

## **In what senses did the Devotio Moderna and Christian humanism represent a rejection of mediaeval Christianity by the laity?**

During the fifteenth and early sixteenth century many radical changes in intellectual life had taken place: a new religious movement the *Devotio Moderna*, was thriving and Humanism was born. These two movements sought the renewal of some aspects of the Church, which was seen as a corrupt institution that had to be restored to its former glory. These will later have important consequences on the religious and intellectual landscape of the time. This essay will argue that both Christian Humanism and the *Devotio Moderna* represented a rejection of Medieval Christianity by the laity mainly in three senses: (1) as a way to renew the Church in its practices and morality, (2) as an affirmation of the importance and value of the laity, and (3) as an intellectual (or anti-intellectual) shift away from Scholasticism. This paper will show that there was a profound dislike for public expression of devotion in favour of a more private and internal exercise of piety. It will explain how the laity sought a more active role in the Church. It will illustrate how both the *Devotio Moderna* sought to purge the Late Medieval Church of its corruption. Eventually, it will show how both movements rejected Medieval Scholasticism.

First of all, we shall analyze the renewal that the laity wanted to be seen in Church practices: a shift from an exterior and harsh devotion to a more interior one. Indeed, there was a general dislike among the adherents to the *Devotio Moderna* of all those practices that involved an external and extreme expression of faith in favour of a more interior, private form of piety. As a matter of fact, Medieval Christianity put a lot of emphasis on the apostolic poverty and extreme renunciation.<sup>1</sup> Also, the Medieval practice of the imitation of Christ's involved the physical re-enactment of his physical suffering.<sup>2</sup> Physical pain played an important role also

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Norman Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215-1515* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 104-105.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

in the Medieval communities of Flagellants, who whipped themselves in public to ask for forgiveness. This created a huge gap between the laity and what was considered a proper religious life. Indeed, these practices could only be performed by a religious élite<sup>3</sup> while the laity was busy working.

Conversely, we find in the “Imitatio Christi”, one of the pillars of the *Devotio Moderna* movement (and, for this reason, one of the most valuable sources), that “[n]o man appears in safety before the public eye unless he first relishes obscurity”.<sup>4</sup> Here, à Kempis is affirming that the interior practice has precedence over the public display of piety. Instead of replicating physically Christ’s sufferings on the Cross, Kempis calls for a more sentimental rather than physical recreation of Jesus’ passion.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the entire text invites the reader to focus on the frequent examination of conscience, meditation and private prayer. This had an astonishing success and soon became a bestseller both among the clergy and the laity.<sup>6</sup> The success of this book is the proof of how much these ideas were welcome among the laity. Hence, à Kempis rejects the excesses of the Medieval Church and focused more on interiority. For a layperson, a more simple, private piety was much more approachable than a life based on self-mutilation.

Similarly, Christian Humanists also focussed on interiority rather than the outer practice of piety. Indeed, Erasmus has his own conception of *pietas*. He suggests to the reader “to identify piety not with diet, or dress, or any visible thing, but with what I have taught here: the priority of soul over the body and of the inner over the outer person”.<sup>7</sup> Here, Erasmus is

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, translated by Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (Milwaukee, 1940), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

<sup>6</sup> Max von Habsburg, “The Devotional Life: Catholic and Protestant translations of Thomas à Kempis’ ‘Imitatio Christi’, c. 1420-c. 1620” (PhD Thesis, University of St. Andrews), p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, “Enchiridion militis christiani”, trans. Charles Fantazzi, in John W. O’Malley (ed.), *Collected Works of Erasmus – Vol. 66 Enchiridion, De Contemptu Mundi, De Vidua Christiana* (Toronto, 1988), p. 127.

suggesting just like à Kempis, that one's life should be more concentrated on a rigorous regimen of prayer and cure of self rather than an exterior public display. It is important to highlight here that, although Erasmus was a priest, he intended his *Enchiridion* as a book not for the exclusive use of the clergy, but for the laity as well. Indeed, the book was probably dedicated to a canon founder, and therefore lay.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the idea of *pietas* was closely associated with *Caritas*, was focussed on simple devotions and service to their own neighbour.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Macek was correct when saying that Erasmus's work satisfied a lay demand for a devotion that was in between the contemplative and the active, thus re-evaluating the work that the laymen did.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, both the *Devotio Moderna* and Christian Humanists wanted to purify the Church from the corruption that characterized the late Medieval Church. For example, Geert Grote, who has always been a lay theologian and was never ordained, was profoundly dissatisfied with the state of the Church of his time, in particular, because of the *dos* that the friars required and the *propriarii*.<sup>11</sup> Humanists were committed to eradicating corruption as well. Erasmus found it ridiculous that bishops were seeking power while the apostles themselves renounced that and called for a restoration of apostolic values.<sup>12</sup> *Ergo*, it can be argued that the removal of clerical corruption was an important part of the project of Church renewal.

Secondly, we must move on to analyzing the new role that the laity hoped to have in the Church through these movements. In addition to this, the *Devotio Moderna* responded to the need of the laity to participate more actively, thus re-emphasizing their position. Indeed, in the mass, the presence of the laity was considered just a mere accident and not necessary for a

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 274.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Allard Macek, "Fifteenth Century Lay Piety", *Fifteenth Century Studies* 1 (January 1978), pp. 168-169.

<sup>11</sup> Regnerius R. Post, *The Modern Devotion* (Leiden, 1968), p. 67-74.

