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THE QUIET REVOLUTION

Robin Waterfield

The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life were a Christian religious group that existed in northern Europe from about 1380 to 1580. They were an intrinsic part of what was called the *devotio moderna*, or ‘devotion for our times’. Although the group and the whole movement are quite well known in Europe, they have been relatively neglected in the English-speaking world; they generally merit a sentence or two in the standard histories, but only as the movement within which the famous mystic Thomas à Kempis worked, or as the educators of the humanist writer Desiderius Erasmus. The purpose of this article is to go some way towards rectifying this neglect. I will summarize their work and also ask whether, in addition to framing a path of devotion for their times, they have anything wider to offer.

We need to start with some historical background. At the time, external life was very grim: there was extreme poverty, constant warfare, and disease, including the Black Death. What was perhaps worst of all, however, was that the Church offered no secure refuge from all these horrors. Not to put too fine a point on it, the Church – or at least many of its parts – was corrupt, as scholars of the period tend to agree.

The source of this corruption was undoubtedly the lust for material power. For centuries the Church had been vying for power with the various secular authorities of Europe. The removal of the papacy to Avignon in 1334 (which took place as a result of pressure from King Philip IV of France) indicated that at that point the balance had swung in favour of the French court. By the 1380s, however, there was once more a Pope in Rome – but there was still one in Avignon as well. For the next twenty-five years the two Popes called each other ‘anti-Pope’ and even ‘Antichrist’, and were busy excommunicating each other’s followers. (You counted as a follower by virtue of which side your local bishop took. If he chose the wrong side, he and all his flock would be damned to hell.)

Damnation and salvation were central to everyone’s thoughts. It is important to remember that this was their reality, not some kind of psychological myth. The crucial issue was how to reach salvation, though in practice people were concerned with the issue in its negative form: how to avoid damnation when you sinned. Once you had sinned, you had to do penance, but there was no system to this. One bishop might more or less pardon the same sin for which another would give you a lifelong

penance. The penance system soon became corrupt in its own right. You could pay another person to take on your penance; you could donate money to a church; you could even buy absolution on your deathbed. In other words, your chances of getting away with sin were far greater if you were rich; and penance was often merely automatic. Yet Christianity is an egalitarian religion, and one which demands emotional engagement. These vital features were often ignored.

The Church was, in short, tending to forget eternal truths while playing at politics, overlooking men's souls in favour of their wallets. This rift, which was taking place at all levels of society, was epitomized by the division between canon law and secular law. Certain areas of your life were subject to canon law – your religious and moral life, everything to do with death and birth, marriage and sex and legitimacy, wills and inheritance, and so on. Not only are these crucial aspects of life, but they are often complex, so canon law pervaded everyday life and required a huge bureaucracy to back it up. Your religious life was no longer a matter between yourself and God: a thousand rules and clerics intervened. And these clerics were not subject to secular law at all. This in practice often gave them virtual immunity, even when they committed secular crimes.

Where, then, did one go for moral guidance? There were, within the Church, various reformist attempts, which had either died out or led to the establishment of various religious orders. But by the fourteenth century these too were often corrupt. The Benedictine monasteries had, by and large, become hugely wealthy, and abbots lived and ruled like noblemen. The monastic ideals of obedience, chastity and poverty were commonly abandoned; monasteries and convents often even required a monetary donation as an entry fee. The Cistercians had become rent collectors on their rural properties instead of farming the land themselves in poverty. The Franciscans, established as the most egalitarian of orders, now vied with the Dominicans as the intellectuals of the Church. The Dominicans usually won out, and became the bastion of the Inquisition, which was founded in the early thirteenth century as a result of paranoia about the threat of heresy.

In those troubled times, more and more reformist individuals and movements arose outside the Church. They were often condemned as heretical, not only because their views conflicted with Church teachings, but because the Church itself had become brittle and resistant to change. The history of heresy and reformism in this period is fascinating and complex – and not the subject of this article. Suffice it to say that if the Brothers and Sisters (and their equally fascinating forerunners, the Friends of God) were reformist, they were not alone.

