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INIGO BOCKEN

THE LANGUAGE OF THE LAYMAN

The Meaning of the *Imitatio Christi* for a Theory of Spirituality

1. THE DILEMMA OF THE LAYMAN IN MODERNITY AND THE TASK OF A THEORY OF SPIRITUALITY

Without any doubt, the character of the 'layman' belongs to the most fundamental cultural paradigms which characterize modern society and its forms of thinking and experiencing. One of the most discussed examples of the role of this paradigm today may be the principle of *laïcité*, on which the French state and society are built. This principle is generally understood as the legitimate heritage of the Enlightenment and as such is the expression of the emancipation of the individual and its capacity of autonomous thinking, its liberation from the repression of hierarchically structured forms of power and communal life. Another, though historically much later, example of the emancipation in the sign of the layman, can be found in the Catholic Church. The movement which – inspired by the Second Vatican Council – stressed the positive and decisive role of laity in the church, is in many ways an expression of the same emancipatory project which intended to liberate the individual from the enslavement to hierarchical structures, or, to use the words of Immanuel Kant, to liberate it from its 'selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit'.

In modernity (from the 17th century onwards), the character of the layman seems to function as a metaphor for the emancipation from repressing and humiliating powers in history. It belongs to the myths which modernity told to itself that it is precisely our enlightened new age which is able to set free all those unused and suppressed possibilities of the human individual and to lead it to a glorious flowering. This emancipation seemed to be boundless. The profusion of possibilities which arose from this way of thinking endangered all concrete and traditional forms of life and installed new, more hidden authoritarian power claims, which again were formulated in terms of the 'layman'. For, the concept of the layman seems also to refer to a second, almost contradictory cultural development. Other than in the emancipative meaning of the word, 'laymen' in modern terminology are those who are not specialists. In other words, the layman is the one who lacks the necessary knowledge to fulfill particular tasks or to respond to particular questions. 'Specialisation', together with the emancipation of the

individual with its autonomous rationality, forms a second characteristic shift of modern society. Both characteristics develop relatively independent from each other, sometimes even seem to conflict with each other. The enlightened emancipation threatened to turn into its opposite through new monopolies of knowledge, which contained new power claims.

‘Spirituality’ refers to a field in which – more than in other forms of human experience and knowledge – this conflict finds its most explicit shape. On the one hand, every claim to be a spiritual specialist seems to be in radical opposition to the value experiences of late modern society: in the name of tolerance it is impossible to claim the monopoly of spiritual knowledge. Those who make such a claim risk to be suspected of being either clerical fundamentalists or omniscient gurus. At the other hand, knowledge and insight in our society can only be mediated and developed by ‘specialists’. If such a specialised mediation is impossible for spirituality – and this impossibility belongs to the cultural patterns of expectation towards spiritual experience – it seems to be able to identify spirituality with the aura of vague and confuse inner feelings. Public and general criteria, articulated by ‘specialists’, clash with the very personal character of those intimate experiences of the human soul.

To escape from this dilemma is the task of every theory of spirituality in an actual cultural constellation, at least if this theory of spirituality wants to be more than just a history of spirituality. The reduction of a theory of spirituality to a historical description would not only be a makeshift solution, also it would make it impossible to articulate the criteria according to which it can be made clear which phenomena or texts belong to history and which do not. To avoid this question would mean that we do not take seriously the actual need for spirituality. Since the theme has become again one of the central topics of political debates – there seems to be a silent social consent that ‘religion’ in modern society will be shaped by its spiritual dimensions, far more than by its institutional ones. We do not have to decide whether this is true or not. More important is the question, which Charles Taylor recently put on the agenda in his study on the variety of contemporary religions, for a criterion with which spirituality can be discerned from other ‘inner’ experiences.¹ An exclusive internalisation of experience leads to a contamination of concepts, with the consequence that everything – and therefore nothing – is spirituality. An exclusive externalisation at the other hand – a historical perspective or a perspective of the religious sciences – is blind as to the concrete personal and individual experience, which is typical for the spiritual life.

The problem at stake is characteristic for the logic which determines late modern society as such and is expressed in the ambiguity of the concept of the ‘layman’,

¹ See Charles Taylor, *Varieties of religions today: William James revisited*, Cambridge (MA) 2003.

as it appears for instance in the relation between patient and doctor, or between client and therapist. ‘Spirituality’ however is that field in which this problem gets its most radical shape because the determination of the field itself is discussed and questioned here. The given examples refer to the paradoxical character within a relatively stable context – namely medicine or psychotherapy. With the system theoretician Niklas Luhmann however, one could argue that even within these systems, stability is illusory and not guaranteed by any essential determination.² But even Luhmann admits that the system of ‘religion’ in general³ and that of ‘mysticism’ in particular⁴ are fields in which the paradoxical character of modern systems as such becomes manifest in a paradigmatic way. This does not mean that the developments in the history of spirituality influenced the genesis of modern society in a causal way. It is rather the history of spirituality in which the dilemma of emancipation and specialisation became manifest in its most radical way, even before the problem was clearly recognised in other social and cultural systems. In this contribution, the thesis will be presented that it is precisely the history of lived spirituality which enabled the radicalisation of the dilemma – and therefore enabled modern rationality as such. Only the typical western way in which the encounter with God developed and has been shaped, enabled the observation and the fruitful elaboration of the fundamental paradox, which becomes radically manifest in modern rationality. It follows from this thesis that the theory of spirituality for which we are searching is a theory of science and meaning *sui generis*, which explores experiences in the concrete spiritual life in relation to human knowledge as such.⁵

This idea can only be partially explained. An appropriate approach to understand the paradoxes of lived spirituality – and the ways in which they got their concrete shapes – is the spirituality of the layman (*idiotia, laicus, illiterates*), as it was practiced and reflected in the tradition of the *devotio moderna*. The representatives of this religious reform movement in the Netherlands – with a great influence in Germany – at the end of the 14th and the first half of the 15th

² See Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt a.M. 1997, 356.

³ See Niklas Luhmann, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt a.M. 2000, 185.

⁴ See Niklas Luhmann & Peter Fuchs, *Reden und Schweigen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001. The identification of ‘mysticism’ and ‘spirituality’ can be questioned. The way in which Luhmann and Fuchs speak about mysticism however, justifies this identification. Likewise in the methodological study of Waaijman, we find a description of mysticism as the ‘logic of spirituality’. See Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, foundations, methods*, Leuven 2002, 53.

⁵ This does not mean that the exploration of this relation would be the only task of such a theory. Inasmuch as we have to suppose *that* there is a history of lived spirituality, this discipline also contains historical research on concrete experiences, on ways in which these are articulated in texts – or even the experience that they cannot be articulated in texts – but also research in the field of psychology and sociology of religion have to be integrated in such an elaborated theory. These considerations, however important they are, are not discussed in this contribution.

century, understood the concrete practical piety, also of not theologically educated 'laymen', as the starting point of a new paradigm of spiritual theology. Shortly, it can be said that for important authors of the *devotio moderna* as Jean Gerson, Gabriel Biel, Geert Groote, Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen or Thomas of Kempen, the individual *practice* of an evangelical life, 'imitating Christ', could be seen as the highest form of *theory*. In spite of the historical distance – or perhaps thanks to it – we can ask whether the fundamental outline of this model contributes to a better understanding of relevant concepts in the realm of spirituality, in a context in which the layman plays a central role, as cultural reality and as a metaphor for the ambiguity of the late modern society. Or is it rather a matter of a coincidental resemblance of words, in which moreover the differentiation between *idiotia*, *laicus* and *illitteratus* seems to be forgotten?

In this contribution, we shall first analyse some parts of the *De imitatione Christi* of Thomas of Kempen, in which the fundamental structure of the logic of the layman will be shown. Thomas' interpretation of the realm of *interiority* will play a central role in this analysis (§2). Secondly, this concept of interiorisation will be confronted with the perspective of the layman (*idiotia*) as it can be found in the work of the philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) who, as we know, had very close historical relations with the movement of the Modern Devotion. Although the works of Cusanus cannot be counted among the spiritual literature of this movement, there are many arguments to say that Cusanus attempted to understand the anti-theoretical tendencies in life and thought of the followers of the Modern Devotion (§3). Finally we shall present some systematic conclusions that could form a point of departure for a theory of spirituality, which takes into account the modern dilemma of the layman and possibly solves this.

2. THE EXTERIOR INTERIORITY OF THE LAYMAN – THE *IMITATIO CHRISTI* AS A PARADIGM OF 'CIVIL' SPIRITUALITY

2.1. *Historical developments*

Many historians have, with good reasons, referred to the obvious relation between the explosive development of pious religious movements in Late Middle Ages and the gradual rise of the civil consciousness in the growing cities of the Low Countries and the German Empire.⁶ The gradual transformation of feudal structures and the related monastic religious culture had consequences which were not

⁶ See f.i. Berndt Hamm, *Bürgertum und Glaube: Konturen der städtischen Reformation*, Göttingen 1996.

limited to social, political or economical realms. On a religious level too, one was searching for conceptual forms which would enable citizens without theological education to live within the inner richness of the Christian faith. The fact that these attempts were founded on the Gospel, in which Christ directed Himself to the poor and powerless people, and to Augustine, has often been overlooked in sociologically oriented historical analyses.⁷ The refined and ingenious philosophical and theological models of Scholasticism were at this time experienced as elitist and intellectualistic obstacles for citizens and craftsmen wanting to follow the path of the faith.⁸ Until the Late Middle Ages, this problem was solved by a strict hierarchical distinction between clergymen with a theological education on the one hand, and layman who did not know Latin and who had no access to the deep mysteries of faith on the other. There were people who, through education and ordination – and mostly both – were able to speak (*litterati*) and there were also people who, through lack of both, only could listen (*illitterati*).⁹ Petrus Lombardus, whose comments on the *sententiae* had a far reaching and deep influence on almost all medieval intellectuals, made the distinction between a *revelatio distincta*, meant for superior minds, and the *revelatio velata* for the *simplices*. Though these simple souls are, in the view of Peter, not able to understand the articles of faith, they have at least to be able to *believe* them.¹⁰ In the vision of Alain de Lille, faith had to be mediated by material metaphors and images for these *minores*, who are not able to leave the domain of the senses.¹¹ Thomas Aquinas too would express himself in a similar way.¹²

⁷ A very important exception is Anton G. Weiler, 'Soziale und sozial-psychologische Aspekte der *devotio moderna*', in: Klaus Schreiner (Ed.), *Laienfrömmigkeit im späten Mittelalter: Formen, Funktionen, politisch-soziale Zusammenhänge*, München 1988, 191-201. The complexity of historical reality obliges to say that the rise of the individual consciousness in late medieval society also originates in the Gospel and the tradition, founded on the Gospel. Therefore, the need for religious reform is not only a consequence of dramatic social transformations, but also – and perhaps primarily – its cause.

