CHAPTER 2 · MODES OF PIETY: LITURGICAL, MYSTICAL, MONASTIC, POPULAR

And therefore whatso thou be that covetest to come to contemplation of God, that is to say, to bryng forthe toche a childe that men clepyn in the story Beniamyn, that is to say, sight of God; than schalt thu use thee in this manner. Thou schalt clep togeders thi thoughtes and thi desire, and make thee of them a churche, and lerne thee therein for to love only this good worde Jhesu, so that alle thi desyre and thi thought be onely sette for to love Jhesu, and that unesesynnsgly, as it may be here, so that thou fulfille that is seyde in the psalme: ‘Lorde I schal bles thee in churches,’ that is in thoughts and desires of the love of Jhesu. And than, in this churche of thoughtes and desires, and in this onede of studies and of willes, loke that alle thi thoughtes and thi desire and thi studies and alle thi willes be solely set in the love and the preisyng of this Lorde Jhesu, withouten forgettyng, as fer forth as thou maist by grace and as thi freyte wil suffre, ever more mekyng thee to prayer and to counsell, pacyenty abiding the wille of oure Lorde, unto the tyme that thi mynde be rachisched aboven itselfe to be fed with the faire foode of aungelles in the beholding of God and godly things. So that it be fulfilled in thee that is wrynt in the psalme: ‘Ibi Beniamyn adolecentulus in mentis excusas.’ That is: ‘There is Beniamyn, the yonge childe, in ravesching of mynde.’ Amen.

—“TRETYSE OF THE STODYE OF WYSODE”

If by piety we mean the stance of the faithful before God as it is expressed not only in the struggle to avoid sin and to attain virtue but also in meditation, prayer, adoration, worship, and the longing for union with the divine, then a particular message is conveyed by the quotation above (itself a fourteenth-century reworking of a twelfth-century text).¹ It may be taken to signal that the late eleventh and twelfth centuries form the watershed of late-medieval piety.² In Chapter 1 it was argued that the subsequent career of the ecclesiastical institution was largely determined by what the Gregorian reformers did and what they left undone. In relation to the subsequent development of medieval piety a similar importance attaches to the new departures made during roughly the same period by such spiritual pacesetters as St. Peter Damiani (1007–72), St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), and Richard of St. Victor (ca. 1123–73), as well as to those enduring modalities of the spiritual life left virtually untouched. The Reformation historian, his senses sharpened by exposure to later conflicts, is often apt to scent novelty in aspects of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century spiritual life where none perhaps exists. But the medievalist likewise, lulled even in fifteenth-century works by the reassuring patter of references to Augustine and Jerome and Cassian and Bernard, is sometimes tempted to attribute to medieval piety a degree of stability that scrutiny of its history cannot in fact sustain. The stretch of history involved is a long one. That it was marked by some discontinuities no one, I imagine, would question. That the most important of those discontinuities, however, and the ones in many respects determinative for the whole texture of late


² In two recent studies, Giles Constable has documented the popularity of twelfth-century spiritual writings on the later Middle Ages, and, developing the insights of André Wilmart, M.-D. Chenu, and others, has argued for "an affinity of religious temperament between this age and the twelfth century"; see "Twelfth-Century Spirituality," pp. 51–32. He concludes that "in religious history, unlike intellectual history, the four centuries from the twelfth to the sixteenth must be seen as a whole and that the turning point in medieval religious history . . . lies in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries . . ." (ibid., pp. 49–50). Cf. his "Popularity of Twelfth-Century Spiritual Writers," in Molino and Tedeschi, eds., pp. 5–28.
medieval piety, should have occurred already in the early-medieval centuries and again during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries may well be less clearly apparent. With those earlier centuries, then, we must begin.

Liturgical and Devotional Premises

In any discussion of Christian piety the initial focus should properly be not the private prayer life of Christians as individuals or as members of voluntary subgroups but rather the liturgy, that whole range of worship "which is officially organised by the church, and which is open to and offered by, or in the name of, all who are members of the church." In the celebration of the Eucharist has always constituted the very heart of liturgical worship, but the understanding of the Eucharistic action and the mode of its performance have scarcely been stable. Central to the performance and the understanding of the Eucharist in both primitive and patrician eras, however, was its corporate nature. It was an action not simply of the priesthood but of the whole community of the faithful. For its fulfillment it required that all orders—bishop, priests, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, and laity alike—properly perform their own particular "liturgy." Moreover, the action itself was not really understood in temporal terms as a repetition by a man or group of men of Christ's historic sacrifice or as merely a memorial to that sacrifice. More mysteriously, in that the church was itself conceived quite literally as the body of Christ (indeed, as the "true body" or "body of the whole Christ"—corpus verum, totus Christi corpus), the action was itself trans-temporal. It was one in which Christ, the high priest, and the faithful of his church, united in one body as head and members and by their very action intensifying that union, offer to the Father that very body under the form of bread and wine, re-presenting thereby the one sacrifice of Christ—or, better, "energizing" that one sacrifice. As St. John Chrysostom put it toward the end of the fourth century in

5. Dix, p. 1. Though I have also consulted Klause and Jungmann, the following paragraphs are most heavily dependent upon Dix's fine book.

4. See Dix, p. 298.

a fashion typical of the early commentators: "We do not offer a different sacrifice like the high-priest of old, but we ever offer the same. Or rather we offer the anamnesis of the sacrifice." And the word anamnesis, it should be noted, conveyed something akin to an active "reliving" rather than a merely passive remembering.

This conception of the Eucharist—in the context of which metaphysical questions concerning the precise nature of Christ's physical presence understandably did not arise—survived the transition from the comparative simplicity of private worship to the imperial grandeur of public ceremonial undergone by the eucharistic act in the wake of Constantine's grant of toleration to Christianity and its subsequent ascent to the status of an official religion and civic cult. Down to the thirteenth century, indeed, the original conception of the Eucharist found something more than routine echoes in the formulations of theologians, and its memory remained embedded in some of the liturgical texts themselves until it was brought to light once more during the course of the last hundred years. As early as the fifth and sixth centuries, however, a certain erosion had set in, and by the onset of the religious "revolution" of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries a critical transformation, which that revolution did nothing to undo, had already long since been completed.

The transformation reflected changes both practical and theoretical. On the practical side were the marked increase in the number and importance of the prayers to be said by the clergy alone (fourth century); the rapid and catastrophic decline in the frequency of lay communions and the concomitant fading of the people's offertory (fourth and fifth centuries onward); the appearance in the West and growing dominance of the "low mass," or Eucharist not sung by bishop, priests, deacons, and people but said by a single priest assisted by a solitary minister (sixth century onward); the emergence of independent vernacular languages and the final incomprehensibility of the Latin liturgy to the great mass of Europeans (eighth and ninth centuries); and the contemporaneous shift to recitation of the canon in an

inaudible whisper and removal of the celebrant to the front of the altar where he could no longer face the people. All of these changes contrived to transform the Eucharist from a corporate liturgical act in which laity and clergy alike participated into an exclusively priestly liturgy, something the priest did on behalf of lay people, themselves reduced progressively from "doers" to "bearers and seers" and, finally, to "seers" only. To complete the preconditions necessary for the liturgical phenomena characteristic of the late Middle Ages it remained only for a certain monastic practice, already established by the eighth century, to spread in the following centuries among the secular clergy and eventually to reshape the rite of the mass as publicly celebrated. The practice was that whereby those monks who were also priests celebrated daily, and often simultaneously on separate side altars, masses that were "private," that is, without any congregation.

These practical changes were accompanied by (and perhaps helped to stimulate) an enormously complex series of interrelated theoretical shifts. At their most profound, these shifts involved a diminution in the sense of the organic connection between Christ and his church and also, therefore, between Christ's sacrifice of himself and the church's eucharistic action. More obviously, they involved a stress on the more purely temporal and sacerdotal nature of the eucharistic action, a tendency to align it with the unambiguously historical moment in Christ's redeeming activity (with the Passion rather than the Resurrection or Ascension). A tendency also to see it as in some mysterious sense a repetition of that historical sacrifice and to attribute to the priestly consecration alone what had originally been regarded as the work of the eucharistic action as a whole—namely, the making present of Christ in his body and his blood.

These alterations in the meaning attributed to the Eucharist, coupled with the practical changes already outlined, led to the formation of a fundamentally new pattern of liturgical thinking and behavior. The controversies concerning the metaphysical relation of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament to the physical elements of bread and wine which raged on and off from the ninth to the eleventh centuries also contributed to that process. 9 Within the new pattern each mass came to be regarded as in some sense a repetition of Christ's original sacrifice on Calvary, a fresh sacrifice generating its own individual quantum of grace, a sacrifice that, simply by virtue of their possession of holy orders, priests and priests alone could offer, applying its merits in accordance with their own chosen intentions to petitioners or benefactors, present or absent, living or dead.

That pattern was clearly signaled in the early Middle Ages by a significant Frankish interpolation in the old Roman text of the canon of the mass. 7 Having undergone considerable intensification during the centuries that followed, it was to endure until the end of the Middle Ages, and in Catholic Europe to the Council of Trent and beyond. It may be said to have been particularly congruent with the conditions of religious life from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, when the characteristically Christian preoccupation with the personal relationship of the individual soul to God was to a striking degree submerged in the collective rhythms of a devotional life that was external rather than internal, public rather than private, communal rather than personal.

So strong was this bent, indeed, that even the monks—those products of what at the start had been a nonclerical, unambiguously sectarian, and intensely private quest for personal sanctification—were transformed into a class of professional clerical intercessors. They became the dischargers of an onerous round of corporate worship, performing in choir the successive phases of the Divine Office, inter-

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6. Thus, as Dix points out (p. 621), "the first treatise on this problem in theological history" was the De corpore et sangue domini, written about 840 by Rabbenu.
7. "Together with Thy servants N. our Pope [and N. our bishop and all the orthodox and the worshipers [who are] of catholic and apostolic faith] remember Thy servants and handmaids N. and N. and all who stand around, whose faith is accepted of Thee and whose devotion known [for whom we offer unto Thee, of] who offer unto Thee this sacrifice of praise, for themselves and all who are theirs. . . ." (cited by Dix, p. 501). Dix comments (p. 501, n. 1) that the bracketed clauses are later Frankish interpolations into the authentic Roman text and adds: "In the Roman idea it is the people themselves who are the offerers; in the Gallican interpolation it is the priest who offers for them."
ceding with God in their masses on behalf of the rest of society, and completing as substitutes the burdensome penances that their aristocratic benefactors felt themselves unable to discharge. They were, in fact, the "soldiers of Christ," by their ceaseless round of prayer struggling against the swarming evils that threatened society. To that calling professional competence and commitment were central; the quest for individual perfection, however, was by no means a necessary motivating force.