By the 1350s there was a new wave of reformism. This is the era familiar in British history as that of John Wyclif and the Lollards. They asserted the right of everyone to read the Bible in their own language; Wyclif even produced the first complete translation of the Bible into English. It was also the time of John Ball, with his wry egalitarian question: 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?' In northern Europe, you might come across a Franciscan friar who still held to his order's aim of popular preaching in the local language; or a religious fanatic trying to stir up armed rebellion against the clergy or recruiting for a crusade; maybe – if the time and place were right – you would have heard Gerard Groote.

To give more than a thumbnail sketch of this man would occupy a full paper in itself. Even then certainty would elude us, because the richest source of material about Gerard is contained in the six biographies that were written from 40 to 140 years after his death. All of them, however early, combine legend and fact. Indeed, one of the most remarkable testimonies to the man is the speed with which the Gerard

legend grew up. We have to rely on these lives to some extent, but we also have to treat them with a pinch of salt – especially when they tell us that he had twelve disciples, one of whom was to betray him! Otherwise all we have are Gerard's own writings.

I will try to sum up the man by telling my favourite true story about him. Once a year the bishops and dignitaries of the Low Countries used to meet in Utrecht. In 1383, they invited Gerard to give the keynote sermon. They had obviously heard what a powerful speaker he was, but they would live to regret the invitation. His sermon (the text of which is extant) consisted of an impassioned harangue against the focarists – priests who had taken the vow of celibacy and then broken it. He even went so far as to claim that they were excommunicated by their actions. Worst of all, he backed up all his claims with canon law, precedents and references to the Church Fathers. The cap obviously fitted the council of bishops: within a couple of months, a local edict had been passed forbidding deacons from preaching. (Gerard was a deacon, having renounced his higher positions within the Church to conform with his belief that earning money from religion was immoral.) Not long after, the edict was changed so that all deacons were allowed to preach except Gerard!

On 20 August 1384 Gerard died of the Black Death, still fighting to have the edict lifted. He was only forty-four years old. At one time he had seemed destined for high Church office. His university career in Paris had been exemplary; his grasp of canon law and love of learning were outstanding; he was making a good living from his prebends and had independent means anyway; he was even once used as an envoy to the Pope in Avignon. But in the early 1370s something happened. Just what it was is unclear, since it was largely an internal matter and so became rich pickings for the legend-makers. Gerard simply called it his 'conversion' or 'reorientation'. However, one of the stories about it is too good to omit. Although the full conversion seems to have taken a number of years, and had to overcome some resistance on Gerard's part, it was apparently started by a stranger, an unknown Friend of God, who approached Gerard out of the blue, saying, 'Why are you standing here, intent on empty things? You ought to be another man.'

As a result of this conversion, Gerard renounced his offices, turned his house in Deventer (in what is now the Netherlands) into a hostel for poor women, adopted an ascetic way of life, and went on a long retreat to a Carthusian monastery. Here, instead of studying astrology and magic (as he had done before), he concentrated on mystical and spiritual studies. After five years, he emerged from the monastic life and became a deacon. He then began a mission of preaching repentance and conversion around the local towns and villages. He swiftly attracted groups of loyal followers, as well as some opposition. We have already seen the culmination of this opposition only three years later, in 1383.

What was Gerard's message? As revealed in his letters and other writings, it was stringently – some would say rigidly – moralistic. We have already seen his attack on focarism. His letters show that he was someone to whom people turned for advice, especially when they felt they were in danger of confusing monetary and religious matters. His replies are humble but uncompromising: Money and religion do not mix. Everyone is equal in the eyes of God, and someone's poverty should not debar him from entering a monastery. Gerard also acquired a reputation as a 'hammer of the heretics': his particular targets were the self-styled 'Free Spirits', who held that they were not bound by any rules, since God was in them and that made everything they did all right.

What this sketch of Gerard shows us is a man of moral principle. Neither the corruption of the Church nor the corruption of the Free Spirits provided a moral foundation, so Gerard fought to restore morality. He did this by preaching, by writing books, by advising his friends and acquaintances, and also by what he copied and translated; for instance, he translated out of the Latin a series of prayers that could be used by people at home to increase devotion even apart from church-going.

