

UNITED OR BOUND BY DEATH?

A CASE-STUDY ON GROUP IDENTITY AND TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE DEVOTIO MODERNA*

The last quarter of the 14th century saw the emergence of several small communes of women and of men living a common religious life in a couple of market towns in the IJssel region in the eastern Netherlands. These communities of both clerics and lay people, inspired by reform-minded ecclesiastics such as Geert Grote (1340-84) and Florens Radewijns (1350-1400), were in search of a spiritual revival based on an intensified private devotion and self-examination. They were going to be at the basis of the development of the late medieval movement known as *Devotio Moderna*.¹ Typical for such nascent circles of reform, however, in medieval but also in later times, was their extreme vulnerability, not only to attacks from the outside but also to internal dissension following the death of their first and charismatic leaders. As a result the religious inspiration and thus also the original enthusiasm of the first generation could easily be lost. The religious feeling that characterised the early years therefore had to be translated into a more regulated lifestyle and transmitted to the following generations. Moreover this process had to be coupled with new ways of remembering the earliest days of the movement. In the terms of the Egyptologist and cultural theorist Jan Assmann, what had to be realised was a transmutation from a lived and embodied memory into forms of cultural memory that were symbolic and written.²

* We are very grateful to Anne BOLLMANN, Koen GOUDRIAAN and Wim VERBAAL for comments and remarks on earlier drafts of this essay and to Myra HEERSPINK SCHOLZ for her careful translation of our original Dutch text.

¹ Besides the old standard work of R.R. POST, *The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism*, Leiden, 1968, a very rich and innovative synthesis can now be found in J. VAN ENGEN, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*, Philadelphia, 2008.

² J. ASSMANN, *Introduction: What is Cultural Memory?*, in IDEM (ed.), *Religion and Cultural Memory. Ten Studies*, Stanford, 2006 (German original: 2000), p. 1-30 (17). German scholars especially conducted groundbreaking research on the medieval culture of remembrance. See e.g. K. SCHMID and J. WOLLASCH

These last two transitions — on the levels of both institutionalisation and memorial practices — were made quite successfully in the *Devotio Moderna*. The first small communities of devout men and women even gave rise to three different branches: the so-called Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, who lived together according to particular household customs without taking the monastic vows; Tertiaries, men and women who adopted the rule of St. Francis's Third Order and whose communities became united in institutional structures such as the Chapter of Utrecht; and finally, several communities of regular canons and canonesses of St. Augustine, among which the monastery of Windesheim near Zwolle was of foundational significance.³ These branches, whilst being parts of one and the same movement, inevitably led to the rise and further differentiation of various group cultures — that is, groups with their own typical repertoires of behavior — in which gender and the degree of religious organisation played an important role.⁴ Despite this diversification, an important unifying factor was that each community, when stressing its identity, relied heavily on the texts and life stories of leading figures from the movement's early years. The ways in which this textual heritage, and the written cultural memory, were interpreted, integrated, and used for structuring the behavior of group members and enhancing their solidarity could vary considerably. In that sense we might perhaps consider the *Devotio Moderna* not only as one big textual community, as Nikolaus Staubach recently proposed with reference to the famous concept coined by Brian Stock, but as a movement

(eds.), *Memoria. Der geschichtliche Zeugniswert des liturgischen Gedenkens im Mittelalter*, Munich, 1984, and O. OEXLE (ed.), *Memoria als Kultur*, Göttingen, 1995.

³ On the Brethren of the Common Life, see A. G. WEILER, *Volgens de norm van de vroege kerk. De geschiedenis van de huizen van de broeders van het Gemene Leven in Nederland*, Nijmegen, 1997. On the Tertiaries, see H. VAN ENGEN, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus in het middeleeuwse bisdom Utrecht. Een bijdrage tot de institutionele geschiedenis van de Moderne Devotie*, Hilversum, 2006. On the Augustinian chapters of Windesheim and Sion, see the still important works of J. G. R. ACQUOY, *Het klooster Windesheim en zijn invloed*, 3 vols. Utrecht, 1875-1880, and E. YPMA, *Het generaal kapittel van Sion. Zijn oorsprong, ontwikkeling en inrichting*, Nijmegen, 1949.

⁴ On the concept of medieval group cultures, see R. KÜNZEL, *Beelden en zelfbeelden van middeleeuwse mensen. Historisch-antropologische studies over groepsstructuren in de Nederlanden*, Nijmegen, 1997, p. 21-22, 256-260.

within which a gradual diversification of various interrelated textual communities can be observed.⁵

In this essay we want to shed some light on this process of differentiation in the cultural transmission within the *Devotio Moderna*. We want to achieve this by means of a case study which focuses specifically on the various roles attributed to death in the movement's spirituality. This focus is pragmatic without being arbitrary. "No other age has so forcefully and continuously impressed the idea of death on the whole population as did the 15th century, in which the call of the *memento mori* echoes throughout the whole of life," Johan Huizinga already declared in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*.⁶ The brevity of life, the fear of hell and the hope of heaven, he pointed out, were among the most frequently occurring themes in devotional literature of the late Middle Ages. In the last few decades a great deal of scholarly work has once again focused on the late medieval contemplation of death and the *ars moriendi*, propagated by Jean Gerson (1363-1429) and others.⁷ The attitude towards death in the *Devotio Moderna* in particular has also been the subject of innovative research. Notably Leendert Breure has used this attitude as the point of departure for a compelling study of the collective psychology of the New Devout, based on a computerized analysis of a body of mainly biographical accounts.⁸ Like Huizinga, Breure concluded that the New Devout

⁵ See B. STOCK, *The Implications of Literacy. Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Princeton, 1983, p. 88-92; IDEM, *Listening for the Text. On the Uses of the Past*, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 23, 28, 37. On the *Devotio Moderna* as one, unifying textual community: N. STAUBACH, *Text als Prozeß. Zur Pragmatik des Schreibens und Lesens in der Devotio moderna*, in Ch. MEIER et al. (eds.), *Pragmatische Dimensionen Mittelalterlicher Schriftkultur*, Munich 2002, p. 251-276 (253-258).

⁶ J. HUIZINGA, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, Chicago, 1996 (Dutch original: 1919), p. 156.

⁷ N. OHLER, *Sterben und Tod im Mittelalter*, Munich, 1990; A. BORST et al. (eds.), *Tod im Mittelalter*, Konstanz, 1993; P. BINSKI, *Medieval Death. Ritual and Representation*, London, 1996; M. J. WENNINGER (ed.), *Du guoter löi: Sterben im Mittelalter: Ideal und Realität*, Klagenfurt, 1998; B. GORDON and P. MARSCHALL (eds.), *Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, 2000; A. REINIS, *Reforming the Art of Dying: The Ars Moriendi in the German Reformation 1519-1528*, Ashford, 2007, p. 17-42.

⁸ L. BREURE, *Doodsbeleving en levenshouding. Een historisch-psychologische studie betreffende de Moderne Devotie in het IJsselgebied in de 14^e en 15^e eeuw*, Hilversum, 1987.

lived with constant thoughts of death and of punishment and reward in the next life. By the middle of the 15th century this attitude was spelled out very clearly by Thomas a Kempis (1379/80-1471), when he advised in his *Imitatio Christi*: “Therefore, in every deed and every thought, act as though you were to die this very day.”⁹

In what follows, we will concentrate more specifically on the attitude towards death in the spirituality of the Devout as set forth in two texts which are very representative of the movement’s varying devotional preoccupations, namely the Latin treatise *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (1367-98)¹⁰ and the Middle Dutch *Collatiën* attributed in the middle of the 15th century to Johannes Brinckerinck (1359-1419).¹¹ Both authors had belonged to the first generation of the New Devout as followers of Grote and Radewijns and their words were therefore used as testimonies of the earliest, charismatic period of the religious movement. Both treatises, however, originated at different moments in the late 14th and 15th centuries: with an interval of about half a century, they played a pivotal role in forming the identity of specific groups within the *Devotio Moderna*. While they

⁹ Thomas a Kempis, *Imitatio Christi* I, 23, in L. M. J. DÉLAISSE (ed.), *Le manuscrit autographe de Thomas à Kempis et l’imitation de Jésus-Christ. Examen archéologique et édition diplomatique du Bruxellensis 5855-61*. Vol. 2. *Texte*, Paris etc., 1956, p. 212: “Sic te in omni facto et cogitatu deberes tenere, quasi statim esses moriturus.”

¹⁰ Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, in Gérard Zerbolt de Zutphen. *La montée du cœur — De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, introd. N. STAUBACH, ed. and trans. F. J. LEGRAND, Turnhout, 2006 (hereafter: DSA). Landmark studies on Zerbolt: G. H. GERRITS, *Inter timorem et spem. A Study of the Theological Thought of Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen 1367-1398*, Leiden, 1986; J. VAN ROOIJ, *Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen*, vol. I, *Leven en geschriften*, Nijmegen, 1936; N. STAUBACH (ed.), *Kirchenreform von unten. Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben*, Frankfurt am Main, etc., 2004.

¹¹ Johannes Brinckerinck, *Collatiën*, ed. W. MOLL, *Acht collatiën van Johannes Brinckerinck, eene bijdrage tot de kennis van den kanselarheid der Broeders van het Gemeene Leven, uit handschriften der vijftiende en zestiende eeuw*, in *Kerkhistorisch archief*, 4 (1866), p. 98-167 (hereafter: *Collatiën*). On Brinckerinck: W. KÜHLER, *Johannes Brinckerinck en zijn klooster te Diepenveen*, Leiden, 1914; G. H. GERRITS, *Johannes Brinckerinck. Life, Sermons and Thought*, in H. BLOMMESTIJN, Ch. CASPERS and R. HOFMAN (eds.), *Spirituality Renewed: Studies on Significant Representatives of the Modern Devotion*, Leuven, 2003, p. 51-120.

certainly do not offer two different approaches to exactly the same devotional question, both texts are very revealing of the omnipresence of the contemplation of the afterlife in the diverse interpretations of the movement's spiritual goals. A comparative study of the treatises of Zerbolt and Brinckerinck, and of the contexts in which their work was received, brings out a number of constants within the spirituality of the New Devout. It also shows, however, how the concern for preserving and transmitting the original ideas and ideals of the first generation led to completely new emphases in the formation of group identities and hence to varying textual communities.

