

THE INTERIORISATION OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE MODERN DEVOTION BY GABRIEL BIEL (d. 1495), PRECONDITIONS AND OUTLINES.

1. Introduction

Whereas the Christian view of mankind is, *a priori*, characterised by a deontological and teleological orientation, the Church's trials and tribulations tend rather to confirm, *a posteriori*, a cyclical notion of life. From the very beginnings of Christianity, charismatic personalities emerged who experienced the developments in the life of the Church as a yet further distancing from the original ideals. Able to articulate their concerns, they attracted groups of like-minded people from whom there emerged a strong sense of reforming zeal. Making full use of the provisions of Canon Law, these groups quite often went on to achieve legal status by the adoption of a *Rule*. If the members of the community were to discover at any particular moment in time that their own life-style did not match up to the demands of the *Rule*, having been shown up perhaps by the exemplary life of another member of the community, then, here too a tension could arise. Only if the members of the order were prepared to renew their lives in the light of the *Rule* and the promises they had made could this go on to become purifying and fruitful. And behold: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*.

The way in which Christians deal with the tension between ideal and reality depends upon the way of life already chosen. In any order, the unifying point of reference, is formed by promises and the *Rule*. Groups of people gathered about a reformer, having recognized the fact that the institutionalised communal forms were lacking in credibility, could just as easily choose a different point of reference. Often they too would take on an already existing *Rule* as a starting point with which to shape their own way of life and to develop their own spirituality. But they stopped short of entering an already existing order.

In this way, Gabriel Biel (about 1410-1495) also developed a *vita quasi monastica*.¹ He was the inspirer and organiser of

¹ Basing her study on the known biographical details concerning Biel, I. Crusius has recently drawn innovatory insights into his progress as a student at Heidelberg, Erfurt and Cologne (1432-1457) and his work as a priest at the Cathedral of Mainz (1457-1466?), as Dean of the Cathedrals of Butzbach, Urach and Schönbuch and his duties as a professor in Tübingen (1470-1495). At present, she is preparing a paper involving research into manuscripts and archives in order to broaden our knowledge

L'assemblée générale des maisons des Frères de la Vie Commune dans la Rhénanie (Das Oberdeutsche Generalkapitel). This he was able to do in communities whose self-understanding could be traced back to the ideals of the father of the reform movement in the late middle ages, Geert Grote.² Recent studies have shown that Biel took as his example the Canons Regular of St. Augustine of the Congregation of Windesheim, as far as monastic organisation and way of life were concerned.³ But Biel did not suggest the Brethren to join

of Biel's origins. See: I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel – eine Karriere zwischen *vita contemplativa* und *vita activa**, in: U. Köpf, S. Lorenz (eds.), *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben. Beiträge aus Anlaß des 500. Todestages des Tübinger Theologen*, Stuttgart, 1998, pp. 1-23, *Contubernium. Tübinger Beiträge zur Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 47. This study contains some additional material and is a re-working of: I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel und die oberdeutschen Stifte der *devotio moderna**, in: *Studien zum weltlichen Kollegiatstift in Deutschland*, Göttingen, 1995, pp. 298-322, see 299, footnote 5, *Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte* 114; *Studien zur Germania Sacra* 18. This study, once again, represented the completion of her contribution: *Gabriel Biel und die oberdeutschen Stifte der *devotio moderna**, in: J.M. Cauchies (ed.) *La dévotion moderne dans les pays bourguignons et rhénans des origines à la fin du XVIe siècle*, Neuchâtel, 1989, pp. 77-88. The biographical sketch by G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben. Quellen und Untersuchungen zu Verfassung und Selbstverständnis des oberdeutschen Generalkapitels*, Tübingen, 1999, pp. 33-59; *Spätmittelalter und Reformation*, Neue Reihe 11, deepens Crusius's insights into Biel's time in Württemberg and is based, *inter alia*, on research into the sources of the Statutes of the Upper German General Chapter. For an interpretation of the biographical data in the context of time, theological thinking and devout spirituality based on the well-known sources and biographies by W. Landeen, H. Oberman, W. Ernst, A. Goossens, see: M. Schrama, *Gabriel Biel et son entourage: Via moderna at Devotio Moderna*, in: *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 61, 1981, pp. 154-176.

² For the Church historical, socio-economic and theological factors lying at the root of the development of the movement which was the *Devotio Moderna*, see: P. van Geest, *Thomas a Kempis (1379/80-1471). Een studie van zijn mens-en godsbeeld*, Kampen, 1996, pp. 25-42, with a bibliography.

³ For the path of development, self-understanding and legal-status of the Brethren of the Common Life see: I. Crusius, *Die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben in Deutschland. Zur rechtlichen Entwicklung der religiösen Genossenschaften im späten Mittelalter*, Göttingen, 1961, (Diss. masch). The aforementioned study by G. Faix and the book by U. Hinz, *Die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben im Jahrhundert der Reformation. Das Münstersche Kolloquium*, Tübingen, 1997, *Spätmittelalter und Reformation*, Neue Reihe 9, make it possible to distinguish areas of agreement and areas of dispute between the Brethren of the North of Germany and those in the South. For sources and bibliographies dealing with the history and the spiritual life of particular houses see: W. Leesch, E. Persoons, A. Weiler, *Monasticon Fratrum Vitae Communis*, Vol.II: *Deutschland*, Brussels, 1979, *Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique/Archiefen Bibliotheekwezen in België* 19; A global sketch of the broad outlines of the historical and constitutional path of development of both the Community at Windesheim and the Brethren of the Common Life, with an exhaustive bibliography, is supplied by: R. Th. M. van Dijk, *Windesheim. Chanoines réguliers de – et Frères de la Vie commune*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 14, Paris, 1994, cols. 1457-1478. There is, finally, an important study by W. Kohl, *Die Windesheimer Kongregation*, in: K. Elm (ed.), *Reformbemühungen und Observanzbestrebungen im spätmittelalterlichen Ordenswesen*, Berlin, 1989, pp. 83-108, *Berliner Historische Studien* 14, *Ordensstudien* 6.

this monastic wing of the movement. Instead, he opted for the conventual way of life with its own distinct legal status. However, he interpreted this in such a peculiar way that I. Crusius felt compelled to characterise the conventual form developed by Biel as a *devotes Kollegiatstift* in order to distinguish it from a secular convent.⁴ Her studies show that Gabriel Biel got it just right when he developed the form of a *devotes Kollegiatstift* in which to promote the original ideals of the *Devotio Moderna*. Since the form of a *Stift* had already been recognised by the Canon Law of the Church, it could hardly be said to be provocative, and it was this that was to ensure that the original ideals of the *Fraterherren* did not simply evaporate and their original self-understanding could still inform their interior life. Even in the elite College Convent of St. Peter, founded by Biel in 1491, they remained convinced of the ideal of the *ecclesia primitiva* just as the young clerics and lay people leading the communal life in the vicarage of Florens Radewijns had been about 120 years earlier.⁵

This study sketches some of the more important aspects of the spirituality lying at the root of the development of the way of life in one of these *convents* which Biel had integrated into his thinking about this form of living in community. These aspects of spirituality characterise Biel as being devout in a modern way. Since Biel owed a huge debt of gratitude to Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (d. 1398), one of the first generation Brethren of the Common Life, it has been assumed, rightly, that he valued the ideals of the *Devotio Moderna* very highly indeed. But the spirituality of the *Devotio Moderna* is far

⁴ J. Haller thought that Biel should be regarded as a conservative reformer who had not the slightest intention of creating new forms of communal living: J. Haller, *Die Anfänge der Universität Tübingen 1477-1537*, Tübingen, 1927, 2 Vols., Vol. I, p. 167. The studies by I. Crusius have supplanted this insight. See: I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel und die oberdeutschen Stifte der devotio moderna*, in: *Studien zum weltlichen Kollegiatstift in Deutschland*, Göttingen, 1995, pp. 298-322 & here 309-320. The sources and studies published by G. Faix and U. Hinz, support her insights here too. See: U. Hinz, *Die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 131.

⁵ Even as far back as St. Augustine, the example of the *ecclesia primitiva* was the determining factor when founding his communities and drawing up his *Praeceptum*. Furthermore, the Lateran Synod of 1059, which, amongst other things, occupied itself with the reform of canonries, reached back into apostolic times (*vita apostolica*) for an example of life in community. Thus it was, that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council breathed life into the age-old tradition whilst attempting to reform the religious life by taking the Early Church as their example. See: The Decree: *Perfectae Caritatis* 15, in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Konstitutionen, Dekrete und Erklärungen*, Freiburg, Basle & Vienna, 1967, 3 Vols., Vol. 2, pp. 296-297.

from being monolithic; its uniqueness is more difficult to establish than e.g. that of the Franciscan Movement. And yet, in Biel's *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, there remains a conglomeration of perceptible ideas, earlier formulated by e.g. Gerlach Peters, Thomas a Kempis and Johannes Mombaer. In this conglomeration, we can just make out the first contours of Biel's devout spirituality. It would be too much of a coincidence if this conglomeration in Biel's thinking were to have come about without him having to owe some debt of gratitude to the spirituality of the devout and a good working knowledge thereof.

Now, Biel's process of interiorisation of the spirituality of the Modern Devotion, and the development of the *devotes Kollegiatstift*, has been determined by a number of factors. Firstly, we must mention Biel's relation to the Ruler and we will do this by taking a look at one of Biel's contemporaries: Andreas Proles (d.1503). In the light of the relationship of Proles to his Ruler, we will be able to uncover the pre-conditions, which served to ensure that elements of this devout spirituality could continue to operate unhindered in the life and work of Gabriel Biel.⁶ A comparison with Proles, who, as well as being a contemporary of Biel, was also Vicar General of the Observantist wing of the Augustinian Order, makes the uniqueness of Biel all the more understandable. A further comparison with the salient views of Biel and Proles concerning the role and function of the vota and on the religious life as *status perfectionis* will shed light on the reasons why Biel could not allow "his" Brethren of the Common Life to join an *ordo canonicus*. This last fact is truly remarkable: the way ahead lay wide open to Biel since the Canons Regular of Windesheim, whilst professing the same spirituality, had indeed chosen that particular canonical form. And this particular way would have been a realistic option for quite another reason, namely, the utterly monastic way of life the Brethren actually led. It will appear in the course of this study that it was precisely this semi-monastic way of life in its turn, which suggested the pre-conditions for how best to interiorise some of the specific elements of devout spirituality.

⁶ With regard to Andreas Proles, see: R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis. Der Augustinereremit Andreas Proles (1429-1503) und die privilegierte Observanz*, Tübingen, 1996, *Spätmittelalter und Reformation*. Neue Reihe 7.

2. Relative independence as the pre-condition enabling the original spirituality to become personalised.

2.1. Biel's relationship with the Ruler.

Driven by a patriarchal sense of responsibility for the well being of their own people, praising God whilst at the same time determinedly consolidating their own power and driving through reforms of Church and Society, many German Rulers in the 15th century secured for themselves a very effective instrument. By the granting of privileges, they were able to involve the monasteries in their own plans to reform Church politics and education. Often supported by the religious orders themselves, these reforms went hand in hand with the granting of privileges and were speeded up by them.⁷

How Andreas Proles and Duke William III of Saxony, got on with each other, provides us with a textbook example of the relationship between a monastic reformer and a Ruler.⁸ When, on 5th November 1437, Pope Eugenius declared the Observantist wing of the Order of the Augustinian Hermits in Germany legally valid, representing the union of five monastic houses, the Father General of the Order attempted to frustrate the workings of this Papal measure. In his second period in office as Vicar General of the Observantist wing, Proles felt he had been left with no other alternative than to involve the Duke in the introduction of the *observantia regularis*.⁹ From this time

⁷ For an explanation of the conglomeration of political and religious motives of the territorial potentates whenever an observance was being introduced, as well as the intrinsic involvement of religion and the well-being of the country concerned which lay at the heart of the matter, see: M. Schulze, *Fürsten und Reformation. Geistliche Reformpolitik weltlicher Fürsten vor der Reformation*, Tübingen, 1991, *Spätmittelalter und Reformation*, Neue Reihe 2, here: pp. 88-101 & 192-197. This makes it quite clear that it was not a craving for power but the need to stabilize the Realm, which was the driving force behind the Church polity of the Rulers. Reforming the monasteries accomplished this; failure to reform led to unrest. The genuine piety of a Ruler could also bring about reform quite apart from the demands of *Realpolitik*. It would have brought clarification, if Schulze, Weinbrenner and Faix were to have assessed the piety of the respective Rulers. They would then have been able to compare this piety as stated in the rulers' letters of reform with the written texts in which the spirituality of the Order or Brethren, which the Rulers followed, clearly shines through.

⁸ R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, p. 17.