During these early-medieval centuries, more than ever before, the monasteries molded the spirituality of the church at large. And the most striking characteristics of that spirituality were its public, impersonal, communal, even "heroic" qualities: its worship of a God who was seen above all as mighty lord of the universe and terrifying judge of man, of a Christ portrayed even on the cross as triumphant king, royal Christ reigning in glory, heavenly analogue of the greatest of earthly kings. It is understandable that when change came, the monasteries functioned as spiritual pacemakers for the church at large. During the course of the eleventh century there began to appear within the world of Benedictine monasticism a certain uneasiness with the established order of religious living: a restless desire for a more evangelical or apostolic mode of life, a yearning once more for greater solitude and heightened poverty, for an existence geared less to the needs of the community at large than to the disciplined exploration of those profound depths of the soul wherein the individual seeker could hope to encounter the divine.

The teachings of St. Peter Damiani south of the Alps and to the north those of Hugh (d. 1141) and Richard of St. Victor, of Ailred of Rievaulx (d. 1167), and, above all, of St. Bernard of Clairvaux were at the same time a manifestation of that yearning and a response to it. So, too, were the flurry of monastic reform and the appearance of new monastic orders in the latter part of the eleventh century and the first part of the twelfth. Particular emphasis should be placed upon the spread of reformed congregations of canons regular following the so-called Augustinian rule (to one of which Hugh and Richard of St. Victor belonged) and upon the founding and rapid proliferation of the Cistercians, the order that St. Bernard himself joined and upon which he placed the imprint of his own dynamic spiritual vision.

It is, then, to the impact of an originally monastic impulse, to the example of the Cistercians in particular, and to the work of St. Bernard above all that we must ascribe the dissemination across Europe during the twelfth century of a different type of spirituality—more emotional, more personal, more private, more preoccupied with individual will and inner piety than that generally cultivated in the great age of Benedictine monasticism that had now drawn to a close. The interior life of the committed individual, the hunger for the soul for the divine, the longing to be "immersed completely in that sea of endless light and bright eternity," the tender and compassionate devotion to Christ's sacred heart and holy name, to his human life and suffering and to that of his blessed mother—such themes, if not altogether novel, became dominant in a way that they had not been before.

These were the themes that the new mendicant orders of the thirteenth century, and especially the Franciscans, took as their own. Through their example, their spiritual direction, popular preaching, and "third order" (which opened even to lay folk a life of evangelical and penitential dedication), the Franciscans made themselves felt everywhere as a vital spiritual force, bringing the new, more personal and emotional piety, and the simple religious devotion that went with it, into the homes of the comparatively unchurched city dwellers of Europe.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, at a time when the public corporate structures of the church, monastic as well as secular, were entering a period of troubles and confusion, this new type of more individual and affective piety continued to flourish and even to put forth new shoots. Without it, and certainly without the great spiritual achievement of the Augustinian canons, the Cistercians, and the Franciscans, the great flowering of mysticism in the fourteenth century and the emergence of the devoto moderna in the fifteenth

8. The words cited are those of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, De dilectando Deo, chap. 10, from Perry, ed., p. 65.
would have been inconceivable. Without it, too, it would be difficult really to comprehend many of the attitudes and practices that came to characterize the popular piety of those centuries. But it must also be insisted that without one great weakness in that spiritual achievement it would be equally difficult to comprehend some of the qualities characteristic of all three of the spiritual developments to which we have just referred. That great weakness reflected the failure to reverse the process that, over the centuries, had transformed the practice and understanding of the Eucharist.

Upon that other great segment of the church’s liturgical worship, the Divine Office, the spiritual revolution of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries certainly did have its effect. It encouraged the individual participant to view the performance of the office less as the discharging of an external ritual function than as what it had originally been intended to be: an occasion to evoke and express a personal interior devotion. Nor did the Eucharist go altogether unaffected. The introduction during the twelfth century of the elevation of the host at mass; the institution during the thirteenth century of the feast of Corpus Christi and processions of the Blessed Sacrament; the growth during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries of the practice of exposing the previously consecrated eucharistic Species for public adoration in an ostensorium or monstrance; a contemporaneous increase, however modest and regional, of the frequency with which the laity actually received communion—all of these practices bear witness to a deepening of devotion to the mystery of the Eucharist. But in its individualism, its concentration on the priestly consecration, its sense that in the sacrament alone one encounters the true body of Christ, its preoccupation, therefore, with seeing and adoring the consecrated Species, this devotion was light-years away from the primitive and patriotic view of things. It assumed as its very foundation the transformation that had occurred in the late-antique and early-medieval centuries.

In a marvelously quotable passage in his *Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine*, Archbishop Cranmer (1489–1556) asked:

What made the people to run from their seats to the altar, and from altar to altar, and from sacring (as they called it) to sacring, peeping, rooting and gazing at that thing which the priest held up in his hands, if they thought not to honour the thing which they saw? What moved the priests to lift up the sacrament so high over their heads? or the people to say to the priest “Hold up! Hold up!”; or one man to say to another “Stoop down before”; or to say “This day have I seen my Maker”; and “I cannot be quiet unless I see my Maker once a day”? What was the cause of all these, and that as well the priest and the people so devoutly did knock and kneel at every sight of the sacrament, but that they worshipped that visible thing which they saw with their eyes and took it for very God? 

Few readers would be likely to miss the element of parody in this description. But most would be disposed to see in it an accurate witness to one very striking characteristic of Catholic piety on the eve of the Reformation. And properly so. Always provided, of course, that that characteristic is taken for what it truly was: no late-medieval novelty, indeed, but the mature dividend of a legacy from a much more distant era.

The Flowering of Mysticism in the Fourteenth Century

It is a commonplace among the classic writers of the Christian tradition, and one echoed by Jean Gerson (1363–1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, at the start of the fifteenth century,10 to distinguish three ways in which man can attain to a knowledge of God. First, as Paul suggests (Rom. 1:20), we can do so by applying the powers of our natural reason to the things of the world that manifest his creative activity. This way was traditionally called *natural* theology. Second, we can do so by scrutinizing his own revelation of himself as reported to us in the Scriptures. This way was *dogmatic* theology. Third and more mysteriously, it is possible for the devout soul

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10. See his *De mystica theologia speculativa*, Cons. 2; ed. Combes, pp. 7–8.
to be so “ravished above itself” as to achieve direct, intuitive, ecstatic experience of God. Dom David Knowles has said:

Such at least is the traditional teaching of the Church, reinforced by the express declarations of theologians and saintly Christians throughout the centuries from the days of the apostles to our own time. This knowledge, this experience, which is never entirely separable from an equally immediate and experimental union with God by love, has three main characteristics. It is recognized by the person concerned as something utterly different from and more real and adequate than all his previous knowledge and love of God. It is experienced as something at once immanent and received, something moving and filling the powers of the mind and soul. It is felt as taking place at a deeper level of the personality and soul than that on which the normal processes of thought and will take place, and the mystic is aware, both in himself and in others, of the soul, its qualities, and of the divine presence and action within it, as something wholly distinct from the reasoning mind with its powers. Finally, this experience is wholly incommunicable, save as bare statement, and in this respect all the utterances of the mystics are entirely inadequate as representations of the mystical experience, but it brings absolute certainty to the mind of the recipient. This is the traditional mystical theology, the mystical knowledge of God, in its purest form.\(^{11}\)

Whereas natural and dogmatic theology, the first two of these ways, were pursued with great vigor by the scholastic theologians during the quickening in intellectual activity that occurred in the High Middle Ages, the third was very much the beneficiary of the great awakening of spiritual life in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. During those centuries the monastic histories of the Cistercian and Augustinian canons are punctuated by evidences of the revival of mystical religion. So, too, in the thirteenth century is that of the Franciscans. In the writings of St. Bernard and the Victorines, moreover, and in St. Bonaventure’s masterpiece, the *Liber suntis monis in deum* (1259), the mystical way found notable and extremely influential expression. But it was the fourteenth century that saw the greatest flowering of medieval mysticism, above all in Germany and the Netherlands but also in England and, though to a much lesser degree, in Italy.

Although the Victorines had responded to the quickening philosophical currents of their day, they, like St. Bernard, had written in the context of a revitalized monastic piety, addressing themselves both explicitly and implicitly to a monastic readership of rather restricted nature. The mystics of the fourteenth century, on the other hand, not all of them members of monastic orders and writing usually in the vernacular rather than in Latin, were responding to a much more varied clientele. Evelyn Underhill has said that “mysticism only becomes articulate when there is a public which craves for the mystical message.”\(^{12}\) The very existence and nature of that broader clientele attests to the continuing penetration into European society of a deeply interior piety capable of stimulating even outside the cloister that “naked entente directe unto God” required of those who aspired to cast themselves adrift on “the boundless sea of the Divinity.”\(^{13}\)

Thus, in Italy, though St. Catherine of Siena became affiliated with the Dominican Third Order, she was clearly an independent spirit and certainly no cloistered one, neither the product of a traditional monastic formation nor concerned in the *Dialogue* or the multitudinous letters that she dictated (for she was illiterate) to communicate with a merely monastic readership. She was, in fact, an activist, addressing herself to popes and cardinals in particular and to the Christian world in general. This last cannot be said of the English mystics of the period, for all appear to have been solitaries and the counselors of solitaries. But that itself implies withdrawal not only from the world at large but from the smaller world of monastic community as well. Thus, although Walter Hilton (d. 1396), author of *The Scale of Perfection* and other works, was an Augustinian canon, there is evidence to suggest that he had become a solitary

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13. The phrases cited occur, respectively, in *Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Hodgson, p. 28, l. 8–9 (also p. 58, l. 15–16), and in Jan van Ruysbroeck’s *De Geestelijke Bruidskamer*, trans. Colledge, p. 124.
but, while continuing to pursue ordinary occupations, committed themselves to a community life of simplicity and celibacy. Like the comparable “Beghard” communities of laymen that came into existence during the same period, the Beguines were only minimally connected with the ecclesiastical authorities, and they were frequently suspected of heresy. And although ecclesiastical suspicions ran well ahead of the facts, as they so often did, heretical or quasi-heretical opinions undoubtedly did find a home in some communities. One such opinion, a mystical doctrine asserting the possibility of total unification in this life with the godhead and the concomitant redundancy of the ordinary sacramental ministrations of the church, it seems proper to attribute, in the light of their own writings, to the heretics known as the Brethren of the Free Spirit.  

