perceived shortcomings of medieval social structures to enable a faithfully apostolic life outside of the institutional monastery. The Brethren of the Common Life's founding by Geert Groote at Deventer in the late-1370s was only one moment in this long tradition. It is clear from Van Engen's analysis of the Modern-Day Devout that many of them were conscious of fulfilling a distinct, if ambiguous, social niche, and that those devout who lived and worked as communities in private houses had to argue (often very creatively) for their legitimacy in both the ecclesial and civic order of the early-to-mid-fifteenth century.²³

Similar movements were not unheard of: the most prominent threat to the Devotion's survival was the frequent accusation that they were identical to beguine houses, or represented a new kind of mystical sect, the likes of which flourished from the mid-thirteenth to early-fourteenth century before their widespread suppression.²⁴ Enclosure and vows were the surest

²² Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 305-315.

²³ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 200-238.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 84-118.

means of gaining acceptance, but many followers of Groote interpreted enclosure as antithetical to his vision of forming lay and professed persons alike to live out the “estate of the perfect.”²⁵ Most Devout houses eventually capitulated to the civic and ecclesial pressure to regularize: by the 1470s, most women devout became Franciscan tertiaries or Augustinian canonesses, while Augustinian canonries subsumed many male communities.²⁶ When Erasmus arrived at the Deventer Latin school c.1478 near the site of the movement’s origin, the Devout were fairly well established and accepted within the structure of the region’s towns and dioceses. Nevertheless, they maintained a distinct identity of community life that emphasized a particular austerity, as well as a very strong adherence to regular pious exercises and straightforward spiritual reading (as opposed to the more mystical literature found in other orders and movements).²⁷

Erasmus’ disdain for the codified rigidity of both the movement’s schools and the canonries is well-known, although he defended the efficacy of their way of life for some.²⁸ Most considerations of his relationship with the Modern-Day Devotion study his spirituality as it compares to the *Imitatio Christi* and similar works of the Modern-Day Devout. Yet there are further insights to be gained here into the origins of the *philosophia Christi* as a reaction to the lives of the Brethren and their peculiar place in society. The canons of the Windesheim Congregation were not ignorant of the movement’s history: Brethren communities wrote and

²⁵ Ibid, 119-161.

²⁶ Such a process was common enough to other movements of lay piety: see Alison More, “Institutionalizing Penitential Life in Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Third Orders, Rules, and Canonical Legitimacy,” in *Church History* 83, no. 2 (June 2014), 297-323.

²⁷ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 266-304; for the most recent evaluation of Erasmus controversial early life, see Koen Goudriaan, “New Evidence on Erasmus’ Youth,” in *Erasmus Studies* 39.2 (2019), 184-216.

²⁸ For a good evaluation of Erasmus’ public opinion on the Windesheim Congregation, see Richard L. DeMolen, “Erasmus’ Commitment to the Canons Regular of St. Augustine” in *Renaissance Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1973), 437-43.

shared lives of the movement's founders as well as chronicles of the communities themselves. The conflicts surrounding the movement, which plagued its existence for most of the fifteenth-century and determined its place in the urban landscape of the Low Countries, were likely not lost on the young Erasmus, who spent three years at a Brethren school in 's-Hertogenbosch before entering the associated Windesheim Congregation at Steyn. In addition, Van Engen highlights how not all who entered communities of the Brothers or Sisters were particularly interested in living the "estate of the perfect;" many were young women seeking refuge from an unwanted marriage, or the sons of an emergent *petite bourgeois* whose fathers could afford the lower tuition of the Brethren's schools (which were better known for their austerity and strict spiritual instruction than their scholastic quality). The liberty of the Christian to choose their mode of life was an enduring theme for Erasmus that is usually attributed to his dislike of monastic rules. However, encounters with this dimension of Brethren communities may have affected him as well, whereby an estate that advocated the free choice of individuals to live pious lives in a private manner was not, in actuality, freely chosen by many of its members.

The *Devotio Moderna*, as a distinct movement descended from Geert Groote and carried on largely by the canonries of the Windesheim Congregation, was limited to the Low Countries and Rhineland. However, it was part of a much broader phenomenon known as the Observance Movement. Due to the Christendom-wide success of the *Imitatio Christi*, written by a Windesheim canon, it is tempting to assign an outsized influence to what was essentially a regional movement. The Modern-Day Devotion must be considered within the broader context of the fifteenth-century reform impulse, which also included Wycliffism, Hussitism, the Conciliar Movement, the concurrent reform of many religious houses, and efforts from within and without to reform the orders themselves. To this point, James D. Mixson has noted the

fractured nature of Observant Movement studies.²⁹

An impulse for renewal in the church toward enabling the faithful to live a more personal, interior religious life was expressing itself in diverse-yet-similar means throughout Latin Europe in the century before the Reformation. This was occurring not so much as a deliberate theological turn in the intellectual church, but as a much broader movement by clerics, religious, and noble laymen alike to affect the spiritual lives of the faithful in new and highly personal ways. This ongoing development in historiography demands a reevaluation of the source of Erasmus' own conceptions of personal piety. I am thinking especially of his disdain for excessive pious acts and preference for reading and silent prayer. Recent scholarship asserts that pious exercises such as pilgrimage, a frequent target of Erasmus' religious criticisms, possessed a very rich spiritual dimension for late-medieval faithful, contrary to older assumptions about a stagnant and mechanistic medieval church culture, which (supposedly) produced endless anxiety in its participants due to its apparent emphasis on salvific works.³⁰ Erasmus himself, through the enduring caricatures he created while voicing his criticisms of religion as it was practiced, is partly to blame for this interpretation.³¹ The emerging rehabilitation of the vitality of late-medieval religious life complicates our understanding of Erasmus' piety as it relates to the Observant Movement, as well complicating the relationship of the Devotion to both, which possessed a more ambiguous relationship with external piety than other reform figures and

²⁹ James D. Mixson, "Religious Life and Observant Reform in the Fifteenth Century," in *History Compass* 11, no. 3 (March 2013), 201-214.

³⁰ See e.g. Kathryn Beebe, *Pilgrim and Preacher: The Audiences and Observant Spirituality of Friar Felix Fabri, (1437/8, 1502)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). The much older, dismissive evaluation that took Erasmus' own satire for granted is best represented in Johann Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* trans. F. Hopman (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010), originally published in 1924 and previously a standard work on Erasmus, but hardly useful today in light of better scholarship.

³¹ The most concise source for such caricatures is the *Moriae Encomium*.

movements. The effect of Observant Reform upon Erasmus by avenues other than the Modern-Day Devotion is definitely worth exploring: connections between the movement and the development of humanism, antisemitism, national and continental identity, and other subjects with relevance to Erasmus are all part of a growing and vibrant subfield.³² However, this thesis is only concerned with Erasmus' roots in the Devout, and so consideration of Observant Reform broadly will be left aside in favor of focus upon Low Country devotees.

The relationship between Erasmus and the Devout has a fairly clear majority and minority interpretation from the past half-century. Most Erasmus scholars only consider his origins in the movement peripheral to his overall work, and only somewhat more relevant to his piety and spirituality. Yet even when acknowledged, it is mainly considered as a foundation against which he reacted with disdain and disinterest. Erika Rummel, the best interpreter of Erasmus' religiosity, develops the biblical and practical aspects of Erasman piety directly from his own works without attempting to relate them to his late-medieval origins, except where it is an explicit reaction against his description of those origins.³³ Cornelis Augustijn did much the same three decades earlier, when he recognized the local impact of the Devout but dismissed their relevance to Erasmus as mostly a brief, negative source of personal or intellectual formation.³⁴ Christine Christ-von Wedel acknowledged the unsettled nature of the Devout on Erasmus' spiritual formation, but also assumes little interest in evaluating it, choosing instead to evaluate Erasmus' roots in the classics which he immersed himself in as a young canon, an

³² On the present state of Observantist studies: Kathryn Beebe, "Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Monasticism*, ed. Bernice M. Kaczynski, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 300-316.

³³ Erika Rummel, *Erasmus* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 1-19.

³⁴ Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus von Rotterdam: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, trans. Marga E. Baumer (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1986), 18-19.

approach also assumed earlier by James D. Tracy.³⁵ This sampling represents the majority evaluation of Erasmus and the Devout; the minority, arguing for a much stronger relationship, is represented by R. J. Schoeck and Anthony Levi.

In a two-part biography of Erasmus, Schoeck considers the Devout to have had a profound and essentially positive impact on the man—that is, providing his most essential pious ideas. Schoeck bases his argument on the exposure Erasmus had to the Devout and the similarities between their conceptions of piety as found in sources like the *Imitation of Christ*, as well as Erasmus' formation as an Augustinian canon.³⁶ Levi takes for granted such a relationship, calling the Modern-Day Devotion the “enduring foundation” and “seedbed” of Erasmian piety.³⁷ Levi claims a direct intellectual and religious continuity from the Rhineland mystics through Geert Grote and the Brethren to Erasmus and on to the Jesuits and the Council of Trent. However, Levi seems to have taken this relationship for granted without developing for his readers a particularly close examination or proof of it.³⁸ Levi's work as it relates to Erasmus requires more justification than he could provide, as well as more rigorous connection to its socio-cultural dimensions, despite his overall command of theological and intellectual history and twentieth-century scholarship. Schoeck is far more detailed in his evaluation of Erasmus' formation by the Devout and retention of Devout ideals, but his diminishment of Erasmus'

³⁵ Christine Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 5, 19-24. James D. Tracy, *Erasmus: the Growth of a Mind* (Geneva: Libraire Droz S.A., 1972), 21-30.

³⁶ R.J. Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Making of a Humanist, 1470-1500* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1990), 1-60.

³⁷ Anthony Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation: An Intellectual History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 135; see also his introduction to Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), xxxvii-xxxviii.

³⁸ A lengthy biography of Erasmus by Levi was published posthumously but seems to have had an extremely limited printing, thus making it nearly impossible to get ahold of. If a closer examination of Erasmus and the Devout is present there, I have not been able to see it.

explicit dislike for the Brethren and the differences between them is not always convincing.³⁹

The majority opinion regarding Erasmus and the Devout leaves something to be desired now that there is greater scholarship on both Erasmus' religiosity and on the spiritual movements of the Late Middle Ages. Although this may seem to be answered by Schoeck and Levi, neither have much to offer in the way of primary source comparison between Erasmus and the Devout, and both writers have been uncritically cited or otherwise unengaged with in the two-to-three decades since their major works were published. Yet although most Erasmian scholars are content to leave the Devout as only a very minor part of Erasmus' life, the theses of Schoeck and Levi are provocative enough to have generated this paper. If indeed Erasmus was of spiritual significance as many have more recently asserted, then it would seem worthwhile to revisit the question of his medieval religious origins, rather than continue to re-read his works in only their immediate, Reformation context.

The first chapter summarizes the history of the Devout and the biography of Erasmus. It then evaluates the physical relationship of Erasmus to the Devout. There are many well-established connections, most notably his adolescent schooling with the Devout and his brief time as a theology student in Paris under the rule of the Devout reformer Jan Standonck. There are also more speculative aspects of the relationship which are not firmly established yet still proposed by some biographers, which are evaluated.

The second chapter takes up the primary spiritual interests of Devout figures, namely its founder Grote, and those of Erasmus. The emphasis of both on the personal relationship with Jesus Christ necessary for proper piety is prominent, yet the context in which this relationship is

³⁹ For a much more expansive (if dated) evaluation of Erasmus' historiography, including as it relates to the Devout, see Bruce Mansfield, *Erasmus in the 20th Century: Interpretations c. 1920-2000* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

proposed in the writings is dissimilar. Where Grote and his followers sought a fairly ascetic and literal application of the Gospels to their lives (similar to that of the observant mendicants but without legally binding vows), Erasmus took up a much more intellectual adherence colored by a stoic exertion of personal effort that did not necessarily require ascetic or standardized forms of piety. He nicknamed this interpretation of Christian fundamentals the *philosophia Christi*, and it has been a crucial aspect of more recent works on Erasmus' thought as a reformer.

The third chapter expands on the second by comparing Devout ideas about how best to live in society with Erasmus'. The Devout were, despite their aversion to vowed and formal religious life, essentially disinterested in the social order. Instead, they assumed a dedication to *contemptus mundi* that resembled cloistered life, promoting an aversion to public life as an occasion of sin in favor of a very private religiosity. Erasmus would take this principle and apply in a much less literal way, seeing the established social order as redeemable and useful for Christian life, so long as individuals kept the guiding principles of the *philosophia Christi* as the foundation for every action. It is on this point that Erasmus' reliance on the Devout is least apparent, yet still subtly present.

The conclusion offers some suggestions for reincorporating this thesis' interpretation of Erasmus' Devout-influences into readings of the Reformation. In the course of writing this thesis, it became clear that the question taken up was not as straightforward as originally thought. Yet it is hoped that in revisiting this issue, a more complete picture of the humanist titan's place in the world of late medieval and Reformation religion is possible.

The bulk of this work is primary source analysis, because its principal questions are about the presence or absence of arguable influences between two bodies of texts. Although a greater number of secondary sources would undoubtedly benefit this work, the relative narrowness of

the question at hand made incorporating many additional sources in a meaningful way difficult. A lack of sources on the Modern-Day Devout in English besides John Van Engen, and my lack of language knowledge, was also an obstacle. However, the sources that are relevant and available to this study are quite substantial on their own.