⁹ Presumably, Andreas Proles assumed the office of Vicar General of the Order after 1461 for the first time and from 1473 to 1503 for the second time. In that year, 37 Convents acknowledged membership of the privileged Observance. For a more detailed description of the emergence, flowering and decline of the privileged Observance, see: M. Schulze, *Fürsten und Reformation*, pp. 87-101, 108-111 & 163-179; R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, pp. 58-59, 98-110 & 117-125.

on, the reform policy of the Duke concentrated on disengaging the reform-minded monasteries from the Father General's sphere of influence. In this way, the Duke hoped to strengthen his own hold over the monasteries. It need hardly be said that the Pope lent him powerful support in all of this. At his request, the Pope conferred upon the Duke sole rights in the granting of Papal privileges to the Observantists thus guaranteeing the exemption from the Father General of the Order. The latter's decrees of excommunication, as well as all further action the Father Provincial might take against Proles, would, as such, be proscribed or illicit.¹⁰ Being totally dependant on the Ruler, Andreas Proles merged his reforming ideals with those of the Duke without reservation. Whereas the Duke saw restoration of discipline and choral prayer as a way of making optimal use of his instrument of reform, Proles, in the little space left him, endeavoured to promote the monastic way of life as *vita perfecta* by means of his sermons.¹¹ An additional problem was that the reforms were carried out not so much by Proles's powers of persuasion as by the authority of the Duke himself in the form of his officials appointed to do the job for him. The Order was treated as a distinct instrument of the Ruler's politics of reform. Proles's credibility suffered all the more as a result because he had developed a quite different way of thinking and approach to the carrying out of the reforms to that which he sought to promote in his sermons. As a result, an unfruitful area of tension developed which expressed itself in the double meaning surrounding the term "becoming privileged". On the one hand, this could be understood as becoming privileged because of the Duke; on the other hand, it typified the life style of the monk; after all, the monastic life amounted to the *vita perfecta*. Deeply rooted within this ambiguity lay the real reason why these reforms never caught on.¹²

¹⁰ Th. Kolde, *Die Deutsche Augustiner Congregation und Johann von Staupitz. Ein Beitrag zur Ordens- und Reformationsgeschichte*, Gotha, 1879, p. 426; Beilage IV, 10 contains the letter of Duke William to the Counsel of the Convent of the Augustinian Hermits at Gotha, dated 12th January 1476. It is clear from this letter that the Duke had arranged for the granting of a privilege on behalf of the Pope. Compare: M. Schulze, *Fürsten und Reformation*, pp. 46-111, & here pp. 90-93. The sources relating to the reforming polity of Duke William III are printed in: F. R. Rudolphi, *Gotha Diplomatica oder ausführliche historische Beschreibung des Fürstentums Sachsen-Gotha*, Frankfurt-am-Main & Leipzig, 1717, Vol. 1, pp. 138-141, see the comment at footnote 7.

¹¹ R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, pp. 125-136.

¹² R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, p. 189. Following on from Johannes Nider, Proles admits, in his sermons, another meaning for the word privilege than the strictly juridical and thus goes on to increase the tension even more between privileges being granted from outside and monastic

Thus it was that an alienating tension arose between the reforms which were being directed and pushed through from outside and the sermons in which Proles broached the whole subject of the *reformatio* as being strictly an individual affair which came about by means of the *imitatio* and *conformatio (passionis) Christi*. In this way, the Vicar appears to have been following Dionysius the Carthusian who argued that monastic reform can only ever come about as a result of an inner *principium motionis ad bonum*. At its heart lies the purification of the individual intensified by prayer, study, penance, conversion and by one's own circle of friends.¹³ In his dealings with the Ruler, he appears just as avidly to support the view of Martin von Senging. For this Abbott, the optimum *modus reformandi* was a deed of governance. By authority of the Abbott, the Order is handed back to the monk.¹⁴ Neither the disposition of the individual Abbott, nor his authenticity are essential for the reform of the Order and the individual monk. The disposition of the individual monk, nor the man's authenticity and credibility are essential for the reform to be effective. The fact of many Observantist Augustinian Hermits going over to Luther and the subsequent decline of the privileged Observance was rooted in this outside interference directing and pushing through the reforms.¹⁵

From 1447 on, Gabriel Biel was working in Württemberg. There monastic reforms were carried out in much the same way. Whilst being initiated in the Orders themselves, the Dukes were happy to push them through for the sake of their own reform policy.¹⁶ In 1459

spirituality. In the state of life of a religious, privileges there are too. Thus Proles writes, with regard to the vows in the second privilege, in *De privilegiis religiosorum*, that the monastic life, with its concentration on poverty, chastity and obedience, is the complete fulfilment of the commandment to love. The fourth privilege of this state of life contains the possibility of regaining the state of grace by living the vows after having committed a sin. See: R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, pp. 134-144.

¹³ "Nempe, quum coeperint Deum timere atque diligere, spiritualisque vitae suavitatem aliquantulum degustare, ex se ipsis movebuntur ad observantiam eorum quae Ordinis sunt, et pro sua salute fient solliciti", Dionysius Cartusianus *De reformatione claustralium*, art. XXI, 242A, in: *Dionysius Cartusianus opera omnia*, Tournai, 1909, Vol. 38, pp. 209-242.

¹⁴ R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, pp. 52-54.

¹⁵ R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, pp. 222-247.

¹⁶ For relations between the Rulers in Württemberg on the one hand and the monastic reformers and land commissioners on the other see: D. Stievermann, *Klosterreform und Territorialstaat in Süddeutschland im 15. Jahrhundert*, in: *Rottenburger Jahrbuch für Kirchengeschichte* 11, 1992, pp. 149-160; D. Stievermann, *Landesherrschaft und Klosterwesen im spätmittelalterlichen Württemberg*, Sigmaringen, 1989, p. 261.

Pope Pius II granted permission to the Dukes Ulrich V and Eberhard im Bart for the reform of the monastic houses within their territory, which enabled them to consolidate their powers vis-à-vis the Bishops, and the monastic reformers. Duke Eberhard did not flinch from the complete integration of almost all the monasteries within his territory. At the Convents in Stuttgart and Backnang amongst others, he made full use of his powers of intervention. And just like the Duke of Thuringia had done in reforming the monasteries of the Augustinians, he reformed them entirely to the satisfaction of his own territorial politics.¹⁷

Due in no small measure to the influence of Gabriel Biel, Eberhard's dealings with the Brethren of the Common Life were of a much more circumspect nature. In 1477, at the Duke's request, Pope Sixtus IV elevated the parish church of St. Amand at Urach to the status of conventual church. The prebends and curacies, which came with the church, together with two prebends from the parish church of Dettingen, were, in this way, conjoined to form a single store of wealth. For the purposes of his reforming policy but after consulting Biel, the Earl entrusted the new conventual church to the Brethren of the Common Life offering them a secure existence by allowing the conjoined store of wealth to be used for the sole benefit of the Brethren.¹⁸ In 1439, the *bull*a *Eugeniana* was issued allowing the

¹⁷ With regard to Eberhard im Bart see: D. Mertens, *Der Humanismus und die Reform des Weltklerus im deutschen Südwesten*, in: *Rottenburger Jahrbuch für Kirchengeschichte* 11, 1992, pp. 11-28; and the contributions to: H. M. Maurer (ed.), *Eberhard und Mechtild. Untersuchungen zur württembergischen Geschichte im ausgehenden Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 1994. See also G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, 378-397.

¹⁸ The *Statuta et ordinationes ex bulla Eugeniana* (pub. in: R. Doebner, *Annalen und Akten der Brüder des gemeinsamen Lebens im Luchtenhofe zu Hildesheim*, Hannover & Leipzig, 1903, pp. 210-212, *Quellen und Darstellungen zur Geschichte Niedersachsens* 9, make clear that this privilege was meant for the Houses at Münster, Cologne and Wesel. But Hendrik van Ahaus made no use of it when, in 1401, he founded the first House of the Brethren in Münster taking as his example the House in Deventer. He was the first to see a threat to the semi-religious way of life in such a Canon Law construct, see: R. Post, *The Modern Devotion*, pp. 356-357 & 450-452. Not until 1463 was there any use made of the Papal Bull for the House at Hildesheim and even then the Brethren did not assume the titles of Provost and Canon. The opinion of K. Elm regarding Biel's intention and vision require a certain nuance in the light of these facts. In his synthetic, and, as such, extremely valuable study, he states the following: „Unter dem von Klerus, Episkopat und Kurie ausgehenden Druck, sich zumindest in ihren äußeren Form den Normen des Mönch- oder Kanonikertums anzupassen oder gar auf die Eigenart ihrer semireligiösen Lebensweise ganz zu verzichten, reagierten sie mit einer Entschiedenheit, die unmissverständlich zu erkennen gab,

Brethren of the Common Life to transform their Houses into collegiate churches. At first, the Brethren saw this kind of canonical structure as a threat to their *medius vivendi modus*. Biel must have realised that the canonical legitimacy, which the privilege of the bull afforded, meant that only a slight restructuring of the devout communities would be needed and that it was precisely by such means that the influence of Geert Grote's ideals would continue to be guaranteed. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the reforming work of the Brethren would be multiplied by the Duke's material support. It was, perhaps, because, in contrast to the secular canons, they desired to live in community of goods, in line with Acts 4,32-36 and the Rule of St. Augustine, that the Brethren were exempted the payment of taxes also. Besides this, the Duke desired to lay no claim to the income generated by the convent, which he usually did demand when dealing with a secular convent. The community of goods, which Biel propagates exhaustively for his Brethren in his *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, as well as making it fundamental to the life in community, must have formed the basis for the credibility of the Brethren in the mind of the Duke. The latter must have known that the dangers, which made the secular convents so vulnerable, by allowing private property, had to be avoided in the case of the Brethren of the Common Life. Although the degree to which private property and freedom of movement in every secular convent differed, this issued,

dass sie ihrer durch Gleichheit, Freiheit und brüderliche Liebe gekennzeichneten Lebensform einen höheren Rang zuerkannten als dem auf Bindung und Gehorsam gegründeten Ordensleben. Auf diese Würde zu verzichten und eine Regel anzunehmen, erschien ihnen als nichts anderes, *quam vendere libertatem nostram* ..., wie es 1490 Peter Dieburg ... formuliert.“ K. Elm, *Vita regularis sine regula. Bedeutung, Rechtsstellung und Selbstverständnis des mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Semireligiosentums*, in: F. Smanell (ed.), *Häresie und vorzeitige Reformation im Spätmittelalter*, Vienna & Munich, 1998, pp. 239-273, *Schriften des Historischen Kollegs Kolloquien* 39, quotation pp. 266-7. Moreover, Dieburg's quotation has its origins in an explanation for fellow Brethren who wished to see the House at Hildesheim incorporated into the tightly organised Münster Colloquium and, as such, it is not an explanation for (or against) religious. See: R. Doebner, *Annalen und Akten*, p. 113, Gabriel Biel would also dissuade Dieburg from including in the House Rules such typically monastic expressions as the persecution of the lapsed, see: R. POST, *The Modern Devotion*, pp. 430-1. Elms's observation about this Münster co-operation holds true only in part, see: U. Hinz, *Die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben im Jahrhundert der Reformation*, p. 19: „Unter den Häusern des Münsterschen Kolloquium blieb die freiheitliche Komponente trotz der teilweisen Annahme von stiftischen Rechten kennzeichnendes Merkmal des Brüderlebens und schlug sich auch in den Fragen der rechtlichen Organisation der Lebensform nieder, wie es die gescheiterten Versuche zur Errichtung einer Union im frühen 16. Jahrhundert illustrierten.“

not infrequently, in profanation of moral.¹⁹ Further evidence of the Duke's confidence in the authentic nature of the undertaking as led by Biel, can be had by looking at the fact that the Duke waived his right of presentation along with his right to intervene in the internal affairs of the House. Eberhard appears to have understood both the nature and the aims of the way of life which Biel had developed, never allowing the devout convent to decline into an administrative centre, as was the case with the secular convent, whence officials and clerics worked on the consolidation of his ruling power.²⁰ Finally, we can conclude that Biel had great powers of persuasion and that the Duke, perhaps because of this, became more concerned with reforms than with the consolidation of his power. As a result, the Duke gave his approval to Biel's plan for the House at Urach to be incorporated into the extraterritorial General Chapter which he had already developed, and which comprised the Houses of Königstein, Marienthal and Butzbach.²¹ The Duke probably realised that structural contacts with other Houses increased the effectiveness of the Brethren of the Common Life and reduced the likelihood of their losing sight of the original ideal. Now the General Chapter would carry out visitations and the appointment of the Provost would not be dependant on the approval of either Pope or Bishop.²²

Such a measure of freedom must have been a rare exception. Why should the Duke even consider offering this degree of freedom? Did he, perhaps, perceive that devout persons, who had taken on the

¹⁹ See: P. Moraw, *Über Typologie, Chronologie und Geographie der Stiftskirche im deutschen Mittelalter*, in: Max-Planck-Institut (ed.), *Untersuchungen zu Kloster und Stift*, Göttingen, 1980, pp. 9-37, *Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte* 68; *Studien zur Germania Sacra* 14; I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel und die oberdeutschen Stifte der devotio moderna*, in: *Studien zum weltlichen Kollegiatstift in Deutschland*, p. 322.

²⁰ I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel – eine Karriere zwischen vita contemplativa und vita activa*, in: *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 14.

²¹ See: I. Crusius, *Die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben in Deutschland*, pp. 89-104 & 139-160; U. Hinz, *Die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben im Jahrhundert der Reformation*, pp. 18-19; G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 50.