Fear, Hope, and Love. Zerbolt's Pondering of Death as a Guide for Survival

Fear of the hereafter was not only preoccupying religious thought in the late Middle Ages. Without suggesting an all too straight causal connection between spirituality and historical circumstances, it can be established that late 14th century reality, with its omnipresent threat of death, was a factor in forcing the first New Devout into a race against time as they sought to implement their reform.¹²

The most influential of the first houses of the Common Life, which was going to become of almost symbolic significance for later generations of New Devout, came into existence around 1381, three years before the death of Geert Grote, when a few of his pupils began to live a communal life in Deventer in the house of Florens Radewijns, vicar of the Altar of St. Paul. This first small community, to which both Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen and Johannes Brinckerinck belonged, consisted of only four priests, some eight clerics, and a few laymen.¹³ The brothers strove for a revival of inner religious experience, for a spirituality modelled on the ideal of the *ecclesia primitiva* and the desert fathers, yet refashioned in the context of late medieval urban society. However, the canonical position of the brotherhood was extremely shaky at first. It did not even immediately improve when, from their house in

¹² See also: VAN ENGEN, *Sisters and Brothers...* [see n. 1], p. 296.

¹³ C. VAN DER WANSEM, *Hel ontstaan en de geschiedenis der Broederschap van het Gemene Leven tot 1400*, Leuven, 1958, p. 125; VAN ENGEN, *Sisters and Brothers...* [see n. 1], p. 69-75.

Deventer, the brothers founded the Windesheim monastery in 1387 and the congregation of regular canons bearing the same name in 1395. Opponents, especially the mendicant orders, compared the brothers to the semi-religious beghards and beguines, whose way of life still led to suspicions of heresy even in the 14th century.¹⁴ Supported by Zerbolt, who was well versed in canon law, Radewijns tried to secure the necessary episcopal approval for their new communal life. This meant that Radewijns and Zerbolt paid many visits to the bishop's court in Utrecht and travelled extensively as lobbyists for their cause.¹⁵

In 1398, however, Johannes of Kessel, one of the brothers from the Heer Florens House, died suddenly of the plague. Some of the brothers, among them Radewijns and Zerbolt, then took the precautionary measure of moving to the brothers' house in Amersfoort, which had been founded a few years earlier. The ones who had left kept in contact by letter with those who had stayed.¹⁶ At the beginning of July they received a message from Deventer that Lubbert ten Busch, who served as rector in Radewijns's absence, had also fallen ill with the plague. Thanks to this letter one can follow very closely Lubbert's process of dying.¹⁷ Although such texts undoubtedly had to conform to a specific epistolary style and may have been rewritten later, they give a clear picture of the dismay felt in the small community.

¹⁴ H. VAN ENGEN, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus...* [see n. 3], p. 61-66. See also: F.W.J. KOORN, *Women without Vows. The Case of the Beguines and the Sisters of the Common Life in the Northern Netherlands*, in E. SCHULTE VAN KESSEL (ed.), *Women and Men in Spiritual Culture, XIVth-XVIIth Centuries. A Meeting of South and North*, The Hague, 1986, p. 135-47; J.C. SCHMITT, *La mort d'une hérésie: l'Église et les cleres face aux béguines et aux béghards du Rhin supérieur du XIV^e au XV^e siècle*, Paris, 1978, p. 61-95; W. P. SIMONS, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries 1200-1565*, Philadelphia, 2003, p. 118-137.

¹⁵ J. VAN ENGEN, *Devout Communities and Inquisitorial Orders: The Legal Defense of the New Devout*, in STAUBACH (ed.), *Kirchenreform von unten...* [see n. 10], p. 44-101.

¹⁶ Th. MERTENS, *Zerbolls letzter Sommer. Die Amersfoorter Briefe aus dem Jahr 1398*, in STAUBACH (ed.), *Kirchenreform von unten...* [see n. 10], p. 120-142.

¹⁷ Th. MERTENS, *Rondom het sterfbed van Lubbert ten Busch: de Moderne Devoten en de pest te Deventer in 1398*, in *De pest in de Nederlanden: medisch historische beschouwingen 650 jaar na de zwarte dood. Vierde symposium Geschiedenis der geneeskundige wetenschappen, Brussel 21 maart 1998*, Brussels, 1999, p. 141-158.

Soon after the brothers who had left returned to Deventer, Zerbolt died suddenly also at the age of only thirty one. In December 1398 he had travelled to the Benedictine monastery of St. Mary in Dikninge to speak with the abbot about the attacks on the Devout's movement. While spending a night in Windesheim on his way back to Deventer, he fell seriously ill and died after just a few hours. Then, two years later, even before the bishop of Utrecht finally gave his approval to the life and customs of the brothers, Florens Radewijns passed away. In the space of less than five years the brotherhood had lost its most important members. In keeping with Radewijns's wish, the newly ordained priest Amilius Assche was appointed as his successor as well as rector of the Deventer brothers' house. Three years later he died too. For such a small community this was a terrible blow.

Understandably, in these critical circumstances the brothers felt a need to fall back on some of the basic texts of the recently deceased founders of the movement as the ideal guide for the future spirituality of the Devout. One of those authors was Zerbolt. Son of a middle-class family from Zutphen, he had entered Radewijns's sphere of influence already at age fifteen, as a pupil of the Latin school in Deventer, and had become the librarian of the brothers' house. Accounts of Zerbolt's life, as in the *Dialogus noviciorum* of Thomas a Kempis, written shortly before the mid-15th century, paint a picture of a devout and widely-read man who spent a great deal of time in study and prayer.¹⁸

Despite his rather short life, Zerbolt played an unusually important role in recording and spreading the ideas of the *Devotio Moderna*. He wrote two treatises on the devotional life within a religious community: the *Tractatus devotus de reformatione virium anime* and *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*.¹⁹ Moreover, as already indicated, he was in large part responsible for legitimising and propagating the new movement of the Common Life in the outside world, enhancing in this way at the same time the sense of com-

¹⁸ Thomas a Kempis, *Dialogus noviciorum*, in M.J. POHL (ed.), *Thomas Hemerken a Kempis. Opera omnia*, vol. 7, Freiburg im Brisgau, 1922, p. 275-282 (*De domino Gerardo Zutphaniae*) (277).

¹⁹ Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen, *Tractatus devotus de reformatione virium anime*, in *Gérard Zerbolt de Zutphen. Manuel de la réforme intérieure — Tractatus devotus de reformatione virium anime*, introd. J. VAN AELST, ed. and trans. F. J. LEGRAND, Turnhout, 2001; DSA... [see n. 10].

munity among the Devout.²⁰ He himself, it should be noted, never joined one of the regular variants of the *Devotio Moderna*.

Especially in his treatise *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, which can be viewed as a further elaboration of *De reformatione virium anime*, Zerbolt made of both death and the desire for heaven a central theme. In doing so he placed exceptional weight on a sensitivity that had been cultivated in the brotherhood from its earliest days. Geert Grote, for example, in a letter to the very worldly student Johannes ten Water, had already made a passionate plea for the art of dying as set forth in the work of the German Dominican Heinrich Suso (1300-66) and the Brabant mystic Johannes Ruusbroec (1293-1380).²¹ And it also turns out that already at a very early point in the circle around Grote and Radewijns, Monday was reserved for spiritual exercises concentrating on the meditation on death.²² Grote is moreover reported, in a famous passage of the chronicle of Henry Pomerius (1382-1469) from the Augustinian monastery of Groenendael, to have been occupied even more intensely with dread of the hereafter than his source of inspiration Ruusbroec. According to this testimony, he once tried in vain to convince Ruusbroec to be more concerned with the fear of infernal punishments instead of trusting solely in God's providence.²³

De spiritualibus ascensionibus is a treatise which is highly typical of the New Devout's early preoccupation with the "recrafting" of

²⁰ See Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, *Super modo vivendi devotorum hominum simul commorantium*, ed. A. HYMA, *Het traktaat Super modo vivendi devotorum hominum simul commorantium door Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen*, in *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van het Aartsbisdom Utrecht*, 52 (1926), p. 1-100. John Van Engen is currently preparing a new edition of this collection of texts under the more appropriate title *Circa modum vivendi quorundam devotorum hominum qui simul in suis domibus vel conductis hospitiis commorantur*. See VAN ENGEN, *Devout Communities...*[see n. 15], p. 97-101.

²¹ Geert Grote, *Gerardi Magni Epistolae*, ed. W. MULDER, Antwerp and Nijmegen, 1933, p. 124-131; J. VAN ENGEN, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, New York, 1988, p. 40, 78-84.

²² R.Th.M. VAN DIJK, *Tijdordering in de devote overweging*, in P. BANGE (ed.), *Geloof, moraal en intellect in de Middeleeuwen. Voordrachten gehouden tijdens het symposium t.g.v. het tien-jarig bestaan van het Nijmeegs Centrum voor Middeleeuwse Studies 10 en 11 december 1993*, Nijmegen, 1993, p. 139-158 (155-156).

²³ Henry Pomerius, *De origine monasterii Viridivallis et de gestis patrum et fratrum in primordiali fervore ibidem degentium*, ed. J.B. DE LEU, in *Analecta Bollandiana*, 4 (1885), p. 263-322 (290).

the self.²⁴ Zerbolt describes how a person needs to ascend out of his sinful condition into a state in which his heart is again free from sin and filled only with love for God.²⁵ Humankind, according to Zerbolt, had fallen three times: through original sin, through sinful inclination, and through mortal sin. Although Christ's crucifixion had redeemed human beings from original sin, it had not yet restored them to their original state.²⁶ All three falls, however, could be reversed by means of three corresponding ascents — through repentance, purification of the heart and the struggle against the mortal sins —, each of which was further subdivided into several steps.²⁷

These ideas were not particularly original. With his *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* Zerbolt placed himself in a long tradition going back to Plato's allegory of the cave and early Christian authors like Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite, who distinguished three paths of spiritual ascent: that of purification (*via purgativa*), enlightenment (*via illuminativa*), and union (*via unitiva*).²⁸ By way of the 12th-century Parisian theologians from the school of St. Victor, this mystical three-part scheme was taken up in the 13th century by a few important Franciscan authors such as Bonaventura (1217-74) in his *De triplici via*.²⁹ But it was primarily from the work of Bonaventura's contemporary and fellow Franciscan David of Augsburg (1200-72) that Zerbolt gained his familiarity with the *triplex via*.³⁰ David's *De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione* enjoyed an

²⁴ VAN ENGEN, *Sisters and Brothers...* [see n. 1], p. 79.

²⁵ GERRITS, *Inter timorem et spem...* [see n. 10], p. 264.

