

# Gerhard Groote - Laboring under Submission

## Introduction

The concept of “nations” (nationhood) is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the past, tribal entities, language groups, ethnic identities and cultural heritage were what formed borders in the ancient world. Empires (e.g., Greek, Roman and Ottoman) sometimes reached across these borders and created some integration, but generally did not breach the local commonalities. Just as often they were resented in various regions. Religion, however, often provided an overarching unity; the Roman Church in most of Europe formed a significant unity for the first time in that part of the world.

But throughout the early periods of human civilization, the idea of the common man having a significant influence over his rulers did not exist. In the Middle Ages, nobles, men of means, yes; peasants (the working class), no.

When we talk of the “world” at this time, Europe, which is to say, Christendom, must be our focus.

- The Americas were unknown in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and only began to emerge from pagan darkness in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.
- Asia was largely unknown and largely pagan, a source of invasions and imports, but otherwise of little interest.
- Europe, on the other hand, except for the eastern reaches, was under what was essentially a single religious umbrella – the Roman Church. And even in the east, though the authority structure was different, the Church was a dominant force.

Such was the basic situation as the world entered the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, what Barbara Tuchman has called the “Calamitous Century.” That is a fitting title, due mainly to three calamities that emerged during that 100 year period and threw Europe into upheaval:

- The 100 Years War beginning in 1337.

Basically a dynastic battle between France and England, the 100 Years War encompassed much of Western Europe at one time or another. Divided into 3 periods, only the early two periods (1337-1360 & 1369-1389) concern our story. The French army, defeated at Crecy and Calais (1346 & 1347) and again at Poitiers (1356), fell back upon the land, looting, pillaging, raping and levying exorbitant taxes. This led directly, two years later, to the *Jacquerie*, an ignoble and vicious peasant revolt that was, in turn, ruthlessly put down by the nobles, led by Charles of Navarre. In the aftermath, 20,000 peasants, many of whom had never been members of Cale's revolting army, were brutally slaughtered.

- The outbreak of the Plague in 1347.

The Plague was an Asian import. It first appeared in Europe in the Crimea and, later the same year, in Sicily. From there it spread northward. By 1351, it had reached Russia, thus covering all of Europe except the Kingdom of Poland. Death tolls varied, from 80% of the population in parts of Italy, to 30% in England and most of Germany. In Hamburg, the toll may have been as high as 60%. In Paris, at least half the population perished. By the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, 40,000 hamlets and villages in Germany alone were wiped off the map. One third of the villages in all of Europe were completely devastated.

- The Western Schism in 1378 – the division of the papacy.

Since Hildebrand, ecclesiastical authority had been acknowledged as centered in Rome. The "Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (1309-1376) upset this for nearly 70 years. It was followed by the Great Western Schism (beginning in 1378), this time establishing an Avignon Papacy as a *second* locus of ecclesiastical authority, seriously dividing the Church and the Empire.

These conditions shook Europe to its roots. The population was in upheaval, suffering from widespread death, destruction, and despair. Desperation and religious doubt began to characterize the attitudes and sensibilities of men throughout the continent.

### The Emergence of Groote

Into the midst of this unhealthy spiritual, physical and cultural low period in European history, in 1340, a child was born to a well-to-do family in Deventer, the Netherlands. The father of the family was a member of the merchant guild, an alderman of Deventer, who was an important figure in the emergence of what would become the most powerful trade cartel in the history of Northern Europe, the Hanseatic League. His name was Werner Groote.

The child was Christened Gerhard Groote and he was an only child, although he had an illegitimate half-brother named Bernard. Gerhard's early life was pleasant, so far as the record lets us see. He lived in opulent surroundings and was given all the advantages of a wealthy family.

But his time with his parents was short. In the late 1340s, the Black Death reached Deventer, and by 1349, Gerhard was an orphan. Both his parents died of the plague within a few weeks of each another, leaving the child of 9 years a millionaire, with considerable holdings of land, gold and other wealth.