²² G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, pp. 43-45. The foundation of communities of the Brethren at Herrenberg, which also had to do with the remodelling of a collegiate chapter, Dettingen (1482) and Tachenhausen (1486) was completed according to the same procedures and granting of privileges. See especially: W. Schöntag, *Gabriel Biel als Organisator. Der Auf- und Ausbau der Württembergischen Stifte der Kanoniker vom gemeinsamen Leben, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Stifts Tachenhausen*, in: U. Köpf, S. Lorenz (eds.), *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben*, pp. 155-177.

Rule of St. Augustine rather as a source of inspiration than as a means of attaining legitimacy in canon law, would, if they were to fall into deformation, *ipso facto* eliminate themselves as a group and not go on forever still clutching to their anchor in canon law? Did Gabriel Biel enlighten him as to this fact, or was he himself already aware that *formation* costs less of an effort than does *reformation*?

In any event, the Brethren of the Common Life enjoyed his complete trust. In 1481, tensions arose within the Teutonic Province of the Dominican Friars between the older preaching theology of Vienna and Basle and the Neo-Thomism of the School of Cologne, which was steadily becoming more dominant. Faced with this impasse, the Duke made haste to recognise the rights of the Brethren over the parish church and the castle church of Tübingen, to be served only by them, and that they should have the use of the presbytery as a college of the University.²³ With this as his base, Gabriel Biel, by now a professor would go on to play a large role within the Faculty of Theology as well as within the University as a whole. Towards the end of his life, he continued to display an enormous capacity for work and he remained a leading light in the development of ways of living, which could renew society.²⁴ In Tübingen too, it became clear that the erudite

²³ See: B. Neidiger, *Das Dominikanerkloster Stuttgart, die Kanoniker vom gemeinsamen Leben in Urach und die Gründung der Universität Tübingen. Konkurrierende Reformsätze in der Württembergischen Kirchenreformpolitik am Ausgang des Mittelalters*, Stuttgart, 1993, pp. 80-92 & 97-114, *Veröffentlichungen des Archivs der Stadt Stuttgart* 58.

²⁴ For an overview of Biel's work see: W. Bayerer, *Libri Capituli Ecclesiae Sancti Marci. Zur Katalogisierung der Butzbacher Handschriften an der Universitätsbibliothek Gießen*, in: *Wetterauer Geschichtsblätter* 24, 1975, pp. 57-91; W. Bayerer, *Gabriel Biel Gratiarum Actio und andere Materialien zu einer Testimonien-Biographie bezüglich seiner Universitätsjahre in Heidelberg, Erfurt, Köln (und Tübingen)*, in: *Forschungen aus der Handschriftenabteilung der Universitätsbibliothek Gießen*, Gießen, 1985, *Berichte und Arbeiten aus der Universitätsbibliothek Gießen*; W. Bayerer, *Die Handschriften des ehem. Fraterherrenstifts St. Markus zu Butzbach*, Vol., 1: *Handschriften aus der Nummernfolge Hs 42-Hs 760*, Wiesbaden, 1980, *Handschriftenkataloge der Universitätsbibliothek Gießen* 4. Systematic overviews of Biel's writings can be found in: H. A. Oberman, *Der Herbst der Mittelalterlichen Theologie*, Tübingen, 1965, *Spätscholastik und Reformation* 1, pp. 21-29; W. Ernst, *Gott und Mensch am Vorabend der Reformation. Eine Untersuchung zur Moralphilosophie und -theologie bei Gabriel Biel*, Leipzig, 1972, pp. 36-55, *Erfurter theologische Studien* 28; A. Goosens, *Alliance et Grâce. Le sacrement de l'eucharistie selon Gabriel Biel*, Paris, 1971, Vol., 1, pp. 15-54 (diss. dact.); M. Schrama, *Gabriel Biel et son entourage: Via moderna et Devotio Moderna*, in: *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 61, 1981, pp. 176-183; P. van Geest, *Das Niemandsland zwischen Via moderna und Devotio moderna. Der Status quaestionis der Gabriel-Biel-Forschung*, in: *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis/Dutch Review of Church History*, 80, 2000, pp. 157-192.

Fraterherren were being granted privileges by the Duke so as to become instruments of his reform and educational policy. Yet, at the same time, it became clear that they, as a group, were becoming successful in their devout endeavour to give some shape to the ideals of the *ecclesia primitiva*. In contrast to the regular orders, the Brethren of the Common Life appear not to have experienced any tension between the politics of the Duke and their own spirituality because the Duke himself recognised the fact that it was in their authenticity that their reforming power lay. Thus it was that he was able to favour both at one and the same time.

Biel and Eberhard's foundation of the House of St. Peter on the Einsiedel provides us with the clearest example of the use of the Brethren as an instrument yoked in harmony to the ideals to which they themselves, in tribute to the *Devotio Moderna*, were aspiring. St. Peter's was intended as a place within which all of the various classes of the Realm were to be represented as in an exemplary Utopia and the young elite of the world was to be brought up under Provost Gabriel Biel's direction.²⁵ Whilst the Duke saw in St Peter's his ideas of state embodied and the unity of his dukedom as in a microcosm saw safeguarded, Biel saw it as a place where the *vita activa* and *contemplativa* could fruitfully interfere with each other benefiting society as a whole as well as the individual. He saw the House as a Christian way of existing, which was capable of withstanding the crisis through which Church and Society were going at the time.²⁶ But underlying this element in his spirituality lay Biel's characteristically devout ideals. A. J. Jelsma has identified three aims associated with the spirituality of the Modern Devout and it seems that Biel, in carrying through the plans for the House of St. Peter, had made them his own or had at least recognised them as being his own. These aims were: to stimulate the piety of the laity, to promote, by means of small

²⁵ See: W.M. Landeen, *Das Brüderhaus St. Peter im Schönbuch auf dem Einsiedel*, in: *Blätter für Württembergische Kirchengeschichte*, 40-41, 1960-1961, pp. 5-18; W. Schöntag, *Die Kanoniker und Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben in Württemberg*, in: *Rottenburger Jahrbuch für Kirchengeschichte* 11, 1992, pp.197-208; W. Schöntag, *Die Anfänge der Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben in Württemberg. Ein Beitrag zur vorreformatorischen Kirchen- und Bildungsgeschichte*, in: *Archiv für Diplomatik* 23, 1977, pp. 459-485; G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, pp. 309-346 (statute edition) & passim. See also: M. Schulze, *Fürsten und Reformation*, pp. 27-28 & 55.

²⁶ M. Schulze, *Fürsten und Reformation*, pp. 22-28; I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel – eine Karriere zwischen *vita contemplativa* und *vita activa**, in: *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben*, pp. 19-23.

units, the spiritual life and to care for the upbringing of young persons.²⁷ They fitted precisely with the Duke's own wishes.

But, equally, after the demise of both in 1495, the synergy, which had existed between Duke and Provost, ceased to be. After the deaths of the Duke and the Provost, Einsiedeln appeared to have become a vulnerable test-bed for righteousness, so that, as later too, the Jesuit Reductions in Paraguay, no long life would be granted it.²⁸ The seeds of the destruction of this devout convent lay not only in the deaths of Biel and Eberhard but in the decision of Eberhard's successor to use the material furnishings of the convent for his own ducal chapel and in his awarding of privileges related to private property and personal freedom. This development, along with our perception of the position and work of Andreas Proles, accentuates the charisma and the independence of Biel as demonstrated by the formation of the living communities in accordance with the devout ideals. The devout spirituality was indeed able to take root in an exceptional communal form. The reasons for Biel's independence, however, deserve more detailed explanation.

2.2. *The origins of Biel's autonomy and freedom.*

The exceptional status accorded the Brethren of the Common life, is explained in general terms by pointing to the mutual trust which Biel and Eberhard had in each other, the Duke's willingness to try out new forms of communal living capable of furthering his genuine wish for reform, and, his extraordinary commitment to the

²⁷ A. J. Jelsma, *Doorwerking van de Moderne Devotie*, in: P. Bange, C. Graafland, A. J. Jelsma, A.G. Weiler (eds.), *De doorwerking van de Moderne Devotie. Windesheim 1387-1987. Voordrachten gehouden tijdens het Windesheims symposium Zwolle/Windesheim 15-17 oktober 1987*, Hilversum, 1988, pp. 9-28. See for Biel's activities concerning these three aims: footnotes 54 & 55 of this paper.

²⁸ See: W. Schöntag, *Die Aufhebung der Stifte und Häuser der Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben in Württemberg. Ein Vorbote der Reformation?*, in: *Zeitschrift für Württembergische Landesgeschichte* 38, 1979, pp. 82-96; W. Schöntag, *Gabriel Biel als Organisator: Der Auf- und Ausbau der württembergische Stifte der Kanoniker vom gemeinsamen Leben, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Stifts Tachenhäusen*, in: U. Köpf, S. Lorenz (eds.), *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben. Beiträge aus Anlass des 500. Todestages des Tübinger Theologen*. Stuttgart, 1998. *Contubernium. Tübinger Beiträge zur Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 47, pp. 155-177 and S. Molitor, *Dann der kapenherrn hat niemand's nutz oder frucht ... Ein wiederentdecktes Dokument zur Situation von St. Peter im Einsiedel und anderer Stifte und Häuser der Kanoniker vom gemeinsamen Leben in Württemberg nach dem Tode Gabriel Biels*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 179-193.

life of the *Fraterherren*.²⁹ His desire to be treated as one of the Brethren at St. Peter's and his wish, expressed in his last will and testament, to be buried on the Einsiedel, wearing the blue habit of the Brethren of the Common Life, as if he himself were a fellow-member of the Brethren, all bear witness to this.³⁰ That the Duke should have felt himself so existentially drawn towards the Brethren of the Common Life, fundamentally had to do with the authenticity and credibility of the Brethren, a fact which we had already made mention of. After all, they were not in need of reform. Everyday reality was not far removed from the ideal.³¹ Under the guidance of Biel, the Brethren at Butzbach had succeeded in institutionalising their already existing friendships and had elevated these by means of a monastic organisation of daily life to *the Praise of God and the Good of the Country* (*Gott zu Lob und dem Land zu Nutz*).³² But, in their efforts to give shape to the *ecclesia primitiva*, they had safeguarded themselves, in principle, from tension. Because of the very nature of their vocation, they didn't assume the *status perfectionis* which was implied *de iure* by the monastic life, and that was underpinned as it was by a theology which emphasised the difference between this state and the imperfect state of the world beset by sin. Thus it was that the Brethren were shielded from the tension likely to be caused by accepting and preaching monastic life. The *vita perfecta*, representing the ultimate way of life on the one hand and the implementation by outside forces of this life because of, at the end of the day, it was the politics of the country that was crucial. This was bound to lead to tension. Biel, acting as Provost, never felt the need, as did Andreas Proles, to summon the alienating assistance of the civil authorities in order to carry out reforms within his own circle, although, possessing the right to punish by imprisonment, as the statutes of St. Peter's clearly state, might have suggested otherwise.

Made possible because of the seamlessly interwoven threads of devout ideals, reforming potential and the reforming zeal of the Duke,

²⁹ G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 55; I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel – eine Karriere zwischen *vita contemplativa* und *vita activa**, in: *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 15.

³⁰ I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel – eine Karriere zwischen *vita contemplativa* und *vita activa**, in: *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 19.

³¹ R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, p. 31.

³² For the classical formulation, in which the motives of the Ruler are summarised and which can also be found in the Statutes of the House of St. Peter: D. Stievermann, *Landesherrschaft und Klosterwesen im spätmittelalterlichen Württemberg*, p. 295.

the independently developed way of life meant that the Brethren were able to enjoy relative autonomy. This took on a more definite form in the social sphere with the promulgation of the abovementioned decree of Duke Eberhard relinquishing his right to intervene in internal affairs. The seamlessly interwoven threads of the internally lived ideal and the externally felt zeal for reform encouraged a consciousness of autonomy in the sense that no institutionalised pressure to conform was felt as was the case with the Brethren of the Colloquy of Münster who felt it all the time. All of these factors enabled Biel to develop a new form of communal living in which the Brethren, not in spite of, but because of the reforming zeal of the Duke, were able to realise their full potential in a powerful way and to work out a few elements in their devout spirituality, as will be seen in what follows.

The relative autonomy which the Brethren demonstrated by developing their communal life form in the devout convent, could itself, however, be traced back to the autonomy which Biel had always preserved in his own life. This had revealed itself already whilst he was a student. At the time, it was unusual to go to Cologne in order to study the theologians of the *via antiqua*. But Biel did do so between 1453 and 1455. His independent disposition becomes particularly clear, however, when we consider the way in which he joined the Brethren of the Common Life. It is perfectly possible that, as W. Ernst maintains, it was in Cologne that Biel became acquainted with the ideals of the *Devotio Moderna* for the first time. Indeed, the results of the matriculations of the University of Cologne do indicate that, of the students who studied there, between 1389 and 1558, a quarter came from the Diocese of Utrecht. But there is no suggestion of there ever having been a regular connection between them.³³ It is just as likely that, as I. Crusius assumes, he got to know the *Devotio Moderna* whilst staying with the Carthusians at Mainz.³⁴ In any case, in 1463-1464, he offered his services to the Archbishop of Mainz, Adolph of Nassau, without any obligation and apparently indifferent, in order to help found the House of the Brethren at Marienthal.³⁵ Biel then went on, for the sake of the Archbishop's brother, John Duke of Nassau, to

³³ See: H. Keussen, *Die Matrikel der Universität Köln*, Bonn, 1928², 2 Vols., Vol. 1, 1389-1475, p. 561, no. 44 & *passim*, *Publikationen der Gesellschaft für Rheinische Geschichtskunde* 8.