⁸ Klaus Schreiner, 'Frömmigkeit von Eliten oder Frömmigkeit des Volkes?', in: idem, *Laienfrömmigkeit im späten Mittelalter*, 1-78.

⁹ The 13th century minorite Alexander of Bremen praised both the *litterati*, who were able to talk, and the *illitterati*, who were able to listen: Alexander Minorita, *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (Ed. A. Wachtel), Weimar 1955 (Quellen zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 1). Quotation found in: Herbert Grundmann, 'Litteratus – illitteratus: Der Wandel einer Bildungsnorm vom Altertum zum Mittelalter', in: idem, *Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, III: *Bildung und Sprache*, Stuttgart 1978, 38-54, esp. 45.

¹⁰ Petrus Lombardus, *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, tom. II, liber III et IV, Roma 1981, Liber III, distinctio XXV, cap. 2 'De fide simplicium', 154.

¹¹ Alain de Lille (Alanus ab Insula), *Summa de arte praedicatoria*, Paris 1853 (Patrologia Latina 210), 184.

¹² *Summa Theologiae* II, q.2, a.6, 'Utrum omnes teneantur ad habendum fidem explicitam'.

But after a while, this self-interpretation of Christian theoreticians, who were situating themselves *outside* of the concrete, material actuality of human sorrows and earthly political power relations, did not correspond with reality anymore. In social and cultural practice, the distinction between *clericus* and *laicus* began to shift more and more away from that between *litteratus* and *illitteratus*. The identification between both distinctions however remained in a theoretical way. Against the background of the Augustinian tension between the City of God and the earthly empire – a tension which gave to medieval society its dynamic unity¹³ – it was important to preserve the distinction between spiritual and earthly citizens. At the same time, this opposition borrowed its dynamic character from its instable character (which resulted in far-reaching social conflicts such as the conflict between pope and emperor). At stake was the boundary between those who had received ordination and those who had not, which was at stake, when one spoke of ‘laymen’. The implicit difference in (theological and philosophical) education could in reality not always be identified with the difference between clergymen and laymen. The difficulty to define the state of the layman, made the principle and normative boundary between *litterati* and *illitterati* vague and pervious.¹⁴ At the same time, the boundary between heavenly *theoria* and earthly talking and acting, a boundary which enabled the *litterati* to distinguish themselves from the practical *illitterati*, was continuously the subject of theoretical reflection and was in that sense more and more questioned. The abstract metaphysical reflections of scholastic thinking may have been intended to comprehend the whole of reality in the light of a teleological order, but were not (or sometimes did not want to be) able to realise the articulation of this divine order. The *visio Dei* exceeded the intellectual powers even of the divine citizens – the clergy – albeit that they were perhaps nearer to this goal than craftsmen, merchants or politicians. The awareness of the provisional nature of our thinking in relation to the highest *theoria* characterised even the most comprehensive scholastic ‘systems’¹⁵ and gained greater importance, not least under

¹³ See Inigo Bocken, ‘Katholieke democratie?’, in: Luc Sanders, *Politiek voorbij de transcendentie* (pp. 114-123), Kapellen 2005.

¹⁴ ‘Der Umstand aber, daß der Traktat [of Gerard Zerbolt von Zutphen] in die Volkssprache umgesetzt und dadurch auch ungelehrten Laien zugänglich wird, zeigt, dass die Laien nicht mehr nur das passive, zu belehrende Gottesvolk sind, über dessen Seelenheil ein lateinisch-wissenschaftlich gebildeter Klerikerstand wacht, ja, dass die Scheidung in *clerici* – *litterati* und *laici* – *illitterati* den tatsächlichen Verhältnissen nicht mehr (und man könnte hinzufügen: längst nicht mehr) gerecht wird’. (Volker Honemann, ‘Der Laie als Leser’, in: Schreiner, *Laienfrömmigkeit im späten Mittelalter*, 238-247, 242).

¹⁵ ‘System’ has to be understood here in a broad sense. The thinking of people like Duns Scotus was systematically organised and even has systematic meaning, but was no ‘system’ as it would be later in the case in Idealistic philosophy or as it had been the case in the system of nature in Eriugena’s philosophy.

the influence of the Franciscan thinkers. The strict distinction between *litterati* and *illitterati* increasingly lost its absolute character, and the awareness arose that both theoretical educated subtle minds and the rough, simple faithful ones were subject to the same conditions: both were ultimately bound by the limits of the finite character of human speaking, which could never be directly deduced from the divine word. In the so called nominalistic theological and philosophical systems, the idea that even the most abstract and refined articulations were subject to the limiting conditions of human language – whether it was Latin or Middle High German – became the focus of attention. The critical nominalistic idea that even the most general concepts could not be understood as ideas of the divine intellect, but only as ‘names’ produced by human intellect, was perhaps an idea of epistemological value, but also had a clear social and spiritual meaning. Ockham’s famous razor only had its clarifying effect because of the awareness that arguments and concepts were primarily meant for *human* readers, who thought and lived within the same intellectual and mental horizon as the writer of the text.

This awareness had far-reaching consequences: theoretical oriented scholars began to realise that their ideas and concepts had to be listened by practical-living *minores*. At least, an increasing number of theological considerations were accompanied by a reflection about the addressees of the spoken words. One of the earliest and most spectacular examples of this evolution is Meister Eckhart with his vernacular sermons. However, Meister Eckhart was not influenced by nominalistic thinking.¹⁶ The awareness that the faith also, and perhaps primarily, was meant for unlearned practical and simple people may have had a history which began earlier than the 14th century, but after the preaching of Meister Eckhart, this awareness got a new validity and started to play a role *within* the academic theological and philosophical debates themselves. Important theoreticians as Jean Gerson and Gabriel Biel began to understand that their deep theological ideas and concepts had to be reformulated in such a way that even less sophisticated minds would be able to realise them in their own lives. There was, of course, still a gradual difference between theoretical scholars and craftsmen, but this difference was no longer based on a different ontological state.

The famous church historian Berndt Hamm recently argued that the reformulation of abstract theological ideas in order to make them understandable for ordinary people came at a cost: the high degree of differentiation and complexity which characterised the scholastic thinking, had to be given up for more concrete

¹⁶ See Wolfgang Göbel, *Okzidentale Zeit: Die Subjektgeltung des Menschen im Praktischen nach der Entfaltungslgik unserer Geschichte*, Freiburg 1996, 168-194.

and sometimes rough ideas.¹⁷ Hamm's observation however is only partly correct. Inasmuch as the simplification of theory had been led by a high degree of reflexive consciousness about the role of speaker and listener, respectively reader,¹⁸ the complexity of the 'theoretical' – this means: 'God seeing' – processes was transformed, rather than given up.¹⁹ In other words: it was not only the social pressure 'from outside' – the increasing awareness of practical craftsmen and traders in the context of the explosive development of the cities in late medieval society – which forced theoretical minds to clarify and to simplify their theological concepts. It was (at least: also) a transformation within theory itself, which produced the realisation that reflections about the seeing of God had to be listened to or to be read and this not only by a divine hearer or reader. More and more, the 'layman' became the paradigmatic character *within* theological reflections, because it was he, who lead the reflection of (at least some important) theologians and philosophers. The transformation of theory was not in the first place caused by laymen who began to claim the right to higher education or theological knowledge; rather it were the *litterati*, becoming aware of the deeply practical character of their arguments and beginning to search for theological and philosophical criteria in practical piety. It should be obvious that not all theologians and philosophers of the time were involved in this process, but those who continued to work according to the old theoretical – scholastic – paradigm, were seen as representatives of an abstract and old-fashioned scholarship, which was criticized by the reformers of the 'theology of piety'.²⁰

However, neither is it true that the transformations were primarily initiated by the spiritual or intellectual elite. It was rather the complexity of the relation between *litterati* and *illitterati* which was changing. This was not exclusively a sociological process. The way of encountering God was changing. This encounter was less experienced in theoretical articulations which are mediated by human words. One became increasingly aware that human language is directed towards other hearers, instead of understanding it as a direct and total representation of the encounter with God. Though it is in language that human beings speak about the encounter with God – about the divine word – this speaking is not the Word itself. It is certain that all main scholastic theologians knew and understood this difference. But this difference used to be interpreted as a shortcoming

¹⁷ Berndt Hamm, *The reformation of faith in the context of late medieval theology and piety*, Leiden 2004.

¹⁸ Hohnemann, 'Der Laie als Leser'.

¹⁹ With the 'theoretical processes', I refer to the original meaning of 'theorein', the 'seeing' – namely of God – as the original goal of every theory.

²⁰ Berndt Hamm, 'Normative centering in the 15th and 16th centuries: Observations on religiosity, theology and iconology', in: Hamm, *The reformation of faith*, 1–49, esp. 18.

of language in relation to the divine reality. In the new vision, the difference between human and divine word was not the last word, but rather the starting point of the considerations. Due to this changed interpretation, human language was seen in its own value, not anymore as the direct mediation of the divine word, but as a medium to exchange thoughts with both laymen and specialists about the inexpressible encounter with God. This can be seen in the growing importance of sermons, which were held in vernacular in order to communicate theological ideas and experiences in such a way, that they strengthen the faith of the hearers.

