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FIFTEENTH CENTURY GERMAN RELIGIOUS LITERATURE IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

The role of vernacular literature - specifically religious vernacular literature - in 15th and early 16th century German society and its importance in paving the road for the Reformation has become a matter of serious interest to German scholarship only in the last decades. The reason for the previous neglect has been, for one, the dearth of innovative literature of note in this period, even though among the elite the interest in literature at the time was immense.

More than 85% of late medieval German literature is of an explicitly religious nature, which has oddly seldom been a favorite of medievalists. For the most part these works are also simple translations or adaptations of originally Latin texts and therefore have previously not qualified for what by traditional standards was considered a true work of literature and worthy of scholarly interest. The many works written in this period are indisputably far from the caliber of the courtly literature of the 12th and 13th centuries. Extensive manuscript research in recent years has shown, however, that categorizing literature according to modern standards of quality and, to a certain degree, subject matter is clearly anachronistic. Secular epic in verse can for instance be found in manuscripts also containing prose meditations on the passion of Christ or similar works for the edification or religious instruction of the laity, as well as tracts - say - on the diagnosis and treatment of illnesses. Our modern classification of books into 'good' literature, popular literature, appropriate for mindless entertainment, and self-help books, teaching us how to better master life and psychological difficulties, would have astounded medieval readers - especially in the 15th century. For them literature was intended to be of assistance in dealing with practically all of the central aspects of life on the road to salvation. Literature was meant to teach readers to better understand and fulfill their roles in society, to instruct them in matters of faith and to edify them, but also to inform them on very secular matters. It is this new evaluation of the scope of what the medieval world considered to be literature that has prompted scholarship to take a broader look at the writings of the later Middle Ages.

The 15th century was for the German-speaking world a period in which the interest in vernacular literature boomed. Approximately 70% of all extant medieval manuscripts were written in this time. The heritage of the 15th century is an enormous body of literature, manuscripts and prints, far surpassing the corresponding numbers of all other vernacular literatures in Europe. There are of course obvious reasons for this development: above all, the rapid advancement of literacy in the towns, where - primarily because of professional considerations - most craftsmen and merchants as well as other members of their families had to be able to read at least German texts. Reading skills could now be obtained in a growing number of city and Church-run

schools, as well as through private tutoring. Even the poorer artisans are reported to have made great sacrifices in order to make at least elementary education possible for their offspring. The number of - in the medieval sense - semi-literate lay-people probably never exceeded 3% of the total population, but even this seemingly ridiculously low number was a huge advancement in the spread of literacy as compared to previous centuries. For those members of the laity who could afford them - and these were quite numerous in prosperous cities such as Nuremberg, Augsburg, Strasbourg, Cologne and Lübeck, where the rate of literacy certainly exceeded 3% - books often became an integral part of life. They were read intently, had become - as had education - modern status symbols and, more often than not in the case of manuscripts containing religious literature, even expressly commissioned with the intent of gaining favor from God.

Of course book production was also greatly encouraged by the dramatic drop in the price of producing books. By the middle of the 14th century paper had become widely available and was only about 1/10 as expensive as vellum. The crafts associated with the production of books were much in demand. Recent research has shown that in highly prosperous Nuremberg with a population of about 20,000 in the 1450s, 113 commercial scribes are listed as having moved there and worked in their profession. Add to that the native Nurembergers, and we can safely assume that at least 200 scribes earned a decent living from their craft. If these numbers are broken down into decades, the 50 years between 1420 and 1470 are definitely the boom years, reaching a peak in the 1450s, at the time that modern printing techniques were invented. If we compare these statistics to those on manuscript production (based on dated manuscripts) the parallels are startling. Beginning with the 1420s manuscript production rose decade by decade, peaking in the 1450s and 1460s, then dropping sharply in the 1470s. The reason for this drop is of course obvious: in the 1470s German printers began publishing vernacular works on a large scale, making scribes superfluous.