³⁴ W. Ernst, *Gott und Mensch*, p. 26; I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel und die oberdeutschen Stiften der devotio moderna*, pp. 304 ff.

³⁵ See: W. Ernst, *Gott und Mensch*, p. 27. The debate as to whether Biel entered the House at Marienthal is summarised by M. Schrama in: *Gabriel Biel et son entourage: via moderna et devotio moderna*, pp. 170-171, n. 76.

co-operate with him in his attempt to open a House of the Brethren at Wiesbaden.³⁶ Biel's signature on the Charter of Foundation of the House at Königstein in 1467 is evidence that, gradually, his association with the Brethren of the Common Life was becoming more intense and taking on definite forms of its own.³⁷

When the House at Butzbach was being founded in 1469, Biel went on to operate in no less a capacity than that of plenipotentiary of Earl Eberhard III of Eppstein and saw to it that the House became incorporated into the General Chapter of Upper Germany.³⁸ At this stage in his life, it had become clear that his connection to the Brethren could no longer be characterised as being merely sympathetic and noncommittal. Very gradually, he appeared to give up his independence from them, and it is precisely this gradualness, which testifies to his autonomous attitude. This can also be inferred from the date of his entering the community. It was not until somewhere between 30th January 1469 and 6th September 1470 that he became one of the Brethren of the Common Life at Butzbach. This he only did after many years of waiting and not before he felt able to confess that the quasi-monastic community of the Brethren had come closer to him and he to those who gave shape to this communal way of living.³⁹

The tendency towards independence of thought and of action, the autonomous streak in his character, was something which Biel had already demonstrated in public in 1461-1462 during the Feud of the Convents at Mainz (*Mainzer Stiftsfehde*) where he refused to accept a candidate who had not yet been ratified by the Pope. Acceptance would have compromised his own position, and he renounced his

³⁶ See: R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion*, p. 442; W. Landeen, *Gabriel Biel and the Devotio Moderna in Germany*, in: *Research Studies of the State College of Washington*, 27, 1959, p. 159.

³⁷ In this Charter Biel is called, "magister, licentiatu et presbiter ... Moguntinae diocesis". And so it is clear that he had not joined the Brethren of the Common Life but did enjoy great authority. See: H. Schalk, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Kugelherrenhauses zu Königstein*, in: *Annalen des Vereins für Nassauische Alterthumskunde und Geschichtsforschung* 7, 1864, pp. 211-236 & here 214 ff; W. Courtenay, *Gabriel Biel als Mainzer Domprediger und sein Eintritt bei den Brüdern vom gemeinsamen Leben*, in: *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 75, 1966, pp. 49-52 & here 51.

³⁸ *Monasticon Fratrum Vitae Communis*, p. 42. See also: I. Crusius, *Die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben in Deutschland*, pp. 139-160.

³⁹ The first date is the date of the foundation of the House at Butzbach; the second date comes from a letter of Biel which he himself signed with the added words: "Chaplain and Brother at Butzbach St. Mark's", ("caplan und bruder sant Marcs zu Butzbach"), *Monasticon Fratrum Vitae Communis*, p. 43.

preaching office at Mainz for a second time. This autonomy undoubtedly increased Biel's credibility in the eyes of the families van Nassau, Eppstein and Königstein and enhanced his good reputation with the Popes.⁴⁰ The Pope's formal approval of Houses, on the orders of the Duke, was arranged by Biel, and for Biel, in a noticeably supple fashion.⁴¹ His credibility must also have had a trickle-down-effect in the manner in which the Rulers regarded both Biel and his views on ways of communal living. That not even the slightest of obstacles was put in his way when he developed his own peculiar form of communal living, was by dint of his autonomous disposition coupled with the fact of his remaining true to himself, his authentic nature and the mirror image of this reflected in the communities which, as Rector or Provost, he went on to shape. His form of communal living became *de facto* monastic although it was never anchored in Canon Law as such. Nor did this communal way of living maintain any formal ties with the Canons Regular of the Congregation of Windesheim.⁴² Even in relation to them, he maintained his autonomy, although in his *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum* he does betray his irritation at the attitude taken by the Windeshemenses faced with his initiative.⁴³

⁴⁰ Moreover, Biel's priorities and progress charmingly substantiate the opinion of Nikolaus Staubach with regard to the similarities between the Modern Devotion and Humanism when he says, "Wenn es eine substantielle Gemeinsamkeit zwischen Humanismus und Devotio moderna gibt, so ist es eben dieses Streben nach einer modellhaften, durch literarische Vorbilder vermittelte Existenz und nach der bewussten und konsequenten Formung der eigenen Persönlichkeit, das nicht nur mit der kritischen Absage an eine von Ehrgeiz und Gewinnstreben motivierte theologische, juristische oder medizinische Universitätsausbildung übereingeht, sondern auch zur Auseinandersetzung mit den etablierten Angeboten der *vita religiosa* herausfordert.", N. Staubach, *Christianam sectam arripe. Devotio Moderna und Humanismus zwischen Zirkelbildung und gesellschaftlicher Integration*, in: K. Garber, H. Wissmann (eds.), *Europäische Sozietätsbewegung und demokratische Tradition. Die europäischen Akademien der Frühen Neuzeit zwischen Frührenaissance und Spätaufklärung*, Tübingen, 1996, Vol. 1, pp. 112-167 & here pp. 134-137 with the quotation on p. 134. In this sense, Biel can be considered as a forerunner of Humanism.

⁴¹ See: H. Oberman, D. Zerfoss, W. Courtenay (eds.), *Defensorium obedientiae apostolicae et alia documenta*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, pp. 3-39. W. Courtenay has pointed out that the chronology of the Works of Biel in 1462 shows that Biel cannot be accused of opportunism because he wrote the *Defensorium* after the feud between the two parties had already been settled. W. Courtenay, *Zur Chronologie der Schriften von 1462 und zu seiner Rolle in der Mainzer Stiftsfehde*, in: *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 74, 1965, pp. 373-376.

⁴² See footnote 18.

⁴³ W. Werbeck, ed. *Gabriel Biels Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, in: U. Köpf, S. Lorenz, eds., *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben. Beiträge aus Anlaß des 500. Todestages des Tübinger Theologen*, Stuttgart, 1998, *Contuber-*

Naturally, one would not be able to explain the evolution of the Brethren of the Common Life in Germany solely in terms of Biel's autonomy and authenticity. But there is no doubt whatsoever that it was precisely these two qualities of Biel's being which fundamentally determined the shape taken by the way of living in community which had been initiated by him. And not just in "his" Upper German Chapter. G. Faix, basing his evidence on innumerable quotations taken from the Statutes of the Upper German General Chapter – developed under the influence of Biel – was able to show that the North German Brethren took the *Oberdeutsche Generalkapitel* as their point of reference when they formed the Union of Münster in 1499.⁴⁴

3. Experiencing the *status perfectionis* and the *vota*.

3.1. Monastic theology and the simple view of the world.

The living communities of the Colloquy of Münster and the Upper German General Chapter, despite being based on the Rule of St. Augustine, had no desire whatsoever to be transformed into monasteries. It is therefore not surprising that large similarities with the religious may be detected in their sort of living community. For instance, by means of the Rule of St. Augustine, both Andreas Proles and Gabriel Biel were hoping to make actual the life of the *ecclesia primitiva* within their own living communities. Whereas the Augustinian Hermits of the Privileged Observance made their *vota* (Vows), the Brethren of the Common Life solemnly declared their renunciation of private property and submitted themselves to the Upper German General Chapter. Besides this, they made a *votum solemne stabilitatis* (Solemn Vow of Stability) before a Notary Public which appeared to give it the status of Civil Law.⁴⁵ One of the reasons

nium. Tübinger Beiträge zur Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte, 47, pp. 137-154, further indicated as *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck & here, p. 146 and G. Faix, ed. *Gabriel Biel: Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, in: G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, pp. 347-368 & here 360, further indicated as *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, "Utinam autem multi, ... etsi debita gratitudine non responderunt, saltem ingrati non existerent hiis ipsis fratribus communis vite, a quibus primum tanti profectus tanteque utilitatis beneficium susceperunt."

⁴⁴ See: G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 123. Biel himself would have had to attribute this to the statutes of the House of the Brethren at Herford.

⁴⁵ See: U. Hinz, *Die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, pp. 18-19; G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, pp. 115-117; M. Schrama, *Gabriel Biel et son entourage: Via moderna et Devotio Moderna*, p. 175; W. Ernst, *Gott und Mensch*, pp. 33-34; R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion*, pp. 446-447.

why the specific status of the Brethren of the Common Life has not always been clearly understood, lies in the fact that Biel, as we have said above, opted for the canonical way of doing things in the Houses of the Upper German General Chapter, allowing them to assume the legal title of "a Chapter". But it is the solemn vow, that is the reason why scholars typified them as "religious" in the Canon Law sense of that word.⁴⁶ But *de iure* they have never been so.

As far as the legal construction, the Brethren of the Common Life appeared far removed from the ideals of their founder Geert Grote who "only" argued for *conclusa et proposita* for the purposes of the personal examination of one's conscience, *sed non vota* with all of the Canon Law that would have been implied by this.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the interaction between the view of the world, as developed in monastic theology, and his experience of the devout ideals, became essential to Biel's choice of the *status medius*. This monastic view of the world was simple in the sense that the *contemptus mundi* in the circles of the Augustinian Observantists in Biel's time was a necessary precondition when seeking to have perfected the love of God: the love which was sought after by living the *vota substantialia*.⁴⁸ In the circles connected with Windesheim too

⁴⁶ W. Landeen, *Gabriel Biel and the Devotio Moderna in Germany*, in: *Research Studies of the State College of Washington* 28, 1960, p. 25 and W. Ernst, *Gott und Mensch*, p. 26, n. 91 argue that Biel does not concern himself with the difference between Canon and Brother within the movement because at the time of his negotiation the difference had not yet crystallized out. H. A. Oberman confuses the different forms of living in community when he characterises Biel as if he had been a member of the congregation at Windesheim, see: H. Oberman, *Via moderna-devotio moderna: Tendenzen im Tübinger Geistesleben 1477-1516*, in: *Theologen und Theologie an der Universität Tübingen*, Tübingen, 1977, pp. 1-64 & here 40-46; see also: *Werden und Wertung der Reformation*, pp. 17 ff., and *Herbst der mittelalterlichen Theologie*, p. 11. M. Schrama argued nevertheless, «que la différence entre Frère et chanoine a été toujours très assignable, du moins au sens canonique et que Biel également optait très expressément pour une vie comme Frère et non pas comme chanoine, celle-ci étant soumise à des nombreuses lois ecclésiastiques.» in: *Gabriel Biel et son entourage: Via moderna et Devotio Moderna*, in: *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 61, 1981, p. 175. The recent studies of G. Faix and U. Hinz do acknowledge the difference in form.

⁴⁷ See: Thomas a Kempis, *Conclusa et proposita in nomine Domini a magistro Gerardo edita*, in: M. J. Pohl (ed.), *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1902-1922, 7 Vols., vol. 7, pp. 87 ff.; see for the non-canonical meaning which the Devout themselves gave to the *propositum* and their own *consuetudines*: M. M. Kors, *Het propositum bij de moderne devoten. De verschriftelijking van een kernbegrip uit de vadertijd*, in: *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 71, 1997, pp. 146-180 & here 163-165.

⁴⁸ R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, p. 48.

this was expressly worked out as such.⁴⁹ And, although he does not lay much emphasis on this in his preaching cycle *De privilegiis religiosorum*, because of the interests of the country, Andreas Proles does raise the matter of the *vocatio* and the *caritas* as being the first step and the final goal of the monk's withdrawal from the world. These are the exclusive poles through which the *societas perfecta*, the *religio*, develops himself as utterly opposed to the ways of being in the world.⁵⁰

Now, I. Crusius argues as follows „Angesichts der Stellung Biels in Mainz und seiner Rolle in der Mainzer Stiftsfehde, dazu als Vertrauter des Stifters, des Grafen Eberhart (III, pvg) von Eppstein, kann keine Zweifel bestehen, dass es Biels eigener Wille war, wenn er als einfacher Bruder in das neue Stift eintrat ... Gabriel Biel wollte sich hier in Butzbach aus allem öffentlichen Leben zurückziehen zu Gebet, Kontemplation und wissenschaftlich theologischer Arbeit...“.⁵¹ Basing one's thinking on this observation might lead one to the wrong conclusion that Biel could just as easily have entered the monastery at Windesheim. Without wishing in any way to diminish the value of Crusius's observation, it must have become obvious to Gabriel Biel, during the interiorisation of the devout ideals and spirituality, that the monastic view of the world was far too simple for the life he intended to live as a *Fraterherr*. We have already seen that it was in the apparent autonomy and loyalty of Biel that the seeds of his freedom to develop his own peculiar way of living in community lay. Following on from this, the integration into an *ordo canonicus* would have meant accepting a *status*, in which the *perfectio* was based precisely on the flight from the world. This ideal was not one, which lay close to his heart. In this respect, too, he shows himself to be related to and knowledgeable about the way of communal living of the first generation of the Modern Devout. A document from a Notary Public in Deventer dated 31st January 1391 shows that the town had offered a house to the first generation of the devout moderns, under the direction of Florens Radewijns, where they could persevere in their contemplation for the well being of the town.⁵² But this faithfulness to

⁴⁹ See: P. van Geest, *Thomas a Kempis. (1379/80-1471) Een studie van zijn mens-en godsbeeld*, Kampen, 1996, pp. 149-158.