²⁶ DSA... [see n. 10], chap. III, p. 112.

²⁷ For schematised representations of Zerbolt's transformational process, see R. Th. M. VAN DIJK, *Toward Imageless Contemplation. Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen as Guide for Lectio Divina*, in BLOMMESTIJN, CASPERS and HOFMAN (eds.), *Spirituality Renewed...*[see n. 11], p. 3-28 (12).

²⁸ GERRITS, *Inter timorem et spem...* [see n. 10], p. 18-26, 264-279; K. RUH, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik*, vol. 1, *Die Grundlegung durch die Kirchenväter und die Mönchstheologie des 12. Jahrhunderts*, Munich, 1990, p. 53-58.

²⁹ Bonaventura, *De triplici via*, in *S. Bonaventurae opera omnia*, vol. VIII, ed. PP. Collegii s. Bonaventurae Quaracchi, 1898, p. 3-27. See also L. A. M. GOOSSENS, *De meditatie in de eerste tijd van de Moderne Devotie*, Haarlem and Antwerp, 1952, p. 52-53; K. RUH, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik*, vol. 2, *Frauenmystik und Franziskanische Mystik der Frühzeit*, Munich, 1993, p. 428.

³⁰ STAUBACH and LEGRAND, *Gérard Zerbolt de Zutphen...*[see n. 10], p. 22; K. PANSTERS, *Didactiek en dynamiek. Voortgaan in deugden in de geschriften van de Moderne Devoten*, in *Trajecta*, 16 (2007), p. 311-334 (318-334).

extraordinarily wide dissemination in Northwest Europe.³¹ During the 15th century, in the Dutch language area alone, there must have circulated at least 150 manuscripts containing it.³² Thomas a Kempis was even able to report that Zerbolt, towards the end of his short life, often reread the *Speculum monachorum* and the *Profectus religiosorum*, the first and third books of the work by David of Augsburg mentioned above, as way to relive the religious enthusiasm of his novitiate.³³

The writings of the first Devout were therefore firmly anchored in a long tradition. Besides the four church fathers, Bonaventura, and David of Augsburg, the authors most read and used included Cassian (c. 360-435), Hugh of St. Victor (1097-1141), and especially the Cistercians Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-67).³⁴ Despite this range of influences, the various texts of the first Devout form a coherent and unified corpus. In the *Tractatulus devotus* and the personal anthology *Omnes, inquiet, artes* of Florens Radewijns, for example, the same material can be found as that used by Zerbolt.³⁵ The extensive similarities and overlaps between these texts are not surprising considering that the two authors lived together in the Heer Florens House. However, the texts of Radewijns, with their point-by-point approach, were intended for internal use.³⁶ *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, on the

³¹ David of Augsburg, *De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione*, ed. PP. Collegii s. Bonaventurae Quaracchi, 1899.

³² K. STOKER and Th. VERBEIJ, *Uit profectus. Over de verspreiding van Middelnederlandse kloosterliteratuur aan de hand van de Profectus religiosorum van David van Augsburg*, in Th. MERTENS et al. (eds.), *Boeken voor de eeuwigheid. Middelnederlandse geestelijke proza*, Amsterdam, 1993, p. 318-340 (324).

³³ Thomas a Kempis, *Dialogus noviciorum*... [see n. 18], p. 280.

³⁴ W. VERBAAL, *Zelfkennis als begin van het heil bij Bernardus van Clairvaux en Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen*, in *Trajecta*, 12 (2003), p. 5-24, here 11-15. See also STAUBACH and LEGRAND, *Gérard Zerbolt de Zutphen*... [See n. 10], p. 423.

³⁵ Florens Radewijns, *Tractatulus devotus*, in *Florent Radewijns. Petit manuel pour le dévot moderne — Tractatulus devotus*, introd. Th. MERTENS, ed. and trans. F. J. LEGRAND, Turnhout, 1999; Florens Radewijns, *Omnes, inquiet, artes*, in M. Th. P. VAN WOERKOM (ed.), *Het Libellus Omnes, inquiet, artes. Een rapiarium van Florentius Radewijns*, PhD. diss., University of Leuven, 1950. See also Th. MERTENS, *Florens Radewijns en zijn Tractatulus devotus*, in *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 73 (1999), p. 20-39 (37); M.Th.P. VAN WOERKOM, *Het Libellus Omnes, inquiet, artes. Een rapiarium van Florens Radewijns*, in *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 25 (1951), p. 113-148, 225-268 (129-133).

³⁶ The only manuscript — Ms. UTRECHT, AARTSBISSCHOPPELIJK MUSEUM, Deventer, PK2, now lost — in which the *Tractatulus devotus* was preserved, ori-

other hand, was aimed at a broader public. It is possible that Zerbolt, on the request of his teacher Florens Radewijns, set about to provide a further elaboration and a systematic basis of the New Devout's way of life.³⁷ The innovative and specific character of the religious experience that is aimed at in *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* seems in any case to be guaranteed by the intensity and systematic nature of the spiritual exercises it describes.³⁸

Zerbolt, however, just like Florens Radewijns in his *Tractatulus devotus*, actually concentrates only on the first path of traditional mysticism, the more practical way of ascetic purification, within which he situates three stages of ascent. His approach can hence be regarded as a fine illustration of what John van Engen has noted, namely that “where mystics threw themselves finally into the spiritual abyss and onto the favour of God (...), the Devout called upon urban neighbours to take charge of their souls, to remake their inner powers and affections, like an expert craftsman”.³⁹ The devotee, according to *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, must actively and individually examine him- or herself in order to become aware of his or her sinful life, for only through this self-knowledge can a person combat his sins.⁴⁰ Aids in this process, Zerbolt explains, are devotional reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), and prayer (*oratio*).⁴¹ *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* consequently offers mainly material for self-examination, in which contemplation of death plays a particularly crucial role. The principal topics for this devotional pondering are the Four Last Things — death, the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell — and the life and suffering of Christ (*mysteria Christi*).⁴²

ginated in the Deventer brothers house. See MERTENS, *Florens Radewijns...* [see n. 35], p. 34-37.

³⁷ VERBAAL, *Zelfkennis...* [see n. 34], p. 8.

³⁸ H. BLOMMESTIJN, *Growing Towards Likeness. Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphens View of the Spiritual Journey*, in BLOMMESTIJN, CASPERS and HOFMAN (eds.), *Spirituality Renewed...* [see n. 11], p. 121-155 (154-155).

³⁹ VAN ENGEN, *Sisters and Brothers...* [see n. 1], p. 79.

⁴⁰ A. G. WEILER, *La construction du soi dans les milieux de la Devotio Moderna*, in *Publications du Centre Européen d'études bourguignonnes XIV^e-XVI^e s.*, 29 (1989), p. 9-16.

⁴¹ DSA... [see n. 10], chap. XLIII-XLVI, p. 274-296. See also GERRITS, *Inter timorem et spem...* [see n. 10], p. 276-279.

⁴² On meditation and spiritual exercises in the first decennia of the Devotio Moderna: GOOSSENS, *De meditatie...* [See n. 29].

In the second ascent, which is aimed at combating sinful inclination, the essence of Zerbolt's process of spiritual transformation emerges. The heart, he explains, must first of all be purified of its sins before the devotee can ascend further unto God.⁴³ This second ascent is again subdivided into three stages: fear, hope, and love. The Devout must in the first place feel a dread of death and hell. This fear, according to Zerbolt, will increase markedly with the awareness of how sternly God judges and punishes.⁴⁴ This, together with the self-knowledge about the sinful state in which the individual Devout finds himself, will lead to remorse (*compunctio*).⁴⁵ In keeping with the idea, which was widespread in the late Middle Ages, that visual images could prove highly effective in the process of memorisation,⁴⁶ Zerbolt maintains that in this process concrete visualisations can be especially helpful:

Our blinded minds are better led to a knowledge of the invisible through the visible and material, and so to better sense those pains, take up the images put in writing by the saints.⁴⁷

In contemplating death the devotee was to first imagine his deathbed. Zerbolt advises him to ponder the brevity of life and the futility of physical and material pleasures and desires. Will he then not feel immense remorse about his sinful life and his approaching end in the light of this experience? All earthly, physical life, Zerbolt declares, is in the final analysis transitory:

⁴³ DSA... [see n. 10], chap. xv, p. 148-152.

⁴⁴ See e.g. *Ibid.*, chap. xx, p. 166-170.

⁴⁵ GERRITS, *Inter timorem et spem...* [see n. 10], p. 180-182.

⁴⁶ J. VAN AELST, *Bitter as Myrrh. Gerard Zerbolts Meditation on the Passion of Christ*, in STAUBACH (ed.), *Kirchenreform von unten...* [see n. 10], p. 306-323 (309). See also J. HAMBURGER, *The Visual and the Visionary. Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, New York, 1998, p. 111-148.

⁴⁷ DS... [see n. 10], chap. XXI, p. 170: "Quia autem mens nostra caeca melius per visibilia et sensibilia ducitur ad noticiam invisibilium, ideo, ut illas penas melius sentias, potes tibi assumere similitudines a sanctis super hoc in Scripturis positas." Our English translations of quotations from Zerbolt's *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* are taken from the slightly abbreviated translation of Zerbolt's text by VAN ENGEN, *Devotio Moderna...* [see n. 21], p. 243-315. VAN ENGEN still had to use the old edition of J. MAHIEU (ed. and trans.), *Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen. De spiritualibus ascensionibus Van geestelijke opklimmingen*, Bruges, 1941. Hence we sometimes slightly adapted his translation.