At least as important in this context however, is a concept which originates from the main monastic traditions of the West: the *collatio*, the ‘collecting’ learning discussion, in which both laymen and theological specialists took part. *Collatio* (from the perfect form from ‘conferre’, to talk together, to collect) is a communal learning discussion and refers to a meeting, where discussions about spiritual subjects take place.²¹ The *collatio* differs from the *disputatio*, the classical form of scholastic philosophical and theological learning and arguing. In a *disputatio* the opponent has to be persuaded by way of arguments to accept an idea.²² Neither is the *collatio* a sermon, in which *one* interpretation is presented to the faithful listeners. The *collatio*, as it was further developed and refined in the houses of the brothers and sisters of the *devotio moderna*, is a meeting in which a contribution is expected from every individual participant. The changed relation between word, concept and truth – which found its expression in and was reinforced by nominalistic theology and philosophy – led to another form of encountering God. The speaker/writer, who gives words to his thinking, does not articulate the divine word, but presents a word, which asks for further explanations which are also articulated by words. In the course of the spiritual discussion, the divine measure becomes manifest for the brothers and sisters. None of the participants is allowed to claim this measure for him or her self. Somehow the relations are reversed: while in the traditional model, one could say that where God is, there concordance can be found; in the model of the *collatio*, God’s working power is only present where concordance is realised.²³

²¹ See Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 785 and further.

²² See Tilman Borsche, ‘Reden unter Brüdern: Diskurstheoretische Bedingungen der Konkordanz bei Nikolaus von Kues’, in: Inigo Bocken (Ed.), *Conflict and reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa*, Leiden 2004, 5-24.

²³ In this sense, this model has also far-reaching political consequences, as can be seen in the reform movement of Counciliarism, in the same time as the *devotio moderna*. This movement intended to reduce the primacy of the pope and to give more power to the Council. In the assembly has to be searched for the divine measure, with which the Church has to be led. The Council of Basel (1430-1432) was the scene where both models – the collation-model and the

The reference to the *collatio* shows clearly that in addition to the social communal character of the new model, we have to define a second important concept in order to characterize the late medieval transformation of spiritual consciousness: internalisation. Whereas scholastic theoreticians were able to interpret reality from the distance of the monk's cell – or the academic desk, which was in fact inherited from the former – now the 'theologians of piety' seemed to take into account concrete experiences of the *illitterati* and the *idiotae* in theory itself as an autonomous 'measure' – principle of order – with which theory can be judged. 'Exteriorisation' of the social dimension parallels the 'internalisation' of the concrete form of life in the 'theoretical processes'. The perspective of the layman is not longer outside the world of the *litteratus* but has become an essential part of it. The now 'simplified' theological ideas can and must be internalised in the concrete form of life of the faithful readers and listeners. In the learning discussion of the *collatio*, it was not the word itself which had to be internalised (as if it would be perfectly true). It was rather the difference of word and truth which can be internalised by the brothers and sisters of the *devotio moderna*. They are neither only speaker, nor only listener, but both at the same time. In the tension between speaker and hearer, they come to understand the divine measure of life. Every individual repeats the whole communal process. The common searching and finding is at the same time the most individual searching and finding. This internalisation as such is not new. To enter the inner essence of things was already the eldest task of *theoria*. This was already the case in Plato and Aristotle and the whole tradition which was built on these thinkers. But now, internalisation got a new meaning.

The 'new' paradigm is not less complex than the subtle scholastic systems. But the way in which this complexity is manifesting itself has changed. In order to better understand the paradoxical complexity of this new paradigm, we shall now direct our attention to the most influential representative of the *devotio moderna*, Thomas of Kempen and his famous book *Imitatio Christi*. In no other movement of late medieval society, both aspects – community (Brothers of the Common Life) and internalisation – are so closely connected as in the *devotio moderna*.

traditional hierarchical model – conflicted. An important participant and witness of these discussions was Nicholas of Cusa. In his writing *De concordantia catholica*, Cusanus attempts to give a foundation to the conciliaristic position. In order to give this foundation, he uses arguments which can be understood in terms of the collation: where there is concordance, there is God, and not vice versa. See Nicholas of Cusa, *De concordantia catholica* I,XII; See: Anton G. Weiler, 'Nicholas of Cusa on harmony, concordance, consensus and acceptance as categories of reform in the Church in *De concordantia catholica*', in: Bocken, *Conflict and reconciliation*, 62-78.

2.2. *Imitatio Christi and theory*

2.2.1. Common individuality

At first sight, the social dimension of spiritual life seems to be rather absent in the *Imitatio Christi*, which was written between 1420 and 1441 and edited by Thomas of Kempen.²⁴ This work, which has paradigmatic meaning for the spiritual movement of the *devotio moderna*, is characterised by a very intimate atmosphere. It is addressed to an individual reader who intends to follow the way of faith. Instructions are given to those who want to practice evangelical virtues and to live a humble life. Thomas continuously advises his reader to look for silence and solitude and, if possible, also to avoid the presence of friends.²⁵

In the third book, chapter 42, Thomas warns his reader never to find peace on other people, but rather on truth. Thomas' reader seems to be a monk looking for solitude, rather than a social being trying to search for a common insight and ready to be questioned by others. The second book, which is dedicated to the interior life, is very clear about this: to follow and imitate Christ, we never can build on other human beings (II,1,12).

Where in these explicit and omnipresent instructions for a lonesome and retired life is the social and common dimension, which we mentioned in the last paragraph? In the following we will show that the paradox of an (external) discussion and the tendency to interiority, which is given with the forms of preaching and thinking of the *collatio*,²⁶ can also be found in the *Imitatio Christi*. For, although the need for earthly solitude and moderation belongs to the central themes of this book, the form in which these themes are presented by the author seems to speak a different language. The book does not offer a theoretical *exposé* 'from the outside' concerning the path of inner life and the imitation of Christ, but is speaking 'from the inside': the author seems to be situated in a circle of readers and hearers. He addresses his instructions to his readers quite personally; sometimes he is using the first person plural, as if he wants to show the shared conditions with which we, human beings, live and out of which we want to follow Christ.

But there is another element stressing the social and communicative aspects of his theory: the author has a pastoral attitude, but shows – at least in books I

²⁴ See Hans-Norbert Jankowski, *Geert Groote, Thomas von Kempen und die devotio moderna*, Freiburg i.B. 1978: some authors are of the opinion that the *Imitatio Christi* was not really written by Thomas of Kempen but by another author, perhaps Geert Grote.

²⁵ 'Maximi Sanctorum humana consortia ubi poterant vitabant et Deo in secreto servire eligeabant. Dixit quidam: Quotiens inter homines fui, minor homo redii. [...] Qui igitur intendit ad interiora et spiritualia pervenire, oportet eum cum Iesu a turba declinare. [...] Qui ergo se abstrahit a notis et amicis, approximabit illi Deus cum Angelis sanctis' (I, 20).

²⁶ Borsche, 'Reden unter Brüdern', 23.

and II – that he lives in the same horizon as his readers whom he encourages and exhorts. He is interchanging the use of ‘you’ and ‘we’ and shows that he himself is involved in the process. In books III and IV the tone changes. The imitation of Christ and the stress on inner life remain central themes, but the mode with which the author expresses these themes is different. The text does not speak anymore of ‘you’ and ‘we’, but of the ‘lord’ (*dominus*) and his ‘servant’ (*servus*) instead. The ‘imitation’ now becomes a dialogue between the faithful and the Christ, whom he wants to follow. In a certain sense, the third book describes the *communion* between the faithful and Christ as a dialogical event. The fourth book consists of the dialogue between God who is communicating and the disciple (*discipulus*) who now is prepared to receive this announcement, the Word of God. We do not know whether these four books are intentionally composed as described here. However, it is certain that the perspective of the author is gradually changing. The imitation is a process in which the common horizon and the most individual intimacy are deeply interwoven. The ‘common’ is finally directed towards this most intimate process of human self-becoming, and on the other hand, this process of becoming oneself can only be realised and supported by the communicative process which becomes manifest in the tension of ‘you’ and ‘we’.²⁷

The author speaks personally to the reader since he lives and thinks against the same background (‘we’). This means that the author, in contrast to the scholastic theologian or philosopher, never can express an ultimate, final word, through which the unity with God can be realised. The words are not so much directed towards their own meaning, but intend to follow the path of faith of the reader. The words only become true inasmuch as the different individual readers concretely realise what words express. The summit of theory within the framework of the *Imitatio Christi* is therefore the practice of the imitation of the evangelical life of Christ itself. Already the first chapter of the book (entitled as *De imitatione Christi et contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi*) contains a brilliant programmatic beginning. The words of the author, addressed to his reader and exhorting a practical life in the spirit of the gospel, are a comment on the words of Christ Himself, from the Gospel of St. John: ‘He that followth me, shall not walk in darkness’. (John 8,12). These words exhort us to follow the attitude of Christ and to imitate his actions. Only thus, can we reach the light and can we be freed from the blindness of our heart.²⁸ With this reference to the Scripture, Thomas shows very clearly that the goal of the *Imitatio Christi* is finally the same as that

²⁷ Rudolf Th. M. van Dijk, ‘De “Navolging van Christus” als concept voor de geestelijke weg: De relevante plaats van het derde en vierde boek’, in: *Ons Geestelijk erf* 77 (2003), 43-92.

²⁸ ‘Haec sunt verba Christi, quibus admonemur quatenus vitam eius et mores imitemur, si velimus veraciter illuminari et ab omni caecitate cordis liberari’ (I,1,2).

of the scholastic theoretical writings. However, this *doctrina Christi* exceeds all other holy theories, precisely inasmuch as its perfection consists in *action*. 'Theory' can only be realised inasmuch as the reader/listener understands his whole life in the light of this path and acts according to this understanding.²⁹ The understanding of the words can only take place in a concrete, 'incarnated' and personal practice.