In such suspicious circumstances, the ecclesiastical authorities were concerned to provide for religious bodies of women the type of skilled pastoral guidance that only an educated clergy could give. By decree of Pope Clement IV (1267) and of the German Dominican provincial (1286–87) the pastoral care of Dominican convents for women was entrusted to the theologians of the order. All three of the great German mysteries of the fourteenth century were called upon to undertake such responsibilities. In their tracts and sermons, accordingly, they responded to the special needs of their charges, attempting to express the most profound speculations in the vernacular tongue and to relate what they were saying to the practical day-to-day exigencies of the devout life. Their efforts were so focused that the late Herbert Grundmann identified as the prerequisite for the emergence of “the complicated phenomenon” known as “German” mysticism this confluence of “Dominican theology and care of souls, vernacular preaching, feminine piety, and the special place that Germany occupied in the religious movements of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.” Nevertheless, it would be proper to note that Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso addressed themselves also to wider and


15. Though other, more esoteric, doctrines and practices were attributed to them by their persecutors.

more varied audiences, preaching to Beguines and the laity at large. Suso was in correspondence with the Rhineland group of lay reformers and mystics who called themselves the Friends of God and from whose circle was later to emerge the compilation published by Luther under the title *A German Theology*. Additionally, Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293–1381), the greatest of the Flemish mystics, though he eventually became prior of a community of Augustinian canons, was for most of his life a secular priest, attempting in the vernacular writings that he addressed to laity and clergy alike to respond to that deep thirst for guidance in the life of the soul that had become widespread in the Flanders of his day.

The appearance in the fourteenth century of so distinguished and extensive a number of mystics bears witness to the wide dissemination during the two preceding centuries of the more individual and interior piety cultivated especially by the Cistercians and Franciscans, but it would be improper to give the impression that their teachings were at all uniform. No less improper, indeed, than it would be impossible in brief compass and in an intelligible fashion to convey the full range and variety of their thinking. But it has become something of a commonplace among historians to distinguish between two fundamental traditions of Christian mysticism.

The first tradition, espoused by the Cistercians and Franciscans and exemplified above all by such men as St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Bonaventure, responded to the Augustinian stress on will and love. The second, espoused by the Dominicans and best exemplified by Eckhart and Tauler, responded especially to the Neoplatonic strand in the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas, to the newly available writings of the sixth-century Syrian monk whom we know as Pseudo-Dionysius, and to the further access opened to Neoplatonic ideas in 1264 by William of Moerbeke's translation of the *Institutio theologiae* of Proclus (d. 485). The former is seen as a tradition of *affective* mysticism, locating in the will the movement of the questing soul toward encounter with God and understanding that encounter as an ecstatic communion of wills, human and divine. The latter tradition is envisaged as a more speculative, essentialist mysticism, locating in the intellect the movement toward encounter with the divine and understanding that encounter as the surging of like toward like, an ecstatic penetration into the supreme intelligence, a veritable union of essence in which the human is absorbed into God, like the spark returning to the fire, the drop of water merging with the wine.

The former tradition is portrayed as unambiguously orthodox; the latter, because of its pantheistic overtones, as suspect of heterodoxy. Less persuasively, perhaps, the former is labeled as characteristically Christocentric in its orientation, the latter as more remotely theocentric.

There is much to be said for this classification. It provides a framework within which one can readily comprehend the suspicion of heterodoxy against which Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, and even Ruysbroeck had to contend, and suggests intriguing possibilities of correlation with a more universal typology recently proposed with Indian mysticism in mind but responding also to stages in psychological development. Nevertheless, however tempting, that traditional classification still presents us with some serious difficulties. They have been variously identified. On the one hand, the will clearly plays a more important role than that classification would suggest, even in the most essentialist of mystics such as Eckhart. Some scholars have found it possible, indeed, to argue (though not, I think, convincingly) that Tauler's understanding of the mystic encounter was not that of a union of essence but of a conformity of wills. On the other hand, in the work of mystics who are commonly classified as "affective," such as St. Bonaventure, the place of knowledge and intellect

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17. On this and related images, see Letter, "Image of Mixed Liquids."
18. Which Oberman endorses, though with suitable qualifications (Harnot, pp. 526–40).
19. Larson, "Mystical Man in India;" an interesting article that attempts to go beyond the traditional historical or phenomenological approaches and to build on the anthropological and psychological insights of Erich Neumann and Erik Erikson. In particular, it contrasts the "unitive mystical experience," involving a sense of the bliss of undifferentiated unity and symbolized by the oneness of infancy, with the "copulative mystical experience," to which the presence of the "other" is essential and which is symbolized by the relationship of marriage and adult sexuality.
20. For a discussion of the relevant literature, see Oostrom, "Mysticism, Nominalism, and Dissent," in Trinkaus and Oberman, eds., p. 68 and n. 1.
is not necessarily marginal. Nearly all of those mystics found it helpful to draw upon Neoplatonic ideas, whether directly from Latin translations of Proclus and Plotinus or indirectly via the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius or, indeed, via St. Augustine himself. And a work as influential as the *German Theology* turns out to combine themes that fit into both the "speculative" and "affective" traditions.

More disturbingly, however, though in so elusive an area of discourse the point can be advanced only with diffidence, too rigid an insistence on the distinction between speculative and affective mysticism will serve us ill if it disposes us to miss the degree to which the traditional "Augustinian" preoccupation with love and will so often set the terms on which Neoplatonic ideas were absorbed by the writers of mystical works. Thus, the two Victorine authors who were very influential in mediating the thinking of Pseudo-Dionysius to the late-medieval world—Richard of St. Victor in the twelfth century and Thomas Gallus, abbot of St. Andrew's at Verceilli, in the thirteenth—reshaped that thinking by substituting for the characteristically Greek and Neoplatonic preoccupation with the role of intellect in the mystical ascent the more traditional Augustinian emphasis on will and love both in the life of contemplation and in the final ecstasy of communion with God. The influence of Richard of St. Victor on late-medieval mysticism needs no emphasis, but it should perhaps be pointed out that Gallus was the author both of a commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius and of the Latin translation on which the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, for example, depended in making his own English version of Pseudo-Dionysius's *De mystica theologia* and also in coming to terms with the thought of that author.21 Thus, if in *The Cloud* itself he insists that the words of Pseudo-Dionysius "wilen clearly afirmre al that I have seye and schal sey,"22 the mystic union envisaged by that book is unquestionably a union of will and love "for onli love may reche to God in thi liif, but not knowyng."23

In all of this, it may be suggested, if we avoid too exclusive a preoccupation with the high intellectualism of Eckhart and his Dominican followers, we can see at work in late-medieval mysticism (and despite the renewed infusion of Neoplatonic modes of thought) a force that had persistently made itself felt whenever philosophical views of Greek provenance had come into contact with the nonphilosophic understanding of the human and the divine enshrined in the pages of the Bible. It was a force massively at work in the thinking of even so ardent a Neoplatonist as Augustine; it was a force that had set a limit to Aquinas's absorption of Aristotle; it was a force that made its presence felt most dramatically in the thinking of Duns Scotus (ca. 1266–1308), William of Ockham (ca. 1300–1349), and the nominalist philosophers and theologians who became so prominent in the intellectual world of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Perhaps more surprisingly, it was a force that left its mark also on the rather somber vision of man framed by such luminaries of Italian Renaissance thought as Petrarch, Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), and Lorenzo Valla (1405–57). And what was it? Nothing other, in fact, than the biblical doctrine of creation and the notion of a transcendent and omnipotent divinity that it presupposed.

No matter how open to philosophies of Greek provenance Christian thinkers imagined themselves to be, they underlined the very foundations of those philosophies when they attempted to combine them, as repeatedly they did, with the biblical God of power and might. He could not be identified in characteristically Greek fashion with the rational order of an eternal cosmos in which man himself partook, but was instead a transcendent God of power and unimpeded will upon whose inescapable decision that order, the universe itself, and all its human denizens were radically contingent.

Given this fact, there is much to be said for a recent attempt to bracket the difference between speculative mysticism and affective

21. Thus, in the prologue to his translation (which he entitles *Diocese Hol Dreinite*), he says that "in translation of it, I have not solde the nub of the text, bot for to declare the hardnes of it, I have moche folowed the sentence of the Abbot of Saint Victor [Thomas Gallus], a noble and a worthy exponator of this same book" (in Hodgson, ed., *Diocese Hol Dreinite*, p. 2, II. 8–12).


mysticism, to understand the late-medieval mystics, instead, within a common conceptual framework based on a crucial distinction that attained great prominence among the scholastic theologians of the late Middle Ages, especially among those of the nominalist persuasion. The distinction between the absolute power of God and his ordained power (potestas dei absoluta, potestas dei ordinata) reflected the determination of medieval theologians to affirm the freedom and omnipotence of God and the ultimate dependence upon his untrammled will of his creation, of the moral norms imposed on man, and of the whole sacramental and ecclesiastical machinery. Current research is making it clear that the distinction was itself susceptible of more than one meaning. The meaning that came to the fore in the late Middle Ages, which is sometimes signaled in the texts by the substitution of the word “ordinary” for “ordained” (potestas ordinaria for potestas ordinata), and which is in question here, is the distinction between the way in which God ordinarily acts— in accordance, that is, with the particular order (natural, moral, ecclesiastical)—he has actually chosen to establish—and those extraordinary acts of untrammled omnipotence in which he sets aside or acts apart from that order.