Gerhard's care fell to an uncle on his mother's side, Johannes Ockenbroeck, and the child lived in the house in which he had been born. This uncle seems to have doted on the child and provided for him both a good home and a solid education. Ockenbroeck also had a care for Gerhard's great wealth and preserved it for him during the remainder of his minority. Groote studied first at Aachen and Cologne, then in Paris (Master of Arts in 1358) and Prague, finally returning to the University of Paris in 1363 to study canon law.

In 1365, Groote began to work with the local political leaders in Deventer. In early 1366, he went to Avignon to meet with Pope Urban V. While representing the needs of his home city, he also sought and received a second prebend<sup>1</sup> in Utrecht to add to the one he had previously been promised in Aachen. For several years, these two prebends provided for Groote a comfortable income from the church. This he spent in loose living and became devoted to the theory and practice of magic. In short, his life was one of profligacy and without piety. He was a womanizer and a playboy.

In 1374, all this changed. In Utrecht he met up with an old friend from his days in Paris. The man's name was John of Calcar, who had joined the Carthusian order and was living a pious life. After lengthy discussions with John, Groote was dramatically converted and made up his mind to mend his ways and devote himself completely to the service of Christ.

He traveled to the Augustinian monastery near Brussels and came under the influence of an octogenarian priest, John Ruysbroeck, a master of the contemplative life. While rejecting Ruysbroeck's radical mysticism, Groote gleaned from him two principle dimensions of the Christian experience: the *inner* life and the *active* life. Contemplation of Christ leads one to be devoted to Truth and to the love of God. This is the *inner* life. But it is to be matched by the *active* life: adoption of the Christian virtues and the practice of them in the world, among men. These two concepts in balance became the hallmark of Groote's living for the remainder of his days.

### Groote' Short Ministry

For 5 years, Groote prepared himself for service to God. He spent about half of this time sequestered in the Carthusian monastery near Arnhem, where John of Calcar had been Prior, but he never took the vows. In 1379, the monks urged him to take his

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<sup>1</sup> A salary paid to a "pastor" who may not have been a resident in the town of "his" church, and often was not an ordained priest. It was not uncommon for men of influence to receive multiple prebends without ever doing any work in the churches by whom they were paid.

new-found devotion, his reverent spirit and his acquired understanding and go preach to the people of the Lowlands. Armed with this encouragement, he went back to Utrecht where the bishop was his friend. He refused the priesthood, considering himself to be unworthy of such high office, but accepted ordination as a deacon.

Immediately he became an itinerate preacher. He traveled to Zwolle, to Kampen, back to Deventer, to Amsterdam and Leyden, to Haarlem and Ghent and to many other towns and villages. All across the Netherlands he went, speaking the words of Christ, and the people flocked to hear him. The churches were not able to contain the crowds. Farmers would leave their fields, pack their families into town to hear Groote's message. Merchants would close their doors and walk to the square to hear him preach.

His voice was raised into the tumult, the devastation, the despair of people living in the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century. God had prepared the soil for the seed of Groote's preaching and it took root. He supported the doctrine of the Church and faithfully attended Mass. The Creed, he said, was true and men must believe it. The sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist, were important, he insisted, and men should receive them. But the forms and the confession were not enough; one needed also to endorse and practice the *inner* life and the *active* life of the Christian. Love of God and love for our neighbor must be the hallmarks, not mere conformity to the forms of Christianity. This was Groote's message. It shaped a new model for Christian Europe and came to be called the *Devotio Moderna* (the Modern Devotion).

But that was not all. He turned his message to the clergy as well. To the people he preached in the vernacular. But the clergy he addressed in Latin. He excoriated them for their faulty living. Having lived himself on church prebends, and having spent time among the clerics and even the monks, he knew well the manner of living that was too common among them. He attacked their immorality, their greed, their hypocrisy. He challenged them to amend their ways, to become shepherds over the flock, instead of wolves among them. He challenged the mendicant orders for their

beggary and false doctrine. He chastised pastors and bishops for their simony. And he preached scorn against the secular priests for their open immorality and adulteries.

His ministry continued in this vein for 3 years. His fame spread and his message carried beyond the sound of his voice, as men were converted and practiced his teaching. A revival of repentance and faith was growing in north central Europe through the influence of the *Devotio Moderna*.