The primacy of lived practice over theory as it is stressed by Thomas already in the first chapters ('I prefer to experience repentance, in stead of knowing its definition'),³⁰ is no simple rejection of words, but implies a different way of dealing with knowledge which is mediated by words. Words get another 'function': they are spurring and questioning and as such, they refer towards a reality beyond the concrete words. However, they do not refer to any kind of secret knowledge which exceeds the power of the high abstract concepts, as often seemed to be assumed in scholastic mystical and hierarchical theology, but to a reader, who is addressed by this word and is called to action. The text of the *Imitatio Christi* finds its meaning in this common process of communication in which author and reader (respective speaker and listener) are involved. And in still another sense the words transcend their own power: the hearer is not asked to conform himself to the expressed words. He is invited to direct his attention to the word that is the real and proper measure of action, the word of Christ itself. The text does not impose a measure, which has to be accepted passively by the reader.

In the process of reading, it becomes clear that writer and reader are both and commonly subject to the same divine measure and that it is a whole life long ('totam vitam') impossible to escape this measure. Thomas explains this, when he asks the reader to think about the need for humility: he, who uses words without humility, displeases the triune God ('displiceas Trinitati', I,1,7). The impossibility to escape this divine measure constitutes the basis for the personal responsibility to follow and imitate Christ, with which every single reader is confronted. As such it is also the basis of the individual and intimate character of this path of imitation. To follow this path means for the reader the attempt to understand all the elements of his life in the light of this divine measure.

One does not have to be a specialist in medieval philosophical literature to understand that the *Imitatio Christi* belongs to another genre than the theological and philosophical treatises of the medieval academic tradition. However, the intention of the work would be misjudged and underestimated if this difference would be seen as absolute. We may ask why the author, who in his many quotes

²⁹ 'Doctrina Christi omnes doctrinas Sanctorum praecellit; et qui spiritum haberet, absconditum ibi manna inveniret. [...] Qui autem vult plene et sapide Christi verba intelligere, oportet ut totam vitam suam illi studeat conformare' (I,1,4/6).

³⁰ 'Opto magis sentire compunctionem quam scire eius definitionem' (I,1,9).

from philosophical and theological writings shows himself thoroughly acquainted with academic traditions, has chosen this literal form and how this form is related to scholastic theoretical concepts.³¹ There can be no doubt that these academic theories form the background against which Thomas explains his ways of dealing with knowledge, speaking and acting, which becomes manifest in the continuously returning (critical) remarks about 'the philosophers' and earthly erudition. Time and again, he reprimands and criticises the vanity of learned philosophers. This vanity is an obstacle on the way towards the conformation with Christ (I,1,6), this means: the divine measure of the own, personal life. For Thomas, there is no doubt that a humble farmer (*humilis rusticus*) is better suited for the spiritual life than a vain philosopher, who 'forgets his soul when he investigates the movements of the stars'.³² Although Thomas concedes to Aristotle that the desire for knowledge belongs to the nature of human being, he directly and extensively adds that theoretical science and knowledge belong to the external affairs of life and that they as such do not contribute anything to the interior way, the last and ultimate goal of this existence, which finds its full expression in the conformation with Christ.³³

In the strictly, modern sense of the word, the *Imitatio Christi* is of course no 'theoretical' writing. However, our above reflections show that Thomas intended a transformation of *theory* in the sense of a vision of God. This 'theory' contains the awareness that all our deeds, as well as our words and thoughts, can (and must) be measured with the divine measure. Only in this measuring, we find their real meaning. Even our most abstract thoughts cannot articulate this measure. Even these are subject to it. Theory is a vision which comprehends our whole life (*tota vita*) and as such it never can be totally explored by our thoughts. This theory can only be lived in an individual manner, namely inasmuch gradually more and more elements of our life can be judged in the light of this divine measure. This judgement never can be claimed by human beings, neither by the author of the text or the thinker of thoughts. Still, in the dialogue between the author of the text and his reader, the obstacles which hinder the working of this divine measure, can be discovered. This becomes manifest in the appeal of Thomas to be taught by 'truth' in stead of human words.

He is happy whom the truth teaches itself, not by figures or passing words, but as it is in itself. Our opinion and our senses often deceive us. [...] What would help

³¹ Charles M.A. Caspers, 'Thomas van Kempen en de communie: Een situering van het vierde (oorspronkelijk derde) boek van *De imitatione Christi* in de geschiedenis van de vroomheid', in: *Ons Geestlijk Erf* 77 (2003), 93-124.

³² 'Melior est profecto humilis rusticus, qui Deo servit, quam superbus philosophus qui se neglecto cursum caeli considerat' (I,2,2).

³³ 'Omnis homo naturaliter scire desiderat; sed scientia sine timore Dei quid importat?' (I,2,1).

us a stream of words about hidden things, for which we do not account because we do not know them?³⁴

We have to give space to theory (in the sense of *theorein*) in order to understand our life in the perspective of this divine measure. Then we are able to integrate our personal life in a process of *theorein*, in order to become conformed with this measure. We have to free ourselves from the words of human beings, even those of the writer of the *Imitatio*, in order to hear the one divine word in which everything is expressed. It is here that we are able to understand the intrinsic relation between the 'social' and the 'individual', which characterizes the book from its first pages onwards.

In the following paragraph we shall present two opposite concepts, which clarify this 'theory' in terms of a process in which 'theory' and 'practice' on the one hand and 'sociality' and 'individuality' on the other, can grow into a concrete unity. First of all we shall discuss the opposition between 'darkness' and 'light', which is elaborated in Book I (2.2.2.). Secondly we shall explicate the opposition between 'exteriority' and 'interiority' as it can be found in Book II (2.2.3.).

2.2.2. The concrete way from darkness into light

The *Imitation of Christ* refers to a way, which is described by Thomas as a process within a continuous field of tensions between opposites: *rusticus* and *philosophus*, doing and thinking, earthly vanity and spiritual humility, word and truth etc. In this process, human beings are called to liberate themselves from every dependency on human perspectives – on the senses, also at the same time on the plurality of human thoughts and judgements.³⁵ Not only the mental thoughts have to be liberated from their material elements – following the logic of Platonism – but even more, the listening to the Divine Word has to be freed from thoughts and concepts. It is the Divine Word, which is able to make our concrete existence (which includes our thinking) understandable and transparent.

However, this understanding is not the objective knowledge from a distance, as it can be found in scholastic theory. In that old paradigm, the knower remained 'outside' of what is known. Reality was analysed in its objective teleo-

³⁴ 'Felix quem veritas per se docet, non per figuras et voces transeuntes, sed sicuti se habet. Nostri opinio et noster sensus saepe nos fallit et modicum videt. Quid prodest magna cavillatio de occultis et obscuris rebus de quibus nec arguemur in iudicio, quia ignoravimus?' (I,3,1-3).

³⁵ Here we can see a direct line from Augustine's *Confessions* towards the *devotio moderna*. The conversation between Augustin and his mother Monica in the 9th Book shows the same ambiguity of silence and speaking as can be found in the *Imitatio Christi*. The dialogue-partners are not silent themselves, but their speaking becomes more and more silent. See Johann Kreutzer, *Pulchritudo Dei: Vom Erkennen Gottes bei Augustin*, München 1995, 255-272.

logical structure, oriented towards God. The goal of this theoretical concept was to articulate the measure with which this analysis could be made, even though the greatest minds of Scholasticism were very well aware of the final unreachable character of this theoretical ideal. This concept is not absent in the ‘new paradigm’ of the *Imitatio Christi*, but it is situated in a different context of arguments. The attempt to make transparent reality in general and our concrete life in particular, could not longer be realised by the theoretician, but had to be left to the Divine Word, which never can be claimed by any human being.

The author of the *Imitatio* gives ‘thinking’ another role: he starts dialogue and conversation and tries to remove obstacles, in order to enable his dialogue partners (his readers) to walk from the darkness into the light; this means: in order to be directed towards Gods judgement.³⁶ Darkness and light are both poles which constitute the fundamental tension in the first Book of the *Imitatio*. ‘Light’ is defined by Thomas as the ‘humble self-knowledge as a way to God, which is more fundamental than the search for the treasures of knowledge’.³⁷ Darkness means the plurality which manifests itself both in knowledge and in action. Living in darkness in the view of Thomas means to place his hope in human beings and creatures.³⁸ The task we have to fulfill, according to Thomas, is the ‘collecting’ of all elements found in this life – whether these are external things in reality or thoughts in our mind – around the measure of God’s Word.³⁹

For Thomas, light is never undividedly present in human life. It is always mixed with darkness. The idea that we can reach the undivided light in this life is one of the illusions from which we are to be liberated. We are never able to reach a pure ‘theory’, a pure vision. No way of thinking can escape the conditions of human existence. Human thinking is involved in reality, with all its finitude and dependency. We are of necessity bound to human perspectives (II,6,2-22). In the view of Thomas, human beings live with the unavoidable permanent danger to mistake something which is dark for light: often we think to act out of love, while we only experience simple natural desire (I,15,9). The dependency on human (and creaturely) things cannot be extinguished: we cannot speak without words, not see without eyes. When we think about the whole of all things, we can only do this as beings, who live and move between

³⁶ ‘Nam homo proponit, sed Deus disponit, nec est in homine via eius’ (I,19,9).

³⁷ ‘Humilis tui cognitio certior via est ad Deum quam profunda scientiae inquisitio’ (I,3,22).

³⁸ ‘Vanus est qui spem suam ponit in hominibus aut in creaturis’ (I,7,1).

³⁹ This ‘colligere’ is praised by Thomas again and again: I,19,15; I,23,30; I,23,43; II,1,33; IV,1,27; III,48,24.

darkness and light. Therefore we have to abstain as much as possible from passing judgements on others.⁴⁰

Thomas refers here to the evangelical idea that who judges others, judges in fact only himself. However, surprisingly enough it is here that Thomas discovers the possibility to find a way out of the darkness of the involvement into earthly things. It is, as we have seen before, impossible to leave this network of dependencies and to reach a global vision of the order of being. But it is possible to know this impossibility since we are able to know that we cannot trust the judgement of our reason. In other words, it is possible to judge ourselves. This does not mean that we can know (in empirical and psychological sense) who we exactly are. But we are able to recognise that we live in darkness at the moment that we mistake our judgements for the final word about reality. We are able to discover that our judgements throw the shadows which hide the light. However, for the same reason it is through the shape of these shadows that we can see the contours of the light of the divine judgement.