In the 1420s the growing demand for books had reached such proportions that the innovative scribe Diebold Lauber from the Alsatian town of Hagenau developed a system of manuscript manufacture on a mass basis. Lauber no longer waited for commissions, he created demand. He chose a sure-fire assortment of works - best-sellers so to speak - and had them copied and illustrated on an almost assembly-line basis. He then advertised his products in personal letters to potential customers and obviously had a great deal of success. Over 50 extant manuscripts from Lauber's workshop, written over a period of 40 years (1427-1467) by five scribes and illustrated by 16 artists, amply document the extent to which the mass production of books had become a lucrative enterprise in the 15th century. This also shows that Gutenberg's invention was not merely a historical accident, but an entrepreneurially inspired invention aimed at surpassing the means of book production developed by pioneers such as Lauber. It still remains somewhat of a mystery, however, why it took printers almost 20 years to fully discover the lucrative market of vernacular literature.

At the beginning I mentioned that the literary tastes of the those able to read in the 15th century were quite clearly of a religious nature, much more so than in any previous time in the Middle Ages. This is hardly surprising, inasmuch as there was probably no other period in the Middle Ages that was as ecclesiastically devout as the 15th and early 16th century. Until the 1960s 15th century scholarship was dominated by the misconception that this period was a time of general moral decay, of a dramatic decline in the importance of the Church and its institutions in the eyes of the faithful

and that the Reformation was provoked by this erosion. However, just the opposite was the case: At no other time were the peoples of the Holy Roman Empire so acutely focused on their personal salvation, so intensely interested in religious matters and the elites so strongly supportive of Church reform. After all, Martin Luther did not preach repentance to the godless masses, he attacked the aberrations of a decadent Church hierarchy and its teachings, taking up traditions dating back to the 14th century. In the 15th century we see a strong rise in very concrete, even measurable forms of devotion, one of the most popular being the vastly exaggerated veneration of the saints and their relics (almost every child received a saint's name, the days of the year were not counted by month and day but by the saint's feast days, etc.), as well as - for the wealthy elites - the great popularity of pilgrimages and, of course, the purchase of indulgences.

The 15th century was also a time of highly ambitious attempts at reforming the Church as a whole, an enterprise that naturally had to begin with a thorough reform of the clergy. The programatics of the reform movement were rooted in new theological thinking, which is primarily associated with the highly influential Jean Gerson and has been aptly named by German theological scholarship the 'theology of piety' (Frömmigkeitstheologie). One of the major aims of this new theology was to breach the huge gap between sterile late scholasticism and the concerns of everyday piety, by, for example, making complex theology comprehensible to the *illiterati*. This, of course, implied an upgrading of the way the uneducated and semi-educated were to be instructed in matters of faith. While the main thrust of reform politics was definitely restorative, there was also a clearly revolutionary side to its programatics: For instance, all truly influential adherents to the 'theology of piety' espoused the use of religious literature in the vernacular for the self-pastoration of the semi-educated, some, like Gerson and the Dominican reformer Johannes Nider, very fervently. This was definitely a radical turnabout in what had been until this time more or less official Church policy, which had been on the whole very restrictive regarding the independent reading of any kind of literature by the laity. Now, in the 15th century, preachers actively encouraged their listeners to study appropriate religious texts on Sundays and holidays, much as Martin Luther did a century later. A remarkably radical change of policy was the lifting of the ban on translations of the Bible - at least for nuns -, even though this remained a matter of great controversy. Because of this more ambivalent attitude taken by theologians, the laity eventually also gained access to German Bibles, which were printed a total of 14 times before 1522, the year in which Luther's Gospel translation was first published.