This distinction is relevant to the understanding of medieval mysticism because, as Ozment explains,

in the practical terms of medieval religious life and theological debate, the potestas Dei ordinata was simply the church with her orthodox doctrines and sacraments, which embodied God’s revealed will.” And the potestas Dei absoluta was that sphere of divine freedom above and beyond this chosen system of salvation. Concretely, the former represented the “establishment”, the latter the permanent possibility of historical novelty. And “mysticism in the late Middle Ages,” he goes on to suggest, “can be called a commonsense science of a presently active potestas Dei

24. For this attempt, see Ozment, “Mysticism, Nominalism, and Discord,” in Trinkaus and Oberman, eds., pp. 66–92; also Ozment, Mysticism and Discord, especially pp. 1–60.

25. Ozment, Mysticism and Discord, p. 2.
had branded as heretics, defending even on some debatable issues the integrity of her public authority, and sharing, several of them, in the exercise of that authority.

The point could be illustrated at length. In the struggle between John XXII and Lewis of Bavaria, both Tauler and Suso sided with the pope. As provincial of the Saxon province of his order from 1303 to 1311, Eckhart was deeply involved in ecclesiastical administration; he was also an ardent believer in the efficacy of frequent communion.28 In the struggle against mystical heterodoxy in the Brussels region, Ruysbroek campaigned, it seems, with great vigor. And so on. But perhaps the classic statement that Julian of Norwich made in describing her visions or "shewings" will suffice:

I am not good because of the shewing, but only if I love God the better. . . . And I am sure that there are many that never have shewing nor sight except of the common teaching of Holy Church, who love God better than I. . . . [In all things I believe as Holy Church preacheth and teacheth. For the faith of Holy Church, of which I had understanding beforehand and which, I hope by the grace of God, I will fully keep in use and in custom, stood continually in my sight. It was my will and meaning never to accept anything that could be contrary thereto. With this intent and with this meaning I beheld the shewing with all my diligence. For in all this blessed shewing I beheld it [the sight and the faith] as one in God's meaning.]29

There is no reason for us to doubt the sincerity of such affirmations. But the fact remains that their contemporaries did not always take them at face value—at least in the case of the more speculative Rhineland mystics. And that fact is not wholly irrelevant to the emergence in the Low Countries of the type of piety that was known as Devotio moderna.

Monastic Piety and the Devotio moderna

The "new devotion" was of modest origins. It stemmed from the struggle of Geert Groote (1340–84), son of a draper in the small com-
mercial town of Deventer in the eastern Netherlands, to find a mode of religious life congruent with his own highly personal spiritual instincts. A master of arts of the University of Paris, he had pursued higher studies in theology, medicine, and law, and, though not in priestly orders, had obtained several benefices when, at some point after 1370, he encountered his moment of truth. At that time, under the influence of an old friend, Henry Eger, prior of the Carthusian monastery of Mönchhutzen, he withdrew to that house for a period of reading and reflection, steeping himself in the spirituality of the Rhineland mystics and especially of Ruysbroeck, whose supporter and disciple in many ways he became. His own aspirations, however, became neither clearly monastic nor fully mystical.30 They involved a life of service in the world and partook of a combination of cautious practicality in spiritual matters and uncompromising rigor in the realm of morality. In the ten years between 1374 and his death, having disposed of his benefices and of some of his property and accepted ordination as a deacon (he thought himself unworthy of the priesthood), he embarked upon a life of personal austerity and public rigor, preaching in the region around Deventer and the neighboring towns of Kampen, Zwolle, and Winsnesheim, attacking immorality and the heresy of the Free Spirit but reserving what were perhaps his sharpest barbs for monks who held too lightly their vows of poverty and secular clerics tainted with simony or guilty of concubinage. The very vigor of his onslaught stimulated a clamor of opposition that led indirectly to the bishop's eventual withdrawal of his license to preach—a decision from which Groote appealed to the pope but which he respected and which was still in force when he died in 1384.

Before his death, however, he had turned his house in Deventer over to a community of religious women and given them an order of life in accordance with which they were to remain laywomen, taking no vows and adopting no habit, working for a living and striving to pursue in common a life of service to God. From this community grew

28. See e.g., Eckhart, Talks of Instruction, no. 20; trans. in Blakney, pp. 27–30.
30. Cf. his "Gloriosa et Proposta, non vota in nomine domini," in Pohl, 7:97: "... malum est etiam propere contemplationem piatem et justitiam quod per aliam hacte non posset desiresse et proximis utilitates suas."
the later Sisters of the Common Life. Similarly, the nucleus of the future Brothers of the Common Life had emerged under his direction in the group of laymen pursuing a common life at the vicarage of Florens Radewijns (1350–1400), the only one of his immediate disciples whom Groote had encouraged to take priestly orders. Finally, in 1387, in establishing at Windesheim a community of Augustinian canons, Radewijns acted upon an idea that Groote had died too soon to realize, making available a fully monastic life for those among the brothers who felt called to that state.

By the end of the fifteenth century, houses of all these groups—Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life and Augustinian canons of the Windesheim congregation—had multiplied and were to be found throughout the region that now forms Holland and Belgium, in the Rhineland in general, and across a good part of western Germany as well. And in both types of community, nonmonastic as well as monastic, was cultivated, developed, and preserved the mode of piety to which the Windesheimers,23 Thomas a Kempis—of Kempen—(1380–1471) and John Busch (1399–1479) themselves attached the name Devotio moderna. The new devotion found its most notable and extraordinarily influential expression in the collection of four books that it now seems safe to attribute to Thomas a Kempis and that is known under the title The Imitation of Christ. By using the name Devotio moderna, these men reveal that they themselves assumed that there was something new and distinctive about their form of spirituality. Unfortunately, neither they nor their successors quite succeeded in pinpointing wherein that novel and distinctive character consisted, and historians have naturally felt impelled to remedy that failure.

Until quite recently, the general tendency was to emphasize the element of novelty and, with much flourishing of the Imitation of Christ, to portray the Devotio moderna very much as a harbinger of things to come. Thus it has been seen to reflect a disgusted turning away from the arid and conveled speculations of the nominalist theology (“What availeth a man to reason high secret mysteries of the Trinity, if he lacks meekness, whereby he displeaseth the Trinity? ... I had rather feel compunction of heart for my sins, than only to know the definition of compunction” [Imitation, I, 1; p. 4]).23 Or it has been considered a cultivation in corporate fashion, as it were, of the mysticism of the fourteenth-century Rhinelanders and especially of Ruysbroeck (“Bewiwt Almighty God and a devout soul there are many ghostly visitings, sweet inward consolations, much heavenly peace, and wondrous familiarity of the blessed presence of God” [Imitation, II, 1; p. 59]). Or, again, it has been found to foster Christian humanism (no fuel, admittedly, in the Imitation for this). It has even been seen as emphasizing an interior and individualistic piety that tends to bypass the external sacramental mediation of the church and points in the direction of the Protestant Reformation (only in the fourth book of the Imitation is the Eucharist discussed). At the same time, it has also been portrayed as involving a stress on a lively, meditative piety to which the eucharistic ministrations of the church were absolutely central and which flowed right on into the Catholic Reformation of the sixteenth century (the fourth book of the Imitation treats of nothing else: “It is a great mystery; and great the dignity of priests, to whom it is granted that is not granted to Angels. For only priests that be duly ordained in the Church have power to sing Mass and to consecrate the Body of Christ” [Imitation, IV, 5; p. 236]).

A somewhat livelier sense of the historical context in which the Devotio moderna emerged and flourished, a more intensive scrutiny of the lives and writings of those who sustained it, and a much more acute sense of its development across time have brought most of these claims into question.24 Thus there is not much to be said for seeing in it any marked reaction to nominalism as such. Though it is by no means a central motif in his writings, Groote himself does appear...
to have rejected the nominalist theory of knowledge. There is some reason, however, to doubt that many of his followers would even have known what that theory was. It was not, apparently, of interest to them. Their rejection was of a different sort; it was a rejection of everything that would hinder or distract from a rigorous life of interior devotion and loving imitation of Christ. That rejection included higher education, academic theology, and, indeed, the study of "anything which does not refresh the soul." 35 The brothers were not given university educations. From those of their reading lists that have come down to us not only the nominalist authors are missing, but the scholastic theologians in general. In their reading they applied themselves, instead, to the fervent scrutiny of the Scriptures and of such spiritual writers as St. Augustine, Richard of St. Victor, St. Bonaventure, and, above all, John Cassian (d. 434)—author of those great classics of ascetic literature the *Institutiones* and *Collationes*. With this general attitude of reserve toward higher education, of course, it would have been odd if the brothers had exercised any great leadership in the introduction of humanist ideas into northern Europe. The tendency, therefore, has been to downgrade their contribution in this respect, to point out that until about 1480 their involvement in teaching went no further than the exercise of pastoral care over the schoolboys attending the neighboring city schools, especially those lodging in their hostels whom they would often try to help with their lessons. In the early days, indeed, the brothers required any teacher who entered their ranks to relinquish his teaching post as incompatible with his religious profession. Only at the end of the fifteenth century, it turns out, did they move to set up a few schools of their own and to permit individual brothers to teach at such city schools as that at Deventer, which Erasmus attended between 1478 and 1483, but which was certainly not under their control. All of this, it seems likely, was too little and too late to enable them to play any major or determinative role in the introduction of humanism into northern Europe, and their once much-vaulted part in this process has become of late, therefore, very much a quodest disputata.

More surprisingly, perhaps, their reputation as cultivators and disseminators of the spirituality of the Rhineland and Flemish mystics has been challenged, and decisively so. Reader and admirer of Ruysbroeck Grouete himself certainly was. But if he thought well enough of some of Ruysbroeck's works to translate them, he was nervous that others might not properly be understood by the uninstructed, and he explicitly stated his antipathy toward those who'd be mystics of his own day who were willing to speculate loosely about the union of human and divine and to preach that "whatever God is by nature, that we can become through grace." 36 His disciples would seem to have taken that nervousness and antipathy as their point of departure and ended by ignoring the Rhinens and Flemish mystics altogether. None of them appear on the reading lists, not even Ruysbroeck, and R. R. Post has argued of all the "New Devotionalists" only the Windesheimers Henry Mande (d. 1431) and Gerlach Peters (d. 1411) can be said to have espoused a full-fledged mysticism. 37 Certainly, Thomas à Kempis does not do so in the *Imitation*. Intense individualists in their piety these advocates of the *Deus servus* certainly were, and the *Imitation* can furnish ample evidence for that claim, but it was an individualism moving wholly within the ambit established by the *ponsitio Dei ordinata*. It was a religious individualism, in other words, that did not reach beyond (let alone call into question) and, in effect, presupposed that whole sacramental and ecclesiastical system of salvation which Catholic orthodoxy proclaimed to be of divine ordination.

