

## DEVOTIO MODERNA IN BOHEMIA

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„Devotio moderna“ refers generally to a lay religious movement which originated in the Netherlands in the late 14th century and whose founder is considered to have been Geert Groote (1340—1384). The research on the movement within this narrowly defined geographical area has been most fruitful, but the devotio moderna must also be viewed in a larger European context.

Eduard Winter has called particular attention to a similar phenomenon in Bohemia, especially in the age of Charles IV — i. e. prior to the emergence of the Dutch devotio moderna — which appears to have anticipated essential features of the Dutch movement and is to be seen in conjunction with early Bohemian humanism.

The bearers of this Bohemian reform movement — the Bohemian devotionists — were, in the first place, the first Archbishop of Prague, Ernst von Pardubice (died in 1364) and Konrad Waldhauser (died in 1369), a member of the order of Austin canons who preached in Prague: both received their education in Italy. A central figure, finally, was Milič von Kremsier (c. 1325—1374), whose personality, life and achievement bore a close resemblance to those of Geert Groote. Both were successful churchmen who experienced a profound inner emotional convulsion which led them to an ascetic life of preaching and the imitation of Christ. Their unrelenting severity toward both themselves and others made them the enemies of the mendicant friar orders, and neither was equal to this opposition. Still they managed to rally supporters and were forced to offer their converts — especially the women — the opportunity to practice the ideal of a life of apostolic poverty. Both thus became the founders of groups in which these people lived in common, without any statutes of an order or other prescriptions — Milič's „Jerusalem“, in the houses of the former prostitute quarter of Prague, and Groote's „Zusters van het Gemeene Leven“, in his parents' home in Deventer. Two personal documents of Milič which have been handed down attest to his attitude, spirit, motives and views: the *Libellus de Antichristo* and a letter to Pope Urban V (1368). But while Milič's work did not endure long beyond his death, more favourable external circumstances enabled Groote's pupils to develop and expand the organization, thus permitting it to become the so-called devotio moderna.

To the extent that it can be comprehended philologically, the devotio concept was applied in practically the same fashion by the Bohemian devotionists — as manifested in the „Malogranatum“ — and by the Dutch — Groote's applied mysticism and the writings of Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen. Common to both was an orientation toward the early Church and the promotion of the lay apostolate. A restaurative spirit directed against what was recognized as the evil legacy of the past was at least a contributory factor in the origin of the twin concept of devotio moderna: it was characteristic of both the

Bohemian and Dutch movements. The first evidence of this concept appeared in the Netherlands c. 1420.

The sources show that the reform movement in Bohemia and, in its initial period, in the Netherlands had similar, if not identical features. In the Netherlands it lived on, while in Bohemia it was extinguished soon after Milič's death, the surviving radical impulses being absorbed in the new movement of Hussitism. Thus there were indeed the rudiments of a *devotio moderna* in Bohemia, even though they could not develop fully. In any case, it seems clear that this phenomenon should not be viewed only in the form which appeared in the Netherlands.