In those religious orders in which rigorous reforms of monastic life were carried out in the 15th century vernacular literature became a major factor in implementing a strict regimen in the nunneries. For the reformed convents of the Dominican, Benedictine, Augustinian and Franciscan orders the establishment of libraries was generally one of the first points on the reform agenda. It is this policy that was to have a major impact on the production and diffusion of vernacular religious literature in the 15th century, also outside of convent walls. I've drawn this conclusion from my extensive research on the connection between Church reform and literature. On the basis of over 1000 representative German manuscripts of definite monastic origin, over 97% came from convents in which the implementation of a reform had succeeded or a serious effort in this direction had been undertaken. Manuscripts from convents which had refused or had never actively espoused reform measures are extremely rare. It is therefore obvious that the widespread interest in literature in a monastic

context was for the most part intrinsically connected to this sweeping reform movement. The best case in point is the reformed Dominican nunnery in Nuremberg, St. Catherine's. Its detailed library catalogue lists over 500 manuscripts in the vernacular by the end of the 15th century, whereby only 36 of these manuscripts had been obtained by the convent in the 133 years previous to its reform in 1428. Many male convents possessed far fewer books. In the North and in the Low Countries the institutions espousing the *Devotio moderna* focused in a similar way on books as a means of education and edification.

The monastic reform movements had far greater implications for the vast diffusion of religious literature in the vernacular than has previously been assumed. Through the diligent efforts of the orders to stock every library in their reformed convents in southern Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the laity in the cities, where these primarily mendicant convents were located, profited immensely. The daughters of the town elite, who populated the local reformed convents, continuously made new works which the convent had acquired available to their families. Once in the hands of the laity, these works could be copied and circulated beyond the monastic realm. In the 1470s the printers also turned to these convents for new material to publish. Although over 80% of all late medieval literature was originally written for a monastic audience - especially for nuns -, lay readers obviously had no serious problems in understanding these works and in applying them to their own spiritual needs. This leads to the conclusion that everyone incapable of understanding Latin was basically reading the same religious literature in the 15th century, demonstrating how far the breakdown of educational barriers among the *illiterati* had progressed. Of course, only few members of the laity would be interested in literature dealing specifically with monastic life, but these seemed to be the only works they would pass over in a convent library. The enormous barriers in matters of learning, especially in the area of theology, which had served clearly to separate the clergy from the laity since late antiquity were being progressively dismantled in the 15th century through the widespread use of vernacular literature in the hands of the unlearned and semi-learned.

But just what specifically did the reformed convents pass on to the laity and what types of works were written by members of the reformed clergy for this audience? What works became best-sellers? In keeping with the tenets of the theology of piety, the most popular literature were tracts or sermons dealing in a very concrete form with the basics of Christian doctrine. Hundreds and hundreds of manuscripts document the tremendous popularity of disquisitions on the proper preparation for confession, defining elaborately what is sinful and to what degree, or how to properly prepare for death. Other works of a similar catechitic nature, explaining the mysteries of the mass, the eucharist, the Nicene creed, the most important prayers, etc., were not much less successful with the laity. The clergy encouraged the reading of such works since they strengthened the role of the Church as the sole spender of the sacraments.

The great popularity of catechitic literature was of course symptomatic for the religious climate of the German-speaking world in the 15th century. The intense concern for personal salvation called for books that set out clear rules and meticulously laid out guidelines for proper spirituality. On the troublesome road to salvation the saints were viewed as the most important personal helpers in warding off every sort of hazard confronting the faithful in daily life. This immense interest in the saints is reflected in the approximately 2500 different saints' lives in the vernacular circulating

in the 15th century, most of them parts of large collections (the *legendaries*), which were organized according to the liturgical calendar. Saints' lives were by far the most popular genre of narrative literature throughout the entire Middle Ages - also by far more popular than secular narrative -, but the 15th century was clearly the age of hagiography in the vernacular. Every reformed convent library possessed at least one *legendary*; any layman who owned books was certain to possess a collection of saints' lives. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Diebold Lauber headed off the list of books he sent to potential customers not with a secular work but with an Alemannic translation of the extremely popular 'Legenda aurea'.

An important side effect to this desire for unobstructed clarity is, of course, the almost complete dominance of prose in all genres, save those for which the verse form was used primarily to facilitate memorization: in oral genres such as religious and secular plays and short, mostly bawdy tales. The gradual transition from verse to prose had begun in the late 13th century with the growing popularity of nonnarrative religious literature, with the writings of the mystics and those associated with them, and, of course, with the translations of Latin prose texts. Whereas theoretical reflections on the advantages of using prose in religious literature had still been controversial in the 14th century, by the beginning of the 15th century verse texts were clearly considered antiquated: this applies to religious as well as most secular literature.