That conclusion, of course, is directly relevant to any attempt to relate the *Deus servus* to the teachings of the Protestant Reformers. One should not ignore the fact that among those of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life and of the Windesheimers who actually encountered Lutheran ideas, the overwhelming majority appear


to have reacted to them with characteristically conservative aversion. The amount of criticism heaped upon the brothers, especially in their early days, makes it altogether too easy to assume that there must have been something at least implicitly heterodox about them and to miss how very orthodox their commitments were and how fundamentally traditional their ways. Even the most respectable of Beguines and Beghards had had to struggle hard to avert ecclesiastical hostility, and the brothers, as Groote had himself foreseen, were forced to do likewise. At the same time that the mendicant orders felt themselves attacked by the brethren’s rejection of begging, the diocesan clergy were reluctant to hand over to them the cure of souls in the houses of the sisters. But when at the Council of Constance the Dominican Matthew Grabow took up his accusations against both brothers and sisters, they found powerful and unimpeachable protectors in the persons of Cardinal Pierre d’Ailly (1350–1420) and his former pupil Jean Gerson. The condemnation that the council handed down was directed, therefore, not at the Brethren but at Grabow.

Finally, it is simply incorrect to classify as representatives of the Devotio moderna the theologians John Ppper of Goch and Wessel Gansfort, both of them sufficiently suspect in their doctrinal views to have been regarded as “Reformers before the Reformation.” Despite allegations to the contrary, Ppper appears to have had nothing to do with either the brothers or the Windesheimers, and though Gansfort respected their ideals and had fairly extensive contacts with them, he never entered their ranks and certainly did not learn his theology from them. Both were university men, pursuing the type of interest in scholastic theology eschewed by the Devotionalists. And the same must be said of another theologian, Gabriel Biel (d. 1485), who joined the brothers only late in life and was unique in combining a university professorship at Tübingen with the office of prior of the brothers at Urach.

So far as anticipations of the Reformation are concerned, then, we are left very much with the alleged tendency of the Devotionalists to bracket or bypass the sacramental mediations of the visible church, to turn away from the externalities of religion so prominent in their own day in order to pursue instead a life of interior devotion. Despite repeated affirmations of such charges, however, surprisingly little can be said on their behalf. So far as ecclesiastical authority is concerned, the attitude of the Devotionalists was unimpeachable. Like Tauler and Suso before them, the brothers, sisters, and canons of the Utrecht diocese accepted exile from 1426 to 1432 rather than breach the interdict that the pope had imposed upon that diocese as a result of a disputed election. Their faith in ecclesiastical authority was such, indeed, that they appear to have made sure that they acquired the indulgences attached to so many of the prayers they said. Thus, writing in 1503, a brother from the Harderwijk house emphasizes the value during the canonical hours of bowing the head at the Gloria Patri: not only can it serve to revive the attention, it is also required if the indulgences are to be secured.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 400–401.}

Given these facts, it is appropriate also to accept only with the severest of reservations any notion that the Modern Devotionalists ignored the externals of religion. Their concern, rather, was to try to ground such “works” in the good intentions that were vital to their fruitfulness. Vigils, images, the rosary, indulgences—these, it seems, they accepted as a matter of course, and if we are prone to recall the assertion of the Initiation of Christ that “they that go much on pilgrimage be seldom thereby made perfect and holy” (Initiation, 1, 23; p. 45), perhaps we should also recall that Thomas a Kempis was a monk committed to the ideal of stability, writing specifically for monks pursuing the contemplative life, and persistently concerned to exclude or downgrade anything not conducive to that life. Indeed, we would do well to recall in general the degree to which the context of the Devotio moderna was monastic or quasi-monastic and to remember what that meant. For the Windesheimers it meant, in fact, an enclosed life differing from that of other monasteries mainly in the rigor of their customs and observance and in the fact that they had restored manual labor (in the guise of book copying) to its ancient place in the daily routine. One of their primary and most time-
this, too, as in so many of their practices, they must be judged to have looked backward to the type of piety developed and disseminated by the Cistercians and Franciscans before them (and which they, indeed, continued to deepen) rather than forward to anything specific to sixteenth-century Protestantism. If they are to be said, indeed, to have looked forward to anything at all, it must surely have been to the piety certainly of Erasmus, perhaps also of the Catholic Reformation. For whatever one makes of the alleged influence upon Ignatius of Loyola's meditational method of the Routem, or Rosary of Spiritual Exercises, written by the Windesheimer John Mombert (d. 1501), Ignatius is said to have esteemed the _Imitation of Christ_ above all other devotional writings, and the spiritual affinity is clear enough.

We are left with the question of what was distinctive about the _Deusio moderna_. By no means easy to answer, the question is best approached by an attempt to locate and understand the new devotion and the institutions that sustained it in the history of monasticism and of monastic piety. In this connection Vandenbroucke has suggested the existence of a certain analogy between the conditions prevailing in the monastic world in the last years of the twelfth century and of the fourteenth century. The suggestion is a fruitful one. By the end of the twelfth century the traditional type of monastic life was no longer satisfying either the needs of the church at large or the aspirations of all those who aspired to a life of more than ordinary religious commitment. In this context surfaced the twin impulses that led on the one hand to the multiplication of communities of Beghards and Beguines and on the other to the creation of the great international orders of mendicant friars. By the end of the fourteenth century, in turn, the Beghard and Beguine movement was in decline and the friars had lost their earlier vitality. And in that context surfaced the impulse that produced Geert Groote and led to the emergence of the _Deusio moderna_.

But that impulse, it should not be forgotten, discharged itself...
along more than one line. In the first place, it sparked the move leading to the foundation at Windesheim of a monastery of Augustinian canons regular and in the course of time to the foundation of co-option of other monasteries that came to be grouped together in the Windesheim congregation. On the face of it a rather conservative move, revert to a form of monastic life that predated the appearance even of the mendicant orders and was nourished, if the reading lists do not deceive us, on a very traditional diet of scriptural and devotional readings. And yet it was these Windesheimers who produced most of the literature that we associate with the *Dhristos moderatus*.

There is nothing paradoxical about this. At the end of his great study of the monastic and religious orders of medieval England, Dom David Knowles identifies the following as prominent among the factors contributing to the relaxation of religious life in the majority of English monasteries: the increasing frequentation of universities by the monks, occasioning prolonged absences from the cloister and calling for a variety of dispensations and privileges; the relaxation of the Rule in relation to fasting, abstinence, the possession of private property, and other matters of daily life; the lack of the type of purposeful and satisfying daily occupation that the copying of books had once provided; and the failure to develop any sort of spiritual method or meditative practice going beyond the spiritual stimulus provided by the liturgy or by the prayerful reading of the Scriptures, the fathers, and the great spiritual writings of the twelfth century.

A comparison with the practices of the Windesheimer houses is instructive. There none of the destructive factors was at work: none of the canons were sent to university; the Rule was maintained in all its rigor; the copying of books was pursued with a degree of intensity, commitment, and concentration that had few parallels in earlier centuries; from the start a persistent attempt was made to cultivate a deep interior piety by using the little things of daily life as stimuli to brief meditations or "ruminations" on the life of Christ, and, over the course of time, a shift occurred to the more systematic and methodical techniques of meditation that find expression in Mombert's *Routinum*. The most novel thing in all of this was, if anything, the degree to which the Windesheimers succeeded in holding on to a bitter-sweet sense of how very great had been the fervor of their monastic predecessors "in the beginning of their religion" and of how very quickly that "first fervor" could be lost—hence their own dogged determination that "the desire to profit in virtue" should not fall asleep in them (*Initiation* I, 18; p. 29). Because of that determination they came to assume throughout their region a position of leadership in the "Observantia" movement of monastic reform that made itself felt across Europe during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and in more than one of the monastic and religious orders.

In the second place, the Devotionalist impulse led to the appearance of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life. With their initial willingness (in the case of the brothers) to mix clerics and layfolk in a single community, their initial lack (in the case of both brothers and sisters) of formal vows and distinctive habit, their commitment nonetheless to lives of celibacy, obedience, individual poverty, and possession of goods in common, they may be said to have carved out new middle ground somewhere between the positions of the traditional monastic orders and those of the Beghards and Beguines. The sisters, it is true, both individually and as communities, betrayed a persistent tendency to move toward the adoption of a fully monastic status. That tendency was not lacking among the brothers, either, for many of whom a period of life in a brother house served as a preparation, testing ground, or way stage en route to the cloister. But for most of them their choice of way of life was a distinctive one, more moderate, more experimental, more hesitant even. It was a choice that conveys a humble sense that the higher peaks of the spiritual life might well not be for them, that it was preferable to make the ascent step by cautious step and to take it day by routine day than to reach too high, as had so many religious before them, only to fall so very low. It

42. Thus *Post*, *Modem Devotion*, p. 522, stresses the marked impact of John Cassian upon the spirituality of Florens Radewijns.
44. Though they too, as Contarini reminds us ("Twelfth-Century Spirituality," pp. 47–48), had their roots in the twelfth century.
was a choice, accordingly, that was a good deal less secure for the community as a whole, which, unlike a monastery, did not possess the coercive legal power to force back a brother who chose to leave, but was more responsive, despite its undoubtedly rigor, to the weakness of the individual brother whose life was simply not to be bent to the maintenance of lifelong vows he might find himself unable to sustain. As one of them wrote in 1490, addressing himself to this very issue of coercion:

We are not Religious, but we wish and strive to live in the world religiously. . . . Since, moreover, our way of life issues and is issued from a core of devotion, it would be unifying for us to establish so many and so burdensome obstacles [dispensae] to reputation, peace, tranquility, concord and chastity. For there is a great difference between our voluntary life as Brothers and the rules, statutes and irrevocable necessity governing those who are Religious. If their monasteries go to rack and ruin through the presence of unstable and undisciplined monks, how much more, therefore, would the life of the Brothers be destroyed by the coerced presence of increased numbers of such rebellious and unstable members. 45

Within the framework established by that choice, however, and under urban conditions a good deal more distracting and certainly closer to the secular rhythms of ordinary daily life, they set out to cultivate very much the same type of meditative and intensely inward piety as that of their monastic cousins. Their success made their example an unusually compelling one, especially when, having become an almost wholly clerical body, they began to discharge pastoral duties among the boys attending the urban schools. It was in the hostels established by the brothers for those schoolboys that many a future priest or monk discovered his vocation, and their influence on the religious life of northwest Europe grew in time to be enormous. But “influence” is a deplorably flexible word, and before turning to the more “popular” levels of that religious life, we should call to mind the casus that Pius issued at both the beginning and the end of his study of the Deofig moderna. “One must not take it for granted,” he said,


"that everyone who showed any signs of piety at the end of the Middle Ages, or who was assumed to be devout, belonged to the Modern Devotion." 46

Popular Piety at the End of the Middle Ages

Delanouët's remark that "we are better informed about the abuses of the fifteenth century than we are about the virtues of the thirteenth" 47 relates with particular force to our knowledge of the religious sensibilities of the broader masses of city and country dwellers. About the modes of piety prevalent among the less articulate strata of society throughout the Middle Ages we know very much less than we do about the spirituality of the elites. And although we are increasingly better informed in this respect for the later Middle Ages than for the earlier period, that fact generates its own problems. As the evidence continues to accrue—evidence concerning the quality of popular preaching, the survival in the villages of magical and quasi-pagan practices, the activities of confraternities, the nature of legacies left for religious purposes, the means of religious instruction, the range of liturgical and para-liturgical rites, the dissemination of popular devotional literature—it is hard to know what to make of it all, what to compare it with, from what perspective to view it.

