

PREFACE

The book entitled *De Moderne Devotie, Geert Grootte en zijn stichtingen*, which appeared in 1940 in the Patria series and was reprinted in 1950, could not exceed a certain small compass. Without scholarly argument and without the external signs of scholarship, it had to resume briefly what was then accepted in the existing state of research. However, since 1940 and even since 1950, various studies and source publications have appeared which have clarified certain obscure points. The prescribed limitations of this book also rendered difficult any research into the history of the German houses and in particular those of the Münster colloquium, upon which the documents of the Brotherhouse at Hildesheim had thrown some light.

A closer examination of old and new sources has led us to realize the necessity for a new book on the Modern Devotion, in which particular attention would be paid to the constantly recurring and often too glibly answered question of the relationship between Modern Devotion and Humanism and the Reformation. Here the facts must speak for themselves. Were the first northern Humanists Brethren of the Common Life or members of the Windesheim Congregation? Had the first German and Dutch Humanists contacts with the Devotionalists or were they moulded by the Brothers? Were the Brothers pioneers in introducing the humanistic requirements in teaching and education? These and similar questions could also be posed concerning the attitude of the Devotionalists towards the Reformation. In dealing with this complicated problem, scholars have contented themselves with advancing opinions, with noting points of similarity between the spirituality of the Devotionalists, notably the Brethren and the first supporters or certain groups of supporters of the Reformation—the Baptists for example in the Netherlands. Sometimes a negative answer was considered sufficient. Like the mystics, the Devotionalists found the outward ceremonies and various devotions of the late medieval church distasteful and felt themselves more in sympathy with the Reformers. This gave rise to a common struggle for change, a common feeling of non-conformity which prepared the mind to accept what was new, what was free, what was evangelical.

Such general considerations are usually not only vague, but also a little biased, since it is very easy to emphasise particular qualities in

old and new so that old and new come to resemble each other. In this connection the mistake, serious for the historian, is often made of describing the attitude and ideals of the sixteenth century *fraters* with the aid of statements by persons over a hundred years dead, as though no change or development had taken place. The Brothers in their heyday, in the middle of the fifteenth century, were different men from Geert Groote, although his biographers described his life as they thought it must have been. The sixteenth century *fraters* were retiring, somber men who lived quietly in their houses or contentedly near the Sisters, while others worked in their hostels helping the boys who attended the city schools. The fact has often been ignored that the first Humanists had already acquired their new convictions before the Brothers had any school of note.

It is our intention here to examine those facts which have some bearing on these questions and to describe our conclusions. These facts must be sought in the history of the individual monasteries and Brotherhouses, which must, however, be viewed not separately but as a whole.

This book is based chiefly upon the data derived from the sources. In indicating the general literature I have thus confined myself to references to J. M. F. Dols, *Bibliographie van de Moderne Devotie*, Nijmegen 1941, and W. Jappe Alberts, *Zur Historiografie der Devotio Moderna und ihrer Erforschung*, Westfälische Forschungen XI (1953) 51-67. Other references are given for the individual foundations.

A difficult task was to define the limits of our subject. Given the fact that the Modern Devotion was a distinctive movement and was so referred to by its supporters in that period, it must be possible to define its boundaries both in time and place. It had a beginning and an end and extended over a particular territory. In this book the Modern Devotion is taken to be that late medieval ecclesiastic and religious movement, begun in the year 1379 by Geert Groote and moving through various channels—the Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life and the canons of the Congregation of Windesheim – into the sixteenth century and beyond, but losing much of its vitality after 1600. Anything falling outside these channels is not dealt with here, even though there is sometimes a connection with the Devotionalists. In the first place we do not discuss the German mystics and John Ruusbroec, except insofar as they influenced Geert Groote or the origin and development of the Modern Devotion. We also ignore the history of the Dutch Tertiaries, both men and women, whose origin

must often be sought in the initiative of Geert Groote, but who already lost their independence around 1400 and came under the influence of the Franciscans. Roughly the same must be said of the Chapter of Syon which originated around 1420 and shows much resemblance to the Chapter of Windesheim, except where it was necessary to clarify the attitude of the monasteries towards Humanism and the position occupied by Erasmus in his first years. Men too like John Cele and Alexander Hegius who were friendly with the leaders of the movement but who were neither canons nor brothers are only mentioned in their capacity of friends. Not everything that was devout in the late Middle Ages formed part of the Modern Devotion

So far as we can deduce from the sources available, Henry Pomerius, the biographer of the mystic John Ruusbroec, was the first to apply the name Modern Devotion to the religious phenomenon to be dealt with here. In his *Vita B. Johannis Rusbrochii*, written between the years 1414 and 1421, he calls Geert Groote the *fons et origo Modernae Devotionis* the fount and origin of the Modern Devotion, thereby excluding his hero Ruusbroec from the movement.

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