The question now is how Thomas understands this precisely. How can we find this light that our finite and dependent judgements limit in the darkness of the worldly network of dependencies in which we continuously are misled?⁴¹ In Chapter 12 of the first Book, Thomas shows us where this concrete turning point can be found. 'It is good for us', Thomas says, 'to meet with stiff oppositions and adversities. They make us understand how much we live in exile and teach us not to place hope in earthly affairs'.⁴² The attacks on reason, which we find throughout the *Imitatio*, do not exclude that we have the possibility and even the duty to use our reason well. In conflicts and opposition we are able to learn our place in the whole of things, however not in the 'objective' sense of the word. Out of the knowledge that our life is moving between darkness and light, reason shows us in which way we ourselves are involved in these conflicts and opposition. It is the fact that we mistake our word for truth, which keeps us away from seeing the *real* measure of all things.

This realisation about ourselves is the moment on which the imitation of Christ really can start. It is the moment that we can observe the light – as a

⁴⁰ 'Ad te ipsum oculos reflecte et aliorum facta caveas iudicare. In iudicando alios homo frustra laborat, saepius errat et leviter peccat; seipsum vero iudicando et discutiendo semper fructuose laborat' (I,14,1-2).

⁴¹ 'Sed saepe aliquid ab intra latet, vel etiam ab extra concurrit, quod nos etiam pariter trahit' (I,14,5).

⁴² 'Bonum nobis est, quod aliquando habeamus aliquas gravitates et contrarietates; quia saepe hominem ad cor revocant, quatenus se in exilio esse cognoscat nec spem suam in aliqua re mundi ponat' (I,12,1).

spark⁴³ – in the darkness and are able to follow it. It is the moment that the ‘collecting’ (*colligere*) can start, not the collecting of things around our own measure, but the collecting of ourselves in all contradictions and conflicts in which we are involved through all our dependencies. And there is a plurality of opinions and doctrines possible. The same fact can sometimes be seen as ‘dark’, sometimes as ‘light’ and sometimes both at the same time. Everyone is always ready with a quick judgement: ‘Often enough, quarrel arises between friends and citizens, between monks and pious people, because of the plurality of opinions and points of view’.⁴⁴

According to Thomas, it is very difficult to discard familiar opinions. But if we understand that every word causes other words, we are able to leave behind our own words and let speak the measure of light, which begins to show itself in the chaos of contradictions, if and when we direct our attention to our own responsibility. Nothing is left but to arrange our own existence and to search for the measure which resolves the inner conflicts in which we are involved.

2.2.3. The interior exteriority

Thomas has explained what it means to live in darkness, but he also marked the point where a turn towards the light is possible and where we can begin to follow the way, which will bring our dark existence into clarity. It is not primarily the ‘uncertainty’ of our judgements (as later in the Cartesian philosophy) which was the main problem for Thomas. It is rather his observation that every judgement itself may be subject to another judgement. Every measure we use can be ‘measured’ itself. He who judges will be judged himself. The light which comes to shine in every judgement is accompanied by a shadow. Thomas realised that human beings never can get out of this network of judging and being judged. It was vanity of scholastic scholars, theologians and philosophers to claim a position outside of this field of dependencies. They studied the stars, but forgot their own soul, as Thomas wrote in the beginning of the first book (I,2,2). They were stuck on their own judgements and ideas, and thus they were dependent on material goods and earthly glory.

The way of clarification does not ask for a renounce from the senses in order to make mental judgements. The centre of darkness has to be searched on a more fundamental level. The path of clarification does not demand that we foreswear the senses or concrete experience, it is a way out of the involvement

⁴³ ‘O qui scintillam haberet verae caritatis, profecto omnia terrena sentiret plena fore vanitatis’ (I,15,14).

⁴⁴ ‘Propter diversitatem sensuum et opinionum satis frequenter oriuntur dissensiones inter amicos et cives, inter religiosos et devotos’ (I,14,9).

of the dependencies of judgements. The clarification can not be realised by a judgement from the outside of worldly relations, for he who judges, is already involved in these concrete relations. The path from darkness into light – the clarification of our place in the whole of all things – starts with a complete change of our perspective, for we have the ability to understand the dependency with which we live by judging. If we understand that we mistake darkness for light, we started our way out.⁴⁵ By way of this consciousness we can deal with our judgements in a different way. It is not possible for us to escape judgements which are given with our life on earth. But we can make our judgements in such a way, that we tidy away as much as possible the obstacles which hinder the light which already shines in and through the judgements.

Through a second central pair of oppositions, that of exteriority and interiority, Thomas explains what this precisely means. This opposition can not be seen in an absolute way, but Thomas describes it as a process of internalisation. He makes a distinction between an interior and an exterior judgement. 'He, who lives from the inside and confers only little value to external things, has no need of pious exercises and devotion'.⁴⁶ Thomas refers to the goal which can be reached by the right inner judgement. This goal can not be reached by imposing the measure of our judgement on reality. We have to sharpen the measure with which we live and judge in the network of all relations, on the measure which is at work already in reality: 'He, who takes everything as it is and not as it has been named or valued, is truly wise and learned, however, more in the view of God than in the view of the people'.⁴⁷ The measure of our judgement has to be measured with the measure of all things in reality. Only in such a way, we find the trace of the real, final measure, the judgement of God, which is the final order of reality in which we live. To live oriented towards this final measure, which can not be subject to our own judgements, means to 'collect' the things in reality around his own measure, which is questioned again and again in the confrontation with the things around us.

The way which Thomas presents here, implies for us the need to accept the challenge of conflicts in the world. This is the only way to escape them and to

⁴⁵ Thomas stresses that the continuous changing of light and darkness is no reason to give up the attempts to search for the light: 'Non est totum perditum quando res accedit in contrarium' (III, 30,21).

⁴⁶ 'Qui ab intra scit ambulare, et modicum ab extra res ponderare, non requirit loca, nec exspectat tempora ad habenda devota exercitia' (II,1,32).

⁴⁷ 'Cui sapiunt omnia prout sunt, non ut dicuntur aut aestimantur: hic vere sapiens est et doctus magis a Deo quam ab hominibus' (II,1,31).

internalise the final judgement which encloses all oppositions as our judgement.⁴⁸ The old paradigm of theory meant searching from the outside to a measure which would be able to resolve and to stabilise the conflicts and oppositions of reality. For it, scholastic theory had to find shelter in more abstract concepts and distinctions, which had to overcome the resistance of phenomena and judgements, and reached such a level of abstraction that they could easily be characterised and unveiled as a *flatus vocis*.

Although modern philosophers like Thomas Hobbes understood their thinking as radical break with scholastic theory, they took over this theoretical claim of a position outside of conflicts, now however as 'political theory', which introduced with the 'sovereign' an external principle that was able to reconcile social and political oppositions. The 'practical' theory of Thomas of Kempen goes in another direction, that of internalisation. It does not suppose a position outside of conflicts, but transforms these into the inner conflict of the individual. It is not the reality 'outside' him which now is internalised, as this would be the case in the later modern subject theories. It is rather so that the devout person enters the conflicts and accepts the questioning of his own judgements, knowing that in this conflict more comprehensive measure will become manifest, which will give him orientation and which will enable him to live in peace with himself and with other persons and things around him. The internalisation is therefore a paradoxical process. The devout person is searching for the internal measure of things and people. It is the plurality of opinions and judgements which has to be resolved.⁴⁹ As such, the internalisation is at the same time a way out, out of the prison of one's own judgement, which always is subject to other judgements. The more one is directed towards the things as they are in themselves, the more one will learn to know one's 'real' measure, which is not subject to continuous changing and confusion. This measure is not a fixed 'essence', but is a living measure. For, fixed measures are judgements which can be judged by others.

Real interiority is not at all a subjective reflection which implies an abandoning of the external world. The pious person discovers in himself the union of the internal and the external. This is true interiority, which never can be other than a 'practical' interiority. However, as such it is not contrary to theory. Rather, Thomas intends to analyse the practical character of judgements inasmuch as these are related to the whole of life (*tota vita*). Theoretical thinking which before

⁴⁸ 'Esto itaque expeditus ad pugnam si vis habere victoriam. Sine certamine non potes venire ad patientiae coronam. [...] Sine labore non tenditur ad requiem; nec sine pugna pervenitur ad victoriam' (III,19,14-15,18).

⁴⁹ 'Non es sanctorum si laudaris; nec vilior si vituperaris. Quod es, hoc es; nec maior dici vales quam Deo teste sis' (II,6,18-19).

had been expressed in syllogisms and proofs, now gets its shape in practical acting. Theory – the vision of the essential – never can be realised from outside, it can only be developed within the complex relations of human acting, which is characterised by judgements.

Theory has become practice and practice becomes theory inasmuch as the acting thinker succeeds in letting fully shine the light which is already present in earthly relations, but which is often darkened by human judgements. This means that the judgements, which are expressed in action, have to be realised in such a way that they become transparent for the light of the ultimate measure of all things. The person following the path of the *Imitatio*, has to find the right measure between speaking and silence, judging and being judged. This ‘right middle’ connects two poles of the tension field in which man lives his life. Thomas is convinced of the fact that this ‘right middle’ never can be reached or fixed by thinking, that is: judging from the outside. The true and real measure can only be realised inasmuch as man knows that he himself is involved in this process of judging.