CHAPTER 1
BIOGRAPHIES
Background

“There [in s-Hertogenbosch] he spent, or rather wasted, about three years in a house of the Brothers, as they call them... This sort of men now spreads widely through the world, though it is disastrous for gifted minds and a mere nursery of monks.”⁴⁰ When narrating his upbringing and the origins of his vocation, Erasmus gives scant credit to the Brethren of the Common Life that he spent much of his young life around. He spent up to 8 years total living with/and or receiving an education from the Modern-Day Devout, both in the liberal arts and in piety. As he presented it, the Brethren only succeeded in holding back young students from good liberal learning and frightening them into joining religious life or their own houses. Erasmus therefore attributed his religious sensibilities to his own reading of Scripture and the Church Fathers, coupled with classical learning that he framed as having largely taught himself. The “prince of the humanists” ensured that nobody would identify him with his Dutch and pietist roots.

We now know that Erasmus was quite creative with his brief autobiography.⁴¹ The *Compendium vitae Erasmi Roterodami* and a very similar account in Epistle 447 served as a basis for Erasmus to free himself from a legal and personal stigma: his illegitimacy. By portraying his entrance to the canonry as a mistake brought on by family misfortune and, more importantly, the pressure of the Brethren, he could more ably avail himself of a papal dispensation from the barriers that existed for him as a bastard priest. It also freed him from

⁴⁰ Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus* 4, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S Thomson, Collected Works of Erasmus (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1977), 406. All citations from the Collected Works referred to as CWE henceforth.

⁴¹ D.F.S Thompson, CWE 4, 400-401.

particular *regula* of his order, allowing him to travel and write as he desired (although short of formally renouncing his vows as an Augustinian). Thus, the role of the Brethren as antagonists in Erasmus' autobiography must be read, as with everything else, critically.

There does not seem to be any time that Erasmus recounted his origins except to distance himself from them for some tangible purpose, namely that of gaining his 1516 dispensation and protecting his reputation as a respectable man of letters. With that in mind, there is no other historical evidence in his own writings that Erasmus simply libeled an easy target for this purpose. While no Erasmian scholars take his accounts at face value, they nevertheless accept the reality of his antipathy toward the Brethren and their piety, depicting that phase of his life as a foundation to react against with liberal learning and a reformed faith.⁴² We will not un-read the validity or reality of his complaints against them here either. By all counts, Erasmus was honest in disparaging the anti-intellectual tendencies of the Devout and the relative severity of their religious observance. Any claim made about Erasmus and the Modern-Day Devout must keep this antagonism in mind. Schoeck's statement that Erasmus was "an heir of the *Devotio Moderna*—perhaps without his full realization" is dubious if taken at face value because it implies that Erasmus was unaware of his indebtedness to a historical movement that he was clearly cognizant of and negative toward.⁴³ It also fails to account for the real differences in Erasmus' views of piety in society and how they differed from the Devout, as will be shown.

Nevertheless, Schoeck and others' attempts to take seriously those principles of the Devout that are present in Erasmus' thought ought not to be discounted or glossed-over in turn. Charting the complexity of his relationship with the Devout is our aim here. The "breathtaking"

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Making of a Humanist*, 268.

parallels in the development of his piety and that of the Brethren described by Van Engen that have been neglected deserve to be examined.⁴⁴ Therefore let us look at the origins of the Devout, of Erasmus, and what we know—or can reasonably and modestly conjecture—about their real historical encounters. Once this is established, we can interrogate and compare the writings of the Devout themselves and Erasmus.

The Growth and Controversy of the Devotion

Grote's followers were initially without any formal ecclesial status, and the lay houses of the Brothers and Sisters strove to remain so, in order to assert what they claimed were their rights as individual Christians to live faithfully in community without vows. However, the movement's greatest visibility and impact in the fifteenth century was due to the Windesheim Canons, whose ability to recruit members and disseminate spiritual writings was made easier by their formal status in civil and ecclesial law as religious communities. A generation after Grote blessed their founding, the canons would produce Thomas á Kempis, who wrote pamphlets of pithy devotional and meditative material; these would be published shortly after his death in 1471 as *De imitatio Christi*. The work was an immediate success, translated into several language and reprinted dozens of times within a few decades. Its popularity as a source of intensely personal and simple religiosity, exhorting its reader to an interior life of prayer and penance, obscured its origins in a regional and innovative pious movement. Thomas' avoided any tinge of scholastic or dogmatic authority, choosing instead to draw nearly exclusively from scripture and urging its regular reading over that of the theologians—an uncommon choice in theological or devotional

⁴⁴ John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 320.

writing of the time. Its more specific themes and impact on Erasmus (who very likely knew it) will be examined later.

The Brothers and Sisters, who applied the term *Devotio Moderna* to themselves and their way of life (as did the allied Windesheim communities), were not the first innovators of religious association among lay people. It was precisely for this reason that the unconsecrated Modern-Day Devout entered a world of profound suspicion against them. They faced many attempts to absorb them into the formal structure of the church or be banished, with many communities disappearing or regularizing within a few decades of their founding. This suspicion was due in large part to the history of “beguine houses,” which preceded the Devout in the thirteenth and early-fourteenth century. The Council of Vienne in 1311 outlawed beguine houses and carefully suppressed similar communities in later decrees. Beguines, a term that became so loaded with derision that it scarcely held any meaningful application after Vienne, were lay widows who sought community life without actually joining a regularized convent. In the eyes of church hierarchy and civil authorities, the beguinages were a potential breeding ground for heresy, which was a common charge against unregulated associations of women. The “Free Spirit” beguine Marguerite Porete gained substantial local popularity as a mystic and religious leader, but her heterodoxy resulted in a condemnation and burning in 1310. Marguerite’s execution served to vindicate the suspicion against beguines and directly influenced the condemnation at Vienne.⁴⁵ Therefore the presence of uncloistered and unregulated religious persons of any stripe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was taken by authorities as a threat to the supposed

⁴⁵ See Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 12-1565*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) for a history of the beguines and similar associations of pious women.

cohesion and order of medieval society.⁴⁶ Grote and his followers were not ignorant of this difficulty. The formation of the Brethren of the Common Life (which includes its female communities) summoned the creative legal energies of its participants. In the generation following Grote, the Devout fought for the right of its members to associate with one another and form communities within the legal and canonical structure of the church and city.⁴⁷ While almost all communities of sisters were compelled to regularize by the 1470s (mostly as Augustinian canonesses), the brothers' communities were able to retain their status as a unique estate into the 1510s.⁴⁸ Their place as communities of secular clergy and laymen were ultimately accepted on account of the role they came to play in the cityscape as valuable educators and copyists, vocations that they assumed to financially support themselves and quietly promote their piety. The men carved a space for themselves, while the women's communities largely succumbed to the ingrained misogyny of late-medieval civil law; self-regulated women were simply too threatening.

While maintaining a strict catholicity in what they taught, helped by their renunciation of seeking scholarly positions and remaining under the pastoral authority of their local parishes, the Brethren houses contributed to their cities most prominently by opening schools for boys and accompanying hostels. These schools gave non-wealthy urban families an opportunity to educate their sons, as the Brethren did not demand high tuition on account of their resolve to common ownership and financial modesty. These schools were fairly rudimentary in their instruction. Most were more concerned with forming young boys in the image of Devout piety than

⁴⁶ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 37-44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 107-118.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 223-237.

producing scholastics.⁴⁹ Many perceived these schools as a kind of junior seminary or pre-monastery, a perception held most notably by one of their pupils, Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Erasmus' Origins

Erasmus was most likely born in 1469 in Rotterdam to a parish priest named Gerardus Helye, a parentage that plagued his career and from which he would work to distance himself. Extremely little is known about his mother Marghareta besides that she and Gerard both died in Erasmus' early adolescence. Contrary to legend, "Erasmus" was almost certainly his birth name and not a self-styled or religious one, although he adopted "Desiderius" later on in his years as a canon. The young Erasmus was first enrolled in a parish school in Gouda before moving to St. Lebwin's school in Deventer, then under the direction of the humanist Alexander Hegius von Heek. Hegius was known to be sympathetic to the Brethren, and one of Erasmus' teachers there, John Synthem, was a member. Although St. Lebwin's was not (or no longer) itself run by the Brethren, Erasmus lived in a Brethren hostel. He would spend five years in Deventer before briefly returning to Gouda and then, at the behest of his new guardians, was put into a Brethren school in 's-Hertogenbosch. It was here that he received his final years of schooling before he joined the Augustinian Canonry of Steyn. There he proceeded rather uneventfully through his novitiate and juniorate before escaping the monastery as a secretary to the Bishop of Cambrai. Erasmus was then ordained to the priesthood in 1495 and enrolled in the Collège de Montaigu in Paris as a theology student the next year.⁵⁰ The Collège was reformed a decade before his arrival by Jan Standonck, an enthusiastic adherent of the Modern Devotion who imposed a strict

⁴⁹ Ibid, 143-145; Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Making of a Humanist*, 48.

⁵⁰ See Goudriaan, "New Evidence on Erasmus' Youth," in *Erasmus Studies* 39.2. Various attempts at dating Erasmus' birth and the chronology of his early life have been made; Goudriaan's work on the subject is the most recent and thorough, taking advantage of previously undiscovered and unused primary sources.

pseudo-monastic and ascetic life on the students. Erasmus lasted there for less than a year before he took up his own residence in Paris in order to escape the rigors of Standonck's regimen.⁵¹ This would be the last known instance of Erasmus living under the supervision or tutelage of the Devout members.

In order to sustain himself outside of the hostel, Erasmus became a tutor of Latin. He was profoundly dissatisfied with scholastic studies, which he viewed as a decadent obsession with Aristotelean categories and distinctions that meant nothing for the church at large. During this time Erasmus composed his *Adagia* as a pedagogical tool for Latin learners, and to give himself some respite from the drudgery of the schools. Some of his students were quite connected, and in 1499 he accompanied one of them to England, where he was introduced to the court of Henry VII. The *Adagia* were published for the first time in 1500 and proved remarkably popular, establishing him in the courts of western Europe as an excellent Latinist. Although still a canon who professed the vow of stability at Steyn, Erasmus was soon traveling quite frequently, which required repeat dispensations from his prior.⁵² In 1501, Erasmus wrote his *Enchiridion* (which will be evaluated in-depth), and over the years composed various colloquies meant for his students as well as the entertainment of his friends. The style he developed drew heavily on the Italian latinists of the previous century, such as Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino: a history-conscious revival of classical rhetoric, which Erasmus imported to northern Europe and made fashionable there more than anyone prior. Yet Erasmus was not a mere importer of the Renaissance. The Italians of the fifteenth century blended their various interests in astrology, politics, natural science, engineering, biology, mysticism, and scriptural exegesis, presenting

⁵¹ Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Making of a Humanist*, 162-168.

⁵² *Ibid*, 223-242.

their body of work as a Platonist alternative to the scholastic tradition. Erasmus was not nearly as broad. Instead, he focused his energies on criticizing the decadence of Christian society in general and set himself up as the most prominent voice for reform on the continent. Published in 1511, his *Moriae Encomium (Praise of Folly)* was a massive success. Presented in a Ciceronian style, the book satirized the complex follies of humanity and specifically contemporary Christians as they clamor for success and God's favor, while promoting a simpler folly: an uncomplicated devotion to Jesus Christ. Although popular, and warmly received by His Holiness Leo X, it had a mixed reception by scholastics and church officials.⁵³ Criticisms against Erasmus were vociferous, accusing him of slandering the church and scandalizing the pious, a charge Erasmus spent the rest of his life denying.⁵⁴

The desire for a simpler and purer practice of the faith and the conversion of its members, especially its ministers, would be Erasmus' defining position as the political upheaval of the Reformation unfolded. His decision to publish an edit of the Vulgate New Testament in 1516, correcting what he alleged were mistaken translations from Greek to Latin made by Saint Jerome himself, did not help the charges against him of unorthodoxy. When Martin Luther, an admirer of his, was condemned, Erasmus became known in Catholic scholastic circles as the original source of Lutheran heresy.⁵⁵

Praise of Folly was the pinnacle of Erasmus fame. His New Testament found favor with Protestant reformers, serving as the basis for Luther's New Testament in German, but saw little

⁵³ Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Prince of the Humanists, 1500-1536* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1993), 72-105.

⁵⁴ The controversy around *Praise of Folly* was embodied most famously in Erasmus' correspondence with theologian Maarten van Doorp. A 1515 letter of Erasmus mocking and refuting van Doorp's charges would be published with most following editions of the book.

⁵⁵ Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Prince of Humanists*, 175-231.

use besides as Protestants pushed forward with vernacular translations and Rome reaffirmed the use of the Vulgate. As the Reformation erupted Erasmus found himself increasingly isolated politically, denouncing Luther and affirming his devotion to the papacy, a position solidified by his controversy on the will with Luther in 1524-25. The remainder of his life was mostly spent writing spiritual works on the sacraments, republishing and editing previous works, and struggling to assert his vision amidst the raging conflict of the Reformation.

Erasmus' Relationship with the Devout

Erasmus was never a formal member of a Devout institution, yet he spent several years Brethren schools and parish schools with Brethren tutors.⁵⁶ The monastery at Steyn was not (so far as is known) a part of the Windesheim Congregation, although it is sometimes confused as having been.⁵⁷ The final direct contact Erasmus had with an institution of the Devout was during his first year as a scholastic in Paris. After this point there is no meaningful historical contact between Erasmus and explicitly Modern-Day Devotion figures.