Up until I've focused almost exclusively on the literature that was *written* in the 15th century, but it is of great importance to consider a phenomenon which has been widely ignored by Germanists: the fact that most of the works circulating in the 15th century were actually written in the previous century. Most of these 14th century works were, however, much like the literature of the following century: simply-told hagiography, translations, popularizations of religious Latin works, etc. This is, however, not true of the great body of literature written by the numerous German female mystics and their spiritual advisors, most notably by Meister Eckhart, Heinrich Seuse and Johannes Tauler. Mysticism had flourished in 13th and 14th century Germany, especially among the Beguines and Dominican nuns. Within this radical religious movement, whose primarily female adherents sought a direct, personal, and independent contact with God in visions and similar experiences, apart from the official channels provided by the Church, women for the first time in the Middle Ages became prominent authors of uniquely innovative works. Their often highly unorthodox religious concepts led to a literary discourse lasting well over 50 years between mystically inspired women and their often highly learned spiritual advisors. Characteristic for this discourse is the astonishing respect of the learned for the oftentimes 'doctrinally unfounded' ideas of the unlearned - it was, for medieval circumstances, an impressive give-and-take.

This receptiveness for radical, theologically questionable approaches to religious practice did not find favor with those wishing to reform the Church and its institutions. At both councils - Constance and Basel - mysticism was clearly denounced as an egotistical form of spirituality almost totally inspired by satanic influences, especially when women were involved. Gerson had even held Catherine of Siena and Birgitta of Sweden responsible for the Pope leaving France and thus causing the Church's division in the first place. Yet the 15th century reform activists tolerated and to a certain degree encouraged the reading of 14th century mystical literature, hoping to tap the religious enthusiasm of the period for inspiration, but allowing these works to be circulated only after they had been properly annotated and, to a

certain degree, purged of questionable material. In addition to these accepted works tracts were circulated in which women were admonished never to doubt the authority of experienced clergymen, who had been properly schooled to detect the workings of Satan, in matters of spirituality. Women were advised to abstain from discussing complex philosophical and theological topics such as the mystics of the previous century had done. A certain body of mystical literature was to be read for edification - after all it told of exemplary women, who could be seen as models of unquestioned piety -, but never should their works be read as an inspiration for a life of exaggerated asceticism with the goal of achieving the 'unio mystica'. Interestingly enough, these tracts cite negative examples of women (mostly widows, by the way) who in the first decades of the 15th century had been severely punished by God for having had mystical inclinations that had - as was discovered later - actually been instigated by the dark forces of hell. Even if we view the factual truth behind these negative 'exempla' with a grain of salt, there can be no doubt that the interest in mysticism had not died out in the 15th century, even if mystical literature written in this period is very rare. The vehemence with which any unorthodox forms of spirituality - especially those which led to a certain independence from the Church and its clergy - was continuously attacked in vernacular tracts throughout the century can only indicate that this religious movement was still considered a viable threat to Church authority.

Of course theologians of the period did not deny the possibility of mystical experience completely, but they were on the whole convinced that it was limited to very few privileged souls. In the German-speaking world of the 15th century only a mere handful of women was considered by Church authorities to be genuinely blessed by mystical experience. It hardly comes as a surprise that all of these women were also outstanding examples for the divine blessings which could be derived through complete adherence to reform ideology. Konrad Kùgèlin's 'Vita' of Elsbeth of Reute, who spent her life totally dedicated to brutal asceticism in a small monastic community near Lake Constance, is clearly conceived to elicit associations to the life of Catherine of Siena, the mystic and patron saint of Dominican reform. For instance, Elsbeth's father was like Catherine's a dyer, she is reported to have partaken in identical ascetic practices resulting in similar mystical experiences, and finally to have received the stigmata just like Catherine. Above all, Elsbeth lived an exemplary monastic life, actually overfulfilling the ideals espoused by the Dominican reform movement, which Catherine had initiated. She was completely obedient at all times and, of course, always followed the advice of her male spiritual mentor. In other words, she is portrayed as being quite the opposite of the self-reliant female mystics of the 14th century.