One might protest at this point that the restoration of morality requires something more than poverty and the eradication of focarism; it requires an inner foundation as well as an outer one. It is true that Gerard's writings are often concerned with external matters, but behind them there is a firm emphasis on the inner life. Here is a neat example: Gerard was once asked to write about the schism between the two Popes, and he did, at some length, making many valuable points. But the basic message of his treatise is that this outer schism pales into insignificance beside the inner schism, the doubts and ambiguities within our own souls. And this is right, of course: whether you are surrounded by schism, tyranny, or liberalism makes no difference to the life of the spirit.

Some writers with quietistic inclinations try to portray Gerard and his followers as emphasizing the inner life at the expense of externals. But the medieval goal of contempt for the external world does not necessarily mean that you hide away from it. Gerard and his followers never ignored the rites and rituals of the Christian faith, but they tried to enter into them with inner devotion, and to maintain this attitude every second of their lives. However, since it is clear that a great many clerics were practising the outer forms alone, with no inner devotion, then relatively speaking Gerard does epitomize a movement inward.

Gerard also sowed the seeds of a movement – the *devotio moderna* – which converted a great many people back to religion, encouraged those pockets of truly devotional people who still remained in northern Europe at that time, and thereby revived faith. It is therefore an extensive and important movement, and I will touch on only one aspect of it, albeit the central aspect: the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.

The name 'Common Life' derives principally from the fact that the Brothers and Sisters lived communally. However, Gerard's evident egalitarianism, along with the fact that both laymen and clergy were welcome to join the brother-houses, emphasizes the point that no one has more or less spiritual potential than anyone else. Ordination is not an automatic key to salvation; neither is wealth. From that point of view, the religious life *is* the common life, the life we all equally share.

We can see the origins of the movement immediately after Gerard's conversion, when he turned his house into a hostel for poor women. At first this was mere charity. The women had to work for a living and conform to certain standards of moral behaviour, but apart from the fact that they lived in the same house, their lives were not strictly communal. It was only when the impetus of the brotherhouses led to the formation of a new religious way of life that sisterhouses began to be founded along the same lines. Poverty was no longer a precondition for entry.

The seeds of the brotherhouses were also sown during Gerard's lifetime, with the spontaneous desire of certain of his followers to live together as a means of changing their lives. But like the sisterhouses, these also took a few years to evolve towards true communal living. Here the principal influence was not Gerard directly, but his disciple Florens Radewijns, whose vicarage in Deventer was the first brotherhouse.

The history of the brother- and sisterhouses need not detain us. It is impossible to be certain how many of them there were at any given time. Houses came and went and changed location. By 1400 they faced considerable pressure to adopt an approved monastic order, and many individuals and even whole houses did just that. All one can say is that at any given time in the mid-fifteenth century, there were, at a conservative estimate, fifty houses in existence in northern Europe, two-thirds of which would be sisterhouses. The average population of a house would be about sixteen, although there was apparently one sisterhouse with five hundred Gerardines (as the Sisters were popularly known).

But what did the Brothers and Sisters do? How did they live? In terms of structure, there was a rector, who would be a priest, as well as a number of members (both clerics and lay people), who held a variety of specific jobs towards the upkeep of the community. The sisterhouses had mistresses to govern day-to-day tasks, but their rector-confessors were Brothers. Members of a house slept in common dormitories, ate communally, practised their religious observances together, and shared a common purse, to which they donated all their income. If wealthy people joined, they would probably donate all their worldly goods, but this was not allowed to create affluence in any given house: the money might be used for building, but any income in excess of needs was given to the poor. Brothers and Sisters lived very sparingly, even ascetically. The main source of income for the Brothers was copying texts; for the Sisters it was weaving, spinning and lace-making. Manual work was regarded as an essential complement to devotional life and as a means of avoiding begging.