It is safe to say that Erasmus never would have considered himself a member of the Devout. As stated earlier, his feelings toward the Brethren themselves were largely negative. These opinions are found most explicitly in his *Compendium vitae* and the "Letter to Grunius." The veracity of Erasmus' factual claims in the letters that make up the compendium have been a source of controversy for centuries. However, it is difficult to refute the genuineness of Erasmus' underlying animosity toward the Brethren, whether his depiction is true to life or not. The following is probably his most famous passage on the subject:

[The Brethren's] chief purpose, if they see a boy whose intelligence is better bred and more active than ordinary, as able and gifted boys often are, is to break their spirit and

⁵⁶ Shoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Making of a Humanist.*, 266-267.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

depress them with corporal punishment, threats and recriminations and various other devices – taming him, they call it – until they make him fit for the monastic life. On this ground they are pretty popular with the Dominicans and Franciscans, who say their Orders would soon come to an end if it was not for the young entry bred up by the Brothers, for it is out of their yards that they pick up their recruits. Personally, I believe that even among them there are some quite worthy people; but suffering as they do from a lack of the best authors, and living by customs and rites of their own in a darkness of their making, so that they have no standard of comparison but themselves – spending moreover a great part of the day in stints of prayer and various activities – I do not see how they can give the young a liberal education.⁵⁸

The unambiguous antipathy Erasmus displays here, with all of its rhetorical flourish, is our starting point for understanding his own views toward the Brethren and the Devout as a whole. First, he disdains their use of corporal punishment. Since striking schoolboys was not in any way unique to Brethren schools at this time, Erasmus is not placing the Brethren beneath the common standard, but on it, lamenting Renaissance pedagogy overall as little more than a penal institution.⁵⁹ Yet Erasmus’ emphasis on the Brethren’s “taming” is more than a condemnation of corporal punishment: it encapsulates his interpretation of their overall spiritual program. It will be demonstrated further on how Erasmus viewed the religiosity of the Devout as undermining of the individual’s personal relationship with Christ. This is due to what Erasmus saw as an obsession by the Devout with personal severity, anti-scholasticism, performative acts of piety, and insularism.

Erasmus’ sources for encounter with the Devout must be listed. The most obvious source of their influence is in his time as a student. As a young boy in Deventer housed in the Brethren hostel, Erasmus was subject each day to the mentorship and supervision of members of the Common Life. He must have learned particular lessons in personal prayer and catechesis from

⁵⁸ CWE 4, 29.

⁵⁹ Several letters and colloquies attest to Erasmus’ low opinion of boys’ schooling and his humanist ideals for authentic childhood education: e.g. “Off to School,” CWE 39, 113.

them and been subjected to a rule of life modeled after that of the Brethren's own houses.⁶⁰ Meanwhile at the school of St. Lebwin, a mixture of Brethren teachers and humanists instructed Erasmus: the headmastership of Alexander Hegius von Heek and his mentor, Rudolph Agricola, profoundly affected the school. Erasmus heard Agricola speak at some point.⁶¹ This undoubtedly encourages Erasmus's interest in Greek and classical studies. However, 's-Hertogenbosch did not have much of the classical learning he encountered in Deventer. There the adolescent Erasmus had to both live in a Brethren hostel and attend a Brethren school.⁶²

We cannot know to what extent Erasmus would have been exposed to the various collected works of the Devout, which includes letters, sermons, treatises, lives, and chronicles. Nevertheless, it is safe to assert that he would have had at least some exposure to the works of the Devout's founding members, namely the sayings and sermons of Geert Grote, treatises and chronicles by Florens Radewijns, and the mystical writing of Gerhart Zerbolt, all of whom were instrumental in establishing the Devout in Deventer, and whose works were kept by the community there. Whether Erasmus personally read any of their works will not be asserted, but it would seem unusual for his Brethren mentors and teachers not to take advantage of such sources, as they were intended for the edification of their own communities. As for Thomas à Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*, it is hard to argue, given its immense popularity in its own time, that Erasmus would not have been familiar with it, either in his days at school or in the canonry.

The presence of tangible Devout influences in the Canonry of Steyn is less certain. Schoeck claims that the Augustinians were "deeply imbued with the values of the Devotio

⁶⁰ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 145-149.

⁶¹ Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Making of a Humanist*, 50. Agricola's work and aims are summarized by Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 261-262.

⁶² Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: the Making of a Humanist*, 55.

Moderna,” but offers no substantial evidence for such a claim.⁶³ The Steyn canonry likely had contact with the Windesheim Canons simply by virtue of geographical proximity and their shared order, but little suggests that they were substantively related. The contents from the library at Steyn are partially known as they appeared a couple of generations after Erasmus: Schoeck notes that it is relatively unimpressive compared to neighboring canonries, and none stand out as holding any particular importance to either the Augustinians or the Modern-Day Devout.⁶⁴ Therefore, it will be assumed for the remainder of this thesis that, with the possible exception of the *Imitatio Christi*, Erasmus’ primary influences from the Devout would have been encountered in childhood and adolescence.

The physical historical relationship between Erasmus and the Devout is thus established. One can see how various authors have been able to downplay or inflate the relationship on the historical facts alone. However, in order to examine the actual impact that Devout spirituality had on Erasmus and assert its historical relevance demands that we examine both in-depth. That the man was formed in some way by this movement of fifteenth-century religion is beyond doubt. This and the recognition of Devout ideals in Erasmus’ writing are not yet enough to assert either Schoeck’s declaration of Erasmus as “heir,” nor Augustijn, Tracy, and others’ minimization of its importance. The following two chapters will address the extent of his continuity with the Devout.

⁶³ Ibid, 88-89; 268.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 100-103.

CHAPTER 2

DEVOUT PIETY AND *PHILOSOPHIA CHRISTI*

The Unvowed Resolutions of Geert Grote

In order to understand the aims of the Modern-Day Devout properly we must understand its founder. From what little is known about him, Geert Grote was an accomplished scholar, and may well have become a prominent scholastic. Although medieval students were not known for lives of luxury, the benefits of obtaining a professorship in the fourteenth century were financially and socially significant. Grote appears to have had his sights set on reaping such benefits by becoming a canon lawyer but was well-rounded in his studies. Having attained two comfortable benefices in the diocese of Aachen and Utrecht by the early-1370s, there is little to suggest that a career failing pushed Grote out of his vocation as a cleric. Instead, he experienced a profound yet not-instantaneous period of spiritual tumult, initiated by an illness but without the drama or spur-of-the-moment conviction that is so common in hagiography. According to Grote, participating in the day-to-day life of the church had no edifying effect on him; rather, it turned him inward. When he emerged in 1379, instead of taking vows to any order, cathedral chapter, or monastery, he resolved to pursue a life of holiness on his own.⁶⁵ The emphasis Grote himself placed on the necessity of personal resolution to convert one's ways is the core principle of all Devout spirituality.

Grote's story is unique in a few ways. In some sense, Grote belongs to the tradition of the anchorites and mystics. They certainly influenced him personally, as he paid visits to the community of Jan van Ruusbroec during his time of self-examination. Van Ruusbroec was a mystical hermit whose works are in the vein of Meister Eckhart and Heinrich Seuse, and whose

⁶⁵ The facts of Grote's life are summarized by Van Engen in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 36-40.

writings and eremitical community would inspire later fifteenth-century religious writers.⁶⁶

Grote also spent a few years living next to a Carthusian charter house and participated in their liturgy often enough to have his own stall in the lay brothers' choir. Yet Grote did not become a mystic or a monastic. Instead, he gathered various lessons from monastic life and fourteenth-century mystical writers and applied them to his way of life as an urban secular. Grote's conversion did not lead him to a hermitage or to a religious order, but to reorient his life while remaining in his own house.

The second peculiarity of Grote's story is that his conversion was not toward some new service for the institutional church. While the most prominent observant reformers found themselves traveling and preaching to the benefit of church authorities (consider Bernard of Siena's socio-political impact in Italy, or Vincent Ferrer's in Spain) Grote never went far beyond the towers and fields of Brabant. Instead, he spent most of the remainder of his life in Deventer. He became a decidedly local figure of reform and lived-out the reform he effected most tangibly in his own house, which he made into a home for widows. It would be the work of Florens Radewijns and others to take Grote's spirituality and apply it in an ecclesial context, which Grote, dying in August 1384, never saw flourish.

In order to understand the insular nature of Grote's piety, we must turn to his "resolutions." At some point in the late 1370s, Grote penned a series of personal resolutions intended to shape his own conduct to live a more perfectly pious life. Whether the resolutions as they survive were written together or compiled over time is unclear, but there is no doubt that they are Grote's own. The opening prologue sets the tone:

⁶⁶ For a summary of Ruusbroec's life and influence see James A. Wiseman, introduction to *John Ruusbroec: the Spiritual Espousals*, trans. John A. Wiseman (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 1-40.

*I intend to order my life to the glory, honor, and service of God and to the salvation of my soul; to put no temporal good of body, position, fortune, or learning ahead of my soul's salvation; and to pursue the imitation of God in every way consonant with learning and discernment and with my own body and estate, which predispose certain forms of imitation.*⁶⁷

The opening statement of “I intend to order my life” is a key if small signifier of how Grote interpreted his faith and its responsibilities. Normally, a Christian seeking perfection placed themselves under an ecclesial authority: vowing chastity, poverty, and obedience, taking the habit of a monastic community, or some other consecration to a particular state of life or devotion. A priest would officiate such acts liturgically, making the vower or consecrated person's act something that takes place in the spiritual and, perhaps more importantly, legal context of ecclesial hierarchy. Yet Grote carefully avoided the appearance of making any vows, whether to the church or even to God directly. Instead, the context for his religious practice centered on the individual alone. It reframed piety from obeying prescribed or customary acts to a matter of individual effort. Grote did not vow himself to a pre-existing *regula* or other authority but took upon himself the responsibility *and* creativity of conforming his life to the will of God.

Grote discerned the will of God by how closely his own life conformed to that of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. Grote refers to pursuing the “imitation of God in every way consonant with learning and discernment” as the means by which he will obtain the conformity sought in the previous clause. The inclusion “consonant with learning and discernment” reenforces Grote's agency in the process: his texts present understanding how best to imitate God not as a generic submission to custom or to ecclesial authority—although Grote does not disregard such, as will

⁶⁷ Geert Grote, “Resolutions and Intentions, But Not Vows” in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 65. Italics added for emphasis.

be shown—but as a process undertaken by the Christian themselves, in accordance with their own reason. Grote makes this even more explicit by adding “with my own body and estate, which predispose certain forms of imitation.” In its late-fourteenth century and reformist context, it is fairly unusual for Grote to claim this. Traditionally, conversion of one’s life would entail a change of manner and estate, from lay to religious; Grote asserts the possibility of converted life in his own estate as a lay and secular (i.e., unconsecrated or vowed to any order). A person’s capacity for true conversion and Christian life is not determined by their assumption of a specific place in the church, but by how well they make their life Christ-like in whatever societal and ecclesial role they already fill. In Grote’s case, this was as a scholar and a prebendary living in an urban center. Although he was definitely not the first figure of the time to pursue holiness in a lay context, Grote is unique in his clear articulation of this point.⁶⁸

Grote did not dispute whether some people ought to make vows, nor did he imply that vows made to the church are distinct from vows made to God: he asserted only that it was not necessary for him to do so to live a converted life. Essential to the Christian concept of a vow is that they bind the individual to a rule, whether it is the authority of a particular person (e.g., to an abbot/abbess or bishop, or directly to God), adherence to a written rule, or both. There are also implicit vows, such as in the obedient and assenting nature of the *Credo* during the mass and with which the average parishioner would be familiar. In making such acts, the Christian is bound in belief as well as in practice. Grote’s prologue implied none of this. Instead, without taking matters of belief or practice entirely into his own hands, Grote presented himself as an

⁶⁸ Catherine of Siena was also a holy lay person, as she was never formally a member of the Dominican Tertiaries who claim her; Alison More discusses the invention of her Dominican legacy by observant reformers in “Dynamics of Regulation, Innovation and Invention,” in *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond*, 85-110. However, as a mystical writer and traveling mendicant, Catherine’s estate as a lay person was not as central to her spirituality or legacy as to Grote.

agent and active participant in his own salvation, capable of determining for himself what practices bound him personally and were more or less necessary for his life as a Christian.

The means by which Grote intended to live out this principle of self-sanctification and resolution are not, on the surface, particularly revolutionary. Nevertheless, his allusions to what he saw as temptations of late-fourteenth century urban life and what Grote chose to emphasize in his following resolutions continue to reveal the uniqueness of his spirituality, and subsequently that of the Devout. Noteworthy is one his first condemnations: the pursuit of gain.

Unsurprisingly, Grote refused himself any benefices in the name of avoiding greed.⁶⁹ However, he added a further reason to avoid accepting financial benefits:

The more benefices and goods I had, the more I would have to serve. But it is to become all the more burdened down, and that is contrary to *liberty of spirit, which is the principle good of spiritual life*. For the affections then become bound to all sorts of things, and remain held in bondage to them. Such affections infect the soul...⁷⁰

For Grote, it was imperative that the devout person not be burdened by too many responsibilities; even if one could use benefices to benefit others, one should avoid whatever they judge to be too difficult to maintain. It is one thing to feed the poor, but it is not worth much to Grote if the work put into it impedes “liberty of spirit.” The importance of this liberty derives no-doubt from Grote’s encounters with the mystical writers, for whom contemplation was the highest form of Christian life. This is a pronounced turn away from a piety of works in the traditional sense.