⁵⁰ R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, pp. 220-221.

⁵¹ I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel und die oberdeutschen Stifte der devotio moderna*, in: *Studien zum weltlichen Kollegiatstift in Deutschland*, p. 307.

⁵² G. Dumbar, *Het kerkelijk en wereltlijk Deventer*, Deventer, 1732, Vol. I, pp. 404-406. See also: R. Dier van Muiden, *Scriptum: Vita domini Florencii prioris nostri*, in: G. Dumbar, *Analecta seu vetera aliquot scripta inedita*, Daventria, 1719, pp. 12-52 & here chap. 8.

ennicheit (*uniformity*) did not prevent the devout, in the spirit of Geert Grote, from allowing male pupils of the Chapter School to acquire knowledge by letting them copy out various spiritual and theological books, for which work they were paid. The devotional conference held for the pupils by Grote and his disciples during this activity, bears witness to the care for their spiritual renewal.⁵³ Just as for the first generation of the devout moderns, so too for Biel, the monastic way of communal living seems to have encompassed a critical distance *vis-à-vis* the world. But the simple view of the world, which monastic theology offered, and which also laid the foundations for the idea of the *contemptus mundi* in e.g. the preaching cycle of Andreas Proles, was not compatible with the ideals of the Devotion such as Biel had given form to in Urach and Tübingen. The construction of grammar books for the pupils of the Latin School, bears witness to his educational endeavours.⁵⁴ The translations of a work by Hugo of St. Victor, a pseudo-Augustinian text, and works by Jean Gerson, bear witness to his reforming endeavours.⁵⁵ Here we can see that Biel in the development of his own peculiar form of communal living in the ripeness of old age still wished to see action and contemplation working together. It is surely not insignificant that Biel, in his *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum* praises the way of living in community in apostolic times in Jerusalem as representing a middle-way between complete separation and the life lived wholly in the world.⁵⁶ Not taking on the state of life of the religious, meant, in the

⁵³ Anton G. Weiler, *Onderwijs en vorming bij de Moderne Devoten*, in: *Speling*, 45, 1993, pp. 15-22 & here 15.

⁵⁴ Biel's *Tractatus utilis artis grammaticae regiminum* was published at Reutlingen in 1486, Urach in the same year, Leipzig in 1497 and Spires in 1495; see: L. Hain, *Repertorium Bibliographicum*, Stuttgart-Tübingen, 1826-1838, no. 3189; A. Goosens, *Alliance et grâce*, p. 24, mentions the occurrence of a publication in 1483. Biel's *Regula puerorum bona et doctrinalis* was published at Urach in 1483 and at Leipzig in 1497.

⁵⁵ *Hugo de sancto Victore von der Krafft und würckung der lieb*, is included in: *Der übertrefflichst Weg zu der Säligkait*, Augsburg, 1518. See: W. ERNST, *Gott und Mensch*, p. 30, n. 112; p. 48; the pseudo-Augustinian *Manuale* (*Hantbüchlein*) and the translations of the tracts by Gerson (*Opus tripartitum Buclin von den Geboten, Bichten und Bekentnis czu sterben*) are described in: W. BAYERER, *Libri Capituli Ecclesiae Sancti Marci. Zur Katalogisierung der Butzbacher Handschriften an der Universitätsbibliothek Gießen*, in: *Wetterauer Geschichtsblätter* 24, 1975, pp. 62 & 83.

⁵⁶ "Et sic accipiendo et applicando istum terminum ordo ad modum vel formam alicuius honeste et ordinate vite dicimus nos habere vel gerere ordinem apostolorum vel discipulorum Christi vel sancte sancte primitive matris ecclesie, de cuius ordine vel modo vivendi scribitur Actis 4^o", *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, 347; "Et secundam istam acceptionem simpliciter et cum omni libertate fatemur nos ordinem non habere, quia

case of the Brethren of the Common Life, a staying off of a tension between the accepted form of communal living, which had institutionalised the flight from the world, and its negative view of the world, on the one hand, and ideals peculiar to oneself on the other; ideals which were also expressed in the work of the Brethren in pastoral care, education and scholarly inquiry in Butzbach, Urach and Tübingen. Biel must have taken as his starting point, the idea that the interplay between the contemplative and the active elements could go on determining things as long as the state of life, in which the flight from the world is formalised and anchored, was not formally entered into. But he probably also perceived, that the monastic way of living in community, offered opportunities for his idea of an *actio in contemplatione*. About which we will have to say more later.

3.2. *The vota substantialia as a guarantee of perfection.*

After The Fourth General Council of the Lateran in 1215, theologians developed a way of looking at the relationship between *religio* and *perfectio* in which *religio* was considered to be a state which, as far as form and content were concerned, was perfect and led to perfection.⁵⁷ Hence, the final profession, by means of which, the monk pledged himself solemnly and publicly to the Order and the Rule, was regarded additionally, in monastic theology, as being a second Baptism. By carrying the job through to the end, eternal bliss would be gained. Poverty, obedience and chastity were the evangelical virtues, *The Counsels of Perfection*, contained in the vows which were considered as being fundamental and essential for the *vita perfectionis*. The *caritas* which was the ultimate aim of the monk, had to be built upon the bedrock of the renunciation of private property, self-determination and sexuality. In the spirit of the predominant thinking of the time, namely, that living according to the vows, made the most that could be made of human nature, for Andreas Proles, the vows were absolutely fundamental and *substantialia* in the sense that they freed one from the three Aristotelian aims of life: the useful, the

neque monachi sumus neque professionem facimus neque habitam alicuius religionis suscepimus", *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 139; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 348; "Nobis interim satis est ad omnem perfectionem stare et vivere in libertate legis christianae sub uno abbate Christo", *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 140; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 350.

⁵⁷ See: K. Elm, *Reformbemühungen und Observanzbestrebungen im spätmittelalterlichen Ordenswesen. Ein Überblick*, in: *Reformbemühungen und Observanzbestrebungen im spätmittelalterlichen Ordenswesen*, Berlin, 1989, pp. 3-19. See also: *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 349 and *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 152.

pleasant and the honourable. Because of these aims, one was forever accommodating oneself to the ways of the world and preventing oneself from being open to the will of God.⁵⁸

But the vows, which were based on the Counsels of Perfection, implied not just an existential confrontation with the salient principles of the monastic life. They guaranteed, over and above that, the certainty of the Law of the Church. One entered into a state of life, which as we have said, in terms of Canon Law, was regarded as perfect. The *vita perfecta* was an institution established by law. Thomas Aquinas expressed this idea as follows, "Sic igitur et in statu perfectionis proprie dicitur esse aliquis, non ex hoc quod habet actum dilectionis perfectae, sed ex hoc quod obligat se perpetuo, cum aliqua solemnitate, ad ea quae sunt perfectionis".⁵⁹ In his *De votis monasticis iudicium* of 1521, Luther made an attempt to free the *status perfectionis* from this essential foundation. *The Counsels of Perfection*, he argued, could not possibly be contained within the limitations of vows. After all, vows, had implications in terms of Canon Law. They were binding and eternal in character. And it was precisely this that formed a hindrance to living them out freely.

Gabriel Biel was not one of Luther's predecessors as far as this was concerned. After all, he never challenged the legitimacy of the *vita perfectionis*. However he did indeed object to the monastic orders having a monopoly on the Counsels of Perfection. Over and against a legalistic understanding of *perfectio* and *religio*, he placed a spiritualised interpretation of the term *ordo* and with it a spiritualised interpretation of perfection too along exactly the same lines as his writings in defence of the Modern Devotion.⁶⁰ Vowing to keep the Counsels of Perfection, obedience, chastity and poverty, formed in Biel's eyes neither a pre-condition nor a guarantee that indeed perfection as understood in a non-canonical but spiritual way would result. In his *Tractatus*, and this for people living outside the monastic environment, he reproduces the Counsels of Perfection as an

⁵⁸ R. Weinbrenner, *Klosterreform im 15. Jahrhundert zwischen Ideal und Praxis*, pp. 46-47.

⁵⁹ *Summa Theologica* II-II 184.4. He did indeed go on to say, "Et ideo nihil prohibet aliquos esse perfectos qui non sunt in statu perfectionis; et aliquos esse in statu perfectionis qui non sunt perfecti." But in this context, Thomas is not working out the virtue of perfection as such but the state of perfection as this exists in Canon Law, i.e. the monastic state.

⁶⁰ *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 139; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 347. In a further contribution, Biel's *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, will be considered in the light of these defensive writings.

instruction for living harmoniously in community. Geert Grote had been dissatisfied with the way of life being led by the priests and reckoned very few of them worthy of their office. In the same spirit, Biel supposed the vows to be useful only for a particularly small minority and considered monastic life too strict.⁶¹ And that is why he is able to emphasise in plain terms the possibility of attaining the *perfectio* also *extra religionem*, without being a religious.⁶² The flourishing of Church life is thanks to the many ways in which it can be lived. Gabriel Biel regretted the fact that only monks and the regular clergy were living in communities grafted onto the three Counsels of Perfection.⁶³ A life in community, *inspired* by the Counsels of Perfection but not *made legitimate* by means of the vows, had, after all, always existed within the Church.⁶⁴

His attempts to give the Counsels of Perfection some sort of shape in everyday life, show that Biel was aiming for the same target as Proles: to make the world understand that the seemingly unstoppable force which is the general drive for riches, sensuality and power, must be resisted. In the spirit of Augustine's *Praeceptum*, Biel, in his *Tractatus*, points to the sharing of property as a means of neutralising this force. The question arises, why was Biel so insistent on uncoupling the vows from the Counsels of Perfection at this particular moment in time? Certainly it all looks a little strange. Consider, firstly, that the way of living in community which he had developed was so similar to that of the *via monastica* as far as the structure of daily life was concerned. Then, secondly, the aforementioned *votum solemne stabilitatis* taken in the presence of a

⁶¹ "De quo (the priesthood, pvg) magister Gerardus tale testimonium perhibuit, dicens. Semel feci unum ordinari in presbyterum: et spero quod dignus sit. De cetero cavebo, ne leviter quid simile faciam: quia paucos ad hoc indoneos cerno", Thomas a Kempis, *Vita domini Florentii*, in: *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 7, p. 139; *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 141; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, pp. 351-352.

⁶² "tamen in sancta ecclesia sunt multi perfectionis gradus ... ut unusquisque pro viribus suis et pro mensura gratie, quam sibi mensus est Deus, id eligat, quod sibi melius competere videbitur ...". See: *Super modo vivendi*, ed. Hyma, pp. 97-99; *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 141; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 351, cited here.

⁶³ "... ut ex hoc dicatur regina (= ecclesia, pvg) stare a dextris regis in vestitu deaurato circumdata varietate ... numquid non multum decoris sibi ex hoc accidere videtur, ut observantia huius communis vite, que iam prochdolor apud solos monachos et religiosos reperitur, etiam apud nonnullos observatores clericalis honestatis reperitur? Atque etiam ita inter clericos servetur et salvetur ista regularis observantia, que primo omnium pro clericis est instituta, neque enim gratis a sanctis patribus sint scripta, que de hac salutari institutione passim reperiuntur et leguntur ...", *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 141; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 351.

⁶⁴ *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, pp. 144-146; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, pp. 355-360.

Notary Public bound a Brother to the General Chapter for the rest of his life. This had a decisive effect on the way in which the organisation functioned. Thirdly, having sworn to keep the oaths of poverty, chastity and obedience, and having adopted a community for the rest of one's life and having agreed to be obedient to the rule of an order, which went along with it, although not able to be considered *de iure* a proper profession, amounted to the same thing nevertheless. Fourthly, the general conditions for entry were extremely similar to those of the regular orders. Only of his own free will might a candidate seek entry and a full year's probation followed on after that which made it all look very akin to a novitiate. G. Faix is correct in stating, „dass bezüglich des Aufnahmeverfahrens innerhalb des Oberdeutschen Generalkapitels eine viel größere Affinität zum Ordenswesen als zum klassischen Kollegiatstift bestand“.⁶⁵ Why, then, did Biel not allow the Brethren of the Common Life to join up with their colleagues at Windesheim?