The problem is exacerbated not only by the existence of regional and local variations but also by the fact that so much of what we have come to know has been gleaned from the exhortations of such popular preachers as St. Bernardino of Siena (d. 1444); the propaganda of such would-be reformers as Pierre d'Ailly and Nicholas of Cémmanges (d. 1437); the proposals of such reform groups as the compilation known as the Capitula agendorum, which emanated from Parisian reforming circles on the eve of the Council of Constance; and the criticisms recorded during visitations like the notable one Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) undertook as papal legate to the Germanies in 1451–52, or those conducted during the same century by St. Antonino and

46. Post, Modern Devotion, pp. xi, 676.
47. Delanouët et al., i, xi. (Cf. the remarks of Hay, pp. 72–73.)
others in Tuscany and in the diocese of Bologna by Niccolò Albergati (who even "found it necessary to reiterate an injunction of one of his predecessors that no one could celebrate mass who was not ordained as a priest").

48 Valuable though such sources are, they naturally focus on what was going wrong, on what their authors wished to denounce in the current religious scene as abuses or corruptions. We are left accordingly, with the problem of deciding how prevalent such abuses really were and whether they represent a downward trend in the quality of religious life or an upward shift in the level of clerical expectations.

A similar difficulty attaches to any use one might be tempted to make of insights and information gleaned from the strictures the Protestant Reformers heaped upon the religious practices of their medieval forebears. Having broken with the old church, they can scarcely be expected to have wanted to represent its customs and ceremonies in a favorable light. Indeed, understandably eager to denounce the more palpable abuses in late-medieval religious life, they were almost as quick to condemn some of the less incontestably pernicious practices—deriding, for example, as "feeding upon the dead" (Totenfresser) the traditional round of masses for the deceased. Many were willing to portray in similarly derisive light the very sacramental ministrations of the church. Thus the confessional became "a schooling in sin"; the sacrament of confirmation "plain sorcery, devilry, witchcraft, juggling, legendaries, and all that naught is"; the Roman mass itself "nothing better to be esteemed than the verses of the sorcerer or enchanter." 49

In handling the growing bulk of evidence concerning the popular piety of the late Middle Ages, one is tempted to assimilate the more novel aspects of what we now know to familiar patterns long since laid down, to take one's cues from the compelling unified picture of religious life in France and Burgundy that Johan Huizinga painted over half a century ago in his Waning of the Middle Ages, a powerfully evocative picture in which superstition, irreverence, and mechanical formalism are tinted with the hues of morbidity, overripeness, decay. 51 Certainly there is enough and more to render plausible such an approach. This was an era set apart from the century preceding it by the onset of widespread famine and economic depression, by the recrudescence of prolonged and devastating warfare, and, from 1347 onward, by the repeated and traumatizing visitations of plague. It was an era set off from most that had gone before and all that were to follow (with the chastening exception of the twentieth century) by the incidence of death on an unimaginably massive scale. Small wonder, then, that it was an era during which spiritual activities were often pursued in an atmosphere of "pitched religious excitement" 52 and religious feelings frequently expressed in extreme and violent form. Small wonder, too, that religious phenomena that smack to us of the pathological periodically surfaced.

Most dramatic among these phenomena were the numerous companies of flagellants that made their appearance contemporaneously with the first ravages of the Black Death. They rose with apparent spontaneity, amid scenes of frenzied popular acclaim, in Austria, Bohemia, Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. Composed mainly of laymen concerned to atone for their own sins and to assuage the inexplicable wrath of God, these itinerant bands, sometimes several hundred strong, pledged themselves to obey a "master" and committed themselves to a mode of life and a ritual performance that appears to have varied little from place to place. They confessed their sins to the master, avoided their wives, eschewed all dealings with women, flagged twice a day in public and once during the night in private, and undertook to pursue the whole grimmest regimen for a fixed

48. Hay, pp. 56-57. The text of the Capitula agendorum is printed in Finke, 4:548-85. Finke endorses the traditional but improper ascription of the compilation of this work to d'Ailly.

49. See Osmont, Reformation in the Cities, p. 95; also pp. 111-16, for a discussion of Pamphilus Gegenbach's popular versified play Die Totenfresser (1521), in which the ascetic says to the priest: "I like dead people better than fighting and screeching; They are our food and drink."

50. Osmont, Reformation in the Cities, p. 55; Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, pp. 55, 56.

51. See especially Waning, pp. 124-181.

period of thirty-three and a half days in commemoration of Christ’s earthly life. The atmosphere generated by their gruesome activities seems usually to have been one of great solemnity and heroic intensity, evoking sentiments no less of hope and exaltation than of horror, fear, and awe:

The men beat themselves rhythmically with leather scourges armed with iron spikes, singing hymns meanwhile in celebration of Christ’s Passion and of the glories of the Virgin. Three men standing in the centre of the circle led the singing. At certain passages—three times in each hymn—all would fall down “as though struck by lightning” and lie with outstretched arms, sobbing and praying. The Master walked among them, bidding them pray to God to have mercy on all sinners. After a while the men stood up, lifted their arms towards heaven and sang; then they recommenced their flagellation. If by any chance a woman or a priest entered the circle the whole flagellation became invalid and had to be repeated from the beginning. . . . The flagellants did their work with such thoroughness that often the spikes of the scourge stuck in the flesh and had to be wrenched out. Their blood spurted on to the walls and their bodies turned to swollen masses of blue flesh.53

As the fourteenth century witnessed the appearance of such groups seeking through their excesses in self-mortification to expiate the sins of the world, it witnessed also, and under comparably disturbed circumstances, the appearance of marauding anti-Semitic mobs and the quickened circulation of legends about hosts allegedly profaned by Jews. It was a century during which millenarian expectations of one sort or another continued to surface, and, along with the two centuries following, it witnessed a great intensification in the belief in witchcraft and sorcery. It was a time marked everywhere by a compulsive preoccupation with death, dying, and the dead, a time when crowds pressed daily into the churchyard of the Innocents at Paris, there to gape at the painting of the dance of death in the cloisters or at the skulls and bones prematurely displaced from their last resting places by the incessant demand for fashionable burial space and piled high in

53. Cohn, pp. 133–34.

55. On which see now Cohen.
for elaborate funerals and repeated anniversary masses was large in the wills and last testaments of the period, leading to the creation in the English chantries of veritable mass factories and elsewhere to the multiplication of altars, mass endowments, and "mass priests" without cure of souls, whose function it was to meet the demand. Some of the numbers involved are staggering. Henry VII (1485–1509) of England provided for no fewer than ten thousand masses to be said for the repose of his soul; ordinary merchants were quite capable of aspiring to the hundreds; confraternities strove regularly to look after the similar needs of their own members. The Elisabethkirche in Breslau was able to keep 122 priests scrambling for the use of 47 altars in their attempts to discharge the sole duty for which their positions had been held.57

It was a sort of "arithmetical piety" that gave "almost a magical value to mere repetition of formulæ."58 As such, it was understandably prone to generate a number of outright abuses and to spawn some very odd practices that conspired unwittingly to make nonsense of the liturgy. The parlous economic situation and the instability of monetary values, which threatened to render legacies inadequate to support the requisite numbers of mass priests, led to the undignified practice of having as many endowed masses as possible sung or said immediately after death rather than being spread out over the years. The pressure of time led to such abuses as the so-called boxed or curtained masses, with "one Mass . . . sung to the offertory or to the Sanctus, then continued as a low Mass while at another altar a second Mass was begun."59 The greed for the acquisition of stipends led to the proliferation of "dry" masses, brief services from which was omitted the whole canon of the mass.

When one adds to these abuses the superstitions connected with the use of indulgences, images, relics, and the Eucharist itself, the picture takes on even darker hues. The fear of the torments of purgatory that led some to procure the privilege of a confessional (making it possible

for their confessors to extend to them on their deathbed the consolations of a plenary indulgence) led others, despite ecclesiastical disclaimers, to believe that even without being sorry for their sins or confessing them to a priest they could purchase with an indulgence the remission of their guilt as well as the punishment due for their misdeeds. More alarmingly, it seems to have led others to think that with an indulgence they could purchase a license to sin freely and safely in the future.60 Stories abound of allegedly bleeding hosts and of consecrated hosts profanedly used to promote fertility and to cure sick animals. In the fifteenth century the cult focused on the liquefaction of the blood of St. Gennaro at Naples appears to have attained its peak.61 The popular yearning to see the body of Christ that led priests at mass to prolong or repeat the elevation of the host overflowed also into the superstition that to have seen the host in the morning would preserve one from death for that day. Similar superstitions clustered around the viewing of relics and of the image of St. Christopher. In rural areas, as Tousaert has argued in his detailed analysis of religious sentiment in the maritime zone of Flanders, they were buttressed by the survival of outright pagan practices and half-Christianized rites and by the prevalence of a fundamentally magical religious vision.62 A gloomy picture it may well be, but what one makes of it depends very much on what one brings to it, and it may be suggested that by bringing the wrong things to it we have tended somewhat to misread it—in two major ways.

