

Cover Page



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Summary

This dissertation focuses on the Middle Dutch text *De dialoog tussen Eckhart en de leek* (the Dialogue between Eckhart and the Layman), an enigmatic spiritual piece of writing from the mid-fourteenth century. A layman and a master converse about a broad range of religious and social subjects. The student remains anonymous, as the title suggests, and the master is named after Meister Eckhart, the famous German theologian and mystic. Here, the controversial Dominican is actually called by his name, which is rather exceptional for Middle Dutch literature. Up until now the exact influence of Eckhart or of his ideas on this text have been difficult to determine. And apart from this unclear relation to the historical Eckhart, it was difficult in general to place this text in the tradition of spiritual literature from the Low Countries. This was – as I argue in the introduction to this book – not in the least due to the research framework habitually used for studying literature in the vernacular. There is, after all, a persistent division present in modern research between religious and worldly (didactic) literature. In the introduction, I problematize this division and hence pave the way for the *Dialogue* to be considered as a text which sits neatly atop the fault line between the world and its monasteries and convents, between a worldly and a religious experience of faith. The text may well be our most important witness to the beginnings of a process of socioreligious changes, in which ordinary laymen, too, wanted to expand the spirituality they had previously internalized.

I In between practical and contemplative literature, a preliminary exploration

In the first chapter I address the multiple layers which characterise the *Dialogue*. I then discuss two aspects of the text's content: mysticism and – as I shall call it here – practical theology. The mystical content describes the personal experience of and unification with God in two separate ways. On the one hand the interaction between knowing God and loving God enhances the process of drawing closer to God. On the other hand strong emphasis is put on the identification of one's own will with God's will. This then foregrounds free will and intentionality in moral and spiritual life.

With regard to practical theology the text criticises various aspects of spiritual practice. We witness the two protagonists express severe reservations considering the practise of pilgrimages, the adoration of Mary and the saints and the importance of visions. This critique on spiritual practices is one of the most pronounced of sacred medieval literature. Using David Kangas' theorising on Marguerite Porete's attenuation of the virtues, I argue that akin to Porete's work, this text posed ideas which effectively challenged the religious consensus which had taken shape amongst members of the church and laity at the time. It is particularly when the contemplations on mysticism in this conversation turn into and give rise to comments on the actual practise of faith, that the function of the text is best exemplified. The joining of mysticism with practical theology enabled the *Dialogue* to offer spiritual guidance to the regular layman who sought to expand his internalised spirituality, but at the same time was uncertain about the way of life this required of him.

II The division of roles in the *Dialogue*. A reconsideration

In modern research the strong emphasis on the critical character of the *Dialogue* has partly been based on the text's rather atypical role division. Although the *Dialogue* employs the question-answer scheme of the traditional 'Lehrdialoge', scholars have stressed that, compared to the pupil figure in other medieval dialogues, the layman has an uncommonly large share of text assigned to him. As such, one could argue that at certain moments the layman outstrips the master and takes the lead in the conversation. The fact that a layman was allowed to play such an important role could then, consequently, be considered an example of the text's critical attitude towards the church.

The main goal of this chapter, however, is to show that numerous mistakes were made in the distribution of the text over the two protagonists. I argue that an important share of the text was until now considered to be part of the laymen's speech, but can actually be attributed to the Eckhart character. I provide an updated role division for future analyses of the *Dialogue*. Using the edition of Franz Josef Schweitzer as a basis, all the problematic passages are discussed and – where possible – a more logical and correct distribution of lines is provided.

The arguments in favour of reassigning the specific passages are in part based on a comparison of the different textual variants, as well as on an analysis of its structure. The new role division of the text also seems to facilitate a better understanding of its contents. It results in a more differentiated profile of the two protagonists, which in turn underpins the adjusted structure even further and announces the idea of the *Dialogue* as a typically antihierarchical text. I discuss the layout of the text by way of different text witnesses, but I also pay attention to what these variants can tell us about dating the *Dialogue*.

I conclude this chapter with a comparative study of the *Questien van eenen*

goeden simplen menschen, the version of the *Dialogue* which was handed down in the Wiesbaden manuscript. I argue that the *Questien* was altered in a systematic way to tone down the critical voice of the text. This exemplifies how even shortly after it had been written, the *Dialogue* was already considered problematic or at least unsuitable for a particular audience.