The Brothers' and Sisters' days were highly structured. This might seem monastic, and of course there were certain similarities. But there were also crucial differences from the monasteries: Brothers and Sisters were not isolated from the world; they were not required to take vows; and lay people could be members. Indeed, when they first came under heavy attack, at the end of the fourteenth century, leading to an investigation by the Inquisition, the main charge was that they were forming a monastic order without permission from the Pope. But they had cleverly found a legal loophole: yes, they were living together under discipline, but where was the crime in that? As the Brother Peter of Dieburg was to put it later, in 1490: 'We are not members of a religious order, but strive and desire to live in a religious manner in the world.' Because they were not officially a religious order, they came under secular rather than canon law, and they took pains to be on the right side of the civil authorities.

The emphasis of their lives was on contemplation and inner experience. Their days were arranged so as to generate an extraordinary intensity of spiritual life. A day in the life of a brotherhouse might look like this:

- 4.00 a.m. Rise; renew resolutions; go to chapel; meditations; matins; prime.
- 5.00 Read Bible or sacred literature in one's own room.
- 6.00 First period of copying.
- 7.00 Terce, Mass, sext.
- 9.00 Second period of copying
- 10.00 Food (with Bible reading); nones
- 11.30 Rest and prayer in one's own room.
- 12.0 Third period of copying, with prayers.
- 3.00 p.m. Vespers; read Bible or sacred literature in one's own room.
- 4.00 Fourth period of copying.
- 6.00 Prayers; evening meal; compline; period of silence.

8.00 Private time.

9.00 Bed

A layman might do less copying and more cooking, while a priest might be spared some copying for his other duties. In a seventeen-hour day, only the last hour before retiring was sometimes your own to do what you wanted. The rest was carefully arranged.

But the particular flavour of the houses meant that your time was not just spent on external forms of religion and work; the emphasis throughout was on simultaneous inner work. For instance, as soon as you woke up, you had to renew your resolutions, and you would check throughout the day to see whether you were adhering to them. The Bible would be read during mealtimes by the rector, who, to make sure of people's attention, could question anyone present about what was being read. You were expected to offer up short prayers at all times of the day and to set yourself particular tasks, like praying whenever you heard a clock chime. Perhaps most important was the process of continuous meditation, or rumination: the rector would set a subject a day – say, the passion of Christ – and everyone had to ponder it all day long. Then there were the communal meetings where correction took place. Here anyone in the group was allowed, with due modesty, to tell another person off for his faults – a sort of communal confession. Whatever you were doing, you were governed by the discipline of not speaking or acting unnecessarily. Your whole day, every day of your life, was given over to constant remembrance of God through the imitation of Christ.

Gerard Zerbolt, one of the movement's most important spokesmen, summed up the reason for the interiority of their lives in a single sentence: 'You ascend only as much as you advance in your heart.' The most important point, however, is not that they did inner work as well as outer work, but that they did inner work *at the same time* as doing outer work. This we can infer from the records of their daily lives, and it is impossible to read any of their writings without gaining the same impression.

The Brothers' and Sisters' main literary efforts went into biographies and handbooks rather than sustained mystical treatises. The biographies were exemplary lives for moral education; the handbooks were either guidelines for everyday spirituality or collections of useful sayings and exercises. Above all they emphasized what individuals can do to improve their religious lives. Because they stressed the practical, they preferred to rely on the authority of the Church Fathers rather than on speculative mystics like Meister Eckhart and John of Ruysbroek (whom Gerard knew, by the way); and by the same token, they did not produce many writers at all.

Nonetheless, they did generate some spiritual writers of the first rank, like Gerard Zerbolt, Gerlach Peters, Hendrik Mande, and of course Thomas à Kempis. Of these, Zerbolt's and à Kempis's writings are more truly representative of the movement as a whole than is the more ecstatic mysticism of Peters and Mande. À Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* is above all a manual for living a spiritual life in everyday circumstances. Zerbolt's *Spiritual Ascents* outlines the stages on the ascent to God, but also stresses that one must descend to help one's fellow man. One ascends towards God through the imitation of Christ, but this does not take one out of the world. In the spiritual life, there is conversion, resolution, ascent and descent, but all four have to happen at once, at every moment of the day. In both books we see an emphasis on simultaneous outer and inner living, on outer virtue as a manifestation of inner virtue. And inner work is seen as your own responsibility. No intermediary can take it on for you: you cannot sell your inner penance or rely on absolution by a priest.