Yet Grote did not refute the necessity of works. In fact, works preoccupy the resolutions, both when to do and when to avoid them. Besides refusing to take up any opportunities for financial gain, Grote refused to investigate astrology or any of the liberal arts.⁷¹ His succinct

⁶⁹ Geert Grote, *Basic Writings*, 65.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Italics added.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

justification is that “[They are] all a useless waste of time, and of no profit to life.”⁷² Only the “moral philosophers” (in this context, Plato and Plotinus) were worth any study, and with the strict guidance of the Church Fathers. He also opposed degrees in medicine, the natural sciences, or civil and canon law because they were “useless, superfluous, and most foolish.”⁷³ Grote spoke not as the writer of a rule for others but examined himself and asserted what was necessary for *his* conversion. At the core of each of these condemnations was not that each were necessarily evil in themselves, but that each was a source of temptation and corruption for Grote, depriving him of the “liberty of spirit” that he seeks. “Avoid and abhor every public disputation held simply to score a triumph or to make a good appearance, such as all those disputations of the theologians and artists in Paris.”⁷⁴ Grote cited how such pursuits would draw him “away from the salvation of [my] neighbor,” as well as from “prayer, purity of mind and contemplation.”⁷⁵ This theme of distraction and the possibility of corrupting oneself through pursuits, especially those with particular importance in late-medieval society and the church, is consistent throughout Grote’s resolutions and his other writings. He kept only those things that would have a tangible, personal effect on his piety and enable his imitation of God.

The means by which Grote intended to conform his life to the imitation of Christ are straightforward and heresy-free: to read the Scriptures and the works of the Fathers daily, to say the Divine Office, to go to daily mass (and stay for its entirety), and to follow the commandments. Works that warrant special mention as particularly edifying include Bernard’s *Meditations*, Seuse’s *Horologium*, Augustine, and scriptural commentaries by various church

⁷² Ibid, 67.

⁷³ Ibid, 68.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 69.

doctors.⁷⁶ This highlights Grote's strong deference to scripture, augmented by some mystical literature. Completely absent is any praise for the scholastics and any theology or philosophy of his own century (excepting Seuse). Grote also insisted on the necessity of following the liturgical cycle, observing traditional fasts, and on adhering to established doctrine. More practically, Grote wrote out specific recommendations to himself on how to organize his day, how much to eat and fast, and other ways to practice deprivation and self-control without burdening himself.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, anything judged a temptation was cut out entirely, even those things that enabled the operation of medieval society, including the study of law and the arts.

This is an unspoken aspect of Grote's spirituality: that it is rooted in his own privilege as a beneficed, urban scholar. His ability to exercise his life of austerity and personal conformity to the life of Christ as he read it in the Gospels was only possible because of his position. It is very difficult to imagine Grote assuming the kind of life he sought to lead outside of an urban and financially secure setting. Otherwise, he would have had to assume a hermitage, thus isolating himself, or join a religious order, thus placing himself at the mercy of a superior. Any other path would have required Grote to assume work in one of the ways that he refuses in his resolutions. It is extremely difficult to imagine a context for Modern-Day Devotion as Grote develops it outside of this urban and financially secure context. By emphasizing the role of his *own* intentions and estate, however, Grote seemed to recognize this; there is no implication that Grote would have had all Christians live in his particular way. The resolutions are only truly applicable to Geert Grote, in his "own body and estate."

Grote left several other writings. When examining his own personal spirituality and what

⁷⁶ Ibid, 70-71.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 71-75.

he saw as priorities for the individual Christian, however, the resolutions are undoubtedly the best source. The highly individualistic if insular nature of Grote's faith sets him apart from contemporary spiritual writers and complicated his relationship with the ecclesiology of the time. While Grote never calls into question his place within the church or refuses its authority over him, he is confident in his assertion that he is the best judge of how to pursue holiness, and not his confessor, bishop, or another ecclesial authority. While the majority Observant Reform figures stressed observance of their respective order's rules and return by church authorities to observance of particular canons, Grote stressed observance of the life of Jesus as he considered it applicable in his own socio-religious context. It is in this way that he carved a unique place in the late-medieval religious landscape.

John Kessel on the Devout Life

The development of Grote's spirituality among his followers did not maintain quite as much individual discernment and agency as Grote appears to have sought in his own life. The foundation of the Windesheim Canons sought to take more general ideas of Grote about *conversio* and *imitatio* and apply them in existing structures of religious life. These canons took the usual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and observed the Rule of St. Augustine. The inheritors of Grote's work toward a *societas perfectas* among lay people were the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, who had a much more difficult time asserting themselves in the legal world of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Netherlandish towns. A notable example of a man following after Grote is found in the "Humble Exercise and Resolution of John Kessel," whose resolutions show developments from Grote's spiritual program.

Kessel (d. 1398) joined the Devout in the generation immediately following Grote's. He was supposedly a wealthy merchant who experienced a call to pious life and initially sought the

priesthood, but then abandoned it upon discovering the life of the Brethren in Deventer. There he insisted on becoming their cook and wrote his own brief resolutions and spiritual examen in a text preserved by Thomas á Kempis, who upheld him as an exemplar member of the Devout.⁷⁸

Kessel began this text, if formulaically, with a remembrance of his own sin and smallness. He exhorted himself to *memento mori*, and to awe at the mercy of God despite his previous life.⁷⁹ Kessel then described exactly—to the hour—what kind of life he had to lead in order to atone for his sins and conform himself to a life of grace. While Grote composed a list of resolutions for particular situations, Kessel wrote out what is essentially a daily schedule, one with a noticeably monastic character. “If then I am to arrive at such humility and love, I must have a daily exercise and *rule* to bring me there.”⁸⁰ Kessel was not content to describe how he ought to act in the face of responsibilities or temptations but bound himself further to a life centered on the daily liturgy, and directed his actions, thoughts, and very feelings. “When you hear the bell each morning at three you ought to rise without delay and immediately think something good with thanksgiving for the mercies of God.”⁸¹ Admonitions like this repeat throughout his sketch of the day, always refusing to be preoccupied by anything negative.

Despite the preoccupation with the self, Kessel framed his devotion as one of service, namely to the others in his house. “I must resolve obedience, so that whatever the rectors of the house order or advice differently from what I had thought, I might at once abandon myself to their counsel and do at once what they want.”⁸² Such exhortations to obedience and servitude in

⁷⁸ Van Engen, introduction to *Basic Writings*, 51.

⁷⁹ John Kessel, “The Humble Resolution and Exercise of John Kessel” in *Basic Writings*, 205.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 206. Emphasis added.

⁸¹ *Ibid*.

⁸² *Ibid*, 208.

Kessel's admonitions read very much like the Rule of St. Benedict and similar *regula*.⁸³ Clearly, Kessel envisioned the life of conversion as essentially monastic. Nevertheless, the "rule" never ceases to be personal; no expectation is ever placed upon Kessel's brothers.

It is worth noting as well that Kessel, although he lived his day-to-day in a manner very similar to a proper religious, assumed that most of his duties would be spent in solitude. This solitude, unlike that of a hermit or the semi-eremical Carthusians whose lives are centered on isolation, took place in the constant presence of urban and communal life. Kessel mentioned that he attended mass at the parish church and said part of sext (the noonday prayer) on his walk home.⁸⁴ He also noted how, despite living in a house with several other brothers, he (and presumably his confreres as well) was to pray all of the hours alone, in his room, using the bell of a local Franciscan priory to mark the time.⁸⁵ This demonstrates again the urban and secular nature of Grote's program. The Brothers organized their life around liturgy, but they shared the liturgy with and derive it from the whole parish, rather than produce it themselves as an insular community. Personal discipline and observance of rule was observed, but the originator of that discipline and rule was the individual themselves, not the community or an ecclesial authority.

Like Grote, the foundation of Kessel and other Devotee's religious life is in their own reading of Scripture and internalizing of pious practices. Besides observing the hours and attending mass, Kessel set aside specific times a day for reading his Bible. Unlike Grote, he made no mention of the church fathers or other works besides Scripture. Instead, Kessel was

⁸³ Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, OSB (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 29: "The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all. Because of the holy service they have professed, or because of dread of hell and for the glory of everlasting life, they carry out their superior's order as promptly as if it came from God himself."

⁸⁴ Kessel, *Basic Writings*, 207.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 207-208.

preoccupied with turning otherwise mundane activities into opportunities for piety: “I must try, moreover, in all my works, words, and thoughts to fear God more than men, so that whatever I do be done purely to honor God and to please him alone.”⁸⁶ There was no separation between acts in general and acts for God; the whole of Kessel’s activities became an opportunity for piety. There was no mention in Kessel’s exercises of practicing any particular devotions. The only mention of prayer outside the mass and hours was that he should say an *Ave Maria* before speaking, in order to avoid any rashness.⁸⁷ Venerating saints, the Rosary, novenas, and the like were all ultimately unnecessary in Kessel’s spiritual practice. In fact, it is precisely in the practice of his labors as a cook that Kessel saw his salvation:

In this I have great confidence in our most loving Lord that he wishes thus to forgive me all my sins and to grant me a special reward for all my labors, *however small*. Even though many other good works are greater and holier, I will nonetheless not leave my work. I will remain firmly in place and trust that no work is more salutary and useful for me than that to which the Lord has called me.⁸⁸

Rather than separate his work from his prayer, Kessel effectively sanctified the mundane: God is seen to reward acts based on the disposition of the soul rather than any inherent efficacy of the acts themselves. Every waking moment for Kessel was a pious moment if he made it one. This particular interpretation of works and the efficacy of grace was derived from Grote, but Kessel’s application of it to cooking seems more unusual than Grote’s efforts to sanctify his life as a preacher. Kessel did not innovate when he professed that one’s internal disposition when working for their daily bread affects their spiritual life. Indeed, this is a key aspect of religious life, if not of all Christian practice: that all of a person’s labors and acts are ultimately directed to God. However, he does innovate by making his daily labors the very center of his devotion.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 208.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 209.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 210. Italics added.

It is unlikely that all who became Devout lived with as much fervor as John Kessel. His status among the Devout after his death makes him an ideal for the movement to strive for in their lives, and not necessarily the norm in practice. In fact, the emergence of “customaries” for Brothers and Sisters houses would imply that leaving each member to their own resolutions did not prove tenable: the next chapter will discuss this. Yet there is no doubt after examining Grote and Kessel’s works that the locus of Devout spirituality was an assertion of the self as an individual subject of God’s salvation. Without separating themselves from the hierarchical church (and in many ways doubling-down on their adherence to it by following established liturgical cycles) Geert Grote’s spiritual descendants personalized their relationship with God in a new way. Grote and his followers did not challenge the precepts of the church yet they decentered them as the ends of Christian life: the precepts became vehicles for a faith that began and ended with the individual’s effort.

Grote and Kessel have prescribed their Devout spirituality in a lay context but essentially all of the theses and principles present in their exercises are found in the *Imitatio Christi* and other properly theological works by Devout figures. The likelihood of a common source in the fragments of Grote is high. The author of the *Imitatio*, Thomas á Kempis belonged to the generation of Devout following Kessel. Unlike Grote or Kessel, Thomas was a monastic, joining the canonry of Mount St. Agnes in Zwolle very soon after finishing grammar school in Deventer. His elder brother was a founding member of the Windhesheim Congregation with Grote’s disciple Radewijns. Therefore, the Devout made a very early impression on Thomas, and the canonry he joined was itself an early bastion of ecclesial support for the Devout. The influence of Grote’s spiritual program made itself known in the pages of Thomas’ devotional pamphlets, which began appearing in the 1420s and were instantly popular in northern Europe. By the 1470s

a more-or-less definitive collection of these pamphlets emerged, and by century's end was translated into several languages and printed throughout the continent.

Only a brief reading of the *Imitatio* is needed to reveal the obvious thematic links between it and Grote and Kessel's writings. The opening lines recall immediately Grote's prologue to his resolutions: "'He that followeth me, walketh not in darkness,' saith our Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are admonished, that we must imitate his life and manners, if we would be truly enlightened, and delivered from all blindness of heart."⁸⁹ The goal of the Christian, according to Thomas, is to conform one's soul to the spirit in which Jesus acted. Therefore, following Grote and Kessel, Thomas posits the necessity of focusing in life exclusively on what is spiritually essential, and to cast off anything superfluous:

"Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity" except to love God and serve Him alone... It is vanity therefore, to seek after riches which must perish and to trust in them. It is vanity also to be ambitious of honors, and to raise one's self to a high station. It is vanity to follow the lusts of the flesh... It is vanity to wish for a long life and to take little care of leading a good life. It is vanity also to mind this present life and not to look forward to those things which are to come... Study, therefore, to withdraw thy heart from the love of visible things, and *to turn thyself to things invisible*.⁹⁰

None of these admonitions by themselves is particularly innovative when compared to similar sayings, whether from Proverbs, the Epistles, the church fathers, or the sayings of Jesus. However, Thomas takes these principles and applies them throughout his work in very practical ways; the reader of the *Imitatio* does not need to belong to any particular way of life to live them out. Like Grote and Kessel, Thomas' devotion consists of making pious acts a mean to an end: the sanctification of the individual soul. It is not so important that the devout do any particular

⁸⁹ Thomas á Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Austin P. Bennett (New York: Confraternity of the Precious Blood, 1954), 5.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 6. Emphasis added.

thing or say any particular prayer, but that they reorient their interior motivations in everything they do to reflect the simplicity and humility that they read in the life of Jesus.