The theoretical model which is characterised by two tension fields – that of darkness and light at the one hand and that of exteriority and interiority at the other – supposes that the person who judges is always involved in that which he is judging. As such, this model does not offer a comprehensive theory, but it contains a hermeneutical frame in which one can learn to deal with real things as well as with texts. The criticism of the *devotio moderna* against scholastic method was based on the observation that these thinkers remained outside the order they wanted to judge. The theoretical practice of the *Imitatio Christi* intends to relate human measure with the divine order, without the certainty that they are identified. This theory encourages us to work on the transformation of the human measure in order to make it conformable to the divine measure. In this perspective this model can indicate how the follower of Christ can deal with texts. Texts offer words and the *Imitatio* calls for an awareness of the fact that these words are read by a reader. With this awareness, it becomes manifest that these words are not the ultimate Word itself. This Word starts to shine at the moment that the reader starts to be aware of the interplay between writer and reader.⁵⁰

2.3. *The theoretical practice of the Imitatio Christi*

Although the *Imitatio Christi* is in the first place a book of meditation, written to serve the daily path of devotion, the way Thomas describes this path is

⁵⁰ ‘Possunt quidem verba sonare, sed spiritum non conferunt. Pulchriter dicunt, sed te tacente cor non accendunt. Litteras tradunt, sed tu sensum aperis. Mysteria proferunt, sed tu reseras intellectum signatorum’ (III,2, 6-8).

characterised by a refined and highly developed theoretical consciousness. Not only can the attentive reader discover implicit references to and discussions with classical theoretical models between the lines,⁵¹ but it is also the reflective and intellectual power and the radical integrity that make the work one of the most read books of Western history. Because this work found its use mostly in contexts of practical piety, its theoretical content has been recognized little in a culture where the dichotomy between elitist science and popular practices remained effective until deep into the 20th century. The *Imitatio Christi* is not only a book which intends to translate subtle and abstract theological and philosophical concepts into a more everyday language.

For Thomas, theory has to penetrate reality. Theory is not longer exclusively meant for the Divine Reader – who has certainly no lack of self knowledge! Theory has a liberating role, inasmuch as it is able to break open and to enlighten the narrow human vision which is darkened by rigid judgements. Also the later ‘modern’ political thinkers (f.i. Hobbes, Locke) would claim such liberation from the narrowing illusion to understand the order of reality.⁵² In this tradition however, the *ordo* of the divine measure was marginalised. In this view the solving of conflicts in society had to be imposed and forced by self interested subjects.

The liberation which is intended by the *Imitatio Christi* has another goal (II,10,7). Thomas shows his readers a way which enables them to listen to the divine word. The individual way of living in reality can gain a divine character itself, if the faithful succeeds in liberating himself from the narrowing and narrowed human judgements. Theory is not only that which has to be exteriorised in reality, but has to be internalised at the same time in the personal practice, which for the *devotio moderna* is the *locus veritatis*.

This inner, enlightening measure cannot be shaped by escaping the conflicts and oppositions of our existence. Later this would become the strategy of political theories in modern time. He who follows the way of Christ is able to enter the conflict,⁵³ and has the capacity to confront his own judgement with other judgements. In this capacity, the one living measure becomes visible. The conversation, which is expressed in the thinking form of the *collatio*, is the space in which this process can be developed. He, who enters this conversation, is able to become, with his whole life, this word itself, with which God is wordlessly speaking.

The task of this theory consists in the critical investigation of our human judgements. The theory is able to unmask us at the moment that we mistake external

⁵¹ One could Thomas, respectively Geert Grote, who is perhaps the author of the text, call a ‘mysticus doctus’ in analogy with the ‘pictor doctus’.

⁵² See Robert Spaemann, *Glück und Wohlwollen, Versuch über Ethik*, 2nd ed., Stuttgart 1998.

⁵³ ‘Eligendum est magis totum mundum habere contrarium quam Iesum offensum’ (II,8,20).

fame or comfort, for real knowledge. We are never certain about this. The way into the light therefore never can be a necessary dialectical process, but needs a clear attention for the seductions of the external world. What is 'internal' or 'external' is not definitively fixed. The most concrete practice can be more spiritual than the most subtle spiritual reflection. But it can also be the other way around. The *Imitation* is a way which has to be started again and again. No one can become a specialist in this field. Therefore, the lecture of the *Imitatio Christi* seems to give the concept of 'layman' a new, inner dimension. The distinction between ordained priest and a citizen without theological background is not the main problem in the view of Thomas. Nevertheless, he delivers criteria for an authentic priesthood. But these criteria, which are described in terms of internalisation, are the same for craftsmen and citizens as for theologians. Measured with the measure of God, all are laymen.

In the next paragraph we will refer shortly to a philosopher who was – at least historically – near to the *devotio moderna*: Nicholas of Cusa. Cusanus seems to have seen the theoretical dimension of the 'layman' and developed it further in his philosophy of the layman as an *idiota*. More explicit than Thomas did, Cusanus brings the layman into dialogue with philosophical and theological tradition. As such, Cusanus seems to present arguments for the paradigmatic meaning of the layman for theoretical thinking: reflection becomes concrete, theory is penetrating reality.

3. THE LAYMAN AND THE PHILOSOPHER

Several recent historical studies have been already dedicated to the (ambiguous) relation between Nicholas of Cusa and the lay movement of the *devotio moderna*.⁵⁴ Although Nicholas may not have studied at the Latin School of the Brothers of Common Life in Deventer – as was assumed till recently – it is certain that he had direct contact with representatives of this movement during his lifetime. Without any doubt, the figure of the layman (*idiota*) which Cusanus put on stage in three dialogues, written in 1450, can be seen as a reference to the central role of laymen in this movement.

In his *Idiota de mente* (The layman on mind) Cusanus sketches a dialogue between a simple spoon-maker and a learned philosopher, one of the most famous of his time, who seems to know Aristotle and Plato extensively. Although the spoon-maker has never read any books, he is clearly the leading person in the conversation and shows more wisdom and understanding than the learned philosopher does. The role of the philosopher is limited to some admiring philo-

⁵⁴ E.g. Nikolaus Staubach, 'Cusanus und die *devotio moderna*', in: Bocken, *Conflict and Reconciliation*, 31-56.

sophical comments about the deep wisdom of the layman, relating his remarks to concepts of philosophical tradition. In another dialogue, *Idiota de sapientia* (The layman on wisdom) Cusanus critically remarks through the mouth of the layman that people who read many books, are in danger to be bound like a foal to the manger of traditional texts,⁵⁵ a remark which is clearly in line with Thomas' criticism on philosophers and learned scholars. These people are so busy with their books and their intellectual constructions, that they do not recognise any more divine truth in the external world. Truth and wisdom are not to be found in dark and forgotten corners but 'cry in all streets and on all markets'.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, the perspective from which Cusanus describes the relation between layman and philosopher is somewhat different than that of Thomas. The layman may be warning of the dangers of knowledge and erudition, but in all the three books, he remains in dialogue with the philosopher. The conversation has even a very friendly character. The layman takes the philosopher's hand and shows him the universe of his ideas. The philosopher attempts to translate these ideas into the language of the philosophers. In addition, the layman asks the philosopher what Aristotle has meant when he talked about mind. There is no disregard of erudition and knowledge at all. It is the conversation taking place between the two, which is essential and generates deep knowledge about the mysteries of the mind. Already in the beginning of the *Idiota de mente*, the philosopher is fascinated by the large number of faithful who are on pilgrimage in Rome – where the dialogue is taking place – at that moment.⁵⁷ Through their faith and devo-

⁵⁵ 'Nam video te deditum ad quaerendum sapientiam multo casso labore, a quo te revocare si possem, ita ut et tu errorem perpenderes, puto contrito laqueo te evasisse gauderes. Traxit te opinio auctoritatis, ut sis quasi equus natura liber, sed arte caestro alligatus praesepi, ubi non aliud comedit nisi quod sibi ministratur. Pascitur enim intellectus tuus auctoritati scribentium constrictus pabulo alieno et non naturali' (*Idiota de sapientia*, I,2).

⁵⁶ 'Ego autem tibi dico, quod "sapientia foris" clamat "in plateis", et est clamor eius, quoniam ipsa habitat "in altissimis". [...] ORATOR: Ut audio, cum sis idiota, sapere te putas. IDIOTA: Haec est fortassis inter te et me differentia: Tu te scientem putas, cum non sis, hinc superbis. Ego vero idiotam me esse cognosco, hinc humilior. In hoc forte doctior exsisto. ORATOR: Quomodo ductus esse potes ad scientiam ignorantiae tuae, cum sis idiota? IDIOTA: Non ex tuis, sed ex dei libris. ORATOR: Qui sunt illi? IDIOTA: Quos suo digito scripsit. ORATOR: Ubi reperiuntur? IDIOTA: Ubique. ORATOR: Igitur et in hoc foro? IDIOTA: Immo. Et iam dixi, quod sapientia clamat "in plateis". ORATOR: Optare aude quomodo' (*Idiota de sapientia* I,3); 'Putabam ego aliquando ipsam in obscuro melius reperiri. Magnae potentiae veritas est, in qua posse ipsum valde lucet. Clamitat enim in plateis, sicut in libello De idiota legisti. Valde certe se undique facilem repertu ostendit' (*De apice theoriae* 5).

⁵⁷ 'Nam cum ex universis paene climatibus magna cum pressura innumerabiles populos transire conspiciam, admiror omnium fidem unam in tanta corporum diversitate. Cum enim nullus alteri similis esse possit, una tamen omnium fides est, quae eos tanta devotione de finibus orbis advexit' (*Idiota de mente* I,52).

tion they know more about the human mind and its immortal character than philosophers can reach through long and strenuous efforts. This fascination is the reason why the philosopher wants to speak with the uneducated craftsman.