Again, we are faced with the idea that the life of the spirit is the common life: anyone who is willing to put in the hard work, devotion and love can share it.

Although copying was the main activity in the brotherhouses, it was not the only one. Particularly if a Brother was ordained as a priest (and many of them were, though they were not considered to be more advanced spiritually than their lay colleagues), there were several alternative activities possible. He might be in charge of a sisterhouse; for a while, there were many more Gerardines than Brothers, and care of a sisterhouse was something the Brothers took very seriously. Or he might preach: several brotherhouses were famous for providing preachers who continued Gerard's apostolic mission. Or he might obtain a vicarage and therefore have his normal pastoral duties in his parish.

Even if you were not a priest, you would not be monastically cut off from the world. The Brothers attended the local parish church for Mass every day, although most houses also had their own chapels. Then on Sundays there was a kind of open house, when schoolchildren and local townspeople could come for 'collation' – a homily based on a scriptural passage. There would also be transactions as orders came in for books to be copied or lace to be made. The Brothers translated the Bible into Dutch and continued Gerard's work on translating the liturgy, so the population outside their houses were a main focus of their attention, even for those who were not priests with flocks to take care of.

In this context, an important point to note is that of the dozens of known houses, only two were not in towns. What was it that kept them in the towns? We come here to one of the nubs of their work, for the towns had schools. At the time, village schools (if you were lucky enough to have one in your village, which was more likely in the Low Countries in those days than in the rest of Europe) could teach you reading and writing, but if you wanted more, you had to come to town. So a system had arisen for the charitable lodging of poor village children who had come to town to be educated. The Brothers did not start this system, but they entered fully into it. They built and manned hostels, helped their young charges with their homework, and took care of their moral education. On Sundays they took the children to the local brotherhouse for Sunday school.

There is no doubt that the Brothers' provision of these poorhouses, as they were called, was entirely charitable. At the same time a certain sequence starts to become plain. Many of the poor schoolboys they looked after would later join the brotherhood, become priests (and maybe join the brotherhood as well), or enter one of the monasteries the Brothers had reformed. The Brothers were not crude revolutionaries. They were not trying to overthrow the system, just to get rid of its corruption. And one of the main ways they did this was by turning schoolboys into priests or monks who would work with integrity within the system after receiving the Common Life training. It is important to note that the Brothers' reforms were not done on the sly: they were often asked to reform monasteries and provide priests for churches. And they were clearly effective: when Martin Luther and his reforming colleagues were preaching anticlericalism around 1520, they specifically excluded the Brothers from their censure, as being manifestly not corrupt.

For many years the Brothers' educational concerns were limited to running these hostels. Any teaching that went on was extracurricular, involved with morality rather than Latin grammar. The brotherhouses were trying to promote the simple life of virtue and godliness, and the proctors in charge of the poorhouses would promote the same in schoolboys. They cooperated with schools and recruited from schools, but there is no unambiguous evidence of their actually running a school until about 1500,

and even then they did not do so everywhere. There were a few earlier attempts around 1460 to set up schools, but these met with resistance from the municipal authorities and were soon closed down.

Finally, no picture, however sketchy, of the Brothers would be complete without mentioning the fact that, already by 1387, they had founded, built and populated a monastery at Windesheim, not far from Deventer. Here were practised the same devotional exercises as the Brothers used, but in seclusion and under monastic rule. Thirty years later, another thirty monasteries, chiefly under the Augustinian rule, had been established or incorporated into the Windesheim chapter; and convents were starting to join as well. From there the movement spiralled out until monasteries of all the different orders were reformed by accepting the same kind of discipline the Brothers had initiated. This is quite remarkable. For decades there had been a steady decline both in the number of monasteries and in their membership. Suddenly interest snowballed; clearly people had only been waiting for genuine religion to appear. The Windesheim chapter always retained contact with the Brothers and their work, but developed along independent lines, and indeed lasted much longer than the Brothers themselves, surviving at least up until the end of the seventeenth century.