The attempt to develop a kind of universal interior piety, from Grote and his followers through Thomas, was profoundly innovative. Such piety was not limited to male communities of Devout, but extended to the female context for the Devout, as well as to the varied contexts of Christians generally who read the *Imitatio*.⁹¹ The applicability of Grote's spirituality in multiple ways of life, as Thomas' popularity evinced, is part of what makes it so innovative, an innovation felt by even the non-Devout, including Erasmus.

Erasmus of Rotterdam and Devotion: The *Philosophia Christi*

The Modern-Day Devout were well established in the Low Countries and Rhineland by the time Erasmus first encountered them. A century after Grote's death, the Devout had developed a corpus of texts, such as Kessel's "Exercises and Resolutions," that their houses disseminated as exemplary of their movement. We cannot know whether Erasmus actually read either Grote's resolutions or Kessel's, or any other Devout work, but that is not a hindrance. As most of his upbringing was spent in the tutelage of the Devout, most of his instruction in the faith would have come from them. As one examines Erasmus' spiritual writings certain parallels to Devout works are obvious; others are less so but present nonetheless, as are his points of divergence from Devout practice.

Erasmus wrote the *Enchiridion militis christiani* (*Handbook of the Christian Soldier*), generally known as the *Enchiridion*, around 1501 and published it in February 1503. Addressed

⁹¹ Van Engen's *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life* begins but by no means exhausts examination of the gendered nature of the Devout and the divergent experience of men and women's houses. Additionally, a Devout sources for men and for women deserve a critical comparison for gendered differences in their piety: "the Way of Life for Sisters and the Customary for Brothers" in *Basic Writings* is an obvious place to start.

to “a friend at court,” Erasmus wrote at the behest of a Burgundian nobleman, Jacob Batt, who with William Blount Mountjoy was instrumental in Erasmus’ introduction to the courts of Europe.⁹² While Erasmus would go on to compose other spiritual works, especially after the Lutheran controversy and his alienation from the Protestant reformers, the *Enchiridion* is undoubtedly the most concise and straightforward source for understanding Erasmus and Christian conduct. Edited and reprinted several times before his death, Erasmus never moved on from or repudiated any principles outlined in the work; it is safe to say that it represents a summary of a spirituality he held throughout his life.

The work is considered by most to be programmatic for Erasmus’ understanding of the role of piety, but it has also been considered less relevant to understanding him as his later works. Levi considered it a deliberate merger of Devout spirituality with the rhetorical flourish of Italian humanism, noting its reliance on Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, and considered it a foundational work for Erasmus.⁹³ Christine Christ-von Wedel considers it a fairly immature work, imbued with Neoplatonist platitudes that Erasmus would later abandon in his religious writings.⁹⁴ It is granted that Erasmus’ use of neoplatonic themes subsided as his works matured, yet there is no reason to downplay the relevance of the *Enchiridion* as a source for Erasmian spirituality overall. His many reprintings and reedits of the work throughout his life demonstrate that it never ceased to portray his spiritual ideals.

The *Enchiridion* does not focus so much on conversion and imitation of Christ, though these are central themes, as on *pietas*. Piety for Erasmus may be summarized as anything that

⁹² Introductory note, CWE 66, 2.

⁹³ Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 191-192. Marsilio Ficino died in 1499; Pico died in 1494. Both were Florentines and renowned for their revival of Neoplatonic philosophy as a challenge to Aristotelian scholasticism, and composed sprawling works incorporating theology, politics, astrology, and natural philosophy.

⁹⁴ Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity*, 45-54.

aids what he refers to as the two weapons of the Christian soldier: prayer and knowledge. The soul is embattled in a world of sin, and its principle means of defense are to pray and to learn. To do both of these is, for Erasmus, the essence of Christian piety. The Erasmian soldier does not fight for the church so much as for their own soul, and how well they fight is a matter of personal responsibility as much as it is God's grace:

No one fails to win in this battle except those who do not want to win. The goodness of our helper has never failed anyone. If you see to it that you do not forsake his goodness, you can be sure of victory. You must ascribe all the victory to him (...) but this victory will not come about *without your effort*.⁹⁵

The use of militarized language throughout the work is formulaic.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, the allegory of the Christian as a soldier serves Erasmus by emphasizing the active, individualistic character of the pious subject. It is a personal contest between the Christian's worldly temptations and conformity to God's will, determined by their willingness to pray and learn. While the "victory" is ultimately in God's hands—that is, dependent upon grace—it is up to each soul to actually use such grace. Erasmus rejects any notion that gaining and using grace involves merely following church precepts and customs: "Can you not deduce that the soul is sick if it performs all its acts of piety with languor and distaste, when it cannot bear with the slightest repulse, or becomes dejected at the loss of a little money?"⁹⁷ It is paramount that a Christian actually benefit internally from their acts: Erasmus cites the Gospel and Paul's admonitions against prayers of many words, insisting on the necessity of "five words uttered with understanding."⁹⁸

The "I resolve" of Grote and the Devout is clearly present here: Erasmus does not offer

⁹⁵ CWE 66, 30. Italics added.

⁹⁶ Describing the church's members in this life as *ecclesia militans* was one of the most generic refrains for the Roman Church in the Middle Ages and remained common up to the last century. Besides its use here, Erasmus tended to avoid such allegories, as he held a very low opinion of war.

⁹⁷ CWE 66, 28.

⁹⁸ CWE 66, 31.

submission to ecclesial authority and practice as itself salvific, but instead points to the individual Christian's internal experience and discernment of how to act.⁹⁹ Erasmus makes this explicit by his equal pairing of prayer and knowledge. Each necessarily informs the other: "One makes prayerful entreaty; the other suggests what should be prayed for."¹⁰⁰ Erasmus' source for such learning is Scripture, just as Grote's resolve to imitate God necessitates sacred reading. In both articulations, the faithful Christian *must* consult the Bible if they are to live correctly.

Similarly to Grote, Erasmus also offers a reading list, but unlike Grote, it is not limited to holy books. Whereas the Devout were preoccupied with Scripture and traditional commentaries, Erasmus not only recommends but requires his ideal Christian to read pagans. Concealing his deeper love for the classics, Erasmus mandates that a person who studies Scripture should have "a kind of preliminary training" in classical literature, as "you will find many things there which are conducive to a holy life, and the good precepts of a pagan author should not be rejected..."¹⁰¹ Whereas Grote only allowed Plato, Erasmus made room as well for, at least, Homer and Virgil. Erasmus easily combined Scripture with classical learning. This is Erasmus's most obvious departure from the Devout program: that he was a humanist, whereas Grote and most of his followers shunned non-sacred learning.¹⁰²

Erasmus' willingness and enthusiasm to engage with the classics derives from his view of what we might call "acceptable risk" in Christian practice. The Devout, may reject any exposure to "things of the world," even if beneficial, for the sake of avoiding temptation. Grote upholds

⁹⁹ This is another example of the latent theological controversy in Erasmus' writings, in this case whether he ought to be considered a Pelagian.

¹⁰⁰ CWE 66, 31.

¹⁰¹ CWE 66, 33.

¹⁰² This emphasis on learning as necessary is highlighted by John W. O'Malley's as a "first" for spiritual writing, and he sets it against the anti-intellectual bent of *Imitation of Christ*. O'Malley, introduction to CWE 66, xliii.

“liberty of spirit” as a daily goal, and anything that may disrupt that liberty should be cut off. This includes any unnecessary engagement with non-sacred aspects of culture. Erasmus, however, accepts that possible sources of temptation are ever-present, and in many cases are worth encountering. “If you cull what is best from the ancient authors, and like the bee flitting about the garden suck out only the wholesome and choice juice, *leaving aside the poison*, your mind will be much better equipped for the common life that they call moral.”¹⁰³ Although there are plenty of references to the inherent corruption of the world, Erasmus does not want to convey that “the world” is so contaminated as to be useless compared to Scripture.¹⁰⁴ Without denying the *contemptu mundi* tradition, Erasmus challenges its more literal application by the Devout and other religious.

Part of the reason Erasmus is able to incorporate “worldly” things into his spiritual program is because of his peculiar description of the soul. Unlike the Augustinian and later scholastic tradition of body and soul, Erasmus cites Origen (whom he treats no differently than the canonical church fathers) and claims that each person is actually body, soul, and *spirit*. Whereas the Augustinian soul is directly affected by the experiences of the body, the Origenic/Erasmian soul moves itself between adherence to either its lower, sinful inclinations in the body, or to its higher, virtuous inclinations in the spirit.¹⁰⁵ Whatever the soul encounters in the world may lead it to either side and can be used accordingly. Grote ideally removed as much as possible from anything that may smudge the soul with temptation and small sins. Erasmus relies instead on a soul that can discern in any situation how to avoid sin without fleeing.

¹⁰³ CWE 66, 36. Italics added.

¹⁰⁴ E.g., CWE 66, 25: “According to the words of St John [the world] is given over entirely to vice, and for that reason is the hated and deadly enemy of Christ.”

¹⁰⁵ CWE 66, 51.

Obviously, the correct action for Erasmus is always whatever leads the soul to the spirit and away from the body, but he rejects that all things that appear bodily or not spiritual, and vice versa. “There are some who are never titillated by the pleasures of the flesh. They should not attribute to their own virtue something that is in itself indifferent. *It is a virtue to conquer lust, not simply to be free of it.*”¹⁰⁶ True piety is not in-of-itself avoiding those things that might lead to sin, because what that is changes from person to person and place to place. Erasmus goes on to rebuke those who gain a kind of spiritual pleasure from pious activity: “Be careful that your fasting does not pertain to the flesh. A brother is in help but you mumble your miserable little prayers to God while ignoring the needs of your brother.”¹⁰⁷

It is worth comparing this to Grote’s emphasis on spiritual liberty. Central to the way of life he and later Devout developed is freedom from anything that might impede individual spiritual growth in a secular and urban context: “Temptation lurks in everything in this world, even if a man does not perceive it.”¹⁰⁸ For Grote it is better to shun even money that could feed the poor if it means too much anxiety. For Erasmus there really is no such imperative. Spiritual liberty is not the goal of his piety, although it is presumably a consequence of piety done right. The goal of Erasmian piety is always to move the soul closer to the spirit; constantly to convert away from sin and imitate Christ. Imitating Christ was also the goal for Grote and the Devout, but they identified this imitation with silence, solitude, and constant prayer—spiritual liberty—as it is for hermits and certain monastics. For Erasmus, on the other hand, solitude and quiet are not presented as virtues, but merely tools for those who need them to wield the “weapons” of prayer and knowledge.

¹⁰⁶ CWE 66, 53.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Grote, “Noteworthy Sayings of Master Geert” in *Basic Writings*, 76.

Would Grote, Kessler, or any other Devout actually take issue with this? Erasmus's theology regarding the soul and the object of piety is not wholly different. The use of the tripartite, Origenic soul may very well be a device to describe what is essentially the same spiritual reality perceived by the Devout: both see the individual's constant conformity to the discerned will of God as the goal of life. The best environment for pursuing this end is where the Devout and Erasmus differ. Clearly, Grote and his followers believed it was necessary for a person to shun anything that may draw them away from a constant attention to prayer, even learning. While it may be possible for a Devout person to live outside such a context, it was not preferable to them. Erasmus does not share this belief, because to be "in the world" is not taken particularly literally:

If you are in the world, you are not in Christ. If you mean by the world the sky, the earth, the sea and the air we breathe, then there no one who not in the world. But if you mean by the world ambition, pleasures, greed, and lust, then certainly if you are of the world, you are not a Christian.¹⁰⁹

Obviously the Devout did not seek to flee from nature entirely. Yet as Erasmus goes on, it becomes apparent that there are far fewer things in the world always to be avoided, and far more things that may appear holy but still prove to be "of the world" because of their misuse and corrupting influence.

As the *Enchiridion* progresses, Erasmus offers his own kind of *regula*. Each rule serves to emphasize the individual responsibility of each Christian to conform to Christ. The fourth rule stands out for our purposes because it encapsulates just how unrigid and situational Erasmus' piety is compared to the Devout. The rule itself is merely "place Christ before you as the only goal of your life;" a sufficiently generic exhortation. However, he elaborates: "If your eye is not

¹⁰⁹ CWE 66, 57.

sound and you look elsewhere than towards Christ, even if you perform good actions, they will be unfruitful or even harmful. *For it is a fault to perform a good action in an improper way.*¹¹⁰ This actually leads us back to a dependence upon the Devout, rather than a development from them. This same sensibility is abundantly clear among the Devout. Grote himself in a sermon admonishes that “any exercise that gets in the way of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, or any one of the three, is harmful, burdensome, and improper for a man.”¹¹¹ The relative simplicity of prayer and penitential exercises found in Grote and Kessler’s resolutions are a consequence of this. No particular devotion is seen as necessary among the Devout for imitating Christ; only those that are clearly and personally beneficial. Erasmus shares this opinion and, against the general tide of devotionals and customary pious practices promoted by church authorities, demands only whatever the individual discerns is actually helpful to them. Unlike the Devout, however, Erasmus extends this principle to much more than religious actions. Instead of posing the threat described by Grote and the Devout, worldly things like money, books, social stature, and the like are in-themselves neutral, and may be put to good use so long as one uses them to imitate Christ.¹¹² “If you examine all your actions and ambitions in accordance with this rule [of keeping Christ as the goal] and never stop midway until you reach Christ, you will never stray from the true path...”¹¹³

It is clear just from examining the *Enchiridion* that, at least in his fundamental ideas about Christian life, Erasmus was heavily informed by the spirituality of the Modern-Day Devout. He shares with them not just generic notions of *conversio* and *imitatio*, but also has the

¹¹⁰ CWE 66, 61.