Mystical literature of the 14th century was tolerated but looked at with serious misgivings by those who in the 15th century wished to channel the great religious enthusiasm of the period in the direction of absolute orthodoxy. The aforementioned Johannes Nider, one of the most influential and active leaders of the Dominican reform movement, advised his readers not to concern themselves with lofty theological and mystical concepts, since they would be incapable of understanding them anyway, but to instead read catechetical books, such as elucidations of the decalogue. And his advice was obviously followed. The dangerous challenge authors of mystic writings had represented to the Church in the 14th century was definitely no longer of any serious importance in the following century. Free-spirited mysticism had been domesticated.

So much for literature in the monastic context. There was, of course also a

considerable body of religious literature written by the reformed clergy for the laity. These works were, however, as a rule, still of such a general nature that they could just as well be read by women in convents. Some of the most popular works written for the laity were authored at one of the most important centers of reform politics and theology, the University of Vienna, in the late 14th and the first half of the 15th century. Strongly encouraged by the Viennese court, influential theologians such as Heinrich of Langenstein and Nikolaus of Dinkelsbühl wrote catechitic and edifying texts that obviously had a strong appeal to the reading public, as can be documented by hundreds of extant manuscripts.

In possibly no other work of 15th century German literature are the ideals of the theology of piety as completely manifest as in '24 Golden Harps' by the Dominican Johannes Nider, who had received his university education in Vienna and was one of the most powerful motors of the reform movement in southern Germany. Nider addresses a broad audience, but the religious needs of the laity are clearly at the heart of his pastoral focus. Nider elaborates on central matters of the faith as they apply to daily life, taking care to buttress his teachings with quotes from the Church fathers and contemporary theologians, primarily Thomas Aquinas. In one sermon he even uses a meticulous description of the organization of a university and its faculties as a basis for his parenetic digressions.

This divulgence of the 'secrets' of the learned world to the semi-educated in a pastoral context should not however be understood as a symptom of a gradual softening of hierarchical thinking within the Church. Just the opposite is the case. Church reform was totally aimed at restrengthening the essential immutability and integrity of the Church's rigid elitist structure. Especially in catechitic literature it is generally stressed, that absolute trust in the clergy is a major element in the quest for salvation. Nider and others even went as far as to propagate ways of 'monasticizing' the life of the laity. Absolute obedience to the clergy was emphasized and a life of celibacy for married couples who no longer wanted children was strongly encouraged. Nider propagated the cult of St. Alexius, who, after having gotten married, observed a vow of absolute chastity.

My very sketchy picture of the dissemination and the general content of works read by the semi-literate in the 15th century Germany invariably must lead to the question in what way this literature helped pave the way for the Reformation. The use of the vernacular had become more and more widespread in practically all areas of knowledge, public discourse and administration. Inevitably this had led to a certain democratization of knowledge, thereby slowly eroding the absolute authority of the clergy.

This can be seen especially clearly in German hagiography. Authors of saints' lives, in keeping with Christian poetic theory, had for centuries invented fantastic stories about the life and miracles of the saints, since they did not view themselves primarily as historians in the modern sense of the word but as authors of edifying literature. Readers of the 15th century were, however, increasingly confounded by the implausibility of many legends, since this ancient criterion of literary truth had of course never been explained to them. In a number of German saints' lives of the 15th century we find digressions defending the credibility of various fantastic episodes by appealing to the lay reader's blind trust in the critical acumen of the learned authors, something never to be found in legends from previous centuries.

I hope to have shown how the gradual intellectual emancipation of the lay elites from the absolute authority of the Church in the 15th and early 16th century was

enormously supported by the wide-spread consumption of vernacular literature. Even though most of the true best-sellers were aesthetically of negligible value, they are important keys to understanding the historical processes that were to shape German history in the 16th century, a century that was to shake the Christian world like no other.

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