

THE BRETHERN OF THE COMMON LIFE:
A REVIEW ARTICLE OF R. R. POST'S
THE MODERN DEVOTION

KENNETH A. STRAND

Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan

The "Devotio Moderna," entitled *The Modern Devotion* in a recent book by R. R. Post (but perhaps more accurately to be translated as "The New Devotion"¹), was a spiritual movement which originated in the Netherlands toward the end of the 14th century. This movement, of which Gerard Groote (1340-84) is considered to have been the founder, consisted primarily of three related groups: the Brethren of the Common Life, the Sisters of the Common Life, and the Augustinian Canons Regular of the Congregation of Windesheim. Whereas Brethren Houses and Sister Houses were organized in somewhat semi-monastic fashion, the monasteries and convents of the Congregation of Windesheim were full-fledged monastic establishments. From its main early centers in or near Deventer and Zwolle in the Netherlands, the Devotio Moderna branched out to other places in the Low Countries and also into Germany. Although the movement had no foundations in France, it did make an impact on monastic reform there.²

The Brethren of the Common Life established schools in connection with certain of their houses. Also, members at times served as teachers in nearby city schools or church schools. In addition, the Brethren commonly maintained

¹ Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1938 and later printings), refers to the "*Moderna devotio*, that is, the modern, or new devotion" on p. 89 and speaks of the movement several times as the "*New Devotion*" on pp. 92 and 94.

² See, e.g., Albert Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1951 and 1955), pp. 337-374.

dormitories or other housing for youth. In their care for youth, spiritual exercises were an important part of the daily program. The copying of books (particularly religious books) was also a significant activity of these youth.

Because of the ideals of the *Devotio Moderna*, it is frequently claimed that the movement opened the door for humanism and even paved the way for the Protestant Reformation. Among the various scholars who have taken note of the *Devotio Moderna*, Albert Hyma is undoubtedly the most prominent to do so in America. He produced a comprehensive study of the movement in a book entitled *The Christian Renaissance*, published in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1924. This book has been republished in an enlarged second edition in 1965 in Hamden, Connecticut. Hyma has also dealt with the movement in his *The Brethren of the Common Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1950), and he has given due note to it in other of his works such as *Renaissance to Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1951 and 1955) and *The Youth of Erasmus* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1931; New York, 1968). Some of Hyma's doctoral students, such as William M. Landeen and William Spoelhof, have done comprehensive studies on certain aspects of the movement as well.

In Europe, the late R. R. Post has been recognized as an outstanding authority on the *Devotio Moderna*. His various Dutch publications are well known to the specialists. In 1968, however, he published what is undoubtedly his most comprehensive survey of the *Devotio*. This book is in English and, as we have mentioned, carries the title *The Modern Devotion*. It was published as Volume III in the Brill series "Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought," edited by Heiko A. Oberman. This work of some 700 pages is of sufficient importance to deserve more than a brief review; hence the present review article. However, this article will have to be limited to three items: (1) a few general observations; (2) a consideration of the educational work of the

Brethren of the Common Life, and (3) some remarks about the *Imitation of Christ*.

I

Post in his *The Modern Devotion* divides the history of the Devotio Moderna into three periods—from its origin to about 1420, from about 1420 to about 1480 or 1485, and from about 1485 to the extinction of the movement toward the end of the 16th century. The Brethren, the Sisters, and the Windesheimers are each dealt with as a group during these three periods. Such a division would be useful if for no other purpose than to place the profuse material within manageable segments. However, the chronological arrangement has further significance in that the history of the Brotherhood falls easily into these periods. For instance, it is during the last period that the Brethren became truly active in the field of education.

Post's presentation of the historical source materials reveals his thorough mastery of these sources. Indeed, his competence in this regard represents by far the best part of this book. On the other hand, this publication has a polemical setting which tends to mar Post's evaluation of various data. He attacks the views of Paul Mestwerdt, G. Bonet-Maury, A. Hyma, Lewis W. Spitz, William Spoelhof, and others. These scholars, he feels, evaluate too highly the influence and contributions of the Brotherhood of the Common Life.

Post calls for more careful definition of what the Devotio Moderna was. He also indicates the need for a more critical evaluation of the sources dealing with this movement. There has been, as he points out, a certain looseness in treating the Devotio. Just who, for example, belonged to this movement, and of what did the movement consist? Throughout his book Post questions whether various individuals whom other scholars refer to as representative of the Devotio really should be considered a part of this movement. Does, for example, the mere fact that certain persons had spent

time in the dormitories or schools of the Brotherhood without joining the movement make them valid representatives of the *Devotio Moderna*? Post raises important questions here.