¹¹¹ Grote, “A Sermon Addressed to the Laity” in *Basic Writings*, 92.

¹¹² CWE 66, 62-64.

¹¹³ CWE 66, 65.

same notion of personal responsibility, the necessity of proper intention regarding acts, and the mutability of pious customs as a means to an end. That these concepts are attributable to the Devout is evident because these were not universally accepted concepts in the common religious praxis of the fifteenth-century. Nevertheless, Erasmus complicates Devout spirituality by rejecting their insistence on isolation: there is no preference for one kind of lifestyle over another, nor much renunciation of “worldly things” as too dangerous or unnecessary. Grote insisted on the possibility of living a perfect Christian life in any estate; Erasmus expanded the boundaries of what living that life could actually look like. This reading tracks well with that of Rummel’s with regard to Erasmus’ denunciation of one particular way of life, such as monastic life, as more conducive to holiness, while not denying the potential benefits of one way or another depending upon the individual living it.¹¹⁴ Levi’s claim that Erasmus’ spirituality is primarily indebted to the Devout would seem to be affirmed here, but the differences in applying that spirituality between Grote’s followers and Erasmus were wide enough that we ought to be cautious in calling the *Enchiridion* or anything else from Erasmus an extension or inheritor of Devout literature, as Levi or Schoeck might. How these boundaries affected Devout and Erasmian ideas of community and culture will be examined next.

¹¹⁴ Erika Rummel, “*Monachatus non est pietas*” in *Erasmus’ Vision of the Church*, 41-56.

CHAPTER 3

PIOUS SOCIETY/IES

Devout Society

So what are the implications of Grote's program in the medieval order, as well as those of his followers and Erasmus? Grote's flight from the world may have been predicated upon personal resolve and effort, but such a radical embrace of *contemptus mundi* rendered almost the entire medieval order unfit to him for a holy life. Rather than advocate for any kind of revolution in the medieval order, he accepted this reality, and espoused very simply the necessity of detaching oneself from that order while remaining within it physically. This would prove to be the model of Devout piety as it related to society generally, but its application proved in many circumstances to be unrealistic. The lay Devout therefore had to contend with adapting to ways of life that ultimately resembled religious life. Such imitation of religious life did not satisfy Erasmus, nor did the initial radicality of Grote: rather than abandon the world wholesale with the internalized hermitage of the Devout, he advocated for a redeemed social order. Erasmus disavowed the notion of separation or regularization as necessary for salvation, and instead desired a world where everyone, from the rulers of church and state down to the lowest commoner, would have a converted disposition. This did not eliminate religious or detached life, but rendered it in Erasmus' mind as just one mode among many, freely chosen by believers as they saw necessary for their salvation.

The Flight of Geert Grote

When a young man named John ten Water left the Devout in Zwolle to pursue an education in Cologne, Grote was emphatic that he return. Leaving for the university was not only unwise, claimed Grote, but a sure path to damnation. Grote's address to John was preserved in

several manuscripts by the Brethren as “Letter 29,” and its opening lines make Grote’s concern about John quite clear:

Chosen one, once highly loved and still much loved in Christ, whom I strive to win singularly and especially for the greater glory of God and your own salvation, with a zeal granted, I believe, from on high! Would that you might cease singing and walking in the way of iniquity and worldly deception! Do not proceed in the way of anxiety, sorrow, fear, labor and grief., of which the world is full, but in the way of sincerity, exaltation, certainty, and uprightness (...) Who enticed you to come so near to a fall? Who drew you away from all good and from Him who is the source of all good, O my beloved in the Lord, and led you to a precipice? (...) See the treachery of the enemy. How forcefully he draws you away from your good intentions under the guise of study so that you turn your face away from the Lord and your own good resolutions and then descend into all manner of carnal, worldly, and vain desires.¹¹⁵

The letter is not without convention, as such appeals for an individual’s religious conversion were not a genre invented by Grote.¹¹⁶ It is its employment that is revealing. Divorced of context, a reader may surmise from the letter’s intensity that Grote’s addressee is in severe spiritual trouble: a drunk or a wastrel who wandered off from the safety of a religious vocation to a life of vice; a prodigal son needing an intervention. This young man was throwing away his life. And yet no such suggestion exists, either in the remainder of the letter or in any surviving history of the Brethren. John ten Water, given over to the Devil himself so far as Grote was concerned, simply left the Brethren house for an education at one of Europe’s most prized universities, specifically one associated with well-known saints and theologians.¹¹⁷ Granted, medieval universities were not generally known for the holiness or good behavior of their

¹¹⁵ Grote, “Letter 29” in *Basic Writings*, 78-79.

¹¹⁶ The 22nd letter of Jerome, to the noblewoman Eustochium, is one of the most famous examples in the patristic canon of this sort of exhortatory letter, urging its reader to flee their personal prosperity and encouraging them in the way of an ascetic, converted life. Jerome’s subject had already vowed her virginity, but the convention is the same. See also Bernard of Clairvaux’s 2nd letter (“to the Monk Adam”). A study of exhortatory epistles on conversion addressed to individuals in the ancient and medieval world may be worthwhile.

¹¹⁷ Van Engen, introduction to *Basic Writings*, 40-41. Sts. Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas are Cologne’s most notable medieval teachers, working at the cathedral school a century before its official founding as a university. It remained a center for Dominican theology for centuries.

students, and a liberal arts education was not necessary for salvation.¹¹⁸ Yet Grote does not merely warn John of the dangers facing him as potential pitfalls: he considers leaving the Brethren spiritual suicide. Merely leaving the Brethren house for an otherwise normal vocation and exposing oneself to the hustle of city and student life, even with good intentions, is ruinous for Grote. So foul is the direction John took that Grote does not simply recommend his own way of life, but positively identifies it with salvation itself. “Return, return, my beloved. The wound is recent and deep, still curable and responsive to medicine; resist beginnings. We all await you, *your God and all his saints, your own angel*, and also poor me, I who grieve—God alone knows how much—*over all the innumerable evils that will overtake you...*”¹¹⁹ The flight from temptation and distractions to spiritual liberty that define Grote’s resolutions is not offered as a possibility but as an absolute necessity. There is no “if” you fall, but when; no “if” John’s faith suffers away from the Brethren’s way of life, but “when” he inevitably turns from God toward evil. All of this is directed not at a known sinner, but only a potential one, whose exposure to temptation was no more substantial than all the other religious men sent to universities throughout the Latin Church to learn, principally, the dogma of their faith.

It seems clear that Grote had a particular affection for this man—who did in fact return to the house in Zwolle and later became a Windesheim canon. “I ask that you deign to come to me and seek consolation with me, or rather to console me, for I grieve no small amount over you.”¹²⁰ It is entirely possible that Grote’s insistence on the unsalvageable evil of the world and its

¹¹⁸ See e.g. Hannah Skoda, “Student Violence in Thirteenth- and Early Fourteenth-Century Paris,” in *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1270-1330*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 119-158. The only monograph I could source on student life generally at medieval universities is Robert S. Rait’s *Life in the Medieval University* of 1912; an updated work in the same vein would be worthwhile.

¹¹⁹ Grote, “Letter 29” in *Basic Writings*, 79. Italics added.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

institutions was just a heartfelt, if hyperbolic plea to a beloved disciple. It may also represent a polemical exercise, reminiscent of Grote's forceful preaching. However, the Brethren preserved and copied this letter as an example of their core teachings.¹²¹ Grote's severity in judging "the world" as inherently dangerous is echoed throughout his resolutions, as well as in his sermons and other letters. "Temptation lurks in everything in this world, even if a man does not perceive it."¹²²

Traditionally, someone with as much fear of temptation as Grote would seek the desert. Yet Grote's peculiar aversion to worldliness does not extend merely to secular or non-religious matters. As we know from his resolutions and biography, Grote did not view the monastery or a hermitage as any safer. Anywhere, anytime could be an opportunity for temptation and sin, and obstacles inevitably arise for those seeking conversion and repentance. Such a view on its own sounds intensely paranoid and spiritually suffocating. But this is where Grote's spirituality of resolve finds its place in—or perhaps in spite of—the medieval order: instead of seeking escape by better external circumstances, his primary counsel for himself and for others seeking his spiritual liberty was, simply, to stay where they are and bear what they must; to live an interior life.

In a letter to an unnamed friend in a religious house (preserved as "Letter 62"), Grote outlined the absolute necessity of an indomitable patience, and warned against attempting to escape one's circumstances. This friend was subjected to a problematic confrere, who was in some way disrupting or corrupting the life of the community. In order for this young man to leave for a better cloister, he would have had to request a dispensation from his monastic vow of

¹²¹ Van Engen, intro to *Basic Writings*, 41: Van Engen suggests it was used as a recruitment tool for those considering joining the Devout.

¹²² Grote, "Noteworthy Sayings of Master Geert" in *Basic Writings*, 76.

stability. Grote warns, however, that even desiring to leave is itself a source of unnecessary temptation. “Never desire to leave or to transfer elsewhere. The mere desire of transferring disquiets and disturbs a man unbelievably, distracting and upsetting him; therefore determine in your mind the certainty of stay in impossibility of leaving.”¹²³ Perhaps this may seem a cruel suggestion, but in the spirituality and worldview of Grote, it is the only reasonable course: to bear one’s cross is the inevitable lot of life, and to seek an escape from it is useless. The solution, therefore, is prayerful endurance of all things, because the patient endurance of evil breeds strength. His admonition to stay is preceded by a lengthy and scriptural exhortation to endure suffering. “We ought also to have frequent experience in adversity so as to deepen concretely the knowledge and testing of ourselves, and through our blessed Lord God to train our hands for warfare and our fingers for battle (Ps 143/141:1).”¹²⁴ Grote, of course, means spiritual battle; the theme employed itself is not unusual for medieval spiritual allegory. The way to self-improvement, to greater imitation of the person of Christ and his cross, cannot be found in any particular place, according to Grote. Only in accepting one’s estate can the devout soul advance toward Christian perfection.

Pour out and restore the oil of gladness in your conscience, and your testimony will ever be a joy to you. When you do all things well and the proud reproach you, leaving you no external witness to your virtue, in the manner of the prudent virgins gather the oil in your jars along with the lamps (cf Mt 25:3-4). For the jars carried by the prudent virgins contained that which would not give light in the sight of men: that is, to be scorned when someone does well; or to do well to our neighbors without favor, acquaintance, or hope of return...¹²⁵

Grote therefore demonstrates that, although the world apart from the devout community is a spiritual death sentence, even life apart is nevertheless subject to the same old problems of

¹²³ Grote, “Letter [62]: On Patience and the Imitation of Christ” in *Basic Writings*, 90.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 87.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 89.

community. People will inevitably feel each other's weakness and faults socially. Rather than turn to laying down a new rule and imposing it through vows, Grote seeks the transformation of the soul from within, which can only be done if the individual devotee places all their focus on improving themselves, and little or no expectation on their neighbor.

Other than the sacraments of the church and its required ministers, Grote has no particular place for the institutions and social order of his time. Nevertheless, he is insistent that they not be challenged in any meaningful way. Despite his great fear of secular life and distrust of religious houses, Grote always defers to meager obedience and the patience of the cross, instead of institutional change. His appeal to the recipient of Letter 62 not to seek a transfer and his insistence on organizing likeminded laymen and women instead of seeking religious approval are evidence of this. The establishment of the Windesheim Congregation, which sought to incorporate the devout life into the existing ecclesial order, is also an example. The first generation of devout did not seek so much to create a new society apart from the existing one, nor to transform the present order; instead, they created an association of individuals who persisted *among* medieval society but did not see themselves as *of* it.

The Imitation of Christ repeats essentially all of Grote's admonitions. At times, Thomas a Kempis may almost be described as antisocial, recommending only as much community as is necessary to get on with life. One of his shorter chapters includes:

Associate thyself with the humble and simple, with the devout and virtuous, and treat of those things which edify. Be not familiar with any woman, but recommend all good women in general to God. Desire to be familiar only with God and his angels and fly the acquaintance of men. We must have charity for all, *but familiarity is not expedient.*¹²⁶

If this were a writing of the Desert Fathers or the Rhineland Mystics it might not seem out of

¹²⁶ Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 25. Italics added.

place. However, the intended audience of these works are predominantly urban laymen and clerics, not monks and hermits. *The Imitation* takes solitude and social avoidance as a recurring and necessary principle, while offering very little in the way of how to associate publicly except that which is absolutely necessary. “If thou wilt withdraw thyself from superfluous words and idle visits, as also from giving ear to news and reports, thou wilt find time sufficient and proper to employ thyself in good intentions. The greatest saints avoided the company of men as much as they could and chose to live to God in secret.”¹²⁷ These admonitions to solitude and silence are accompanied by the necessity of endurance and patience with the faults and offenses of others; the only subject that matters to Thomas is the reader and their soul.