Otherwise than Thomas, Cusanus intends to take the position of the learned philosopher seriously. Theory has to take into account the perspective of the layman and his experiences in a fundamental way. If we want to know truth, we have to suppose that this is (also and perhaps primarily) lived and articulated in the practice of human beings. Even the learned philosopher is not able to have full understanding of truth as it is in itself. There are always other ways of seeing truth remaining, which we can not know. This is however no reason to despair. In conversation and dialogue, the different positions can be confronted with each other. In this conversation, a more fundamental measure can become manifest. Cusanus presents the *idiota* as a kind of phenomenologist who is observing his own occupations without being hindered by learned judgements and reflects on what is going on while making a spoon.⁵⁸ The spoon-maker claims to possess a creative ability which does not need any real object which his art imitates: 'The spoon has no other exemplar except our mind's idea of the spoon. [...] In my work, I do not imitate the visible form of any natural object, for such forms of spoons, dishes and jars are perfected by human artistry alone'.⁵⁹

The layman describes the process of the production of the spoon, whose exemplar is invented by the mind and which is realized in wood. However, the spoon is not realized in a perfect way. The spoon-maker describes his experience that the idea of the spoon which he has in mind is never fully realized by the one he makes. In fact it is the experience of every artist which is described here by the layman: the real and concrete work of art is still not able to fully and exhaustively express the artist's idea. There can still be alternative expressions, and although it is the artist's own idea, he does not seem to understand it as the ultimate idea. At the same time, the artist – in this case the spoon-maker – knows very well that he can only understand his own idea by expressing it in material and concrete objects. He has no choice. It is only by the actual making of spoons that he knows that the idea is not yet fully realized.⁶⁰ The spoon is an expression

⁵⁸ This example has been made famous by Hans Blumenberg's analysis of modernity in his *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt a.M. 1966, 20.

⁵⁹ 'Coclear extra mentis nostrae ideam aliud non habet exemplar. Nam etsi statuarius aut pictor trahat exemplaria a rebus, quas figurare satagit, non tamen ego, qui ex lignis cocleana et scutellas et ollas ex luto educo. Non enim in hoc imitor figuram cuiuscumque rei naturalis' (*Idiota de mente* II, h²V, n 62).

⁶⁰ 'Esto igitur, quod artem explicare et formam coclearitatis, per quam coclear constituitur, sensibilem facere velim; quae cum in sua natura nullo sensu sit attingibilis, quia nec alba, nec nigra aut alterius coloris vel vocis vel odoris vel gustus vel tactus, conabor tamen eo modo, quo fieri

of the idea, but it is not a precise one (*in nullo praecise*). Yet only at the moment when the artist really makes a spoon, is he able to know that it is not a precise expression. He will make more spoons, always knowing that the precise idea will never be produced.

With this description, Cusanus intends to show the necessary ‘concrete’ character of thinking. In the making of the spoon, a reflective process is going on, which turns around the ultimate measure of all things. The unreachable character of this ultimate measure is not to be understood as a tragic condition, but is the condition for further reflection. One does not need to have read books for this reflection, but an attentive eye which notices how thoughts and ideas are productive in concrete practice. The implication of this vision on the relation between theory and practice is that learning and thinking too can be seen as practical occupations. The theoretician has to realise that his thoughts can only be concretised in material reality. Through reflection on his own activities the layman shows a mirror to the philosopher.

Further on in the same book, the *idiotia* describes metaphysical thinking – the thinking in the perspective of the idea of truth – as the attempt of a painter who tries to paint his own painting. It is the ultimate goal and task of every painter to paint the art of painting itself. For Cusanus, the beauty of a painting consists not in a successful production of the likeness of the image with the nature outside of the painting, but in the expression of the principles and limits of painting itself.⁶¹ For Cusanus, the task of the painter to paint the art of painting itself

potest, sensibilem facere. Unde materiam, puta lignum, per instrumentorum meorum, quae applico, validum motum dolo et cavo, quousque in eo proportio debita oriatur, in qua forma coclearitatis convenienter resplendeat; sic vides formam coclearitatis simplicem et insensibilem in figurali proportione huius ligni quasi in imagine eius resplendere. Unde veritas et praecisio coclearitatis, quae est immultiplicabilis et incommunicabilis, nequaquam potest per quaecumque etiam instrumenta et quemcumque hominem perfecte sensibilis fieri. Et in omnibus coclearibus non nisi ipsa simplicissima forma varie relucet, magis in uno et minus in alio et in nullo praecise’ (*Idiotia de mente* II, *ibid.*).

⁶¹ ‘Ecce nosti mentem nostram vim quandam esse habens imaginem artis divinae iam dictae. Unde omnia, quae absolutae arti verissime insunt, menti nostrae vere ut imagini insunt. Unde mens est creata ab arte creatrice, quasi ars illa se ipsam creare vellet, et quia immultiplicabilis est infinita ars, quod tunc eius surgat imago, sicut si pictor se ipsum depingere vellet et, quia ipse non est multiplicabilis, tunc se depingendo oriretur eius imago. Et quia imago numquam quantumcumque perfecta, si perfectior et conformior esse nequit exemplari, adeo perfecta est, sicut quaecumque imperfecta imago, quae potentiam habet se semper plus et plus sine limitatione inaccessibili exemplari conformandi; in hoc enim infinitatem imaginis modo, quo potest, imitatur, quasi si pictor duas imagines faceret, quarum una mortua videretur actu sibi similior, alia autem minus similis viva, scilicet talis, quae se ipsam ex obiecto eius ad motum incitata conformiorem semper facere posset, nemo haesitat secundam perfectiorem quasi artem pictoris magis imitantem’ (*Idiotia de mente* XIII, h²V, n148-149).

is not only necessary, but at the same time *impossible*. If the painter would succeed in painting such a portrait, he would have failed his goal. For he would have painted all possible paintings, except one: namely the painting which expresses all those possible paintings itself. One does not need too much speculative power to understand that this process will never reach an end. Whatever the painter will try, the painting of painting always will escape his perspective. The painter is his own obstacle in reaching his goal: he will never be able to leave his point of view and the more he tries to do this, the more he is involved in his own way of looking.

But this is for Cusanus no argument at all to resign and not to undertake attempts to paint the art of painting itself, for this attempt is the 'essence' of the art of painting. The painter can discover the impossibility of his task only by his attempts to fulfill it. The only way to fulfill his task is to give expression to its impossibility. But how can he do this? Are there criteria for reaching this new goal? Cusanus seems to be aware of the paradoxical fact that the painter is confronted here with the same limits as before: it is as impossible to paint the definite impossibility [of the painting of the painting] as it is to make the last comprehensive painting. For Cusanus, there is only one way to escape from this dilemma: by painting unexpected and subtle turns or perspectives – as e.g. in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini-portrait in which the painter painted himself in a mirror⁶² – the painter can break open the prison of his own perspective. The discovery of being himself his own obstacle, results in a reversal of the perspective. For, through the expression of this discovery, he shows that what has been painted, could possibly be painted in infinite different manners. The reality which is depicted is so rich that there could always be made more paintings of it.

Cusanus introduces here the distinction between a living image and a dead one (*imago viva* and *imago mortua*). The painter of the dead image attempts to depict objects outside the painting in a naturalistic – one almost could say: photographic – sense. A living image on the contrary shows the dynamics between the painter and the measure with which he is wrestling. This dynamics is part of an infinite process which turns into infinity and is in this sense a process of identification with the divine measure. Layman and philosopher agree that it is the final task of human beings to become the living image of God *Himself*. We do not have to make works of art which remain outside the maker. Rather we have to relate the elements and contradictions in our existence in such a way,

⁶² See Sylvie Tritz, 'Ad imaginem et similitudinem: Bildtheologie, Malereitheorie und Kunstpraxis zur Zeit des Nikolaus von Kues', in: Inigo Bocken & Harald Schwaetzer (Eds.), *Spiegel und Porträt: Zur Bedeutung zweier zentraler Bilder im Denken des Nicolaus Cusanus*, Aachen-Maastricht 2005, 197-230.

that they express the divine measure. Then, we are not longer spectators of this work of art, but we become the painting ourselves, with a divine spectator.

The discovery that we are bound to our own perspective and that there are always perspectives escaping our view, is already expressed in the first main work of Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* (On learned ignorance, 1440) where he speaks about infinity. In an infinite universe, the centre is everywhere and necessarily identical with its periphery.⁶³ In other words: every place in the universe is centre. The whole reality can be reflected from everywhere in the universe. We are able to know *that* the centre is everywhere. However it is not possible for human beings to understand all centres at the same time. This is only reserved for God, who is the real Centre which can never be reached by rational arguments. In this tension between the concrete and the divine centre, man can be understood, in the view of Cusanus, as a microcosm in which the whole of reality is present, though in the way of this concrete being.

There is only a small distance between the concept of the microcosm and the figure of the layman. Theory, the vision of the divine centre, can never be reserved for only some. Every individual human being has to discover his own centre, in a search for the divine centre in his own (microcosmic) existence. This search never can be realised in a syllogistic-theoretical way. Therefore, the philosopher needs the dialogue with the layman who is able to show him that there are still perspectives which he does not know.

In short: there are a number of similarities both in the logic we have discovered in the *Imitatio Christi* and the philosophy of the layman as can be found in the work of Cusanus. In both models, it is the search for the inner measure of all things, which is central. Both in Thomas of Kempen and Cusanus, this measure can not be articulated by rational theories – not because of its irrational character, but because it is a *living* measure. For both thinkers, Christological aspects play a crucial role even if these are not elaborated in an objective theological way. The precise imitation of the living measure is in fact the only possible guarantee that reality is no subject to the narrowing measure of the *ratio*. (Christology breaks open rational thinking, not because there is something which can be believed for not-rational reasons, but because this living measure *itself* originates a more fundamental form of rationality with which human being can handle with reality.) Again, we find an important similarity between Cusanus and

⁶³ 'Propter quod machinam mundanam habere aut istam terram sensibilem aut aerem vel ignem vel aliud quodcumque pro centro fixo et immobili variis motibus orbium consideratis est impossibile. Non devenitur enim in motu ad minimum simpliciter, puta fixum centrum, quia minimum cum maximo coincidere necesse est. Centrum igitur mundi coincidit cum circumferentia. Non habet igitur mundus circumferentiam' (*De docta ignorantia* II,11, h I, p. 99/100, nr. 156).