However, there is another side to the story too. Even though there may be need for more careful definition of the Brethren of the Common Life and of the *Devotio Moderna* in general, there is also necessity to avoid a wooden approach to the subject. After all, when we speak of the *Devotio Moderna* and its influence, are we necessarily to limit our discussion to individuals who formally became members of the movement? Or were not the ideals of the movement spread by individuals who had long and lasting contact with the *Devotio*, whether or not they became members of one of its three constituent groups? For example, did not friends and students of the Brotherhood of the Common Life, even though not necessarily formally joining this Brotherhood, proclaim its views and exemplify its piety? In dealing with the spread of ideas and ideals, as is involved in a study of the *Devotio Moderna*, one must consider the *indirect* as well as the direct lines of influence. Therefore although there is much to say in favor of Post's appeal for clear definition, there is also a good deal to say against his rather rigid method of applying it. Obviously, much of Post's dispute with various other scholars revolves around this very question of definition. Some of these other scholars may at times have failed to define clearly. But on the other hand, they may nevertheless have pictured the true dimensions of the *Devotio Moderna* more accurately than Post has done.

Another impression a reader gets from Post's new publication is that the author at times simply fights "straw men." Has he evaluated properly the discussions and viewpoints of the scholars he criticizes? To take but one example: On pages 15-17 Post refers to the first edition of Hyma's *Christian Renaissance* (it is unfortunate that he was evidently unaware of the second edition of 1965). After summarizing

Hyma's view in a fairly, but not totally, accurate way, Post goes on to draw the following conclusion:

This remarkable and interesting opinion imparts to the *Devotio Moderna* a world-historical significance. It gave rise to the Christian Humanism north of the Alps, improved education and caused the counter-Reformation (p. 16).

Such a statement reveals an obvious misunderstanding of Hyma, who is further misrepresented by Post's later remark: "Hyma also assumes that no piety or even inward meditation existed outside the circles of the *Devotio*" (p. 17).

A summary of the latter kind is most astounding! Hyma surely takes no such position, and I know of no other serious and competent scholar in the field who does so. But still, Post's attack on such supposed views furnishes a background for this particular publication. That this should be the case is indeed sad.

In spite of such shortcomings, however, any interested student of the *Devotio Moderna* may well take to heart Post's appeal for clearer definitions, careful evaluation of the sources, and accuracy in treating details. Moreover, this comprehensive study will undoubtedly become a classic in its field. It cannot be ignored by any serious student of the *Devotio Moderna*.

II

Post may be classified among those scholars who have done considerable service by revealing the fact that the Brethren of the Common Life had schools in connection with some of their foundations. Nevertheless, the treatment he gives to these schools in his *The Modern Devotion* is, on the whole, quite negative. First of all, the Brotherhood did not take a real interest in education until around 1480. Only two schools (and one of them a doubtful situation), he says, were founded by the Brotherhood before this time. Moreover, few among the Brothers (if any at all) were teachers until about this same time.

The situation, according to Post, was this: The Brethren of the Common Life were anti-intellectual. They at first devoted their time so exclusively to spiritual activities and to copying books that they did not engage in educational pursuits and teaching. In fact, since they did not normally earn Master's degrees they were unqualified for teaching posts. However, around 1480 things changed. Humanism was coming on the scene by that time and was making an impact on education. To some degree the Brethren felt the influence of this movement and participated in it. However, a major factor in developing their interest in teaching and operating schools was the arrival of printing. This made the copying of books by hand unprofitable, and the Brethren of the Common Life had to look for some other source of income. An illustration of the type of statement Post makes occurs in his presentation regarding the Brethren's school in Emmerich: "Here and there . . . around 1480, the Brothers underwent a change of ideas. Driven by economic necessity, they looked about them for new sources of income" (p. 419). This "economic necessity" sent them into the field of teaching!

Even so, however, their entry into the educational field was not significant, according to Post. He indicates that in many places where the Brethren had houses and built dormitories they neither taught in nearby schools nor operated schools of their own, and that in various places in the Netherlands and Germany where they did have schools, these schools were quite mediocre. In a few places such as Liège, however, the Brethren did operate schools of some importance. The Liège school, which opened around 1500, was by 1515 the one main school in that city and was supported by the city itself (p. 558). John Sturm, who attended this school from 1521 to 1524, used it as a pattern for his later educational reforms in Strassburg.

But in spite of Post's admission as to the importance of this school in Liège, and even though he quotes from a source

of the time calling this "the principal school of Liège," he adds the following statement in a more negative vein (p. 567):

Such was the success of the Brothers in the field of teaching. Their own boys in the *domus pauperum* also profited by the school, and their house was moved closer to the school in 1544. However, despite their successes, the Brotherhouse lost ground and the role of the Brothers was soon played out. They belonged to a different period. Teaching was incapable of imparting a different spirit unless the conditions of life were completely transformed. The Brothers' aspirations to simplicity, even simplicity carried to excess, rendered them unsuited to the teaching profession.