By not describing a specific estate of life, *The Imitation* opens itself up to adaptation. Religious, clerics, married, and solitary people alike could (and in its continued, multi-denominational popularity, can) apply its advice to their immediate circumstances. The way of perfection that the Devout sought was not tethered in principle to any place, institution, or social order that could be imagined in the fifteenth-century Latin Church. Only the life of faith in each individual who chose the way of devotion was of concern; everything else was an opportunity for Christian virtue.

There is therefore in the writings of the Devout a certain kind of apocalypticism: an awareness of a seemingly collapsing Christian worldorder. Preaching of such as a call for renewal and reform in the church and society emerged regularly in waves throughout the Middle Ages, but was particularly relevant in the fifteenth-century and a central theme for Observant

¹²⁷ Ibid, 65.

preachers.¹²⁸ As the entirety of not just secular society but the institutions of the church itself were unfit for Christian conversion without sincere and severe personal effort, practitioners of the Devout way espoused, at least in intention, an interior retirement from society in anticipation of the kingdom. This meant a kind of spiritual escape while remaining in the confines of established society, as Grote laid out in Letter 62. If it did not matter what particular estate the converted found themselves in, then it did not particularly matter whether they reformed any of those estates. This may be a separating point for the Devout from the broader context of Observant Reform, at least as founding principles and motives are concerned. “The more a man disereth to be spiritual the more this present life becomes distasteful to him; because he better understands and more clearly sees the defects of human corruption. To eat, drink, watch, sleep, rest, labor, and to be subject to other necessities of nature is truly a great misery and affliction....”¹²⁹ The watchword for the Devout, therefore, is ultimately *memento mori*: only preparation for the end of life matters, the *ars moriendi*.¹³⁰ The Devout’s apparent despair for society and constant personal preparation for the last things places them squarely within the more general currents of late medieval spirituality, and opposes them to the relative optimism of the Renaissance humanists.

This presents a problem, however: whether the Devout actually succeeded in living according to these principles. In theory, the only thing preventing them from practicing the new

¹²⁸ Bernard McGinn, “Apocalypticism and Church Reform: 1100-1500,” in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, Stephen Stein (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 273-293.

¹²⁹ Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 75-76.

¹³⁰ On death, see e.g., *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Bruce Gordon, Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For the liturgical and devotional importance of death, c.f. Duffy “Last Things,” in *The Stripping of the Altars*, 299-347, and Karant-Nunn, “Banning the Dead and Ordering the Living: the selective retention of Catholic rituals,” in *Reformation of Ritual: an interpretation of early modern Germany* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 138-189.

devotion and spreading it was their own will and interior life. Yet this is not how the Devout existed. The realities of medieval urban life proved too cumbersome for the idealism of Grote's resolutions and individual agency. Forming communities that ultimately resembled religious houses was a positive necessity for their survival. Outside of the Windesheim Congregation, whose members had only to integrate the personal resolutions of Grote into their already-regulated lives as Augustinian canons, the Devout essentially compromised. In the same spirit as Grote's exhortation to John ten Water, followers of Grote had to escape their external circumstances at least somewhat in order to live out their devotion with any success. The explosion of Brethren and Sister houses in the first half of the fifteenth century point toward the realization of Grote's spiritual movement as an essentially religious one; that is, as a congregation of semi-regularized persons. Although each house was ordered not according to a "rule" but a "customary," the secular houses of the Devout appeared to many outsiders and especially to church authorities as little more than a new order of monasteries.¹³¹ Beyond the individual resolutions of each member, such as those made by John Kessel for himself, each house's customary expected members to rise and retire at the same time, to pray the major hours together, to attend mass together, to eat meals in common, and to share their literature.¹³² The customaries even prescribed garb, albeit without the specificity of a religious habit: [members should] wear humble and simple garb suitable to the clerical estate...¹³³ It is not difficult to

¹³¹ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 200-237.

¹³² *Basic Writings*, "A Customary for Brothers," 155-175; "A Way of Life for Sisters," 176-186: the preserved customary for the brethren house is explicitly for non-vowed, non-religious men living in common; that of the sisters, from around the same time, employs canonical language that makes it apparent how quickly women were forced to regularize. Its author, Salome Sticken, was an Augustinian Prioress, and makes no mention of secular devout houses for women. The gendered difference in the *devotio moderna's* institutions, with the Sisters having to regularize almost immediately while the Brethren survived to the Reformation with secular houses, is touched on by Van Engen, but deserves more treatment than can be offered here.

¹³³ *Basic Writings*, 155.

understand why this movement, although it explicitly rejected religious status, was seen by many urban and church authorities as a new religious order escaping regulation.

Likely the only reason the Modern-Day Devotion spread so much beyond its first generation of devotees is because of this religious turn. In the confines of late-medieval urban and ecclesial society, the only practical option for living out their chosen vocation was if the devout adapted themselves to existing structures. The personalism and self-made faith of Grote and his followers was preserved in their writings and, to a lesser extent, by the Brethren schools and the local relationships fostered by devotees. However, such writings spread most through canonically regular means: via canonries and the pulpits of clerical members. The dream of Grote for Christians to live in austere, scriptural, and simple imitation of Jesus Christ wherever they found themselves worked for some, but most who took up his way were subsumed by the prevailing ecclesial order.

Erasmian Society

Erasmus wrote his first treatise on the subject of *contemptus mundi* as a relatively new canon at Steyn. The work is structured as an epistle from a pseudonymous author to his nephew, and was most likely a literary exercise, as Erasmus did not publish it until decades later in 1521. Although not very original in its content—Erasmus cites similar writings of Jerome, Bernard, and Innocent III, among others—Erasmus made the rhetorical style very much his own. He notably calls on the classics in places rather than scripture to illustrate his points. Most exhortations ring quite similar to those of *The Imitation* and related Devout writing, but they do not share their tone, focus, or motive. Indeed, much of Erasmus' praise for converted life is grounded in a sense of classical, almost heroic self-mastery and in pleasant contemplation that is missing from the writings of the Devout, whose language is decidedly penitential and submissive

by comparison. At times this is accomplished, somewhat paradoxically, by disdaining the same figures whose feats he alludes to. On the superiority of secluded and converted life to worldly gain, he says: “What is left of such grandeur and majesty [as Caesar, Hannibal, and others had]? Nothing but feeble stories told by men (...) Wise men are they, wise men indeed who, content with their lot, strive to constrain themselves, to command themselves rather than others, and seek to gain that heavenly kingdom destined for eternity...”¹³⁴ This is not only a Devout sentiment but a generically Christian one, yet Erasmus does not merely include kings and generals in his examples of vainglory. Indeed, the epilogue to *De contemptu mundi* takes as its target his own monastic life.

“I see that for some time now you have been packing up your things and putting on your travelling boots to hasten to us right away, but I must give you a few warnings in advance...”¹³⁵ The necessity of monastic vows, and even monastic life, is far from essential for the converted life as Erasmus imagines it. “No one is forced to profess himself a Christian, but one must never abandon this profession” that is, that of the baptized, “and without it there is no hope of salvation. As for the other institutions founded by men in accordance with the needs of the time, it may not be advisable to tie a man down forever and allow no retreat...”¹³⁶ Like Grote, Erasmus finds in the monastery no more salvation than outside it; unlike Grote, Erasmus is not only skeptical of the usefulness of vows, but advocates for those who wish to be dispensed of them. Where Grote would insist on accepting one’s place and seeking no better circumstances for fear of falling on worse temptation, Erasmus has no anxiety. It is not just up to the Christian to take life on as it comes, but to improve it externally.

¹³⁴ CWE 66, 145-146.

¹³⁵ CWE 66, 172.

¹³⁶ CWE 66, 172.

Once monasteries were nothing but solitary dwelling places for men who disdained the enticements and vices that afflicted human life (...) or who, harrowed by cruel persecutions, left the cities and hid in pathless mountains to meditate upon an angelic kind of life (...) Now most monasteries are in the midst of worldly affairs and so entangled in them that they are no less parted from the world than are kidneys from a living body (...) But even in those monasteries where religious discipline is strong, a certain risk remains: *each man is suited to a different kind of life*, and therefore you must first examine yourself so that, knowing yourself, *you choose wisely a way of life you have come to know*, testing everything but retaining only what is good, according to St. Paul's teaching.¹³⁷

Erasmus espouses not only the virtues of the Devout necessary for what Grote or Thomas a Kempis would call spiritual liberty, but also the necessity of a more general, embodied liberty. The freedom to choose one's way of life is, in Erasmus' mind, an ideal to be striven for, because within each person is an exterior calling to which they are suited. This vocational notion of where in society the Christian belongs is absent from the writings of the Devout, for whom only accepting and tolerating one's circumstances was necessary. Yet it must be noted that the Devout nevertheless sought community with one another, as pursuing their way of life in solitude proved impractical. This itself may be seen as a kind of Erasmian vocation: the Devout viewed their common houses and reformed cloisters as the best places for their individual pursuit of Christian perfection, although they insisted that there's was the only means of living the converted life.

The key difference here between Erasmus and the Devout is that he places no obligation upon enduring an unjust or problematic community. It is not just recommended but necessary for Erasmus that a proper Christian seeking to flee the world find their own unique place to do it, and not compel themselves to endure one or another form of the pious life. "I want you to understand first of all what true religion means; then when you have examined your character and your physical and mental abilities, when you have discovered the life that suits you, when

¹³⁷ CWE 66, 173. Italics added.

you have found a brotherhood that is one in Christ, then join it....”¹³⁸ This is a far cry from the epistles of Grote, who insisted simultaneously on a radical flight from all things worldly *and* on their endurance where they could not be escaped. Erasmus’ notion of how much worldliness is acceptable is far more tempered. The presence of “profane” figures like Horace and Virgil is a concrete example of his openness to non-spiritual reading as a potential good for Christians, and his wariness of the monastery stems not merely from their late-medieval corruptions, but simply because he knew life in one may not suit every pious man’s humors. Erasmus’ respect for choosing one’s path opens the way in his views on society to not merely enduring, but positively sanctifying non-religious ways of life, as well as reforming the decadence of the clerical and religious estates.

Returning to the *Enchiridion*, there is a key letter in which Erasmus laid out his ideal notion of Christian society; something absent from the purely interior concerns of the Devout. The 1518 printing of his manual on piety included a prefatory letter to the Abbott Paul Volz of Hugshofen, a Benedictine friendly to the humanists. In the letter, Erasmus outlines a simple, if optimistic structure for Latin Christian society. It is a definitively clerical ecclesiology but demonstrates Erasmus’ optimism for the existing institutions of his time, that they can be conformed to his notion of pure Christian teaching and virtue. “Let Christ remain what he is, the centre, with several circles running round him....”¹³⁹ There are ultimately three circles, and Erasmus notably does not order them according to notions of height or honor; one could compare it to the usual diagram of papal supremacists, for whom the rungs of a ladder are more apt. Instead, the proper order of society is predicated on how occupied a vocation is with matters of

¹³⁸ CWE 66, 174.

¹³⁹ CWE 66, 14.

faith, measured as distance from Christ. The first circle, those “nearest to Christ,” are clerics, among whom Erasmus does not dwell on regarding hierarchy (“priests, bishops, cardinals, popes, and those whose business it is to follow the Lamb wherever he may lead them.”¹⁴⁰) The second circle are princes and government officials. The third circle is everybody else: tradesmen, gentry, peasantry, academics, etc. In so doing, Erasmus hardly redeveloped the organization of medieval society, as the three circles correspond quite obviously with the traditional estates of the medieval world and the *ancien régime*. Erasmus’ point, however, is to emphasize the responsibility of each circle or estate to conform themselves in holiness to the precepts of the Gospel, rather than emphasize the power or rights typically associated with the estates.

Like the clerics of the first circle, Erasmus does not care to order its members in any particular way or reference any particular model of governance for the second circle. Of course, this may reflect less a sense of egalitarianism and more his desire not to annoy any specific sovereigns of the time by remaining vague, but Erasmus does take up a notably controversial opinion on the origin of their authority. Their placement in the circle outside of the clerical estate is explicitly denied as an indication of an ultramontane or directly theocratic form of governance.

Let us not therefore without more ado make Christ responsible for the actions of princes or lay magistrates, or ascribe them, as they say, to a divine right. They handle a certain amount of worldly business that has no part at all in Christian purity; and yet this must not be criticized, because it is necessary for the conservation of society. It is not their business to see that we are good, but to make us less bad and reduce the amount of harm that bad men do to the common weal.¹⁴¹

Kings, magistrates, and the like are not therefore presented as arms of a ruling clerical or papal class, but as the prudent managers of temporal affairs that are inappropriate for priests and religious. It is their responsibility to be conformed to the teachings of the church, more so than

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ CWE 66, 15.

common people, but not to carry out the prescriptions of that church. Erasmus makes no mention of the possibility of a democratic, aristocratic, or other order. Although always genial to kings and their courts as a man of letters (one frequently in need of sovereign protections), Erasmus is ultimately ambivalent about the origins of political power and of social hierarchy, an ambivalence that does not open the road to new or revolutionary forms of government so much as defer to the sufficiency of the established order. Erasmus' only firm prescription is that each member of society act in accord with how near their estate or vocation is to the demands of the Gospel, with priests being held to the highest standards, and commoners to the lowest, but all to at least some level of Christian obligation.