We already gave the first reason in the preceding text. It is quite possible that the simple view of the world, implicit in the idea of the monastic life as *vita perfecta*, was not compatible with the reforming ideals of Gabriel Biel nor with those of the Ruler. Additionally, it was precisely the interpretation of the *votum solemne stabilitatis*, which suggests that Biel wanted to keep the Brethren of the Common Life away from the Windesheim sphere of influence because they were driving through reforms, which were not to the liking of Biel. It would be impossible so with this solemn vow of stability, to send the Brethren of the Common Life out as monastic reformers to other monasteries, in the interests of the Ruler, as were the members of the Congregation of Windesheim under Johannes Mombaer. The Augustinian and devout ideal of the group as representing a continuation of the *ecclesia primitiva*, was safeguarded in the form in which Biel had already championed it.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the Brethren of the Common Life of the Upper German General Chapter avoided the danger of being used, either as collective, or, as individual tools of reform, in a way which was thoroughly opposed to their ideal of a *vita communis*.

But despite the Brethren of the Common Life getting closer to the monastic way of organisation and life-style, there was a third and rather more important reason for separating the vows from the

⁶⁵ G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 119.

⁶⁶ See: G. Epiney-Burgard, *Saint Augustin et la "Vie Commune" dans la Dévotion Moderne*, in: *Medioevo* 9, 1983, pp. 61-75.

Counsels of Perfection. As has already been mentioned, canonical status gave a monastery its right to exist and the monk his legal security. In this context, an ambience might develop, within the life of the community, which was neither compatible with the spirit of the rule nor with that of the Counsels of Perfection as sealed by the vows. The orders were free to adapt the rule in *constitutiones* the rule according to their particular requirements. It was not unusual for Biel, in his capacity as the Ruler's Commissioner for Orders at Württemberg, to identify approved *constitutiones* for monasteries in which, for example, private property was permitted or a degree of independence had been allowed for. The identity of a monastic community could, in such a way, be more determined by its *constitutiones* than by the (spirit of the) rule or by the vows themselves. Then in fact, the ability to grow disappeared, which the life lived according to the *vota substantialia* had been able to offer the monk. Worse still, the canonically valid *constitutiones* might even have legitimised this alienation. The way of living in community remained intact although estranged from the ideal. It might well be possible that Biel, just like the first generation of the Modern Devout, wanted to give shape to a way of living in community in which the opportunities for inner growth were based upon a life structured along monastic lines. But could it be that simultaneously and right from the start, Biel had attempted to avoid the danger posed by an institutionalised way of living in community? Did he regard this form of life as dangerous because it was excessively reliant on canonical structures, could continue to exist even though the established *consuetudines* had brought about its estrangement from the ideal? Did Biel perceive that precisely this canonical underpinning would ensure for far too long the maintenance of tension between promised ideals and lived practice? In his *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, it becomes abundantly clear that Biel sought his inspiration in Augustine and the *Counsels of Perfection* having no desire whatsoever to legitimise his own people by getting them to take vows.⁶⁷ It is also evident that a semi-monastic way of living in community was less easily capable of assuring a group's continued existence should an estrangement from the ideal happen to take place. For the sake of the life in community and the power to reform, Biel must have regarded as essential the uncoupling of vows, with their implications for Canon Law, and the Counsels of Perfection, sealed within them. By

⁶⁷ See: *Super modo vivendi*, ed. Hyma, p. 34; *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 146; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 359.

uncoupling them from canonical implications and ulterior motives, he must surely have attempted to unleash the creative power of the Counsels of Perfection making them fully operational and capable of guiding the community. The taking of vows with their Canon Law implications interfered in the whole business of living up to the Counsels of Perfection and so had to be avoided. Security and the right to exist were matters, which Biel sought to procure by working alongside the Ruler and by a *votum*, which had more of the character of Civil Law than of Canon Law. This kept the way ahead open to an experience of the Counsels of Perfection as sealed up in the vows, in the way in which, in his sermons, Geert Grote had intended all along. In the first half of the 15th cent., the custom of making a *propositum* (declaration of intent), was no longer common in devout circles. Nevertheless, Biel attempts in his *Tractatus*, to separate the vows from the Counsels of Perfection, regarding the latter as necessary to the growth of the community and in the interior life. It was not in spite of the Civil Law safety clauses but precisely because of them that Biel was able to position the Brethren of the Common Life perfectly to give shape and content to the original devout experience of the Counsels of Perfection as *conclusa et proposita* in the way in which Grote had intended.⁶⁸ By employing a Civil Law safety clause and by separating the Canon Law form from that which was contained in the Counsels of Perfection and which had to be lived up to, namely, poverty, chastity and obedience, a vision emerges of the role and the function of the *vota* which rings true and betrays not merely Biel's independent nature and autonomy but more particularly his craving for authenticity.

4. Biel's Indebtedness to the Spirituality of the Modern Devotion. Initial Contours.

4.1. The Point of Departure: A Confluence of Interests and Private Life?

Biel was inspired by the ideals of the Modern Devotion. This is amply demonstrated by his concern for the education of young persons and, certainly at St. Peter, as one of the Brethren of the Common Life, for small-scale laical devotion. What remains unclear is whether the salient points in the ideals of the Modern Devotion

⁶⁸ See: for this original view: M. Kors, *Het propositum bij de moderne devoten. De verschriftelijking van een kernbegrip uit de vadertijd*, in: *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 71, 1997, p. 179.

matched up with those of Gabriel Biel from the very beginning or whether he acquired them only exclusively through his contacts with the Brethren. It is perfectly possible that he allowed himself to be affected by these ideals having met up with others who reflected his own background and private life. As had been the case with Grote, Gabriel Biel's privileged background, would enable him to get hold of as many books as he liked during his studies. On the assumption that he had already got to know the Brethren whilst studying at Heidelberg, it is perfectly possible that it was they who reinforced his interest in books.⁶⁹ Had he got to know the Brethren during the two-year period in which he studied and stayed at Cologne, then one would rather speak of like-mindedness in fields of interest.⁷⁰ Whatever the case, Biel's interest in building up a library showed him to be a true devout. He acquired many manuscripts during his studies and these benefited the community at Butzbach, which he entered.⁷¹ Even the spirituality of the scriptorium, which was developed in the circles of the modern devout, seems to have matched up with and to have taken root in the daily rhythm, which the friends took on as they gathered round Biel at Butzbach. The background as well as the shared interest in studies of these friends, rather suggest that here too the spirituality contributed to the deepening of the experience of their already present *habitus* than that it underlay the development of it.⁷² So, it remains

⁶⁹ G. Ritter, *Studien zur Spätscholastik*, Heidelberg, 1921, Vol. 2, *Via antiqua und via moderna auf den deutschen Universitäten*, p. 48; W. Landeen, *Gabriel Biel and the Devotio Moderna in Germany*, in: *Research Studies*, p. 151.

⁷⁰ See: I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel und die oberdeutschen Stifte der devotio moderna*, in: *Studien zum weltlichen Kollegiatstift in Deutschland*, pp. 300-301.

⁷¹ See: I. Crusius, *Gabriel Biel und die oberdeutschen Stifte der devotio moderna*, in: *Studien zum weltlichen Kollegiatstift in Deutschland*, pp. 300-301. Half of the manuscript collection is accessible and forms part of the wider collection of the University Library at Gießen.

⁷² See: K. Grube, ed. *Des Augustinerpropstes Iohannes Busch Chronicon Windeshemense und Liber de reformatione monasteriorum*, c. vii: "Per huiusmodi enim fratrum nostrorum diligentem scripturam laborem sollicitamque librorum correctionem monasteriorum nostrum in Windesem copiosam librorum bene emendatorum nunc habet multitudinem, ut ecclesiam Dei per hunc nostrum horizontem huiusmodi sanctorum librorum voluminis hincinde, ut assolent, communicantes et suis sanctis exemplis et conversationibus longe amplius aedificare et ad meliora credantur provocare, quam si publicis sermonibus declamatorie in ecclesiis populo predicarent." The legal standing and the legitimacy of the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer was based on the communal ownership of books. These books, for the greater part, came from Geert Grote, who, in the year before his demise, had taken five copyists into service. See: C. van der Wansem, *Het ontstaan en de geschiedenis der Broederschap van het Gemene Leven tot 1400*, Louvain, 1958, p. 65. *Publicaties op het gebied der geschiedenis en der philologie*, fourth series, 12. See: W. Lourdaux, *Het boekenbezit*

unclear as to whether Biel's point of departure for the interiorisation of the devout spirituality ought to be explained rather in terms of the compatibility of characters or in terms of being touched by the devout spirit. Thus it was that he viewed Geert Grote's dissatisfaction with the libertarian way of life among the monastic orders and the estrangement from the ideals of the vows as the reason for his refusal to enter an order at all.⁷³ But here it looks like Grote is being held up as the legitimation for a way of living in community developed by Biel rather than as a figure with which one might be able to identify. What then is the nature of Biel's indebtedness to the sources from the circles of the devout? Did he use them rather for purposes of legitimation than of inspiration?

4.2. *Biel's Indebtedness at the Superficial Level: Knowledge of the Sources.*

Whilst his thoughts were developing regarding a semi-monastic community's right to exist, Biel made full use of the thinking which had already been developed in the circles of the Modern Devotion. Many academics have pointed to Biel attributing his *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum* to the apologetic work *Super modo vivendi devotorum hominum simul commorantium* by Gerhard Zerbolt of Zutphen. The latter defended a community life without vows in a *societas caritativa* based on the *ordo apostolorum*, which he regarded as being the same thing as a *societas simplex*.⁷⁴ It seems that Biel

en boekengebruik bij de moderne devoten, in: *Contributions à l'Histoire des Bibliothèques et de la Lecture aux Pays-Bas avant 1600*, Brussels, 1974, pp. 247-325, *Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique/ Archief en Bibliotheekwezen in België*, extra number 11. Biel fitted out a scriptorium at Butzbach and maintained close contact with the printing press of the Brethren at Marienthal. See: W. Bayerer, *Libri Capituli Ecclesiae Sancti Marci. Zur Katalogisierung der Butzbacher Handschriften an der Universitätsbibliothek Gießen*, in: *Wetterauer Geschichtsblätter*, 24, 1975, p. 65. The devout view would have made Biel see the copying and printing of books as a missionary endeavour: "Eligimus itaque scribendi laborem satagentes quantum possumus, ut et politos et emendatos libros efficiamus", *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 148; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 363. For the specific power of formation which the devout ascribed to writing and copying see: N. Staubach, *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Bereich der Devotio Moderna*, in: *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 25, 1991, pp. 418-461 and: T. Mertens, *Texte der modernen Devoten als Mittler zwischen kirchlicher und persönlicher Reform*, in: *Niederdeutsches Wort* 34, 1994, pp. 63-74.

⁷³ *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 146; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 359.

⁷⁴ A. Hyma, ed. Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen, *Super modo vivendi devotorum hominum simul commorantium*, in: *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van het Aartsbisdom Utrecht*, 52, 1925, pp. 1-100 & here p. 4. Biel, would go on to support the right of existence and the self-understanding of the *status medius* of the Brethren of the Com-

made use of Zerbolt's work in his explanation of the *medius vivendi* modus as a way of living in a community, which would be capable of revitalising the life of the *ecclesia primitiva*.⁷⁵ Even when Biel is disputing the exclusive claims of the orders to communal living, it is clear that this too is dependant on Zerbolt's thinking carried out before him. Maybe here he came across the thought that being part of the human race at all has to do with living together. Moreover, the *vita communis* is renewed by Christ and carried on by the Apostles.⁷⁶ Biel once more made Zerbolt's ideas his own when thinking about the usefulness and the necessity of wearing the habit.⁷⁷ When discussing manual work and the ordering of daily life, as well as his idea that the way of living together as brothers in community of goods complies with the situation before the Fall, it is the thought in the work of Zerbolt, which rings out.⁷⁸ Just like Zerbolt had done, Biel held that the Brethren were working on the restoration of the Christian Way of Life in which the Counsels of Perfection might be experienced fervently and of one's own free will and not as vows one is obliged to keep come what may. The idea that the orders had lost this way of living in community because they had permitted the possession of private property, is something Biel articulates in the same way Zerbolt had done.⁷⁹

Above all, investigation of the original sources by G. Faix and W. Werbeck, has served to support H. Oberman's intuition. In a later contribution to this debate, Biel's debt of gratitude to Zerbolt will be brought into greater perspective by exposing it to the light of other

mon Life along the same lines as Zerbolt and the other devout defensive writings. He would do this by making the way of living in community conform to the *ordo apostolorum* or *ordo discipulorum Christi*, an uninterrupted *modus vivendi* in Italy, in which the ideal of living in community in evangelical freedom continued to be safeguarded. See: *Tractatus* ed. Werbeck, p. 144 and *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 357. See also: K. Elm, *Die Bruderschaft vom Gemeinsamen Leben. Eine geistliche Lebensform zwischen Kloster und Welt, Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, in: *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 59, 1985, pp. 470-496 & here 485. As regards Gerhard Zerbolt, see the innovative study by N. Staubach, *Gerhard Zerbolt van Zutphen und die Apologie der Laienlektüre in der Devotio moderna*, in: T. Kock, R. Schlusmann, eds., *Laienlektüre und Buchmarkt im späten Mittelalter*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1997, pp. 221-289, *Gesellschaft, Kultur und Schrift*, 5.