Then follow the bier to the funeral and see how that poor body, for which he sought delights for such a long time, is given over to the earth, prepared as food for the worms and consigned to eternal oblivion.⁴⁸

He subsequently warns the reader of the stringency with which God will judge and punish at the Last Judgment.⁴⁹ The damned will then be separated from the redeemed and carried off to the depths of hell, which Zerbolt describes at length in very lively language:

Think of the multitude of punishments. There is an inextinguishable fire with abounding heat, an undying light, an intolerable cold, a rotten stench, a palpable darkness, and undying worms. There is punishment for every sense and in every member. Sight will see the wormlike faces of demons horribly afflicting it with their horrible aspect. Hearing will take in nothing but grieving, weeping and wailing, and voices saying, "Woe, woe, that I was ever born or created by God and have not perished; cursed be God and cursed be the Trinity which created us for this punishment." Behold this is the song which they sing there with all its lamentations, and so on.⁵⁰

Fear must not become permanent, however.⁵¹ The second phase of the second ascent therefore begins with the contemplation of heavenly things. The resulting desire for heavenly joys, from which one is still so far removed, will cause remorse to grow. That picture of heaven also corresponds to familiar stereotypes — which around that same time were also increasingly widespread in their satirical version, the Land of Cockagne:⁵²

⁴⁸ DSA... [see n. 10], chap. XIX, p. 164: "Deinde, sequere funus ad sepulturam et vide quomodo caro misera, propter quam tanto tempore quesivit delectaciones, terre traditur et vermibus esca paratur et traditur perpetue oblivioni."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 168-170.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. XXI, p. 172: "Cogita de penarum multiplicitate: ibi, ignis inextinguibilis habundans ardore, carens tamen luce, ibi, intolerabile frigus, ibi, fetor pessimus, tenebre palpabiles, vermes immortales. Est pena in omni sensu, in omni membro. Visus videbit larvales demonum facies mirabiliter suo terribili aspectu affligentes. Auditus nil aliud audit quam fletus, planctus et ululatus et vocem illam: heu, heu, ve, ve, ut quid fuimus nati? Ut quid a Deo creati? Ut quid non perimus? Maledictus Deus et maledicta Trinitas que nos ad hanc creavit penalitatem. Ecce hoc est carmen quod ibi cantant continens lamentaciones et ve."

⁵¹ GOOSSENS, *De meditatie...* [see n. 29], p. 45, 136-137; GERRITS, *Inter timorem et spem...* [see n. 10], p. 268-270.

⁵² H. PLEIJ, *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life*, New York, 2001 (Dutch original: 1997), p. 236-237.

It is a spacious field abloom with all the most beautiful flowers. There is always most pleasant air, the most fragrant scents, and plenty of every delight.⁵³

Zerbolt, of course, does not locate the greatest reward in an unrestrained enjoyment of those desirable things but in beholding God: “In it, you will be blessed, and will enjoy fully the most blessed bliss, which is God himself.”⁵⁴ This leads him to advise the reader to think about the loving way in which God created human beings in his own image and endowed them with reason, memory, and soul.⁵⁵

Finally, the third stage within the second ascent is love for God. Zerbolt presents the subjects and the method for a pondering of the life and suffering of Christ. His division of the passion story into chapters with accompanying meditations and exercises enables the reader to commit the story to memory.⁵⁶ In the end the devotee, thus filled with the love of God, ought to be drawn to the good. The ultimate goal of the ascent lies in the vision of God and Christ after the Last Judgment. But this can be fully achieved only after death. Hence Zerbolt urges the devotee to take charge of his fate. Only when a person is aware of being cast to and fro between fear and hope, between the prospect of hell and of heaven, can he make the ascent. Zerbolt, it seems, did not want to choose between fear and hope: it was precisely the individual experience of uncertainty about salvation, combined with the desire for an encounter with God, which gave Zerbolt’s perception of death its dynamic quality.⁵⁷

True mystical spirituality was not completely alien to the early *Devotio Moderna*.⁵⁸ However, the process of spiritual transformation in *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* illustrates the mainly practical

⁵³ DSA... [see n. 10], chap. xxiv, p. 184: “Est item campus speciosissimus omnium florum pulchritudine decoratus. Ibi, semper est estas amenissima, ibi, odorum suavitas fragrantissima et omnium delectabilium copia.”

⁵⁴ DSA... [see n. 10], chap. xxiv, p. 184: “In ea beatus eris et beatissima beatitudine que Deus est perfrueris.”

⁵⁵ DSA... [see n. 10], chap. xxv, p. 186-192.

⁵⁶ VAN AELST, *Bitter as Myrrh*... [see n. 46], p. 321.

⁵⁷ BREURE, *Doodsbeleving*... [see n. 8], p. 86.

⁵⁸ We can think for example of the work of the Windesheim canon Henry Mandé d. 1431. See also Th. MERTENS, *Mystieke cultuur en literatuur in de late Middeleeuwen*, in F. VAN OOSTROM *et al.* (eds.), *Grote lijnen. Synthesen over Midde nederlandse letterkunde*, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 117-135 (120-125).

character of religious experience in the writings of the first generation of the New Devout. Zerbolt drew upon the older mystical tradition, but at the same time, by reducing the traditional three mystical paths of spiritual ascent to the sole stage of purification, he gave to that legacy a highly practical and concrete turn and transformed it into a form of accessible and spiritualised asceticism.⁵⁹ This perhaps explains the popularity and wide dissemination of his text in the course of the 15th century, as he may well have paved the way for the apparent evolution towards an even more ascetical implementation of the Devout's spirituality in later decades.

The true role of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* in the moulding of the spirituality of the Devotio Moderna acquires clearer contours when we consider the extant manuscripts. According to the most recent estimates, approximately 125 manuscripts have been preserved with the — in most cases complete — Latin text.⁶⁰ We can thus notice how a textual community gradually came into being, originating from the first communities of the Common Life and with the *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* as one of its key texts. The success of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* is substantiated for example by the fact that it is listed in multiple reading lists from convents of Augustinian regular canons.⁶¹ In a first phase, this textual community seems to have spanned the whole movement of the Devotio Moderna. However, the extant manuscripts also appear to have originated in reform-minded circles of entirely different monastic orders, such as Crutched Friars or Carthusians. The Carthusian houses of Nieuwlicht in Utrecht or of St. Barbara in Cologne already owned a complete copy of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* in the first years of the 15th century.⁶² At a relatively early point, therefore, Zerbolt's treatise lent itself readily for use in a fairly diverse range of communities related to the larger movement of "monastic observantism".⁶³ Established orders which

⁵⁹ GERRITS, *Inter timorem et spem...* [see n. 10], p. 287, 299.

⁶⁰ STAUBACH and LEGRAND, *Gérard Zerbolt de Zutphen...* [see n. 10], p. 41-54. This number does not include incunables and early printed editions.

⁶¹ See for instance P.F.J. OBBEMA, *Boeken in een meditatieschema uit Deventer*, in P.F.J. OBBEMA (ed.), *De Middeleeuwen in handen: Over de boekcultuur in de late middeleeuwen*, Hilversum, 1996, p. 135-142 (139-142).

⁶² VAN ROOIJ, *Gérard Zerbolt van Zutphen...* [see n. 10], p. 299.

⁶³ See H. VAN ENGEN and G. VERHOEVEN (eds.), *Monastiek observantisme en Moderne Devotie in de noordelijke Nederlanden*, Hilversum, 2008.

had their own characteristic reading programmes thus seemed to be drawn to some extent into the orbit of the newly developing textual community of the first Modern Devout.

In addition to the original Latin version of Zerbolt's treatise, there are also at least 34 manuscripts identified with complete or partial translations, primarily in Middle Dutch but also in a few cases in Middle Low and Middle High German.⁶⁴ The presence of this vernacular tradition allows us to distinguish a clear gender-based difference in the reception of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* as well as a new way of meditating with this text in a rather selective way. While the manuscripts containing the Latin text, in as far as they can be attributed to the collections of specific communities, all belonged to male institutions,⁶⁵ the provenance of the vernacular translations is, except for five manuscripts, women's

⁶⁴ Our figures are mainly based on detailed information in the online catalogues *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta*, University of Leiden, <http://bnm.leidenuniv.nl> and *Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections*, The Hague, Royal Library, <http://www.mmhc.nl>, accessed on 11 November 2009, which list together 31 manuscripts containing 15 complete and 16 partial versions. For two Middle High German manuscripts not listed in these online catalogues, see Gerrits, *Inter timorem et spem...* [see n. 10], p. 29 (Ms. Innsbruck, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Tirol, 641 [complete text] and Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. allem. 125 [excerpts]). Additional information can also be found in VAN ROOIJ, *Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen...* [see n. 10], p. 313-322; K. STOKER and Th. VERBEIJ, *Collecties op orde. Middel nederlandse handschriften uit kloosters en semi-religieuze gemeenschappen in de Nederlanden*. Vol. II. *Repertorium*, Leuven, 1997; and in R.Th. M. VAN DIJK, *Ascensiones in corde disponere. Spirituelle Umformung bei Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen*, in STAUBACH (ed.), *Kirchenreform von unten...* [see n. 10] p. 287-305 (291-292). Van Dijk mentions the existence of some 21 Middle Dutch manuscripts containing the (complete?) text but gives no details. He also points at a now lost 15th-century manuscript of the Tertiaries of Almelo reproduced in the microfilm NIJMEGEN, TITUS BRANDSMA INSTITUUT, *Opera litteraria Devotionis modernae* 3078.

⁶⁵ It should be noted, however, that especially in some houses of regular canons, there must have been several sisters who were well versed in Latin and able to read treatises in this language. See W. SCHEEPSMA, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their writings*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK, Rochester, N.Y. 2004 (Dutch original: 1997), p. 41-47, and K. GOUDRIAAN, *Herinnering en herstel. Memoria in functie van restauratie in het Goudse vrouwenklooster Sint-Margaretha*, in J. DEPLOIGE, B. MELJNS and R. NIP (eds.), *Herinnering in geschrift en praktijk in religieuze gemeenschappen uit de Lage Landen, 1000-1500*, Brussels, 2009, p. 89-103 (99-101). On the situation in houses of Teriaries: L. VAN BEEK, *Ten love Godes ende tol salicheit der susteren. Koptist Peter Zwaninc († 1493) en de*

houses. As far as the original ownership of these manuscripts can be determined, which is the case for 18 of them, it turns out that they were to be found mainly among female Tertiaries (7) and Augustinian canonesses (6).

