Cultural Dynamics in Late Medieval Europe

Late medieval and early modern Europe is characterized by a significant cultural transformation. As a result of this change, the dichotomy between the categories “religious” and “lay” and “Latin” and “vernacular” dissolved into a more diffuse situation and resulted in lay emancipation with regard to active participation in religious life. One of the most significant manifestations of this cultural transformation was the creation of new “reading communities” in addition to the traditional respublica clericorum, the learned community of literate intellectuals and religious (secular and regular clergy) who dominated cultural life through their control of Church institutions, schools and universities. Latin, the preferred language by the members of this respublica clericorum, was thus the official (and dominant) language of culture, science and religion. The new “reading communities” were formed by a non-Latinate, but generally literate, urban laity strongly involved in political, financial and commercial activities. The language of the members of this respublica laicorum, who were showing a growing interest in the organization of cultural activities and in the production of literary texts, was the vernacular, the traditional language of the illiterati and the laity. The growing textual production in the vernacular involved a challenge from a linguistic and a cultural point of view. It meant that the vernacular was emancipated enough to be used for the production of literature, for the transmission of knowledge, and for religious matters.
The development of the European vernacular languages towards a position almost equal to that of Latin was already emerging in France and Italy from the fourteenth century onward. Dante Alighieri wrote his treatise in defence of the vernacular, *De vulgari eloquentia*, in the early years of the fourteenth century. The French kings Jean II Le Bon and Charles V initiated projects for the promotion of the French of the Île-de-France as the new language for politics and science (*clergie*). In spite of the fact that Latin remained the only accepted language for the liturgy, as the arcane language of the divine, the cultural hegemony of Latin, the traditional language of the Church, school and university was no longer indisputable.

This late medieval and early modern cultural transformation has been a much debated topic in European research agenda over the last decades. The focus of this research, however, has been on didactic and moralizing literature, in which themes strictly related to the life and activities of lay readers are discussed: the relations between individuals and groups in the late medieval and early modern urban environment, in particular professional ethics, and family relations. The specific question of the emancipation of the laity, through active readership of religious literature in the vernacular, and in particular the active role of lay people in the transmission and in the production of religious knowledge is still an underestimated subject in medieval research, in spite of the growing interest in the study of religion as cultural manifestation and the significant advances in the study of late medieval religious movements.

Possible reasons for the scarce attention paid to this pivotal aspect of late medieval and early modern cultural life can be identified in the still dominant “protestant paradigm” in the study of religious history, as well as in the leading