⁷⁵ See: *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, pp. 347, n. 4; 351, n. 33; 352, n. 48.

⁷⁶ See: *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, pp. 355, nn. 71 & 79; 367, n. 195.

⁷⁷ See: *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, pp. 355, nn. 71 & 79; 367, n. 195.

⁷⁸ See: *Super modo vivendi*, ed. Hyma, pp. 29-30; *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, pp. 147, 154; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 362.

⁷⁹ See: *Super modo vivendi*, ed. Hyma, p. 34; *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 146; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 359.

sources and weighing its relative worth. In any case, at this stage it is sufficient to remark that Biel did not consult Zerbolt's writing for inspiration as much as to be able "merely" to legitimise his quasi-monastic way of living in community. This could point to a marriage of convenience between the Modern Devotion and Gabriel Biel. And yet, there are other aspects of the work of Biel, which need to be made themselves heard. These point to a greater personal familiarity with some of the typical power lines within the spirituality of the Modern Devotion even if these were unoriginal.

4.3. *The Indebtedness at a Deeper Level: Familiarity with the Themes of Devout Spirituality.*

In his *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, Biel therefore borrows ideas especially those related to status and the ordering of the day of the Brethren of the Common Life, as formulated in Zerbolt's *Super modo vivendi*. In this same Tract however, he further demonstrates that he has interiorized the heart of the Modern Devotion's spirituality. Apart from the ideal of the *ecclesia primitiva* two more aspects need to be identified in Biel's *Tractatus* since they are essential to the devout Spirituality. Both *contemplatio in actione* and care for the interior life are emphasised by him in a very devout way. It is precisely this coming together of these three moments in his *Tractatus* that most clearly demonstrates that Biel's search for an authentic spirituality and way of living in community had led him to be inspired by Modern Devotion.⁸⁰ Besides the ideal of the *ecclesia primitiva*, these moments typify the spirituality of the Modern Devotion. Precisely because Biel had confessed himself as belonging to the Brethren of the Common Life, we are entitled to assume that these were moments that he was able to integrate into his own personal life through coming into contact with the devout. They also represent the first contours in Biel's indebtedness to Devout Spirituality.

Contemplatio in actione.

Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuit order founded by him have gone down in history as those who experienced their moment of "contemplation", during or within the development of their activities. This seminal moment in the spirituality of the Jesuits can be attributed to the intense familiarity Ignatius had with the spirituality of the

⁸⁰ We hope to be able to treat this problem more extensively in a later publication.

Modern Devotion. After all, it was the monks of Montserrat who had given him spiritual counsel during his retreat at Manresa. Whilst studying in Paris under John Mombaer, their Abbott, Garcia Jimenes de Cisneros, had become familiar with the literature, spirituality and methods of reform of the *Windeshemenses*. Ignatius's studies in Paris and his stay in the Collège Montaigu, set-up as it had been entirely along the lines of a "devout school", would only have served further to intensify this familiarity. The Canons Regular of Windesheim derived their idea of the *contemplatio in actione* from Blessed Jan Ruusbroec. A. Deblaere has pointed out that the first generation of the devout sought to associate themselves with his ideal of the so-called "ghemeyne mensch". In Ruusbroec's thought, this is a person for whom work and reflection are accessible simultaneously.⁸¹ This *homo communis* would become the ideal and the norm for Geert Grote. In his *De quattor generibus meditabilium*, a tract in which various methods of interior prayer are discussed, he emphasises especially the forms of prayer that best lead to *contemplatio*. This form of prayer assumes a large degree of purity and passivity but without forgetting the value of work.⁸² The *vitae* of the first "devout" also bear witness to the fact that the thoughts of Jan Ruusbroec in Groenendaal exerted an influence on the first monastery of the new wing of the Augustinian family at Windesheim as far as the overall aim and general ordering of everyday monastic life were concerned. But, as has already been mentioned above, even before all of this, the semi-religious Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life had already given this seminal moment expression in their own lives. Living and working in the world they led a contemplative life and were known by the townsfolk of Deventer as "contemplatives".⁸³ The work of Thomas a Kempis shows clearly enough that this *tentamen vitae contemplativae in actione*, as A. Deblaere puts it, took root in the circles of the Modern

⁸¹ A. Deblaere, *Mystique. II. Théories de la mystique chrétienne. A. la littérature mystique au moyen âge*, in: *Dictionnaire de la Spiritualité* 10, Paris, 1980, cols. 1917-1918.

⁸² "... licet non praecipitanter, licet non ex propria praesumptione, nec propriis viribus, non subito sed paulatim eliminanda et evacuanda recedunt, vel potius transformantur in spiritualem quondam armoniam, ut tam homo interior quam exterior, tam ingrediens quam egrediens, ut ait Christus, pascua inveniat." I. Tolomio, ed. *Gerardo Groote, Il Trattato "De quattor generibus meditabilium"*, Padova, 1975, pp. 110-112; "ut invenirent ingrediendo ad divinitatem per contemplationem vel egrediendo per activam vitam pascua", W. Mulder, ed., *Gerardi Magni Epistolae*. Antverpiae, 1933, 31.

⁸³ Cf. Rudolf Dier van Muiden, *Scriptum*, in: G. Dumbar, ed. *Analecta seu vetera aliquot scripta inedita*, Daventriae, 1719, 2 Vols., Vol. 1, col. 8.

Devout. This Modern Devout and Canon Regular of the second generation would, for the sake of the formation of the novices at the Agnietenberg at Zwolle, from time to time make use of a hagiographic common place in order to recommend the *oratio mentalis* as the most useful form of prayer for keeping the human mind fixed on God whilst at work.⁸⁴ Here, indeed, there is no question of *contemplatio*; rather, the *oratio mentalis* forms, as it were, a prelude and an occasion for this to occur. But contemplation itself cannot be considered without first undergoing this *tentamen*.

Like Thomas a Kempis, Biel also appears to have integrated the *contemplatio in actione*, in its pragmatic form, into his thinking on the right way of ordering one's life. Where, in his *Tractatus*, he comes to talk of the necessity of changing one's everyday routine, he cites Augustine's *De opere monachorum* (XVII, 20). Here the Church Father asks himself, rhetorically as well as literally, whether anyone could object to God's servants simultaneously carrying out manual work whilst deliberating on the Ten Commandments or singing the Psalms. After all, whilst they are at work, most manual workers appear perfectly capable of directing their conversation and attention at the frivolities and scandals of theatrical performances.⁸⁵

The passage in which Biel refers to praying and working simultaneously, whereby unceasing prayer determines the heart of the moment, is taken entirely from Augustine's *De opere monachorum*. Biel himself adds nothing to this piece of writing. In his *Tractatus*, one cannot detect any of the mystical connotations conveyed by a similar passage in Grote's *De quattor generibus meditabilium*. The latter has the contemplative moment and the moment of mystical experience freely given by God, occur almost simultaneously. Thus it is that a total passivity on the part of the person doing the meditation goes

⁸⁴ Cf. e.g., "Per diem laborabant: et noctibus orationi diutinae vacabant: quamquam laborando ab oratione mentali minime cessarent Omne tempus utiliter expendebant; omnis hora ad vacandum Deo brevis videbatur...", Thomas a Kempis, *De imitatione Christi*, in: M. J. Pohl, ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 2, 30; "Qui hanc intrat solitudinem (cordis) quamvis foris laborat: eius tamen mens intus orare non cessat", Thomas a Kempis, *Sermones ad Fratres*, in: M. J. Pohl, ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 1, pp. 126-7. The *Vitae* of St. Dominic contain these common places also.

⁸⁵ "Cantica vero divina cantare etiam manibus operantes facile possunt et ipsum laborem tanquam divino celeumate consolari. An ignoramus omnes opifices quibus vanitatem plerumque etiam turpitudinibus theatricarum fabularum donent corda et linguas suas, cum manus ab opere non recedant? Quid ergo impedit servum Dei manibus operantem in lege Dei meditari die ac nocte et psallere domini altissimi?", *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 365.

hand in hand with meeting up with God in the innermost recesses of the soul.⁸⁶

Entirely in the spirit of St. Augustine, both Thomas a Kempis and Gabriel Biel favour an introductory, a practical and a more imitable form of *contemplatio in actione*. The organic musical expression of thought contained in the quotation from Augustine and replicated in the *Tractatus de communi vitae clericorum*, demonstrates that Biel has not only interiorised one of Augustine's thoughts, but that he has also made one of the force fields of devout spirituality his own. This would tend to suggest that inner harmony in a human being is not just a question of attaining a balance in the sum total of the different parts of the day but also in time set aside for reflection to whatever extent and in whatever form. The singing of Psalms in action might well provide a foundation for this.⁸⁷

More research will have to take place before we can see to what extent and how Gabriel Biel really had appropriated this force field of devout spirituality already mentioned. The question as to whether Biels affinity to the spirituality of the devout needs explaining in terms of compatibility or in terms of indebtedness remains an open question. It is, however, abundantly clear that a fruitful basis for its integration was provided by the context, the reforming ideals and his view of the world. He was always aware of the tense relationship between the active and the contemplative life. Indeed, in one of his sermons he says, "*Vita contemplativa est Deo familiar et purior; temenetsi alia sit sepenumero intensior et fructuosior*".⁸⁸ In the light of this statement, he could well have elaborated this concept of *contemplatio in actione* in the sermons he created when he joined up with the Brethren of the Common Life.

⁸⁶ Cf., for a description of the mystical experience, A. Deblaere, *Témoignage mystique chrétien*, in: *Studia missionalia*, 1976, pp. 117-147, Eng. Transl.: *Christian Mystic Testimony*, in: *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 72, 1998, pp. 129-153. D. Metz has analysed Biel's understanding of mystical experience in his, as yet, unpublished Dissertation and in: D. Metz, *Gabriel Biel und die Mystik*, in: U. Köpf, S. Lorenz, ed. *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben. Beiträge aus Anlaß des 500. Todestages des Tübinger Theologen*. Stuttgart, 1998, *Contubernium. Tübinger Beiträge zur Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 47, pp. 55-92.

⁸⁷ Moreover, Biel refers, in the passage concerned, to Augustine's *De opere monachorum*, XVIII, 21, "*Ista optima gubernatio est, ut omnia suis temporibus distributa gerantur ex ordine, ne animum humanum turbulentis implicationibus involuta perturbent*", *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 364.

⁸⁸ Quoted in H. Oberman, *Herbst der mittelalterlichen Theologie*, p. 319, n. 60.

The Interior Life as true 'religio'.

In Biel's day, Johannes Mombaer, a Canon Regular of Windesheim, developed a series of methodical reflections and exercises in his *Scala meditatoria*. Here one thought was crucial. Mombaer wished to impress on his con-frères that praying the day hours together in community and respecting the letter of the monastic rule, could not *ipso facto* cause holiness to come about. Observation of the rules and the ordering of the day had to be linked to the inner growth of the personality. They weren't to be considered as the aim in life as such. "Student plures observare coeemonias et monastica statuta et ubi haec fecerint salva arbitrantur sibi omnia et de vitiis mentalibus expugnandis est eis postrema cura; sed non sic patris nostri, non sic, quorum unus dixit: Bonum est psallere et statuta servare; sed qui vitia expugnat sic postrema cura, is est qui lardum sub cista reportat".⁸⁹

Not everybody, in the religious circles of the time, shared this understanding of spiritual growth with its focus not primarily on keeping the rules but rather on how to use life's daily rhythm for renewal of the interior life. At the end of the 15th cent., Mombaer himself would return empty-handed from the famous Abbey of St. Victor in Paris. The monks had resisted a softening of the regime intended to provide more opportunity for personal appropriation of the heart of the Psalms and the prayers through individual meditation. For the sake of the prescribed rule, fasts and vigils remained strict, the offices solemn and long as if carrying out the prescribed activities could *ipso facto* lead to holiness. Mombaer realised that such an intense organisation of life's daily routine would only serve to drain a monk's energy so essential to the interiorisation and personalisation of what was being read and prayed for.