Two other foundations of the Brethren to whose educational activity Post gives more than usual attention are those of Utrecht (pp. 568-576) and Brussels (pp. 613-618). In both of these places the Brethren achieved contemporary control over at least a large segment of the educational program. But according to Post's findings the Brethren intended in these places merely to control the schools (at least for part of the time), rather than to teach in them. In Brussels, for example, where in 1491 they were given total direction of the "big school" for a period of nine years, they appointed two teachers. But these teachers, according to Post, probably were not Brothers of the Common Life for various reasons, including the fact that they are not designated as Brothers and the fact that they are called *magister*, whereas "up till now we have no example at all of any Brother studying at the university and gaining his master's degree" (see pp. 613-615).

One further foundation of the Brethren which deserves mention is the one at Magdeburg, especially because of Luther's contact with the Magdeburg Brethren (treated by Post on pp. 628-630).³ In this city Luther went to school during the year 1497-98. In fact, he specifically mentions in a later letter (of 1522) to Claus Storm that he (Luther) and Hans Reinecke went to school "to the Nullbrothers" (the

³ I have dealt with this in somewhat further detail in *Essays on Luther* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969), pp. 107-111.

Brothers of the Common Life) in Magdeburg. It is difficult to understand this language as meaning anything other than that Luther had the Brethren of the Common Life as schoolteachers in that city. Some scholars, following Otto Scheel, have felt that Luther attended classes in the Cathedral School, where Brethren of the Common Life were supposedly teachers. Other scholars, following E. Barnikol, believe that the Brethren operated their own school in Magdeburg. William M. Landeen has presented an excellent study on the subject, and has pointed out that Luther remembered the Brethren as dominating the school he attended.⁴ Both Landeen and Scheel have indicated that Luther probably did not stay in a dormitory of the Brethren in Magdeburg but rather in a private home. If such were the case—and it seems very likely so—, any argument that the Brethren did not teach in Magdeburg and that Luther's contact with them was simply in a dormitory becomes suspect. Interestingly enough, this is precisely Post's conclusion.

Post's argument is as follows: Since the Magdeburg house of the Brethren was a new foundation from Hildesheim and "still entirely in the hands of the *fraters* from Hildesheim," the city of Magdeburg would not have tolerated a school of theirs running in competition to the city school (p. 629). Also, "it is difficult to imagine that the *fraters* from Hildesheim were competent to teach successfully." Thus the "only remaining solution is that the young Martin boarded with the Brothers and went to school elsewhere" (p. 630)! It must be stated that this "only remaining solution" appears to be based more on Post's preconceived ideas than on a careful evaluation of the data. Post's conclusion obviously makes nonsense out of Luther's remark that he went to school in Magdeburg "to the Nullbrothers," as well as of other

⁴ See Landeen, "The *Devotio Moderna* in Germany," Part III, in *Research Studies of the State College of Washington*, XXI (1953), 302-309.

evidence pertaining to the question. We may just add that it is unfortunate that Post seemed unaware of the extensive study on the educational work of the Brethren of the Common Life produced by Julia S. Henkel in 1962 and even of Landeen's work which appeared in print as early as 1953.⁵

Post seems to have become overly impressed with the idea that the Brethren of the Common Life were anti-intellectual and therefore not psychologically suited to be teachers. Actually, as we have noted, a major factor for their entering the field at all, according to him, was the economic necessity of finding other labor once their work of book copying became unprofitable. Indeed, in some of the literature emanating from the *Devotio Moderna*, including Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, there are statements indicating an emphasis on the spiritual, and a corresponding depreciation of purely intellectual pursuits.⁶ This does not, however, mean that all the Brethren were anti-intellectual. Furthermore, Post's thesis leaves some rather important questions unexplained:

(1) If the Brethren were so uninterested in, and even hostile to, educational activities prior to 1480, why the sudden change thereafter? Were these Brethren so changeable and opportunistic that economic considerations brought about a complete reversal of their type of activity? Or would it not be much more logical to assume that education was right in line with the work that they had already been doing as book copyists and disseminators of literature?

⁵ J. Henkel, *An Historical Study of the Educational Contributions of the Brethren of the Common Life* (Ph. D. Dissertation; University of Pittsburgh, 1962); and Landeen, *op. cit.* Mrs. Henkel has also provided an excellent chapter entitled "School Organizational Patterns of the Brethren of the Common Life," in Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Dawn of Modern Civilization: Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics Presented to Honor Albert Hyma* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1962 and 1964), pp. 323-338, and reprinted in Strand, ed., *Essays on the Northern Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1968), pp. 35-50.

⁶ An edition of the *Imitation* less anti-intellectual will be referred to shortly.

