
From the early nineteenth century, when scholarly work on the Devotio Moderna began, the research about this late medieval reform movement has been dominated by scholars from the Low Countries, particularly from the Netherlands. In the context of the rise of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, they were quick to appropriate this late medieval movement as being essentially Dutch and as a preparation for the Reformation. Almost irrevocably this involved Devotio Moderna studies in inter-confessional strife, with Catholic historians like the Nijmegen scholar R.R. Post and the Antwerp Ruusbroecgenootschap protesting that the Devotio Moderna’s roots were medieval and so essentially Catholic. Motivated by various concerns, all of them were out to put the movement forward as typical for the Dutch-speaking Low Countries.

In the last few decades, the study of the Devotio Moderna has developed into a truly international field, thanks to the contributions of the scholars around Nikolaus Staubach in Münster, to the increasingly international orientation of Dutch and Flemish scholars, and to the work of the American medievalist John Van Engen. Over the years, he has published many excellent studies on the subject. As for the book under discussion here, clearly it is the fruit of years of research, which only could have been written by a medievalist of his experience and erudition. *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life* marks the emancipation of the Devotio Moderna from national and confessional concerns. In the introduction, the author states his intention to discuss the movement in its late medieval context rather than with a 21st-century agenda of appropriation in mind. Fortunately, this approach has become more and more common in Devotio Moderna studies.

Van Engen provides a multifaceted history: institutional, social, and intellectual. Furthermore, contrary to most books on the Devotio Moderna, he does not limit himself to its heartland around Deventer and Zwolle, but treats the full geographical range. Furthermore, he goes beyond the early years and follows the movement up until the Reformation. As indicated by the title, he focuses on the most innovative group within the Devotio Moderna, the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. Other groups, such as the Tertiaries—by far the largest segment of the Devotio Moderna—and the Regular Canons and Canonesses of the Chapter of Windesheim, appear in supporting roles.

In a carefully constructed argument, John Van Engen develops his main thesis: that eventually the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life invented a
A new vision of what a religious, that is, a truly pious life after the model of Jesus Christ and the apostles, entailed. First of all, he stresses the international context, in which the Devotio Moderna occurred. Especially in the first chapter, but also continuing this theme throughout the book, he provides an overview of the late medieval culture of conversion. From the twelfth century onwards, this took the form of an interiorization of the Christian faith, for instance, in such figures as the Cistercian, Bernard of Clairvaux. In the thirteenth century, the adherents of the Poverty Movement reinvented the religious life by placing greater stress on poverty, which became the defining characteristic of the imitation of Christ and the apostles. These apostolic poor practiced different lifestyles. The Mendicants formed religious communities: they argued that the combination of their apostolic work, poverty, and vows made them the most perfect imitators of Christ. Others chose to live in communities without vows, such as the Beguines and their male counterparts, the Begards. The “modern-day devouts,” as Van Engen prefers to call the adherents of the Devotio Moderna, worked in this context. Like their predecessors in the Poverty Movement, they strove for an imitation of Christ. As is clear from the biographies that they wrote about outstanding brothers and sisters, they attempted to live as the poor did. Van Engen provides detailed descriptions of the way in which their sober life contributed to their spiritual ascent. Strikingly, unlike the Beguines’ biographies, theirs do not focus on spectacular journeys into the innermost self neither on visions. Instead, the devouts concentrated on moral growth: they trained for the virtues through various exercises such as manual labor and study. Like the Beguines, the first devouts created communities of men and women without vows, the Houses of Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. This form of organization, between the cloister and the world, fitted their apostolic ambition. Living among secular city folk, they were able to provide spiritual care in various forms. Brothers of the Common Life worked as preachers; furthermore, both male and female communities of devouts attempted to educate their fellow citizens by talking to them or, in the case of men, organizing conventicles in their houses. It is striking that the Devotio Moderna appealed to women most. Within the movement, the Sisters of the Common Life were always a large majority. In the thirteenth century the same had been true for the Beguines as opposed to the Begards.

The Beguines had been regarded with increasing suspicion by the ecclesiastical and secular authorities, and some had been accused of heresy. The same befell the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life. The Mendicants in particular attacked them virulently: the accusation of the Groningen Dominican, Matthias Grabow, before the Council of Constance is the most famous exam-