In strict historical terms, this picture of the Brothers' and Sisters' work takes us only up to about 1420, but although about 150 years of their history is being omitted, in essence their work remained the same. The Sisters were always more secluded, and by 1460 nearly all the sisterhouses had become convents of some accepted monastic order. Meanwhile, the Brothers started to run schools and placed more emphasis on study. There was great expansion, but increasingly the flavour of the brotherhouses – of being in the world but not of it – was devalued, and more and more of the individuals and houses turned to the monastic life, or acquired official religious status by becoming incorporated under canon law and with approval from the Pope. In Zerbolt's terms, these brothers would be practising ascent but deemphasizing descent. Then there are signs of the bare beginnings of laxness, leading to the organization of two committees of rectors, exercising central control over the houses (which were divided up into two districts, eastern and western). This in turn led to the efforts of Peter of Dieburg to restore the original emphasis on individual responsibility rather than rule by committee.

The *devotio moderna* was a quiet revolution. Its participants did not become bishops or acquire other high offices; they came on the whole from lowly status and worked among the people, restoring the foundations of faith simply by taking religion seriously, training their hearts, and maintaining their intentions. They resuscitated religion in northern Europe by returning to first principles: faith, morality, inner watchfulness and discipline, self-responsibility. They explicitly saw themselves as renewing the ancient spiritual traditions of Christianity dating from the Apostles and the Desert Fathers.

The quietness of this revolution poses a number of questions, great and small. Whom did the Brothers influence? To what extent were they responsible for the vast religious and educational reforms that swept Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? What was their interaction with humanism and the Reformation? To these questions scholars give a variety of answers, which range from attributing a huge amount of influence to the Brothers and Sisters to more conservative estimates. The truth, however, is that we cannot know for sure. The kind of work the Brothers and

Sisters engaged in tends to have an indirect influence, and to operate at subtle levels. It is therefore impossible to measure.

It will be clear from the brief survey of the state of the Church that I gave at the beginning of this article that the Brothers' revolution was a timely one. On the other hand, I also want to suggest that there is a timeless quality to their work. By this I do not simply mean that inner watchfulness and taking religion seriously are of perennial importance. I mean in the first instance that the particular evils of their age are also the evils of ours. People were disillusioned with the Church, were attacking it from all sides, and attendance was falling. Does this sound familiar? The Church was playing at politics. Are you reminded of Bishop Tutu, liberation theology, and even the social comments of the present Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury? People lacked moral guidance and were beginning to doubt that there was such a thing as objective morality. As a result, people were often swept away by any charismatic teacher or movement that came along: they had their Free Spirits, we have our New Agers. In many cases, these are people who fill the internal space that should be reserved for the religious quest with placebos that dull the sense of enquiry. The Brothers and Sisters countered all these problems quietly, subtly and even obliquely. They resuscitated first principles and allowed those principles to do their own work, which is not only more effective in the long term, but also avoids the danger of personal effrontery. This is a useful reminder today.

To broaden the timelessness of their message even more, it seems that there are certain periods of history when a culture is in transition. Ours is now. It also seems that whenever this happens, someone providentially comes along to restate the fundamental truths in a way that is appropriate to the situation. This restatement enables that culture to carry knowledge into its next stage, as we need now to find knowledge as we develop towards world coexistence and the Space Age.

The transition in the fourteenth century is fairly easy to see; just think of Wyclif and his translation of the Bible. You might react by thinking: 'Were the clergy so elitist that they had kept the Bible to themselves for so long?' But that misses the point. The Bible had not been translated before because there was no need; people were largely illiterate. But now the pressure was just beginning to build that would lead to an explosion of learning and to the invention of the printing press around 1450. By the 1530s Erasmus had over a million copies of his books in print! The point is that, like all major cultural transitions, the explosion of learning that resulted in the Renaissance and the rise of humanism was every bit as traumatic and dangerous as the transition to the Space Age is for us today. I am not claiming that the Brothers and Sisters averted a bloody revolution. It is impossible to know whether the traumas of subsequent decades would have been worse without them; but they restored faith to a world that was preoccupied with works, and faith always performs its own miracles.

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Read also Robin Waterfield's related article "Religion for the Future" published in the diversions section of the *Financial Times* on 23 December 1989.

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