It was not to continue. Opposition arose from a predictable source. The Bishop at Utrecht was a moral and reform-minded man. He personally supported the work that Groote was doing. He was not offended by Groote's attack on heretics nor was he unsympathetic to the charges of immorality among the clergy. But one criticism rang true with him. It was the complaint from the mendicant monks that Groote was establishing new semi-monastic congregations, work that a mere deacon ought not to perform. This struck too close to upending the established order of the church and the Bishop felt forced to act. So, in the autumn of 1383, he issued an edict that henceforth no deacon was to preach in public.

Thus was the voice of Groote silenced in the public square. Together with his associates, he sent an appeal to Pope Urban VI, but pending a response from Rome, he would obey those in authority over him. This proved to be a momentous and fortuitous decision.

In 1374, shortly after his conversion, Groote had given his opulent ancestral home over to charitable purposes. While reserving two rooms for his own use, he turned the remainder of the house into a home for widows and unmarried women. The rules were simple. Honesty and moral behavior were required. Begging was forbidden and each inhabitant was to work according to her ability and deposit her earnings into a common purse which was used to maintain the household and provide sustenance for all. The women were encouraged to pursue the contemplation of Christ and

methodical prayer according to the teachings of the *Devotio Moderna*.

As time had progressed, Groote, together with his disciple and friend, Florentius Radewijns, extended the principle behind this program to young men and boys. Houses were procured, first in Deventer and later in Zwolle. These were made available for those who wished to submit themselves to the *Devotio Moderna*, learn a trade or prepare for a clerical life. This was the beginning of the **Brethren of the Common Life**. No vows were taken and participants were allowed to leave at will, but relatively few did, short of completing their studies. Enterprise was the order of the day and literacy was taught and encouraged. A common activity was the copying of books and manuscripts, work for which the boys were paid. As with the house for women, begging was strictly forbidden and all earnings were held in common and the bounty shared. It was these homes that formed the basis for the Franciscan complaint regarding “semi-monastic orders.”

Ironically, the very work that led the Church to forbid Groote from further public preaching turned out to be his greatest legacy. In the few months that were left to him on earth, Groote poured his energies into furthering the growth of this residential ministry. He also set about translating portions of Scripture and church hymns into the vernacular. He included marginal commentaries on the text, to aid his pupils in their understanding of God’s word. These manuscripts were then copied by the students and a corpus of devotional literature gradually accumulated and was disseminated throughout the country.

In June and July of 1384, there was a resurgence of the plague in the Yssel Valley and one of Groote’s disciples fell ill. Groote, following his own standards of the *active* life, insisted upon attending to the man’s needs himself. In this way, he was infected by the same disease that had cost him his parents and, on August 20, 1384, the short, 44 year life of Gerhard Groote came to an end. Radewijns was by his side, and in his last moments Groote directed

that he should carry on the work they had started together. The mantle had been passed.

Within a few short years, Communities of the Common Life and the homes for women had sprung up all across the northern continent. 38 schools and 87 houses for women were in place in the Netherlands and Germany by 1450 and the number continued to grow until the founding of the final community in 1505. These schools would change the world. The last of them, the school at Hereford, would not close its doors until 1841.

Erasmus, the father of Christian Humanism, studied in the school at Deventer, first learning his Greek there. Thomas à Kempis was also a student at Deventer and became a prominent teacher in the school at Zwolle. There he penned his timeless book, *On the Imitation of Christ*, a volume that has influenced countless believers for six hundred years. Nicholas of Cusa and John Wessel also studied at Deventer. Martin Luther, attended a Common Life school in Magdeburg in 1497. So also did a Common Life education touch Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, William Farel and Adrian of Utrecht, later tutor of Emperor Charles V. John Calvin, as well, received part of his early education from a former master in one of Groote's schools. In fact, there is not one single major figure in the Continental Reformation whose education was not, at one time or another, touched by the Brethren of the Common Life.

Thus, God used the wealthy playboy-turned-schoolmaster, in his humble and obedient response to established authority, to lay the foundation for the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. It is fair to suppose that Groote, had he disregarded the authority of the bishop rather than submitting to it, might have had a far less-reaching influence.