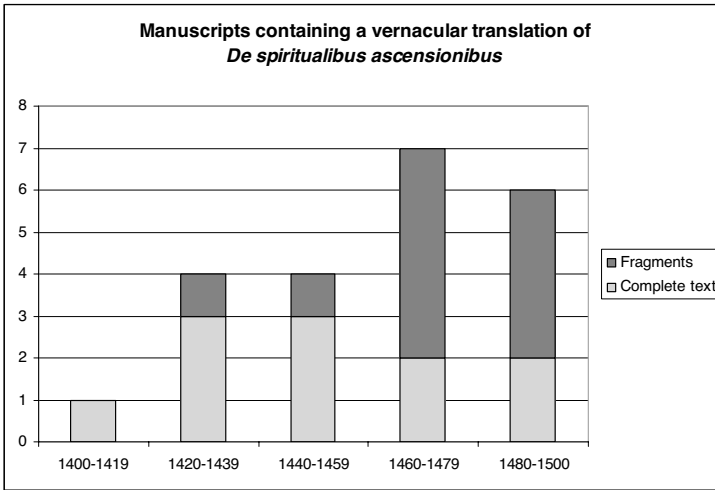
The spread of the Middle Dutch version of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* already started in the first decades of the 15th century. By 1414, the Tertiaries' convent Oude Hof in Weesp possessed a complete translation⁶⁶ as did also, in the first half of the 15th century, the Deventer Brandeshuus, where a community of Sisters of the Common life was residing.⁶⁷ Most of the translations, however, were made from the middle of the 15th century onwards and testify to an apparent need to make Zerbolt's text accessible to a broader, female public. This also becomes clear from the few book lists from Tertiaries' houses that have been preserved and which all list Zerbolt's treatise. Furthermore, in the so-called *Informieringheboek* of the convent of St. Agnes in Amersfoort, a rare devotional manual for women Tertiaries written by Jan de Wael in the years 1510-1512, in which a three-step reading programme for novices is proposed, the Middle Dutch translation of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* is still listed amidst translations of other famous treatises by David of Augsburg, Jan of Schoonhoven and even Bonaventure and Jean Gerson.⁶⁸ However, as can be established from our figure (p. 363), which gives only those 22 vernacular manuscripts which can be dated more or less precisely, it turns out that from the middle of the 15th century onwards, it was mostly partial translations that started to circulate. What stands out about these fragments is that they often deal with the contemplation of the life and suffering of Christ — which, as we shall see below, had become a prime topic of meditation in female convent spirituality.

boekcultuur bij de tertiarissen van Weesp in de tweede helft van de vijftiende eeuw, in *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 79 (2005-2008), p. 51-81.

⁶⁶ Ms. AMSTERDAM, UNIVERSITEITSBIBLIOTHEEK, I G 39 (Cat. 559).

⁶⁷ Ms. DEVENTER, ATHENAEUMBIBLIOTHEEK, I, 53 (101 F 6).

⁶⁸ S. CORBELLINI, *Mannenregels voor een vrouwenwereld. De spirituele opvoeding van zusters in derde-orde-gemeenschappen*, in *Trajecta*, 14 (2005), p. 177-192 (182 and 188).



By the very end of the 14th century it had become urgently necessary to transmit the body of thought of the first Devout to new generations. Zerbolt's *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* belonged to the most important texts in which these spiritual ideals were systematically articulated. It funneled the charisma and religious spirit of the early years of the movement into a guide conceived for individual use and aimed at uniting the followers of Geert Grote and Florens Radewijns.⁶⁹ Their chosen way of life thus acquired a permanent character. In this spirituality, we have noted, the individual contemplation of death constituted one of the main means to accomplish the ideal of the reformation of the self. Finally, by his choice of sources, Zerbolt integrated the ideas of the Devout into an older, recognisable line of thinking, with the result that the life and customs of the Brothers and Sisters, though often criticised, were not perceived as alien to existing orders and traditions, and that his text could even become popular outside the *Devotio Moderna*.

⁶⁹ See for example the case study of one Middle Dutch manuscript with marginal notes pointing to two different week programmes for the use of extracts of Zerbolt's text in personal meditation exercises: VAN DIJK, *Tijdordening...* [see n. 22].

The Four Arms of the Cross. Brinckerinck's *Collatiën* as an Instrument of Monasticisation

Around 1450 the *Devotio Moderna* played an entirely different role in late medieval society from that of half a century earlier. While at the end of the 14th century the movement was still struggling for survival, the popularity and appeal of the Devout's way of life now led to the foundation of more and more houses spread over the Low Countries and the German Empire. Many existing communities joined the movement as well. Women in particular felt drawn to the communal life. Following the death of Geert Grote, Johannes Brinckerinck became the most important organiser of the semi-religious life for female Devout. In 1392, shortly after being ordained to the priesthood, Brinckerinck — on the recommendation of Florens Radewijns — succeeded Johannes van den Gronde as rector of the so-called Master Geert House in Deventer, which was restricted to poor and unmarried women. Before long several communities of Sisters of the Common Life emerged from this house. In 1400, for instance, Brinckerinck together with a few noble women founded a community of Sisters of the Common Life in Diepenveen. A few years later this sisters' house became the first and certainly the most important female Augustinian convent of the Chapter of Windesheim.⁷⁰

The large increase in the number of women in the *Devotio Moderna* placed the leading male communities under considerable pressure for they had to take on the pastoral, sacramental, and onerous physical tasks that the sisters were unable to perform. In 1436 the Chapter of Windesheim even petitioned the pope to forbid the inclusion of any more convents. Nevertheless, the number of regular convents kept growing in the course of the 15th century. Although these were no longer officially members of the Chapter, they were strongly influenced by the way of life and especially by the statutes of Windesheim. More and more communities also tried to approximate the monastic life as closely as possible and converted to a more closed state.⁷¹ As early as the beginning of the 15th century a number of brothers' and sisters' houses of the Common

⁷⁰ SCHEEPSMA, *Medieval Religious Women...* [see n. 65], p. 5-9.

⁷¹ R.Th.M. VAN DIJK, *Het vrouwenklooster Diepenveen in zijn historische context. Bijdrage aan de geschiedenis van de religieuze vrouwen in de Moderne Devotie*, in W. SCHEEPSMA (ed.), *Het oolmoedig fundament van Diepenveen. Zeshonderd*

Life, primarily in Holland, joined the Third Order of St. Francis. From 1401 on they were united in the Chapter of Utrecht.⁷² By adopting an official rule, they strengthened their canonical position. This monasticising process gained considerable momentum in the second half of the 15th century. Many sisters' houses joined the Tertiaries and in several cases moved over to the regular Augustinian order a few years later. Even among the Tertiaries themselves, a monasticising tendency could be noticed, most notably after 1487-88 when they introduced the principle of full vows.⁷³ The initiative for this move towards the monastic life often came from above, from the male clergy, yet to what extent it was also supported by the women themselves remains a question of debate especially since the conversion to the Augustinian rule often implied big changes in the daily life of the sisters and in their commitments towards the outside world.⁷⁴

This process of both expansion and institutionalisation led in the course of the 15th century to a discrepancy between the original small-scale character of the *Devotio Moderna* and the new reality. In keeping with their degree of monasticisation and the sex of their members, new group cultures began to spring up within the movement, with their own repertoires of behavioural rules and cultural expressions. Along with this evolution came a gradual narrowing of the space allowed for purely individual religious experience, especially in the women's communities. In 1455, for example, the Chapter of Windesheim even issued a general ban on writing for women.⁷⁵ This was probably a direct reaction to the work of the famous Ghent prioress Alijt Bake (1415-55), who had rather too candidly put her mystical experiences in writing.⁷⁶ As Wybren

jaar Maria en Sint-Agnesklooster 1400-2000, Kampen, 2002, p. 15-39 (23-25, 28-29).

⁷² H. VAN ENGEN, *De derde orde...* [see n. 3], p. 84-110.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁴ See M. VAN LUIJK, *Bruiden van Christus: de tweede religieuze vrouwenbeweging in Leiden en Zwolle 1380-1580*, Zutphen, 2004, p. 141-174, and the remarks of A.B. MULDER-BAKKER, *Buiten de orde. Devote vrouwen op zoek naar een passende levensvorm*, in *Trajecta*, 14 (2005), p. 193-204 (193-194).

⁷⁵ S. VAN DER WOUDE (ed.), *Acta capituli Windeshemsis. Acta van de kapittelvergaderingen der congregatie van Windesheim*, The Hague, 1953, p. 53. See also MERTENS, *Mystieke cultuur...* [see n. 58], p. 128.

⁷⁶ A. BOLLMANN, *Being a Woman on My Own: Alijt Bake 1415-1455 as Reformer of the Inner Self*, in A.B. MULDER-BAKKER (ed.), *Seeing and Knowing*.

Scheepsma, amongst others, has argued, humility and devotion, supervised by male rectors and confessors, came to occupy a central place in the female spiritual ideal.⁷⁷

In his *De libris teutonicalibus* Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen had declared already that the reading of religious books in the vernacular was not forbidden for laypersons — by which he very likely meant women as well as men.⁷⁸ In particular, texts that dealt with the practice of virtue, or devotional exercises that stimulated remorse and diligence, he considered highly suitable for reading in translation.⁷⁹ Brinckerinck, too, as rector of Diepenveen had made a similar plea to allow sisters to read religious works in their own language, among them those of Bernard of Clairvaux or David of Augsburg.⁸⁰ As we can still deduce from Jan de Wael's early-16th-century *Informieringheboec* for the Tertiaries of Amersfoort, this body of texts continued to be important for the instruction of novices.⁸¹ Yet, while spiritual education and the typical devotional reading proficiency remained primary, this reading culture underwent some adaptation which paralleled the nascent process of monasticisation. Especially from the mid-15th century on, there was a growing need for didactic, moralistic texts which remained connected — at least symbolically — with the spirit of the movement's early years but at the same time could instruct the sisters in the conventual life that had evolved to such a significant degree. It was moreover also from these decades onwards that the first col-

Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200-1550, Turnhout, 2004, p. 67-96 (94); Wybren SCHEEPSMA, *Mysticism and Modern Devotion. Alijt Bakes 1415-1455 Lessons in the Mystical Way of Living*, in BLOMMESTIJN, CASPERS and HOFMAN (eds.), *Spirituality Renewed...* [see n. 11], p. 157-167.

⁷⁷ SCHEEPSMA, *Medieval Religious Women...* (see n. 65), *passim*.

⁷⁸ Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, *De libris teutonicalibus*, ed. A. HYMA, *The De libris teutonicalibus by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen*, in *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, 17 (1924), p. 42-70. See also N. STAUBACH, *Gerard Zerbolt von Zutphen und die Apologie der Laienlektüre in der Devotio moderna*, in Th. KOCK and R. SCHLUSEMANN (eds.), *Laienlektüre und Buchmarkt im späten Mittelalter*, Frankfurt am Main etc. 1997, p. 221-289.

⁷⁹ The Middle Dutch translations of the work of Thomas of Cantimpré were very popular. See C.M. STUTVOET-JOANKNECHT, *Der Byen Boeck. De Middelnederlandse vertalingen van Bonum universale de apibus van Thomas van Cantimpré en hun achtergrond*, Amsterdam, 1990, p. 130-153.