In the first place, we have approached many of these phenomena with too active a sense of their novelty or of their distinctively late-medieval character. The only partially successful struggle of ecclesiastical authorities to stamp out pagan practices and beliefs was by no means unique to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The early-medieval Penitentials down to the Penitential of Burchard of Worms in the early eleventh century reflect the very high priority given to that

57. For some other examples, see Delanoue et al., 2:775–76.
60. Hence the formula that appears on some indulgences of the day, warning that whoever thinks that the indulgence permits him to sin without fear will lose it; see Delanoue et al., 2:811, n. 7.
struggle; reports of bishops and missionary preachers in seventeenth-century France reveal that, despite the effort of centuries, the struggle was still going on. Nor was Protestant Europe exempt. In Britain, pilgrimages "were made to the famous well of St. Winifred at Holywell throughout the seventeenth century. ... When a man was found dead at the well in 1630 after having made scoffing remarks about its supposed powers a local jury brought in a verdict of death by divine judgment." 63 Similarly, the dismay evident in the visitors' report on Lutheran Wiesbaden in 1594 indicates that not even the catechetical diligence and educational enthusiasm of the Lutheran reformers had been enough to carry the day. 64 But indications do suggest that the long struggle had not been entirely without effect, that latter-day ecclesiastics now saw impermissible pagenism in practices that their predecessors would have tolerated, that the slow seepage of Christian ideas into the rural areas had at least had the effect of clothing pagan substance with Christian form. Late-medieval countryside folk in France may well have expected much of their local saints and highly prized local relics when a drought needed to be ended or the crops saved, but in sixteenth-century Sweden, a country much more recently evangelized, the peasants still assumed it appropriate to place that burden on their king, as if, he complained, "he were a god and not a man." 65

Similarly, although the impact of war and of the Black Death undoubtedly intensified the preoccupation with suffering and death and heightened the sense of tender pathos surrounding Christ's passion (it was around this time that we first encounter in art the motif of the Pietà), it certainly did not create them. That preoccupation and that sense had been growing ever since the emergence of a more inward and

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63. Thomas, Religion and the Devine of Magic, pp. 70. 64. Sermon, pp. 30–43. He concludes (pp. 61–62) that "the evidence of the visitation protocols supports the view . . . that the operative religion of country folk, and perhaps of many city-dwellers as well, had much less to do with the doctrines of established Christianity than with the spells, charms, signs and paraphernalia of ancient magic lore and wizardry, the cult of which flourished unaffected by the imposition of new or old denominational creeds." 65. Otto Hoffer, "Der Sakralcharakter des germanischen Königreigns," in Saval Kingship, p. 681.

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affectionate piety in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. Nor did they disappear when the conditions of life improved. The miseries of purgatory continued to be feared; anniversaries masses continued to be endowed; the exercise of charity continued to embrace not only the living but also the dead. In his Supplication of Souls (1529) Sir Thomas More himself portrayed the souls in purgatory as beseeching the living for masses and prayers:

If ye pitte the blind, there is none so blinde as we, which are here in the darke, saving for sighthes unpleasaut and loathome, til some comfor come. If ye pitte the lame, thert is none so lame as we, that neither can crepe one fote out of the fyre, nor have one hand at libertie to defende our face fro the flame. Finally, if ye pitte any man in payne, never knew ye payn comparable to ours, whose fyre do fare passeth in heaste all the fyres that ever burned upon earth, as the harte of all of those passeth a fresed fyre payned in a walle. If ever ye laye sicke, and thought the nighte long and londore sore for daye, while every houre seemed longer than fyne, bethynke you than what a londight we sely soules endure, that lyse slepelesse, burning and broylynge in the darke fyre one long night of many dayes, of many weles, and some of many yeers together. 66

A. G. Dickens cites this passage to make the point (and rightly so) that the "dogmatic and detailed emphasis upon the horrors of Purgatory and the means whereby sinners could mitigate them" was "no mere cult of the vulgar." And with More we are into the sixteenth century. One can add that the upheavals in Catholic life engineered by the Second Vatican Council should not blind us to the fact that More's intense concern with the well-being of the souls in purgatory was not necessarily alien to the older modalities of Catholic life in the twelfth century.

Something similar can be said about the liturgy. In that realm, as we have seen, the critical changes that made the consecration of the mass the focus, the action the priest's, the sacrifice a repetition, the benefit a quantity, the number a consideration—these changes had long since occurred. It was left for the late-medieval churchmen only
to draw out the logic of those changes to its conclusion and to rationalize the whole process. This they did by developing a theology in accordance with which "the value of the Mass is a limited one, so that the smaller the number for which it is offered so much the greater is the profit accruing to each individual," and by multiplying masses accordingly. 67 On the other hand, they also responded affirmatively to the wish to see and adore the host—building tabernacles in which it could be reserved between masses, constructing ostensoria or monstrances in which it could be exposed (even throughout the celebration of the mass), conducting paralyturgical services and processions centering on benediction by or exposition of the sacrament. The Catholic or Counter-Reformation pruned the more bizarre excesses and the ranks of the mass priests were ultimately thinned. In these respects, however, as in others, the spirituality of the Counter-Reformation era was very much in continuity with the late Middle Ages.

In the second place, in making our judgments about the quality of popular religious life during the late Middle Ages, we have perhaps been somewhat guilty of intruding our own sensibilities upon those of a very different era. Grisly though they may seem to us, double-decker transtombs, it turns out, did not represent merely a memento mori for the living, but also (and rather) represented an "expression of hope for the salvation of the soul of the deceased"; in the course of time, they came to symbolize too the Christian faith in the resurrection of the body. 68 To be a member of a company of flagellants (disciplinati), at least in calmer times, was not necessarily a sign of mental aberration; one might just be unusually pious. Certainly, to be admitted to the Company of San Domenico, one of several companies of disciplinati in fourteenth-century Siena, one had to be at least twenty years old and a working artisan, to be interviewed by the priest, to attend mass daily.

67. Iseli, "Wert der Messe," p. 62. The view expressed is that of Pierre d'Ailly who in this follows Robert Holcot's view.

68. Cohen, p. 181. Cf. Jankovsky for a similar line of argument concerning not only the iconography of the tombs but also the debate between corps and worms in the poem he is analyzing. There the dead lady engages in debate with the worms devouring her body and they serve to awaken in her "spiritual insight and hope for eterna felicity" (p. 150).

go to confession twice monthly, receive communion four times a year, and to pledge oneself to the practice of mutual charity with one's fellows. Similarly, for those of appropriately balanced disposition, indulgences could function not as reinforcement to a piety of mechanical formalism but rather as a modest incentive to prayer, and anniversary masses could function not as Totenfresser but rather as a proper and reassuring extension to the dead of love for one's neighbor. 69

Despite all their stress on an inward individual piety, the Brothers of the Common Life, it should be noted, rejected neither of those practices; the conventualities of their houses at Zwolle and Hildesheim show them to have been willing even to accept from benefactors foundations for masses; they betray, in this respect, no striking difference in attitude from that displayed by other priests and monks of the time. So, too, with pilgrimages. Such churchmen as St. Bernardino of Siena and Nicholas of Cusa could criticize their abuse, but they often involved a risk to personal safety and were not necessarily lightly undertaken or widely scorned. When the band of thieves that had been terrorizing the Norfolk country folk around Paston village in the mid-fifteenth century learned that a man whom they had robbed and taken captive to their boat was a pilgrim, "they gave him money," Agnes Paston tells us, "and set [him] again on the land." 70 At the other end of the scale, Margery Kempe of Lynn, in the same county (ca. 1373-ca. 1439), no true mystic perhaps but clearly a woman of more than formal piety, embarked on extended pilgrimages to Compostela in Spain, to Italy, and to the Holy Land. Even for Chaucer, we should perhaps recall, not every pilgrim on the road to Canterbury was a Pardoner or a Wife of Bath.

We need to be sure that the understandable temptation to focus on the bizarre, to assimilate religious life in general to the ecclesiastical confusion of the era, and to view both as a falling away from the achievements of the High Middle Ages does not blind us to intimations of the spread of a deeper and more inward piety even in those

69. On this last issue I would refer to the provocative article of Natalie Zemon Davis, "Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion," in Trinkaus and Oberman, eds., pp. 307-56, on which I have drawn at more than one point.

70. Cited in Bennett, pp. 210-11.
things that seem indicative of an external and formalistic religion. Neither in that era nor later is the preoccupation with apparitions and pilgrimages, for example, necessarily to be taken as a sign of growing superstition and religious decay. In late-nineteenth-century Ireland, certainly, the emergence of the shrine of Knock as a popular focus of pilgrimage came at a time of deepening religiosity, more widespread education, and improved religious instruction.\textsuperscript{71} Again, while we may feel an instinctive sympathy with Crammer's condensation toward the widespread popular desire to see the host, a late-medieval cleric breathing a very different theological atmosphere might well be disposed to view it rather as a heartening sign of deepening piety. The capitoli of one of the new confraternities for boys in fifteenth-century Florence require the members, among other things, to make confession once a month, to go to communion together on the feast of St. John, and to attend mass daily "or at least to try to see the body of Christ."\textsuperscript{72} And Ambrogio Traversari (d. 1439), humanist and master general of the Order of Camaldoli, was loud in his praise for the success of such confraternities in forming youths of exemplary moral character. Even Nicholas of Cusa, who as papal legate to Germany tried to suppress the pilgrimage to the bleeding host of Wilno, recognized in such practices the evidence of a great hunger for the divine and ordered those whom he dispensed from pilgrimage vows to visit and venerate the Blessed Sacrament in their parish churches, for there God truly dwelt.

The scope of Nicholas of Cusa's reforming visitation and the appearance at this time of such confraternities for boys are themselves worthy of note. The latter reflects that growing concern with the moral and religious formation of the young that found expression also in the writing of manuals for confessors geared specifically to help them respond to the spiritual needs of youth, in the apostolate of the Brothers of the Common Life among the schoolboys of the Netherlands, in the aspiration of Savonarola (d. 1498) to marshal the spiritual energies of the young boys of Florence (the fasciulli), in the concern of Gerson for the religious education of the boys of the Notre-Dame choir school in Paris and his insistence in the teeth of criticism that such a ministry was by no means beneath his dignity as chancellor.