Mombaer, in the spirit of the movement which bore him, wished to see once more the interior life, *vita interna*, become synonymous with "religio". Concentration on the renewal of the

⁸⁹ Johannes Mauburnus, *Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium et sacrarum meditationum*, Zwolle (?), 1494, Tit. XVII, XVIII, col. 4,3. Regarding Mombaer's prayer method and technique, see: E. Benz, *Meditation, Musik und Tanz. Über den "Hand-psalter"*, eine spätmittelalterliche Meditationsform aus dem Rosetum des Mauburnus, Mainz, 1976, *Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse / Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur*, 1976, no. 3; P. Debongnie, *Jean Mombaer de Bruxelles. Abbé de Livry. Ses écrits et ses réformes*, Louvain & Toulouse, 1927; A. Deblaere, *Mombaer (Jean; Mauburnus, de Bruxelles)*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 10, Paris, 1980, col. 1510.

interior life had been of the utmost importance to the generations of the devout who had preceded him. In the eighth chapter of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen copiously reproduces the teaching of Florens Radewijns on introspection for the purpose of growth in the interior life. The mystic of the first generation of the devout moderns, Gerlach Peters, notes that an over valuation of e.g. choral prayer, can lead to a lack of interior sensitivity, taking hold of the person before they themselves are aware of the fact.⁹⁰

Chronologically as well as spiritually, Thomas a Kempis maintains a middle way between the mystic Gerlach Peters and the methodical moralist Johannes Mombaer. Only as benefiting himself, did Gerlach seek to make any attempt at expressing in words the direct and passively experienced union with God. Mombaer, on the other hand, developed an entire methodology for the benefit of others giving pride of place to examination of one's conscience and to personal prayer. As early as 1440, Thomas a Kempis had demonstrated his mystagogical powers. For him what mattered was not the development of prayer techniques enabling intimacy with God to come about by means of methodical structures. He was consistent in claiming throughout his works that, when human life was adequately orientated, the driving force would always be the desire for God. Helped by the terms with which Gerlach Peters sought to describe his own mystical experience, Thomas attempted to intensify a desire for God.

It is precisely Thomas a Kempis's work which demonstrates that the devout moderns, *casu quo* the *Windeshemenses*, were in favour of an interiorised and personalised relationship with God. In the *Counsels*, even before the start of mankind's progression towards God, he says that too much emphasis on external observance can be the undoing of interior devotion. The former may never be equated with progress in *religio*.⁹¹

⁹⁰ "Nisi multo labore interiori studeat homo continue inspicere in omnibus que fiunt propter quod sunt et fiunt, maxime in diuinis officiis, valde leuiter declinabat ad insensibilitatem interiorum antequam sciet; et satis videbitur sibi habere folia non curans de fructu. Quid enim aliud inueniet homo in apparenciis exterioribus eciam officiis diuinis, nisi valde caute et acute cuncta perspexerit intus, quam quod omnia onera, depressiones, ligature et incuruaciones animi sint?", Gerlach Peters, *Soliloquium*, in: M. M. Kors, ed. *Gerlaci Petri Opera omnia*, Turnholti, 1996, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* 155, pp. 199-503, and this quotation from p. 313.

⁹¹ "Si tantum in instis exterioribus observantiis profectum religionis ponimus, cito finem habebit devotio nostra", Thomas a Kempis, *De imitatione Christi*, in: M. J. Pohl, ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 2, p. 19.

External trappings and the literal fulfilment of the rule, may never be brought into conflict with *caritas* and its correlative *pietas*. A deed carried out because of love of one's fellow man, can, in Thomas a Kempis's thinking, take priority over fulfilment of a prescribed duty, even if the latter is in conflict with the former.⁹² Thus is revealed what typifies the spirituality of the devout. Its true principle and final norm lie not locked away in monastic precepts nor in a strict following of the community's spiritual practice as laid down in the regulations in the mistaken belief that somehow this might bring about holiness. In the monastic environment then, the starting point of the devout moderns did not always catch on. Indeed, it was even considered unacceptable since *perfectio* was so intimately connected with observing the regulations which shaped and gave meaning to the *vita perfectionis* as a canonically self-contained state of life.

Without now wishing to suggest an explicit connection between the thoughts of the three generations of the devout concerning the primacy of interiorisation at the expense of the execution of one's monastic duties, we can now establish the fact that Biel's ideas on the role and function of the communal form fitted in well with this and was perhaps its correlative. He went on, as we saw, to develop a life form in which observance of the rules and regulations was not an end in itself.⁹³ He appears to praise the idea that the life form *pietatis causa*, but more especially *libertatis causa* and *reformationis causa* should be given a definite form. In his *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, Biel stated that it was sufficient for the Brethren to live the life of perfection in the freedom of Christian Law under the one Abbott Jesus Christ by complying with His rules and regulations and the Counsels of Perfection. According to Biel, the mere fact of the Brethren having incorporated certain elements from monastic rules into their own form of communal life, ought certainly not to be felt as being in any way offensive. Rather, the orders should consider themselves validated and be happy about this.⁹⁴ Here it should be

⁹² "Habitus et tonsuram modicum confert: sed mutatio morum et integra mortificatio passionum verum faciunt religiosum", Thomas a Kempis, *De imitatione Christi*, in: M. J. Pohl ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 2, p. 29; "Vita boni religiosi omnibus virtutibus pollere debet; ut sit talis interius, qualis videtur hominis exterius. Et merito multo plus debet esse intus quam quod cedrnitur foris... Si pietatis causa aut fraternae utilitatis proposito, quandoque consuetum omittitur exercititium: facile postea poterit recuperari", Thomas a Kempis, *De imitatione Christi*, in: M. J. Pohl ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 2, pp. 32-33.

⁹³ *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, pp. 150-151; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 367.

⁹⁴ *Tractatus*, ed. Werbeck, p. 140; *Tractatus*, ed. Faix, p. 350.

mentioned that the mystagogical Thomas a Kempis elaborated on the *devotio* as being the inner dedication to God brought about by a transforming desire for Him. For Thomas a Kempis, this was determined by a personalisation of the connection with Jesus as witness e.g. the Dialogues of the Soul with Christ in his *Imitatio*. Biel's concern and aim were of quite another sort. Just as Augustine had done in his *Praeceptum*, Biel, in his *Tractatus*, wanted to create a framework for a way of living in community, whereby in their observance of a rule, neither the community nor the individual would be judged for not sticking strictly to the letter. To enact this as law, Biel thought, would be more likely to lead, not to greater freedom but to its absence. In his *Tractatus*, Biel sought to uncouple the space, offered by the life form of the *status perfectionis*, from the binding character, which rules and vows assume in such a community. If we consider this work in the light of devoutly striving towards a renewed interiorisation and an interior *reformatio*, then, we cannot but conclude that Biel, in the spirit of the Modern Devout, was describing nothing more and nothing less than the preconditions which would enable this growth and development to come about.

5. Outcome

The studies of G. Faix and I. Crusius, have thrown light on Biel's desire to elevate already existing friendships by ordering the day and providing discipline along monastic lines so as to promote a fraternal spirituality.⁹⁵ This contribution has clarified the preconditions for the process and traced some of the contours of devout spirituality in Biel's *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*. Through his initial affluence and interest for books, Biel was similar to Geert Grote. Exactly when Biel began to get in touch with the Brethren of the Common Life, is still a matter of conjecture. Only when this has been resolved would we be able to say with any degree of certainty whether his initial affinity to the ideals of the devout needs explaining in terms of compatibility or in terms of indebtedness.

As his unusual sojourn in Cologne demonstrated, it was not, unlike Geert Grote, a radical conversion but fierce independence that decided Gabriel Biel's course of development. This typical characteristic of Biel's was perpetuated by his credibility in court circles. The life form gradually and boldly developed by him in the spirit of the Modern Devotion, was itself a reflection of this fierce

⁹⁵ G. Faix, *Gabriel Biel und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, p. 199.

independence. For the sake of reforming his country the Ruler, in consultation with Biel, made his own contribution to the development of this life form, in which his own role and influence were much less than where there were monasteries in need of reform. Thanks to the Ruler, Biel was able also to procure a relative degree of independence *vis-à-vis* the Church authorities. This strictly personal co-operation between Biel and the Ruler could not be institutionalised. This is one of the reasons why the semi-monastic form of life in the devout convent did not catch on. Biel made a conscious decision not to join up with the Congregation of Windesheim. To his mind, a life form, monastic in content but not anchored as such in Canon Law, was more in keeping with the life of the *ecclesia primitiva*, the form of living in community which corresponded most to the ideas of St. Augustine of Hippo and which in the circles of the devout was cherished as being the ideal form. Along with this, thanks in part to Biel's work and in compliance with the Ruler's wishes, the reforming ideals of young and old alike, as propagated by the devout, took on a more optimal form. Maybe the *via monastica* was not chosen because it did not fit in with the needs of the Ruler. Indeed, the Canons Regular of Windesheim were deployed in reforming monasteries elsewhere. It is also possible that, to Biel's way of thinking, the *via monastica* encompassed a worldview that laid far too much emphasis on the difference between the state of perfection, as found in monastic life, and the imperfection of the outside world. By uncoupling the Counsels of Perfection of poverty, chastity and obedience, from the vows, taken for the purpose of gaining the canonical *status perfectionis*, Biel brought about two things. Firstly, he attempted once more to imbue the Counsels with their original meaningfulness since, in the form of *proposita*, they were incapable of guaranteeing canonical security. Secondly, he had an authenticity clause built in. Where Rule and binding vows could be eclipsed by *consuetudines*, there a monastery could long remain without having to be aflame with its original charisma. There could be no question of this in the life form developed by Biel. Faithfulness to the original ideals of the Modern Devotion provided a guarantee of its continuation and of its right to exist at one and the same time.

The adoption of the legal title of "convent" would seem to have signalled a departure from the original semi-religious ideals but this was not so.⁹⁶ The situation and time in which Biel gave expression to

⁹⁶ As far as the adoption of the Chapter form went, R. R. Post stated: "Yet with the loss of their own name, something of their ideals seemed bound to go", R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion*, p. 453.

devout spirituality in a new life form were quite other than those in which Geert Grote promoted the foundation of monasteries as religious centres for his movement. Geert Grote saw the monasteries as stabilising *refugia* to be used by the Brethren in times of need whose position, both in terms of Canon Law and of Civil Law, was very weak indeed. The situation in Württemberg, on the other hand, was such that joining an order appeared to herald a weakening of the Brethren's independent position *vis-à-vis* Church and State.⁹⁷

It would be difficult to estimate to what extent Biel succeeded in interiorising devout spirituality. As one of the devout, his contours remain vague. Certain passages in his *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum* suggest he was not just dependant upon literature produced by devout circles but that the central tenets of devout spirituality were very familiar to him also. St. Augustine of Hippo was Biel's source for his treatment of the question of contemplation in action. But Biels analysis of the situation in the *ecclesia primitiva*, his thinking about a *de facto* instead of a *de jure* form of monastic life and his idealising about freedom from a rule with its binding obligations, turns out to be a conglomeration of ideas and ideals, just as used to be the case in the circles of the Modern Devout.

The extent and depth of Biel's debt of gratitude to the ideals of the Modern Devotion, deserves more thorough research. Up to this point in time, only his above mentioned *Tractatus* is considered proof and measure of this on a global scale. The largely unpublished sermons, which, from 1469 onwards, Biel delivered as *caplan zu Butzbach*, could, within this context, be researched not just for the connection between *verbum* and *exemplum*, but also for underlying ideals concerning images of man and of God. Do these correspond to the ideals, motives and images as these were embraced and developed by the spiritual writers of the circles of the devout? Biel also succeeded in using his academic work in the service of piety. But, when opting for Biel's academic work as an *objectum materiale*, in

⁹⁷ Cf. Thomas a Kempis, *Chronica Montis Sanctae Agnetis*, in: M. J. Pohl, ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 7, p. 354; cf. Thomas a Kempis, *Vita Gerardi Magni*, in: M. J. Pohl, ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 7, pp. 77 & 487: "Habuit quoque fixum in mente ... fundare monasterium regularium secundum formam habitus, quem in Brabantia apud dominum Iohannem Ruesbroeck conspexerat". Cf. Thomas a Kempis, *Vita Gerardi Magni*, in: M. J. Pohl, ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, vol. 7, pp. 7 & 418: "acceperunt habitum sanctae religionis canonicorum regularium sancti Augustini". Similar passages may be found at the following refs. in: M. J. Pohl, ed. *Thomae a Kempis opera omnia*, Vol. 6, pp. 12, 62, 98, 106 & 111; Vol. 7, pp. 345-346 & 471.

order to be able to evaluate the debt of gratitude he owed to the spirituality of the devout moderns, the same objection clings to it as to the sermons *de festivitatibus Christi*. They were delivered by Biel before entering the House of the Brethren at Butzbach but edited by his pupil Wendelin Steinbach after Biel had become a *Fraterherr*. In much the same way as it is difficult to focus sharply on the debt of gratitude attaching to the spirituality of the devout, because of their high degree of theological content, so also, these sermons are a less suitable subject for uncovering the influence of the Modern Devotion on Biel's thoughts about man and God, because of when they were written. His funeral sermons from 1470 onwards, on the other hand, do form a more suitable *corpus* for serious study.⁹⁸ One might also include the *Canonis missae expositio*, and its distilled version written by Biel for the simple priest, among the likely sources one could use in order to focus in on possible influences exerted by the ideals and spirituality of the Modern Devotion.⁹⁹ Whatever the case may be, his point of departure can at least be termed "devout". Biel was always very cautious when unbolting the latch which joins together learning and piety, teaching and life. He took care to do it not just effectively but authentically as well.

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⁹⁸ M. Elze, *Sieben Exequienpredigten von Gabriel Biel*, in: *Blätter für Württembergische Kirchengeschichte* 68/69 (= 1968/1969), pp. 3-52.

⁹⁹ Cf. For a characterisation of the *Epithoma* and the *Expositio brevis et interlinearis sacri canonis missae* based on it, and produced by, Steinbach and a shortlist of the early prints, A. Goossens, *Alliance et grâce*, pp. 41-42.