⁸⁰ STOOKER and VERBEIJ, *Ut profectus...* [see n. 32], p. 326, 478-479.

⁸¹ CORBELLINI, *Mannenregels...* [see n. 68], p. 188.

lections of *vitae* of the earliest brothers and sisters started to gain importance, not in the least by stressing the austerity of the communal life of the very beginnings of the movement.

This development of a new religious discourse that nevertheless appealed to the past brought about a gradual broadening in the role of the pondering of death as well. We have seen how Zerbolt's *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* certainly lost none of its popularity after the mid-15th century. In fact, in women's convents more and more translations of this text began to circulate, though most often in abridged form with a focus on the passages dealing with the passion of Christ. During the same period, however, a new type of reflection on death emerged, one grafted onto the existing tradition but specifically aimed at women's communities in the process of monasticisation. It is precisely in this context that the figure of Johannes Brinckerinck and the collation sermons ascribed to him attracted new attention.

Unlike Zerbolt, however, Brinckerinck wrote no known texts in which he set forth his view of the religious life. He was more of a practical man. Of the Middle Dutch sermons collected under his name not a single word was written down by Brinckerinck himself. The texts that nevertheless circulated under his name from the middle of the 15th century on were considered the written record of the sermons he had preached as rector and confessor of the Master Geert House in Deventer and the convent in Diepenveen.

These sermons, which can also be viewed as summaries of "good points," were part of the specific interpretation that the New Devout had given to the traditional monastic practice of collation gatherings by harking back to the spirit of the earliest desert fathers as presented in the *Collationes patrum* of Cassian.⁸² In the women's communities of the *Devotio Moderna* there must have existed only a limited tradition of *collatio mutua*, in the form of fixed moments of teaching and of helping each other to lead a virtuous life. Besides, and in the absence of father-confessors, the sisters could maintain their "community of conversation" under the leadership of the mother superior or one of the senior sisters by

⁸² For an analysis of this phenomenon, see TH. MERTENS, *Collatio und Codex im Bereich der Devotio moderna*, in C. MEIER, D. HÜPPER and H. KELLER (eds.), *Der Codex im Gebrauch*, Munich, 1996, p. 163-182 (164-169), and the somewhat different approach of VAN ENGEN, *Sisters and Brothers ...* [see n. 1], p. 284-292.

pointing out each other's weaknesses, confessing their faults and consoling one another during meetings of mutual reproof on Friday afternoons.⁸³ But when father-confessors were implied, collation meetings took the shape of a rather unilateral admonition of the sisters. During these kinds of collations, which took place after mealtime on feast days and Sundays, Brinckerinck instructed the sisters of Deventer and Diepenveen in how to lead a religious life. In doing so he could ask them about their good thoughts of that day as a way of settling on the topic of his actual sermon.⁸⁴

The words of Brinckerinck, in particular, played a highly influential role in the gradual formation of a specific group culture in the communities he served. As Thom Mertens has masterfully shown, we can distinguish various stages in this process. First of all there was his preaching of the ideas of the *Devotio Moderna* tailored to the needs of the sisters and his organised exhortation of the women. The role of the sisters in this stage was a receptive one. They listened to the rector but also took a few notes or jotted down the main points in their *rapiaria*, or personal notebooks, from which they could later retrieve material for individual meditation.⁸⁵ This receptive role was in no way a passive one. Some of the women must have diligently applied themselves to recording the *dicta* or sayings of their father confessor and thus to preserving his religious legacy.⁸⁶ We read, for example, in the sisterbook of Diepenveen — a collection of life stories of the sisters of this institution — the following about Liesbeth of Delft:

⁸³ A. BOLLMANN, *Frauenleben und Frauenliteratur in der Devotio moderna: Volkssprachige Schwesternbücher in literarhistorischer Perspektive*, Groningen, 2004, p. 541-542; VAN ENGEN, *Sisters and Brothers...* [see n. 1], p. 290.

⁸⁴ SCHEEPSMA, *Medieval Religious Women* [see n. 65], p. 79-80 seriously doubts whether these regular admonitions by father-confessors like Johannes Brinckerinck have become widespread among women's communities in the *Devotio Moderna*.

⁸⁵ On the use of *rapiaria* among the New Devout: Th. MERTENS, *Lezen met de pen. Ontwikkelingen in het laatmiddeleeuwse geestelijke proza*, in F. VAN OOSTROM and F. WILLAERT (eds.), *De studie van de Middelnederlandse letterkunde: stand en toekomst*, Hilversum, 1989, p. 187-200.

⁸⁶ Th. MERTENS, *Ghostwriting Sisters: The Preservation of Dutch Sermons of Father Confessors in the Fifteenth and the Early Sixteenth Centuries*, in MULDER-BAKKER (ed.), *Seeing and Knowing...* [see n. 76], p. 121-141 (122-136).

And if our father spoke during the collation, then she would sit and write down what he said and record it on her wax tablet. And most of what we possess of these texts was collected by her.⁸⁷

Brinckerinck's words thus came to form part of a rather fragmented textual repertoire within the women's communities of Deventer and Diepenveen and, as such, to function as a binding agent within and between the two institutions. In this way a particular textual community acquired increasingly clear contours, not as a reaction against, but as an offspring from the bigger community of the New Devout as a whole. The groups of sisters not only formed social units but interpretative communities as well.⁸⁸ From the biographical accounts of the sisters it becomes clear, for example, that in their conversations they often referred to sayings of Brinckerinck.⁸⁹

The last stage in preserving and canonising the words of Brinckerinck took place around the middle of the 15th century, a mere thirty years after his death. Only then were the separate jottings made by the sisters compiled and divided into eight or nine thematic collation treatises, known as the *Collatiën*. The fact, however, that the vitae in the Diepenveen sisterbook include some quotations from Brinckerinck's sermons found in none of these treatises clearly indicates that the latter came about through a process of selection and probably also of reformulation.⁹⁰ Rudolf Dier of Muiden (1384-1459), one of Brinckerinck's successors as rector of the Deventer sisters' houses, is generally identified as the person responsible for the editing of this compilation.⁹¹

In contrast to Zerbolt's *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, which was originally intended for brothers with knowledge of Latin, the collations of Brinckerinck were aimed from the outset nearly exclusively at an audience of (semi-)religious women. In these texts a clear

⁸⁷ D.A. BRINCKERINCK (ed.), *Van den doechden der vuriger ende stichtiger susteren van Diepen veen [Handschrift D]*, Leiden n.d., p. 253-254: "Ende als onse vader collacie dede, soe sat sij ende schrief hem dat uutten monde in hoer tafel. Ende dat meeste dat wy van alsulken schriften hebben, dat heeft sie vergadert."

⁸⁸ STOCK, *Listening for the Text...* [see n. 5], p. 150.

⁸⁹ BOLLMANN, *Frauenleben und Frauenliteratur...* [see n. 83], p. 543.

⁹⁰ GERRITS, *Johannes Brinckerinck...* [see n. 11], p. 66.

⁹¹ TH. MERTENS, *Postuum auleurschap. De collaties van Johannes Brinckerinck*, in: A.J. HENDRIKMAN *et al.* (eds.), *Windesheim 1395-1995: kloosters, teksten, invloeden*, Nijmegen, 1996, p. 85-97 (88).

appeal is made, for example, to the typically female religious ideal of being accepted as the bride of Christ. Like Zerbolt, however, Brinckerinck in his collation treatises assigns an important role to the contemplation of death. He tells the sisters that they must be prepared for death at any moment. Every evening before going to sleep they should commit their soul to God, because they can never know if they will survive the night.⁹² As in Zerbolt's work, the life and suffering of Christ also figure prominently in the perception of death presented in the *Collatiën*. Here, too, the image of the crucified Christ, and particularly of the four parts of the cross, is used as a symbol of the most important virtues the sisters should cultivate during their life:

The cross that we must bear has four extremities. The highest one stands for love, that we may strive to follow our dear Lord in love and strive to unite ourselves with Him, and that we may also strive to love our fellow man. The right arm of the cross stands for unconditional obedience. The left arm of the cross is patience. The foot of the cross is humility, that in the depths of our heart we may be humble.⁹³

If we read further in Brinckerinck's *Collatiën* to see how the sisters were to prepare themselves for death, we find that extraordinary weight is given to obedience, symbolised by the right arm of the cross. The entire approach to death seems, in fact, to be embedded in a discourse of total, though at the same time intentional, loving obedience (*minliker ghehoersamheit*). As Brinckerinck was said to have declared:

A person who walks the path of perfect obedience need not fear death and purgatory.... And what could give us more joy when we die than that we have given ourselves in meek, loving obedience to the will of our dear Lord?⁹⁴

⁹² *Collatiën*... [see n. 11], p. 155-162 (161-162).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 162-167 (*Hoe wi dat leven ende die passie ons liefs heren na sellen volghen*), here 164: "Dat cruce, dat wi sculdich sijn te draghen, dat heeft vier hoeken. Dat overste van desen cruce is minne, dat wi onsen lieven heer in minnen pinen an te hanghen ende ons pinen mit hem te verenighen, ende dat wi oec in minnen pinen onsen evenmenschen te hebben. Die rechter arme des cruces is ghehoersamheit sonder uutneminghe. Die lufter arme des crucen is lijdsameheit. Die voet des cruces is oetmoedicheit, dat wi in den gronde ons herten oetmoedich sijn."

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126-134 (*Van der ghehoersamheit*), here 128: "Die den wech der volcoemene ghehoersamheit wandert, die en derf niet sorghen voer helle noch voer veghevier (...) Ende wat mach ons meer verbliden, als wi sterven sellen,

As in Cistercian monastic spirituality, Christ was himself the example of absolute obedience:

St. Bernard said: Our dear Lord preferred to die rather than be disobedient to God. From this we should learn how deeply our dear Lord hates disobedience.⁹⁵

It was therefore primarily through a voluntary choice of submission that religious women could achieve identification with the suffering Christ, whose bride they hoped to become.⁹⁶

For obedience will lead us to the cross, after which death will follow — this means that we die unto ourselves — whereby we shall come to a blessed resurrection and be received into eternal life.⁹⁷

This last quotation also clearly shows how meditation on the passion of Christ was considered an exercise aimed at conforming one's self to the monastic ideal. Deeply influenced by St. Paul, members of religious orders traditionally saw the monastery as the best possible place for a person to completely forsake the world in order to die in Christ and be raised with him (cf. Gal. 2,19-20; Phil. 2,7-8; 1 Thess. 4,14). Meditating on the passion of Christ was definitely not identical with contemplating death and anticipating the experience of dying. Yet the passion cult clearly served to instrumentalise the idea of death in a context of conventual obedience. If the sisters practiced this virtue and were careful not to commit sins, they would not have to fear hell or purgatory:

Those who do everything that they believe will please their superior will not, when they come before our dear Lord at the Last Judgment, have to argue their own defence, because their superiors will bear their burden. But those who judge what they are told to do and wonder when they are assigned tasks what good it will do them or why they were told to do them, they will themselves have to give account of their deeds. In the hour of their death they will have to bear their burdens themselves.⁹⁸

dan dat wi ons tot oetmoedigher, minliker ghehoersamheit ghegeven hebben om ons lieven heren wille?"