Indeed—in a period that remained too devoted to earlier medieval practice in its failure to provide in any systematic fashion for the theological and pastoral training of the secular clergy or for the catechesis of the children—the sheer range, quantity, and variety of the instrumentalities geared in some degree to the moral and religious formation of the lower clergy and laity must be regarded as impressive. These instrumentalities ranged from the increasing attention given to the sacrament of penance to the public performance of the danse macabre, the Mysteries, and the great passion plays (these last by no means devoid of doctrinal content); from the initiation by St. Vincent Ferrer in 1399 of the great teaching missions that took him and St. John Capistrano (d. 1456) across much of Spain and France, St. Bernardino of Siena across Italy, and John Brugman (d. 1473) across the Germans, to the publication of an abundance of teaching manuals, Bible paraphrases and translations into the vernacular, spiritual biographies, books of instruction setting forth Christian doctrine and morality in summary form, Books of Hours for devotional reading at mass, and so on. Even if the vernacular versions of the Bible that circulated during these centuries were accessible only to the literate minority, they were accessible in French, German, Italian, English, Spanish, and Czech and included a Castilian rendering of the Old Testament translated directly from the Hebrew. Similarly, the Lay Folk's Mass Book, which was translated from a French original, circulated in fifteenth-century England in several regional dialects. And the titles of some of the books of popular instruction—such as the German Spiegel der Laix (Mirror for the Laity)—reveal that they

\textsuperscript{71} Lathem. Cf. the remarks of Panin, p. 259, in relation to the religious life of Margery Kempe of Lynn: "The interesting thing to notice is that these manifestations of popular piety, like image-worship and pilgrimages—the very things that the Lollards attacked—and that may seem to a modern observer to take a childish or superstitious form—were to a devout person like Margery not a hindrance but a direct help and stimulus to a more spiritual devotion. There seems in fact to be a direct connexion between the use of images and the practice of meditation in the later Middle Ages."

were intended not as clerical aids but for the direct edification of the laity.

Of all these instrumentalities, and others to which I have not referred, the sacrament of penance and the manner in which priests were encouraged to administer it are especially worthy of attention. The seriousness with which theologians and canonists took that sacrament in the late Middle Ages can be gauged by the impressive number of "aids" they wrote to help confessors discharge their responsibilities, both the simpler and more "popular" sort and the more formidable and encyclopaedic 

As examples of the former, one may cite the influential little manual that formed the second part of Gerson's Opus tripartitum and the first part of the Oscaus sacrosatis (ca. 1326–28), written by the priest and canonist William of Pagula, some passages from which the mystic Richard Rolle admired enough to incorporate into one of his own treatises. In the latter category are the Summa confessiorum of the theologian John of Freiburg (ca. 1290) and the Summa of Angelus Carleton of Clavasio (1480–90), generally known by their nicknames, respectively the Joannina and the Angelica.

The basic purpose of these summaries was to convey to confessors—and through them to the faithful, who were required to confess at least once a year—what their faith required of Christians, the laws by which the church had sought to lend specificity to those requirements, and the sanctions she had attached to those laws in order to secure their observance. Among their characteristic features two have recently been emphasized. The first: the evident trend, as time went on, in the direction of placing the emphasis within the sacrament on the role of priestly absolution rather than on the penitent's sorrow for his sins—in the direction, therefore, of the Scotist teaching that "absolution, by virtue of the [sacerdotal power of the] keys, justifies by turning an attrito into a contrite man, unless he interposes an obstacle." The second, that what was involved here was not simply the imposition of norms of conduct enforced by external legal sanctions, but

73 See Pantin, pp. 196–97, who says of William, "He reminds us that ... we must not dismiss the canons as a race of useless administrators." See also Boyle.

rather a process of socialization, an attempt to insert these norms into the arena of conscience so that the internal sanction of guilt would do the enforcing. What the "summissis" were trying to do, in effect, was to help ecclesiastical authorities get catalogues of forbidden behavior thoroughly internalized. 74

These summaries reveal clearly enough what the clerical leadership was trying to promote. How effective their efforts were is, of course, extremely hard to judge. But given the stirrings of reform evident in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it seems permissible to suspect that by the eve of the Reformation the process of socialization they were seeking to sponsor was shaping the conscience of more and more of the faithful. 75 Certainly, the degree of confidence in the church's mediatorial and sacramental ministrations presupposed by the first of the two features to which attention has been drawn was presupposed also by the intensive investment of the laity in the construction of chapels, altars, and chantries, in the accumulation of indulgences, in the endowment of masses. Similarly, a successful internalization of values of the type the "summissis" sought to promote is very evident in the methodical scrupulosity of the New Devotionists. But of how many more?

Conditions of religious life in Germany during the latter part of the fifteenth century may not have been representative of those in Europe as a whole; there is some reason to believe that the Germans of that period may have been more obviously devout than the Italians, 76 the French, or even the English. Nevertheless, in the context of the values and objectives reflected in the summaries, a particular interest

74 Thomas N. Tentsler, "The Summa for Confessors as an Instrument of Social Control," along with the comments of L. E. Boyle and Tentsler's response, in Trinkaus and Oberman, eds., pp. 101–37. The words quoted occur on pp. 112 and 137. Cf. the full analysis in Tentsler, Sin and Confession. For the "summissis," and for the "astrintronism" of the later Middle Ages, which, he believes, gives witness to "a total confidence in the sacramental order of the Church," see also Delanelle et al., 2:656–64.

75 Note the comments of Tentsler, Sin and Confession, p. 53: "The most traditional picture of the Reformation emphasizes the insensibility or inadequacy of the clergy. But the massive attempt to instruct clergy and laity on the proper way to confess indicates—as any biography of Luther must show—that the church may not have been doing too badly, but rather too well."

76 See the analysis of Hay, especially pp. 49–90, 108–9.
attaches to the arresting conclusion of Bernd Moeller that religious life in Germany in the last decades before the Reformation was marked, on the one hand, by a thoroughgoing commitment to the authority of the church and, on the other, by an increasing intensity of piety. “In my opinion,” he says, “one could dare to call the late fifteenth century in Germany one of the most churchly-minded and devout periods of the Middle Ages.”

Though such a claim runs directly counter to the more negative assessment popularized especially by Lortz, it echoes in updated form similar claims advanced in the nineteenth century. Nor has it failed to win the support of contemporary scholars. But agreement concerning the intensity and vitality of late-medieval piety, although it may end one debate, can serve also to ease the way to the posing of other and more difficult questions concerning the quality of that piety. Asserting, in fact, that “the evidence suggests a flawed and unsatisfying piety,” Ozent, for example, has argued that “the first Protestants attacked the medieval church for demanding too much, rather than too little, from laymen and clergymen, and for making religion psychologically and socially burdensome, not for taking it too lightly.” Furthermore, and, in view of the claims adduced earlier for the influence of the *summae confessorum*, closest to home, he has also argued that “at no point did these apologists feel that they had greater justification for their criticism than at the point of the sacrament of penance and confession.”

How accurate their assessment of that sacrament was remains, of course, a matter of dispute. If sacramental penance did indeed pro-

mote religious and moral discipline by the inculcation of guilt and the consequent imposition of psychological burdens, it was also intended to reconcile the penitent sinner, to promote psychological relief by offering him “a relatively accessible and routine means of consolation.” If the rigorous examination of conscience that it demanded did carry with it the danger of encouraging “scrupulosity,” of molding a hypersensitive conscience prone to torment itself with imagined failings and an overanxious search for sins, the medieval theologians were well aware of that danger, viewed scrupulosity as itself a spiritual vice, and advocated remedies for it. There are those, Gerson said, who “always have a scruple that they are not yet properly confessed. They exhaust themselves and their confessors with repeated confessions, especially of light and unimportant sins.” To all of these alike, he adds, “should be given the counsel to trust not in their own justice but in the pure mercy of God; and as they overestimate their own negligence, so let them also exaggerate the infinite mercy of God.”

Johannes von Staupitz appears to have voiced almost identical sentiments later, when as monastic superior and spiritual guide he in turn was struggling to assuage the crippling anxieties from which the young Luther sought release. It was in vain, of course, that he did so. He failed to convince his adamantally scrupulous protégé, and the Reformers went on to attack the medieval institution of sacramental penance, seeing it as an instrument of torment and anguish of spirit rather than as a medium of consolation and hope. That they did so, however, should not betray us into assuming that they “simply articulated the reactions of sensitive Christians throughout Europe.”


penance" continued to touch the hearts of many of fervent spirituality throughout the Catholic world. If, then, the type of disciplined and churchly piety that the late-medieval summæ confessorum and similar instrumentalities sought to inculcate among clergy and laity alike is to be brought into relationship with sixteenth-century reforming movements, that relationship must properly be understood as one of continuity as well as discontinuity, no less as a positive inspiration to the forces of Catholic renewal than as a negative stimulus to the initiatives of Protestant reform.

84. Steinmetz, Misericordia Dei, pp. 97–104; Tender, Sin and Confession, p. 366.

CHAPTER 3 · CURRENTS OF THOUGHT: THEOLOGICAL AND DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENTS

And, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." If the Word was not ashamed to be born of men, should man be ashamed to be born of God? Saying "He gave them power to become sons of God" does not at all mean, as Pelagius dreamed, that He gave them power to become sons of God by preceding works of merit. It is inconceivable that St. John should contradict his Lord, who said, as John himself reports, "No one is able to come unto me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

—Thomas Bradwardine (ca. 1290–1349)

There is a distinction between compulsory necessity and unfailing necessity [that is, consistency]. With God compulsary necessity has no place, but an unfailing necessity is appropriate to God because of His promise, that is, His Covenant, or established law. This is not an absolute but rather a conditional necessity. According to God's established law the pilgrim who does whatever he can to dispose himself for grace always receives grace. However, if He should choose to, God could deviate from His law for someone other than the pilgrim or the devil. Then, however much such a person [with whom God has not made His Covenant] might dispose himself for grace, he would not receive it. Man's disposition does not require the giving of grace except by congruency, because grace surpasses every natural act; it is impossible for man to fully merit (de condigno) through any natural act.

—Robert Holcot (ca. 1300–1349)