(2) If the Brethren of the Common Life were so out of harmony with the educational ideals of humanism, why did they even accept humanists into their fellowship? Is it not easier to suppose that the work the Brethren had already been doing tied in so beautifully with some of the ideals and aims of humanism (particularly, Northern Humanism) that the two went hand in hand?

(3) The homeland of the *Devotio Moderna*—the towns of Deventer and Zwolle in the Netherlands—seems to have been considered by Post as a rather backward area. Certainly, these towns were not at the center of humanistic influence. But when we analyze the incunabula produced in them we find a situation which Post could well have taken into account: a remarkable interest in classical literature. During the 15th century, presses in these two cities printed some 600 to 700 editions (an astounding publication record!), well over 100 of which were classical works. By way of contrast, the output of incunabula in England was only one-fifth of that for the Low Countries and but two-thirds of that for the city of Deventer alone. England's output of incunabula classics was only about one-third of that of Deventer. Furthermore, Deventer and Zwolle produced more classics during the 15th century than did France and French-speaking Switzerland together. There is reason to believe that influence of the Brethren was involved in the publication interests of Deventer and Zwolle.⁷ Certainly Post could have taken these publication interests into account.

⁷ I have dealt with this in *Dawn of Modern Civilization*, pp. 344, 345 (reprinted in *Essays on the Northern Renaissance*, pp. 54, 55). See also Ludwig Schulze, "Brüder des gemeinsamen Lebens," in *Realenc. für Prot. Theol. und Kirche*, 3rd ed., III (1897), 481, regarding the Brethren's support of the printer Paffraet. And for detailed statistics regarding the publications in Deventer and Zwolle, see Albert Hyma, "Erasmus and the Reformation in Germany," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, VIII (1954), 100, as well as the various catalogs I mention in n. 17 on pp. 352, 353 of *Dawn* (p. 62 of *Essays on the Northern Renaissance*).

III

One of the most important productions of the *Devotio Moderna* is the *Imitation of Christ*. This work deserves mention here because of its great impact on later generations. It has appeared in thousands of editions in many languages and is today still a best seller. In his *The Modern Devotion* Post reviews some of the more recent treatments of the *Imitation of Christ* and its authorship (pp. 521-536). He dismisses Jacobus van Ginneken's thesis that Gerard Groote was the author. He mentions Albert Hyma's suggestion that Gerard Zerbolt, a later contemporary of Groote and one of the pioneers of the Brotherhood at Deventer, was the author, but finally resolves his treatment of the authorship to the question of whether Gerson of the University of Paris or Thomas à Kempis wrote the *Imitation*. As for himself, he accepts the Kempist position. This is, of course, the standard position as regards the *traditional* version of the *Imitation of Christ*.

Unfortunately, Post's discussion of the *Imitation of Christ* and its authorship does not do full justice to the work itself. Post has failed to recognize the material now available to indicate that there was a forerunner to the Kempist version. Professor Hyma has discussed this matter in detail in his book *The Brethren of the Common Life*, mentioned by Post in another context but not adequately utilized at this point. Unfortunately, Post also seems to have been unaware of Hyma's English translation of the text of Book I of the *Imitation* as found in the Eutin manuscript.⁸

An important point to note here is the vast difference of emphasis of the Eutin and traditional texts. Many examples of variance between the texts have been called to attention by Hyma, and a comparison of both the chapter titles and the text itself makes clear that the Eutin version is much less ascetic, monastic, and anti-intellectual in its outlook

⁸ Hyma, *The Imitation of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1950).

than is the traditional Kempist version. Further evidence has been forthcoming to support the thesis of an earlier form of the *Imitation of Christ* than that of Thomas à Kempis—evidence of which Post again seems to have been unaware.⁹

The question of the original version of the *Imitation*, as I have implied earlier, is not unrelated to that of Post's view of the Brethren's attitude toward education. If the emphasis of the Kempist version is considered normative for the Brethren, then one might suspect that school-teaching would be alien to them. But recognition of the earlier version (or versions), plus other writings and activities of pioneer members of the Brotherhood, would lead one to believe that the Brethren were not so anti-intellectual and unsuited to be teachers as Post would have us believe.

IV

In conclusion, it may be said that Post's *The Modern Devotion* is excellent for presentation of a vast store of information on the Brethren of the Common Life, and it is well documented. The unfortunate aspects of the book include its polemical setting, its inadequate treatment of the educational contributions of the Brethren of the Common Life, and its failure to make any significant contribution regarding the *Imitation of Christ*. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, this book is undoubtedly destined to become a standard work in its field. It cannot be ignored by anyone wishing to do scholarly work in that field.

⁹ Hyma and Richard L. DeMolen will be publishing an excellent study of this evidence, and they will include a new English translation of the *Imitation*.