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131: "Sunte Bernaert seit: onse lieve here woude liever sterven dan sinen hemelschen vader onghoersam wesen. Daeruu't moghen wi merken, hoe mishaghelic dat onsen lieven here die onghoersamheit is."

⁹⁶ See also GERRITS, *Johannes Brinckerinck...* [see n. 11], p. 87-94, 104-107.

⁹⁷ *Collatiën...* [see n. 11], p. 131: "Want die ghehoersamheit leidet ons totten cruce, daer die doot na volghet, dat is dat wi ons selves sterven, daer wi mede comen tot saligher verrisenisse, ende die ons opvoert totten ewighen leven."

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128: "Die in allen dingen doen, als si menen dattet horen oversten lief is, die en sellen voer hem selven gheen reden gheven in den daghe des

Submission therefore clearly amounted to refraining from asking questions and complying with the will of the superior, in this case the mother of the community or a rector and confessor like Brinckerinck.⁹⁹ In numerous other texts, including collections of the lives of the earliest brothers as well as sisterbooks, we find various examples of the absolute obedience that Brinckerinck required of the sisters. According to the *Diepenveen vitae*, for example, several noble or wealthy sisters were expected to renounce their worldly possessions without complaint, as their way of forsaking the world.¹⁰⁰ Brinckerinck was said, for instance, to have ordered Jutte of Ahaus, a former abbess from Westphalia who came to Diepenveen to enrich her inner life, to drown her two little dogs with her own hands. In this way she would sever her last ties with the world. By following these painful instructions, Jutte from her side was able to give concrete expression to her voluntary docility.¹⁰¹ Up to the very moment of their death the sisters were required to practice obedience. A typical example can be found in a story from the Master Geert House about a young sister Wibbe of Graes. Even in the throes of fear, on her deathbed, she was exhorted by her fellow sisters: “Sister Wibbe, remain obedient as you lie there, and die like an obedient sister.”¹⁰²

Corollaries of this absolute obedience were patience and humility, the left arm and the foot of the cross respectively. The patient endurance of reprimands and even public humiliations were necessary, according to Brinckerinck, because “a person who does not want to be reprimanded cannot be saved.”¹⁰³ However, this patience must in no way lead to self-assurance, for the sisters could

oerdels, als si voer onsen lieven here comen; mer soe sellen hoer oversten hoer borden draghen. Mer die oerdelen die gheboden ende dencken, als men hem wat doen heet, wat si daer in hebben, of waerom dat men hem dat doen heet, die moeten voer hem selven reden gheven ende in die ure des doets hoers selves last draghen.”

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁰ See e.g. SCHEEPSMA, *Medieval Religious Women...* [see n. 65], p. 40.

¹⁰¹ BRINCKERINCK, *Van den doechden...* [see n. 87], p. 61-62.

¹⁰² D. DE MAN (ed.), *Hier beginnen sommige slichtige punten van onsen oelden zusteren*, Den Haag, 1919, p. 208: “Suster Wibbe, ligget in gehorsomheiden stille ende stervet als ene gehorsommige zuster”. See also BREURE, *Doodsbeleving...* [see n. 8], p. 189.

¹⁰³ *Collatiën*, p. 121-126 (*Van berespinge*), here 122: “wie niet en wil berespet werden, die en can niet salich werden.”

never be completely sure of gaining heavenly bliss. The exercise of virtue and the rooting out of sin required continual fear, for — in the words ascribed to Brinckerinck — “those who are most anxious and concerned about their conscience are often the happiest in the sight of God.”¹⁰⁴ In the collations the sisters are also encouraged to conduct themselves in a small and humble way and to view everything they do as of little significance. Only then love for God and Christ can finally grow and fill their hearts, and they will also be able to love others. Only then, in other words, the top arm of the cross can be realised.

Much more than in Zerbolt, therefore, the path to salvation in the collations of Brinckerinck is linked to concrete, everyday virtues that were meant to support and legitimate a regulated and disciplined life in a monastic context. The process of individual transformation that occupied a central place in the writings of Zerbolt and others who greatly influenced the early *Devotio Moderna* has here been shunted to the background. The contemplation of death seems to have become less an individual exercise in view of the ideal of the construction of the self and more a means of control in the form of a practical monastic ideal for the average sister. In the collations of Brinckerinck it is not individual ponderings but — paradoxically enough — obedience and humility that are considered necessary for the sisters to attain *ynnicheit*, or interiorised devotion.¹⁰⁵

Although the final redaction of Brinckerinck’s collations around the middle of the 15th century coincides with the culmination of the monasticising process in the *Devotio Moderna*, particularly in the women’s branch, this recording was nevertheless the result of a process of remembrance that lasted decades. In the Master Geert House and in Diepenveen, the telling and retelling of Brinckerinck’s words had long nurtured not only a sense of community but also an awareness of identity and tradition.¹⁰⁶ In this way continuity was

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134-143 (*Van der oetmoedicheit*), here 141: “Die alremeeste beanxt ende besorghet sijn om haer consciencie te bewaren, die sijn diewile die alre blijste voer gode.”

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111-121 (*Van den bekinghe*), here 115. See also A.G. WEILER, *Hel oetmoedighe fundament van Dyepenven. Geestelijke begeleiding in een Winderheims vrouwenklooster*, in SCHEEPSMA (ed.), *Hel oetmoedig fundament...* [see n. 71], p. 113-128 (122).

¹⁰⁶ BOLLMANN, *Frauenleben und Frauenliteratur...* [see n. 83], p. 687.

created with the past which bridged different generations. The fragmentary written incorporation of the words of Brinckerinck into individual *rapiaria* meant that his ideas and views became part of the local culture of remembrance. The decision to systematically set down Brinckerinck's spiritual legacy could therefore also have been prompted partly by the fear that his words would be lost with the death of individual sisters who had still known him personally.¹⁰⁷

From the sisterbooks of Diepenveen and Deventer we learn that around the middle of the 15th century this fear must have been well grounded. In 1452 no less than eighteen sisters died of the plague. One of the victims, the Diepenveen sister Alijt Comhaer, was even said to have foretold the many deaths when she told a fellow sister that in a dream she had seen a large and splendid wedding in Diepenveen.¹⁰⁸ That dream was obviously interpreted as a prediction of how Christ would call a number of His brides to Himself. The death of so many sisters within a short time was a traumatic experience for the community. From one year to the next a whole generation had dropped out. This context lends extra weight to the sudden importance attached to recording Brinckerinck's collations. The result, however, was that the specific group identity which had developed under Brinckerinck in Deventer and Diepenveen was, in a sense, exported to a lot of other institutions within the *Devotio Moderna*. With the compilation of the textual corpus known as the *Collatiën* of Johannes Brinckerinck, his words acquired a role in the cultural transmission outside the two sisters' houses.

There are still some fifteen extant manuscripts that contain the *Collatiën*. These can be divided into two groups: a set of manuscripts with eight collation treatises preceded by a short prologue, and a group with nine collations without this introduction.¹⁰⁹ All of them originated in female communities of both Tertiaries and Augustinian canonesses, except for one which turns out to have belonged, exceptionally, to a male community of the Third Order in Aachen.¹¹⁰ The various collations never occur separately, and are almost always preserved in miscellanies of extremely popular

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ BRINCKERINCK, *Van den doechden*, 275... [see n. 87], p. 506-511.

¹⁰⁹ MERTENS, *Postuum auleurschap*... [see n. 91], p. 93-97.

¹¹⁰ Ms. BERLIN, STAATSBIBLIOTHEK — PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ, Germ. Oct. 329.

didactic and moralising sermons and treatises.¹¹¹ This textual environment indicates, despite the relatively small number of manuscripts preserved compared to the massive dissemination of Zerbolt's work, how important a role they played in the institutions in which they were preserved. We might thus conclude from the spread of the *Collatiën* that the Devotio Moderna movement did not only coincide with one big textual community, yet that within this movement, and in keeping with gender and religious organisation, more particular, smaller textual communities were developing.¹¹²

Thanks to the dissemination of Brinckerinck's collations outside the specific milieu in which they had originated, new generations of women of the Devotio Moderna could begin to identify with the first sisters from Deventer and Diepenveen as well as with their particular instrumentalisation of the dread of death in their enhancement of conventual discipline.¹¹³ Moreover, not only the words of the famous rector were presented to the young sisters as an example, but his life as well. A recent analysis of the successive biographies of Brinckerinck has highlighted how with each rewriting the story of Brinckerinck's life became increasingly stylised as a hagiography, and how from the mid-15th century on he was depicted as a truly holy person, a pious and God-fearing man whose saintliness was already apparent at a young age.¹¹⁴ Within the movement, therefore, which by then was firmly established and

¹¹¹ STOOKER and VERBEIJ, *Collecties...* [see n. 64], *passim*; P.F.J. OBBEMA, *Brinckerinck en Jan van Schoonhoven*, in Ch. DE BACKER, A. J. GEURTS and A. G. WEILER (eds.), *Codex in context. Studies over codicologie, karthuisergeschiedenis en laatmiddeleeuws geestesleven aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. A. Gruijs*, Nijmegen and Grave, 1985, p. 277-288 (278); R. LIEVENS, *Lezenderwijs, Brinckerinck en Coesfeld*, in *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis*, 35 (1981), p. 187-208.

¹¹² Yet since we also find two copies of Brinckerinck's text in communities of Clares and Bridgettines, we should add that our previous observation about other monastic circles seeking to be connected to the attractiveness of the New Devout seems to be reconfirmed on a smaller scale. See Ms. BRUSSELS, KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK/BIBLIOTHÈQUE ROYALE, 11151-55, and Ms. LEIDEN, UNIVERSITEITSBIBLIOTHEEK, Ltk 219 respectively.