Thomas: the stress on the concrete character of the way to be followed. One can not avoid this way by referring to a fixed theoretical opinion. For both thinkers it is a way of internalisation: it is ultimately the measure in ourselves that we have to search for. For both thinkers, this search is a very concrete matter, and its medium is the practical life. 'Thinking' is not reserved anymore for highly abstract and sophisticated scholastic treatises.

The experience of opposition and conflict has a central meaning in both models. Both thinkers are searching for a 'coincidence of opposites' (*coincidentia oppositorum*). Oppositions do not have to be resolved 'from the outside', but have to be experienced and internalised. This is not only (and even not primarily) expressed by the 'inner fight' of devotional life, but also in the friendly conversation between philosopher and layman, who discover in their opposite positions a more fundamental and fruitful unity. We have to be penetrated by the opposite (the 'other') of our own intimate judgements and are asked for answers to the questions we are confronted with. Finally there is the logic of conversation which is common to both authors. Only in conversations, the relative meaning of words and judgements can become manifest. This relativity – contrary to the logic of modernity – creates a dynamic space between words and the reality which is expressed in these words; and thus, the living, 'silent' measure of the divine becomes audible in human speaking. This idea of a converting conversation can be found both in Cusanus and Thomas of Kempen.

However, there is also a difference which is important for our investigation. Cusanus intends primarily to redefine the position of classical theory in the light of the dialogue with the layman. The *Imitatio Christi* on the other hand focuses on the layman and the way in which he is able to bring his existence into light. The polemical attitude towards learned theoreticians is almost totally absent in the work of Cusanus. The disregard of learned knowledge is only expressed in a ironic way by a friendly warning. One could read this change of accent as a careful implicit criticism of the radical disregard of learned knowledge by the *devotio moderna*. However, it seems that Cusanus has seen the explosive theoretical potential which is silently present in the pious way of the *devotio moderna* and has taken it a step further. In this sense the philosophy of the layman can be understood as an attempt to lead the implicit theoretical ideas of the *devotio moderna* into the realm of scientific knowledge.

4. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS – THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE LAYMAN

If it is true that the religious movement of the *devotio moderna* presupposed its own paradigm of rationality, which has been forgotten or even denied in 'modernity', what is the meaning of this model for a theory of spirituality today?

Primarily, it can deliver a contribution to the historical self-reflection of spirituality, in which the lived experience of faith is central instead of the abstract validity of arguments. But we hope to have proven however, that the opposition between rational argumentation and inner concrete experience is not a valid opposition in the perspective of the *devotio moderna*. Thomas shows that the concrete practice of faith bears measures in itself which are certainly rational. Beyond the liberation from prejudices is the word which shines through the dark chaos of opposites and dependencies and which offers clarification. The Modern Devotion did not only claim social or ecclesiastic right of existence for simple laymen, but this movement showed that the rationality of classical (theological and philosophical) theory was too narrow to reach its own intrinsic goal, namely the comprehension of the inner life and the vision of God. The logic of the *devotio moderna* offers therefore a reinterpretation of classical theory. The theoretical model of the *devotio moderna* demonstrates that the lived experience of God (spirituality) is always a rational process even if this rationality also exists in the awareness of the limits of rationality. The awareness of these limits can however only be productive inasmuch as these are understood in contrast with divine rationality. The space which is originated by this contrast is spirituality.⁶⁴

The tension between emancipative ('liberating') and 'specialist' aspects of the modern layman, which we discussed in the introduction, can also be found in the *Imitatio Christi*. The claim for spiritual specialisation is clearly rejected by Thomas. The way of the imitation of Christ has to be followed by every individual, again and again. This however does not mean that there are no criteria with which the faithful can answer the question whether he is on the right way or into which directions he should go. Paradoxically all these criteria are deduced from the awareness that the real measure for progression and specialisation lies only in God's hand.

The theme of 'grace' plays an important role in the *Imitatio Christi*. This grace however, does not mean that we do not have any comprehension of the way we have to follow. Interiority, humility, inner detachment: these are only some of the criteria which are products of the attempts to deal with grace. These are so to say 'virtues'⁶⁵ which are given by Thomas as food on the way of the faithful. Although grace – the divine measure – as such escapes all forms of calculation, we are able to think about the ways with which we are capable to deal with this

⁶⁴ This interpretation of a theory of spirituality is in strong opposition with theories like that of Peter Widmer, whose concept of a 'materialistic' theory understands mysticism as the 'otherness' of reason. See: Peter Widmer, *Mystikforschung zwischen Materialismus und Metaphysik*, Freiburg 2004.

⁶⁵ Paul van Tongeren, *Deugdelijk leven: Een inleiding in de deugdethiek*, Budel 2003.

unpredictability. This unpredictability of God is not an absolute, isolated moment. Grace is rather the expression of the difference between human and divine measure which are related by the concrete *imitatio*. In this process, no one can be a specialist, for it comprises the whole life. However learned a human being may be, he remains a layman if he starts the *imitatio*. The real specialist in this field is God himself. This is the critical moment of the *imitatio Christi* which we have to internalise again and again. With every progressing step, even in humility and inner awareness, it is only the divine light which we make more visible. Only he, who knows that he does not know, can make progress, as Cusanus would say in his *On Learned Ignorance*. And it is exactly this knowledge which is a liberating, emancipating knowledge.

But what kind of knowledge is it which is mediated by spirituality? In a functionalistic society, characterised by specialisation, there seems to be no place for comprehensive claims. Because of the universalising of trade mechanisms, the need to show clear and sharp profiles is increased in a disproportional way, as diagnosed by the German philosopher of culture, Hermann Lübbe.⁶⁶ In this sense, the much discussed religious fundamentalism is only one among possible variations of the modern commandment to live in an uncommitted way. In an universe in which everything is uncommitted, there is no limit which keeps us from taking *one* hypothesis for absolute. Perhaps the need of taking ideas and new authority for absolute is even greater than ever before. For there is nothing which can not be questioned, except perhaps the virtue of tolerance which should protect us from absolute claims, and even this virtue is nowadays subject of discussion and critics. 'Flexibility' is one of the principal words and values with which the hidden ideology of our society manifests itself. Nothing which is valuable can not be transformed or improved, there is no boundary which can not be crossed. 'Changing' is no accidental reality anymore which we can not escape and which we have to deal with, but seems to have become ultimate value, for which we have to strive. Lacking any other measure, modernity had to proclaim change as the ultimate meaning of our acting, thinking and living.

The domination of economic rationality is the consequence of this absolute flexibility. Those who were in a leading position yesterday can have lost everything today. Even firm and traditional institutes as the university, which were responsible for the unique flourishing of European culture, have to bow before the changing measures of market. All interiority – that is: the intrinsic value of ideas – seems to dissolve in this flood of functionality, which is in it self subject of changing. There is no foundation which is able to escape this flood and which does not become 'measured'.

⁶⁶ Hermann Lübbe, *Politik nach der Aufklärung*, München 2001, 32.

The emancipation from the hierarchical order, which has been characteristic for the 'old European' culture (Luhmann), seems to suppose that everyone is a specialist, that everyone is able to manipulate reality for his own interests. This model has, however, more in common with the scholastic theoretical paradigm than its modern representatives are aware of. For this model supposes that human beings are acting and thinking outside of reality. The model of the *devotio moderna* is deeply suffused with the awareness that we are always involved in the process of reality and that the rupture between man and reality can ultimately be seen as the unbridgeable tension between human and divine perspective.

With these considerations lies the answer which criteria in the tradition of the *devotio moderna* can make a contribution to an actual theory of spirituality. Such a theory is able to trace this tension between divine and human judgement in different social and cultural systems and elaborate it. This is only possible inasmuch as the 'theory' of the *devotio moderna* can be seen as an attempt to answer the same question as the one who challenged the leading modern thinkers of subjectivity: how to deal with our inability to articulate the real measure of all things and all our judgements? A theory of spirituality from the perspective of the layman is able to show in every form of social action and thinking that every specialist is in fact a layman. This requires a long and differentiated hermeneutical process. However, the same was true for the imitation of Christ itself. This spiritual hermeneutics of social systems and fields of experience, has as its goal to search again and again for the connection between darkness and light, between the exterior and the interior life. This spirituality shows, through the realising of its knowledge in concrete forms of life and action, the necessity to make a step backwards and to understand all absolute claims in the light of the path which, as Thomas of Kempen formulates according to the Gospel, leads from darkness into light. Spiritual hermeneutics can therefore be understood as the enlightenment of the Enlightenment.

SUMMARY

Both as metaphor and as social reality, the figure of the 'layman' belongs to the most fundamental paradigms of modern culture. The paradigm is characterised by a paradox, with which every actual theory of spirituality is confronted. On the one hand, there is the emancipative meaning of 'layman' which rejects every kind of authority. On the other hand, one can observe the increasing meaning of 'specialists' in our societies. Posing the question what 'spirituality' exactly means, one cannot avoid giving a model in which this tension is taken into account.

In this article we refer to an important text of the spiritual tradition of the *devotio moderna*, the Dutch religious reform movement in 15th century: the *Imitatio Christi* by

Thomas of Kempen. Not only can this work be seen as an attempt to develop a spirituality for laymen, but it seems also to offer a new theoretical paradigm for the expression of the concrete encounter with God, different from the abstract scholastic theological and philosophical models. A comparison between the paradigm of the *Imitatio Christi* and the 'lay-philosophy' of Nicholas of Cusa, who was narrowly connected with the *devotio moderna*, shows the theoretical meaning of this 'spiritual' work.

Inigo Bocken (1968, Antwerp – Belgium) is research scholar at the Titus Brandsma Instituut and at the Centre for Ethics of the Radboud University, both in Nijmegen (Netherlands), and has an Alexander von Humboldt fellowship at the Institute for Philosophy at the University of Hildesheim (Germany).

Address: Centre for Ethics, Radboud University, Postbus 9103, NL-6500 HD Nijmegen, Netherlands.

E-mail: i.bocken@cve.ru.nl