It is not immediately apparent but there is, beneath the surface, a fundamentally Devout principle at work here, albeit one that has been transformed. Although it is probable that Erasmus' desire to reach as wide an audience as possible prevented him from espousing something more specific, his ambivalent approach to power and societal order can be read as coming from the same place as the Devout's turn away from society: the absolute necessity of interior conversion to straightforward, scriptural piety and prayer. By making every Christian responsible for their own vocation, though in different degrees, Erasmus takes up the interior turn of the Modern-Day Devout and applies it to all people, but without prejudicing their received or (among the privileged) chosen way of life. The contradiction present in Grote and his followers' teachings—that devotion is not tied to estate or vows, but that a certain kind of estate (semi- or actually religious) is necessary to actually live it—is undone by Erasmus when he holds up no particular way of life as inherently conducive to piety. As he ends *De contemptu mundi*: “[Do] not think that you lack any vows if you have kept the vow you made to Christ in baptism (...) Let it not disturb your mind that you are not one of the Dominican or Carmelite

community, if only you are truly a member of the Christian community.”¹⁴² This statement on its own is highly reminiscent of Grote, but elsewhere Erasmus applies this principle to all ways of life. We must recall that none of the advice and resolutions present in the chapters of the *Enchiridion* imply a specific mode of life; none are so stringent as to compel the reader to take up the semi-religious and ascetic life of Geert Grote or the Brethren and Sisters. Instead, each person is to conform themselves to Christ not merely in spite of their estate, but through it: let priests be good priests, princes be good princes, and laypeople be good laypeople. The churchmen of Erasmus’ time would take no issue with that sentiment; the difference for Erasmus was that the responsibility to lead a prayerful, recollected life of *conversio* applied to all, rather than only to a religious few while laypeople work out their salvation through votive candles and rosaries.

Erasmus made as much explicit in his *Colloquies*, wherein he praises the best aspects for people of different social estates and lampoons the worst. Often this consists of subverting one’s expectations regarding a particular estate or profession. There is never any appeal to a necessary form of community or self-isolation, as found among the Devout. Instead, the same virtues can be found in most places if the individual is pious and interiorly converted. In “The Soldier and the Carthusian,” the title characters meet on a road (as many colloquies open) and chat to catch up, being longtime friends who parted ways for their respective professions. The central moral is a condemnation of war and soldiering, but Erasmus uses the opportunity to highlight his notion of choosing a pious way and attaining true spiritual liberty. When the soldier mocks his Carthusian friend for choosing an oppressive life of solitude, the monk retorts that the walls of his cloister were freely chosen. Meanwhile, many do not choose to live in a particular city but

¹⁴² CWE 66, 175.

are stuck there their whole lives and most unhappy.¹⁴³ As regards solitude, he denies the charge altogether, and points out that he has no less than 16 confreres of like mind with whom to converse when the rule permits, conversations that are made “more delightful and [their] pleasure increased by being intermittent.”¹⁴⁴ Such communal solitude is contrasted with the lonely and wayward life of the soldier who, though he is in an army and possesses comrades, is taken away from his family and the community he is allegedly serving. The Carthusian goes on to probe to the soldier about what is so much preferable in soldiering, and unsurprisingly finds that it is sinful, degrading, and usually of dubious justification.¹⁴⁵ Thus the alleged virtues of either vocation are turned on their heads, with the Carthusian sociable and unoppressed by the rules of his order, and the soldier weighed down by the misfortune and folly of war, which he believed would bring adventure and profit. At the same time, however, Erasmus allows the necessity of defensive wars and soldiers to fight them, while he levels criticism against monks who distort or abuse their lifestyle. Therefore, while the Carthusian obviously has a superior vocation, neither character is *inherently* pious or sinful.

We can therefore see how Erasmus drew upon the same principles as the Modern-Day Devout but did not limit himself to their conclusions regarding the proper way of relating to society. Whereas Grote and his followers could not imagine a program of self-discipline and interior conversion without stringent regulation, approximating or simply becoming formal religious, Erasmus effectively calls on every station in late-medieval society to pursue the imitation of Christ as they are able in their immediate circumstances. The disdain for worldliness was no impediment to Erasmus’ realization, at least theoretically, of a pious society, because his

¹⁴³ CWE 39, 330.

¹⁴⁴ CWE 39, 332.

¹⁴⁵ CWE 39, 333-335.

definition of worldliness was simply not as literal nor as offensive as the Devout perceived it. That temptations inevitably arise, and that one estate or community is not inherently pious or virtuous, are core values shared by the Devout and Erasmus. He likely inherited such notions from them as an alumnus of their schools and a Low Country religious environment heavily influenced by reforming efforts of the Devout in the canonries and more generally through widely disseminated literature, especially *The Imitation*. But Erasmus did not succumb to the narrowness of Devout spirituality as it applied to practical matters. Where Geert Grote saw in profane reading, or in friendship, or in having a pear after dinner a temptation and distraction,¹⁴⁶ Erasmus saw an opportunity for moderation and legitimate enjoyment of things that need not offend the pious. So too did he find in most professions an opportunity to be a good Christian, and only viewed the rigorous ascetism and social isolation of the Devout as necessary to those very few who chose it and needed it for their conversion.

¹⁴⁶ Grote, “Resolutions and Intentions, but not Vows” in *Basic Writings*, 73: “beware of more than one cooked pear after the meal, or a very large one, or three very small ones.”

CONCLUSION

In *Renaissance and Reformation*, Levi interpreted Erasmus as a product of the Devout, and considered his humanism a kind of historically necessary addition for developing a religion with “rationally based morality” opposed to a millennium of prescriptive faith.¹⁴⁷ Throughout the work, the entirety of western theological history is used to demonstrate diverse but consistent currents from the time of Tertullian up to Erasmus and Luther, trending toward this development. It is a sprawling and factually useful yet problematic work, given the sheer scale of its attempted narrative. Although Schoeck was cited above as insisting most emphatically for Erasmus belonging to the Devout tradition, Levi’s claims of a seamless merger of Devout spirituality with renaissance sensibilities in Erasmus is the most impactful in its conclusions. This thesis has not attempted to judge any larger narrative involving Erasmus and the Devout, but any attempts made (like Levi’s) to incorporate Erasmus in an honest narrative will need to address or omit this relationship. Therefore, I have sought to answer how important that question really is to any relevant narratives.

The Modern-Day Devout were not responsible alone for Erasmus’ conception of right piety. This thesis has not considered the potential influence of other individuals in his life, nor delved into his available interpretations of Scripture, patristics, tradition, and other central aspects of his faith. There were gaps in concrete contact between Erasmus and Devout institutions, and there is no evidence he ever had anything to do with the movement after leaving the hostel at the Sorbonne. To claim Erasmus as a necessary historical product of Modern-Day Devotion, besides robbing him of his agency as a real person, would overstate the impact of this

¹⁴⁷ Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 364.

ultimately regional movement and undermine the reality of other socio-religious influences in the late-fifteenth century.

Nevertheless, Erasmus responded to the same challenges to belief posed by late-medieval life as the Devout and gave remarkably similar answers. These answers reverberated in the Reformation.¹⁴⁸ If Erasmus owed his religiosity to the Devout at least in part, especially by reinterpreting their ideals through a humanist prism, then it is in fact reasonable to assert a real relationship between the course of the Reformation and the acts and ideas of the Devout via Erasmus. In this regard, the interpretation of Levi that Erasmus' spirituality was an equal-parts merger of Devout piety with humanism is a fair one, without implying the same historical necessity that Levi read into this merger. Perhaps this point is obvious, yet for my part I cannot find many recent sources that integrate it meaningfully into the discussion of who Erasmus was and what he accomplished. Currently, most scholarship on Erasmus, such as the ongoing annual volumes of *Erasmus Studies* released by Brill, concern his rhetoric, humanist ideals, and contextualizing his emotions and prejudices as an early-modern. If we are to grant that Erasmus was sincere in the faith that he expounded, then incorporating his development of Devout piety into these discussions will undoubtedly aid in contextualizing and interpreting him. Erasmus' impact as a renaissance scholar and a reformer cannot be appreciated really if we neglect his roots in the medieval world.

As addressed at the beginning of this essay, this is not a new claim, since it was common in the early-to-mid twentieth century to present Modern-Day Devotion and Erasmus together as

¹⁴⁸ To present just a few works on Erasmus' relation to succeeding Reformation figures in the past decade, on Tyndale: Rankin, "Tyndale, Erasmus, and the Early English Reformation," in *Erasmus Studies* 38.2 (2018), 135-170; on Luther: *Erasmus and Luther: The Battle over Free Will*, ed. Clarence H. Miller, Peter Macardle (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012); on Calvin: Kirk Essary, *Erasmus and Calvin on the Foolishness of God: Reason and Emotion in the Christian Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017)

definitive forerunners of Protestantism (Huizinga, Hyma). From mid-century onward, this narrative was set aside as too simplistic, and work on developing Erasmus' historical reality opened up into a much more interdisciplinary and intersubjective project. The following are some modest suggestions for reintegrating this question into ongoing scholarship, and for the historical relevance of Erasmus' Devout-origins to our understanding of the Reformation.

Bert Roest laments the lack of development in evaluating the world of early-sixteenth century religion in comparison to the fifteenth, with the former remaining in most histories as an era only of decadence and corruption. Roest brings attention to the fact that observant reform in major religious orders actually accelerated up until the 1530s, with the blessing and support of church authorities. He also points out that many of the famed Tridentine orders, especially the Jesuits, originated years before the reforming council was called and possess obvious roots in the Observant reform.¹⁴⁹ This brings to mind two avenues of study. Firstly, a potential avenue for historians of Ignatian spirituality and the impact of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century. Since the early Jesuits were known to alternately cite and repudiate Erasmus, it may be worthwhile to compare Ignatian to Erasmian spirituality, reinterpreted as a form of Devout rather than wholly original humanist piety.¹⁵⁰ Such an evaluation would shed light on just one path for the dynamic continuity or discontinuity of reform principles throughout the era. Secondly, an evaluation of ongoing observant reform efforts in Erasmus' own time and potential differences in the content

¹⁴⁹ Bert Roest, "The Observance and Confrontation with Early Protestantism" in *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond*, 285-290.

¹⁵⁰ For the relationship of the Jesuits to Erasmus and the debate among them about Erasmus' orthodoxy and usefulness, see Paul F. Grendler, "The Attitudes of the Jesuits toward Erasmus," in *Humanism, Universities, and Jesuit Education in Late Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill N.V, 2022), 430-449. This essay may be a good starting point for the suggested study. Ignatius Loyola himself was claimed in his edited *Acta* to have read and repudiated Erasmus during his conversion period, but this is now considered a later embellishment by the anti-Erasmian camp within the order. See John M. McManamon, *The Text and Contexts of Ignatius Loyola's "Autobiography"* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 9.

of reform between them would be worthwhile. The confluence or divergence of observant reform and humanist reform leading up to Trent is not immediately obvious, and Erasmus' letters may provide leads for such a study.

When compared with secondary sources on the Devout, considerations of religious space are insufficiently studied in Erasmus' thought, although there may be something inherent to him that precludes this. Space and time and liturgical action were very important to the Devout: the regulation of their living arrangements, of their individual and communal schedules, and of their role within the urban landscape were integral to their own understanding of the movement. Van Engen's study is highly attentive to this fact, and his interpretation hinges on the notion that their innovation upset the ecclesial and urban order in a very physical way. In studies of Erasmus' ideals for religion, the universality of his philosophy of Christ, equally livable by all members of Christendom, has very little on the surface to offer about the importance of physical space and the material dimensions to his ideal society. This creates a mild conundrum for any contextualization of Erasmian piety with reference to his forerunners. Although his ideas represent a greater openness to "the world" as it were when compared to the Devout and general medieval religiosity, his emphasis on interior reflection is so strong and permeating as to almost trivialize the relevance of the places, gestures, and times that marked his world and faith. Studies of Erasmus' ecclesiology underline the centrality of what are always very general admonitions: to peace, to prayer, to education, etc.¹⁵¹ As discussed in chapter 4, Erasmus' deference to the established social order and reliance on a highly literate faith may indicate a preoccupation with a somewhat vague, imagined future for the church. This intellectualism may have been a real

¹⁵¹ E.g. Pabel, "The Peaceful People of Christ" in *Erasmus' Vision for the Church*, and Christ-von Wedel's *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity*.

factor in his sidelining by Protestants and Catholics alike when the phenomenon of the Reformation unfolded.

The intellectualism of Erasmus is explained by his humanism, and his humanism is the key to his evolution beyond the Devout. His close relationship with Thomas More, the author of *Utopia*, is somewhat poetic in this regard. The Modern-Day Devout placed themselves at the service of their communities, opening schools and widows' homes, while pursuing their unique life of piety against the common grain. Erasmus was a recipient of their service, at least for a short time, and was imbued with their same spiritual emphases. Yet Erasmus took these emphases and developed a much neater, much more comfortable interpretation of them. In some sense, Erasmus rendered the very real and sometimes radical piety of the Devout a kind of utopian dream, a dream that was highly attractive to readers and undeniably influential, but in practice did not have the same import for ordinary people. Despite his literary success, Erasmus' impact on peoples' religious lives had to be translated through the mouths of preachers, preachers like Geert Grote over a century earlier. For this reason, we can say that Erasmus indeed learned from the Devout, and this is crucial to understanding him, but he was not really their spiritual inheritor.

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