¹¹³ N. STAUBACH, *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Bereich der Devotio moderna*, in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 25 (1991), p. 418-461 (442).

¹¹⁴ K. HEENE, *Hagiografisch herschrijven in de vijftiende eeuw? De casus Johannes Brinckerinck †1419*, in *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 79 (2005-2008), p. 252-284.

highly monasticised, the recording and dissemination of the *Collatiën* provided a renewed and updated continuity with the early years of the Devotio Moderna.

Conclusion

For the Devotio Moderna it was of vital importance to ensure that the inspiration and fervour which had characterised those early years be preserved and handed on. After a period of oral cultural transmission, of face-to-face relationships between Geert Grote, Florens Radewijns, and their first followers, and hence of lived memory, writing had to provide a materialised cultural memory of the community and thus secure ties with the past.¹¹⁵ In addition, written texts had to guarantee unity within the community by functioning as a medium of religious communication and of group identity building, and as carriers and touchstones of a body of thought. Nikolaus Staubach pertinently characterised this phenomenon as a specific “pragmatic written culture” (*pragmatische Schriftlichkeit*) in the Devotio Moderna.¹¹⁶

At decisive moments in the 15th century the New Devout therefore went back to the texts of the most prominent authors from the early days of their religious movement. With the deaths of the principal founders around 1400 it had become urgent to transpose the newly developed spirituality into a devotional guide that could be passed on to posterity. The rapid spread of a fundamental treatise like *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, in which Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen had systematically set forth their teachings and embedded them in an older tradition, prevented the ideas and ideal from disappearing with the first generation. Meditation on dying and on the Four Last Things played a prominent role in the ascent towards spiritual perfection. This ascent to salvation proceeded along an individual path, and while that did not exclude help from others, its aim was personal growth.

In the course of the 15th century, however, the nature and face of the Devotio Moderna changed. The small-scale, semi-religious character which had been typical of the first communities in

¹¹⁵ J. ASSMANN, *Five Stages on the Road to the Canon: Tradition and Written Culture in Ancient Israel and Early Judaism*, in IDEM (ed.), *Religion and Cultural Memory...* [see n. 2], p. 63-80 (63).

¹¹⁶ STAUBACH, *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit...* [see n. 113], p. 428.

Deventer and Zwolle came under pressure. This was partly due to the increasing number of women's communities that wished to join the movement. Around the middle of the 15th century the Devout recorded and disseminated Johannes Brinckerinck's collations in an attempt to fill the growing need for texts that would support the more collective and disciplined monastic life and yet breathe the spirit of the earliest period. It was this need that led to the spread of new texts, like Brinckerinck's *Collatiën*, as guidelines for (young) sisters. For them the safest and surest path to eternal life was supposed to lie not only in the personal pondering of death, as Zerbolt had proposed, but also in the imitation of Christ and in the regulated life, one in which obedience and humility were of pivotal importance. These virtues completely dominated the attitude towards death articulated in the collations of Brinckerinck. The New Devout, and women in particular, were in other words no longer simply united in, but also bound by, death.

This image of the *Devotio Moderna* as a small movement that evolved from ideals of ascetic self-realisation into an institutionalised network of monasticising communities where conventual submission — in women's communities in particular — became gradually more important in order to pursue the collective spiritual goals, is well studied. It became clear already from research by Reinier Post, Thom Mertens, Wybren Scheepsma and others.¹¹⁷ The contextual factors of our analysis confirm this pattern in much the same way. However, we need to be careful not to consider the evolution from the early 15th century *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* to the *Collatiën* compiled in the 1450s and, consequently, from Zerbolt's perception of death as an invitation to recraft the self to Brinckerinck's instrumentalisation of the fear of death in the service of monastic obedience, all too easily as yet another illustration of this narrative of growing monasticisation.

By also taking into account the spread of manuscripts and the scattered information that can be found in medieval reading lists and other sources, this essay has shown that a diversification of ideas, behavioural repertoires and textual communities arose within the *Devotio Moderna*, allowing the two texts examined here to function side by side. Stemming from the very specific context of

¹¹⁷ See POST, *The Modern Devotion...* [see n. 1]; MERTENS, *Mystieke cultuur...* [see n. 58]; SCHEEPSMA, *Medieval Religious Women...* [see n. 65].

the first communities of Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, Zerbolt's *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* proved enormously popular throughout the whole of the 15th and early 16th centuries and inspired a broad range of religious communities, even outside the movement of the Devotio Moderna. The vernacular collations of Brinckerinck, on the other hand, originated in monasticising sisters' houses and were hardly disseminated outside a number of female communities. The compilation of these collations shows therefore how the body of spiritual thought within the Devotio Moderna began to diversify in order to meet the more specific needs of the new group cultures developing within the movement. This spiritual development was therefore not subsequent, but parallel to the spread of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*. One cannot speak either of a complete fragmentation of the Devout's original textual community, but rather of the emergence of variety within unity, of interrelated textual communities which stem explicitly and deliberately from one and the same origin.¹¹⁸ The eventual overshadowing of both Zerbolt's and Brinckerinck's work by the popularity of Thomas a Kempis's *Imitatio Christi* can perhaps be explained by the fact that the *Imitatio* succeeded in offering a renewed synthesis of those divergent tendencies that originated within the movement.

Ghent University
Department of History
 Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35
 B-9000 GENT
 BELGIUM

BAS DIEMEL
 FWO

Ghent University
Department of History
 Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35
 B-9000 GENT
 BELGIUM

JEROEN DEPLOIGE

Summary. — From its origins in the IJssel valley in the Netherlands, the Devotio Moderna developed into one of the most important Northwest European reform movements of the late Middle Ages. A constant concern for the Four Last Things — death, the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell — is often

¹¹⁸ In much the same way, one can also approach the reading culture among lay brothers in the Devotio Moderna. See Th. Kock, *Lektüre und Meditation der Laienbrüder in der Devotio moderna*, in *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 76 (2002), p. 15-63.

considered as one of the main characteristics of its spirituality and as an important aspect of the New Devout's cultivation of the practice of self-examination. This essay offers a comparative study of two highly relevant texts of the movement's devotional preoccupations, namely the Latin *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* of Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen and the Middle Dutch *Collatiën* of Johannes Brinckerinck. Both authors belonged to the very first generation of New Devout. Their texts, however, became seminal important at an interval of about half a century and were used at different moments and in different contexts as testimonies to the earliest, charismatic period of the movement. A close analysis of these treatises shows how the concern for preserving and transmitting the original ideas and ideals led to completely new emphases in the formation of group cultures and to distinct "textual communities," in keeping with gender and a degree of monasticisation. Moreover, while until now the Devout's attitude towards the preparation for death has often been depicted as fairly monolithic and unchanging, this essay argues that within a short time the pondering of death became not only an "ideal" but also an "instrument," not through a linear process, but through a process of institutional and devotional diversification.

Résumé — Depuis ses origines dans la vallée de l'IJssel aux Pays-Bas, la Devotio Moderna s'est développée dans l'Europe du nord-ouest en un des mouvements de réforme les plus importants du Moyen Âge tardif. Un souci constant pour les quatre fins dernières — la mort, le jugement dernier, le ciel, et l'enfer — est souvent considéré comme une des caractéristiques principales de sa spiritualité et comme un aspect important de la nouvelle culture dévote de la pratique de l'examen de conscience. Cet article offre une étude comparative de deux textes extrêmement caractéristiques des préoccupations dévotionnelles du mouvement, à savoir le *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* de Gerard Zerbolt de Zutphen (en latin) et les *Collatiën* de Johannes Brinckerinck (en moyen néerlandais). Les deux auteurs ont appartenu à la toute première génération de la dévotion moderne. Leurs textes, cependant, à un intervalle environ d'un demi-siècle, sont devenus importants pour le développement du mouvement et ont été employés à différents moments et dans différents contextes comme témoignages de la période initiale et charismatique de celui-ci. Une analyse étroite de ces traités montre comment le souci de préserver et de transmettre les idées et les idéaux originaux a mené à des accents complètement nouveaux dans la formation des cultures de groupe et à des « communautés textuelles » distinctes, en lien avec le genre et avec un certain degré d'institutionnalisation monastique. D'ailleurs, alors que jusqu'ici l'attitude dévote envers la préparation à la mort a été souvent dépeinte comme assez monolithique et invariable, cet article montre que dans une courte durée la considération de la mort est devenue non seulement un « idéal » mais également un « instrument, » pas de manière linéaire, mais par un processus de diversification institutionnelle et dévotionnelle.

Zusammenfassung. — Von ihren Ursprüngen im IJsseltal in den Niederlanden entwickelte sich die Devotio Moderna zu einer der wichtigsten nordwesteuropäischen Reformbewegungen des späten Mittelalters. Eine ständige Besorgnis um die vier letzten Dingen — Tod, Jüngstes Gericht, Himmel und Hölle —

wird oft als eines der kennzeichnenden Merkmale ihrer Spiritualität beschaut und als ein wichtiger Aspekt der Kultivierung der Selbstbetrachtungspraxis durch den modernen Devoten. Dieser Essay bietet eine vergleichende Studie zweier höchst relevanter Texte aus den devotionalen Beschäftigungen der Bewegung, nämlich das lateinische *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* von Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen und die mittelniederländischen *Collatiën* von Johannes Brinckerinck. Beide Autoren gehörten der ersten Generation der modernen Devotie an. Ihre Texte waren jedoch für den Zeitraum etwa eines halben Jahrhunderts von grundlegender Bedeutung und wurden zu verschiedenen Zeitpunkten und in unterschiedlichen Kontexten als Zeugnisse zur frühen, charismatischen Periode der Bewegung herangezogen. Eine nähere Analyse dieser Abhandlungen zeigt, wie die Sorge um die Bewahrung und Übermittlung der ursprünglichen Ideen und Ideale zu völlig neuen Schwerpunkten in der Entstehung von Gruppenkulturen und zu ausgeprägten „Textgemeinschaften“ geführt hat, dem Geschlecht und einem gewissen Grad der Monastizierung folgetragend. Darüber hinaus argumentiert dieser Essay, dass während bis jetzt die Einstellung des modernen Devoten zur Vorbereitung auf den Tod oft als recht monolithisch und unveränderlich dargestellt wurde, innerhalb kurzer Zeit das Sinnieren über den Tod nicht nur zum „Ideal“, sondern zu einem „Instrument“ wurde, nicht durch einen linearen Prozess, sondern durch einen Prozess institutioneller und devotionaler Diversifikation.