<sup>12</sup> Erasmus, "Endirichion", p. 74.

correct celebration of the mass.<sup>13</sup> Also, the fact that the Gospel was read in Latin widened the distance between the clergy and the laity.<sup>14</sup> Medieval theologians thought that even if the spectators did not understand, the power of God was still present, so there was not any particular need for them to understand the text.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the relationship between the clergy and the laity was between a superior and an inferior class, with the latter being almost totally excluded from active participation.

The solution to this was represented by the translations of the New Testament that were produced by adherents to the *Devotio Moderna* movement for the laity.<sup>16</sup> In this way, they would have been much more involved in Church's life, having the opportunity to read the Gospel without the immediate intervention and comment of a priest. Indeed, this endangered the monopoly that the clergy had over access to the Holy Scriptures. An important lay member of the *Devotio Moderna*, Jean Gerson also called for the laity to become an integrant part of the celebration: for him, the participation of the laity was necessary for a proper celebration of the mass.<sup>17</sup> The corollary of this proposal was that the laity was just as important as the clergy.

Similarly, Humanists were campaigning as well for more spiritual awareness among the laymen. Humanist scholars like Briçonnet or Lefèvre d'Étaples insisted to read the Gospel aloud and comment it in vernacular so that even the lay could understand the readings.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, Erasmus wanted that his translation of the New Testament to be directed mainly to

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<sup>13</sup> Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Reinburg, "Liturgy and the Laity in Late Medieval and Reformation France", *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23: 3 (Autumn 1992), p. 530.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Koen Goudriaan, "Empowerment through reading, writing and example: the *Devotio Moderna*", in Miri Rubin and Walter Simons (eds), *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Christianity in Western Europe c. 1100-c. 1500* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 414.

<sup>17</sup> Reinburg, "Liturgy and the Laity", p. 542.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 530.

a lay audience.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, he wanted the laity to be able to distinguish between the good and the bad part of the clergy's teachings.<sup>20</sup> This was a call for a restructuring of the relationship between laity and clergy: now the laity was not just a mere receiver of the sacraments that the priest had to offer to them. Rather, the laity was a more engaged part of the Church and was seen as more independent from priestly control. The picture that emerges from this evidence is the one of a laity that does not accept its status as the mere recipient but wants to reaffirm the importance of its order.

Thirdly, we shall explore the sharp rejection of Scholastic authority by both Humanists and the *Devotio Moderna*. Scholastic was dominant in the universities at the time even though since Ockham its hegemony had been waning. Those who had contacts with the *Devotio Moderna* never had a particular appreciation for Scholasticism.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, we find clearly in the "Imitatio Christi" that [t]he Excellence of a Free Mind [is] Gained Through Prayer rather than by Study".<sup>22</sup> The critique of the intellectual Scholastic establishment here is implicit. There is, in fact, a vein of anti-intellectualism, which was very popular among those who did not study theology.<sup>23</sup> Instead of complex doctrines, the Modern Devouts preferred simple texts.<sup>24</sup> This may have reflected the perception that the laymen had of scholasticism as a conglomerate of sophisms and sterile abstractions that was of no use to them.

Christian Humanists were no different. Agricola, a lay, wanted to enlarge the sources that a scholar might have access to beyond the Scholastics.<sup>25</sup> Also, Erasmus affirmed that the Scholastic tradition did not consider the knowledge of the language of the time in which texts

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<sup>19</sup> Jane E. Phillips, "The Gospel, the Clergy and the Laity in Erasmus' Paraphrase on the Gospel of John", *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 10 (1990), p. 100.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Post, *The Modern Devotion*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> à Kempis, *The Imitation*, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> von Habsburg, "The Devotional Life", p. 102.

<sup>24</sup> Macek, "Fifteenth Century" p. 165.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Arnold, *The Great Humanists: An Introduction* (London, 2011), pp. 92-93.

were written.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, he advocated for a Christ-centred philosophy with the help of classics (*Philosophia Christi*)<sup>27</sup>, devoid of the Scholastic influence. In this way, the translation preceded the theological interpretation, thus taking out theology from the monopoly of the clergy and under the scrutiny of (possible lay) translators. In light of this, both Christian Humanism and the *Devotio Moderna* were not exactly enthusiasts of the Scholastic tradition and advocated for a change in intellectual life. This represented the abandonment of Scholasticism, one of the bases of Medieval Christianity, in favour of a religion much more based on Biblical philological or outside the intellectual circles. Therefore, both Humanism and the *Devotio Moderna* rejected Scholasticism, although in two radically different ways.

To summarize, this essay has provided reasons to believe that, through the *Devotio Moderna* and Christian Humanism, the laity rejected Medieval Christianity in three main senses: as a renewal of Church practices and behaviours, as a re-evaluation of their role and their relationship with the Clergy, and as a breaking point with the Scholastic tradition. All these reasons are not necessarily in opposition with each other but they might all help us in understanding this magnificently complex period. Also, it has given reasons why Humanism and the *Devotio Moderna* should not be seen as a lay preparation for the Reformation, but rather as a renewal of the Catholic Church. On a wider level, we can clearly see that the *Devotio Moderna* and Christian Humanism are in certain aspects in discontinuity with the Medieval Period while on other topics never parted with Catholic and Medieval tradition. However, this essay has not included all the other aspects that the laity rejected such as a possible more radical stance of anticlericalism or the re-evaluation of worldly life that Humanism operated in contrast with the Medieval “contempt of the world”. In conclusion, it would be a sensible idea to identify the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries not as an abrupt,

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>27</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, “The Paraclesis”, in Spitz, Lewis W. (ed.), *The Northern Renaissance* (Englewood Cliffs, 1972), p. 167.

sharp revolution from the Medieval to the Early Modern Period, but rather as a period of gradual transition from the former to the latter.

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