III 'Noch soe rade ick dij, dattu swijchst!' On speaking and remaining silent in the *Dialogue between Eckhart and the layman*

In the third chapter I elaborate on the insights from the second chapter and examine the consequences of the proposed new role division for the interpretation of the text. To that end, I discuss the socially critical passages that are the common thread of the conversation. The issue at stake is whether laymen are allowed to join in with discussions on subjects related to higher theology or the divine. During the conversation between the layman and the master, this problem of being allowed one's say manifests itself in two ways. To begin with, it is one of the conversation topics within the dialogue itself, in that it is part of the social criticism the layman and the master express when they discuss the religious developments of their time. This is predominantly the case where the laymen criticizes members of the clergy for their habit of ridiculing and judging the regular laymen because of their intellectual ambitions. It is also at these instances that the new role division appears to be crucial for gaining an understanding of the two protagonists and their respective, complementary, function in setting the tone of the text. If the layman is incensed at the repressive attitude of the clergy, the Eckhart-character is more nuanced in his statements. Essentially the master supports his interlocutor and tries to join him in his frustrations. At the same time, however, he also checks his pupil. Eckhart's major concern was to calm the layman down. By the end of the text, he seems to have succeeded at having the layman take up a less hostile, and maybe even more humble position.

Furthermore, the problem of lay participation becomes apparent from the fictive premise of the conversation itself. From the beginning, the layman was never entirely sure whether he was permitted to converse on God and the Supreme in the first place. It seems to have been the duty of the master-character to do away with this doubt and to formally grant the layman this permission by asking him further questions. So here, too, the interaction between both characters is paramount. Normally, lay people only had the right to talk about theological subjects under the guidance of a confessor. But this text provides an alternative to that constraint, and therefore the dialogue-genre can be considered to have been applied here as a legitimatizing strategy, which protected both the author and the readership. The latter was able to listen in on a discussion which, in spite of its sharp comments, played itself out within the safe surroundings of a student-mas-

ter dialogue; whereas the former could, by interspersing the severe criticism of the layman with soothing words by the master, bring more nuance into his message.

IV 'Even though they are begging for their bread.' The attack on and defence of the lay people of good will

What sources were used for the *Dialogue*? Literal parallels between the *Dialogue* and other texts always proved hard to find, especially those that would suggest a direct lineage or the borrowing of material. In the fourth chapter I connect the *Dialogue* to other spiritual literature from the fourteenth century by using a quantitative and thematic methodology.

For this part of my research I focus on one of the key-themes of the text: the concept of 'the good will' and the terminology on 'the lay people of good will' ('goedwillige leken' in Middle Dutch). I argue that in the *Dialogue* 'good will' was used in a very specific way, which differed from its usual, somewhat general use. 'Good will', which normally referred to a characteristic of a devotee's personality, has instead been personalized and transformed and refers to a specific group of lay people. By using this terminology for the 'people with a good will' as its focal point, the text can be linked to the mysticism of Brabant and in particular to the work of Jan van Leeuwen, Jan van Ruusbroec's pupil at Groenendaal. Both the *Dialogue* and Van Leeuwen's work speak regularly of the 'people with a good will' and describe this sort of people in a strikingly similar manner. In both cases they are associated with the same semireligious groups and share the same key characteristics. Despite the similarities in description, both authors took a different stance on the type of spirituality they associated with these lay people. Whereas the *Dialogue* clearly supported this group on their quest for a more profound spiritual life and indeed offered them a program to develop their rigorous form of spirituality further, Van Leeuwen displayed scepticism. He doubted the profoundness and longevity of the new kind of life these lay people wanted to pursue.

This chapter thus not only aims to bridge the gap in our knowledge of the (social and geographical) context in which the *Dialogue* has functioned, but it also sheds some light on the work of Van Leeuwen and his authorship, which is still not fully understood. At the same time it follows the traces of a broader debate, which was fundamentally important to Middle Dutch spiritual literature, but until now has hardly been researched. Authors seemed compelled to take a stance on the endeavours of lay people who wanted to develop an interiorized spirituality independent from any official church-order. Even if these authors were not doing so explicitly, their social views did influence their mysticism and practical theology.

V Antipodes and pole stars. World view and cosmology in the *Dialogue*

Chapter five offers a study into a topic which is addressed regularly throughout the text but until now has been almost completely overlooked: the subject of cosmology and natural science. Throughout the *Dialogue* we find paragraphs on the planets, stars, firmaments, sun and moon, and their influence on different parts of the earth. After having shown how natural science passages are embedded into the entire text, I try to explain the importance of this cosmological content. In doing so, my aims are twofold.

First, I want to give an idea of the level of knowledge the author had of these scientific topics. How well-read was he (or she) and – more importantly – what knowledge was the audience expected to have? A comparison of these scientific passages with the typical, though not abundant scientific literature of the Low Countries shows us that the *Dialogue*, in its time, offered a modern and updated view of these scientific topics.

Moreover, I want to uncover what could have been the purpose and function of cosmological content in a spiritual and even mystical work. I would argue that, unlike other literature on cosmology, the author did not merely want to pass down scientific knowledge and information. The cosmological theme also played an important part in the development of the mystical theology. More precisely, the ideas on the characteristics and nature of the celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, planets and stars (considered spiritual entities in this text) were used to develop an understanding of the nature of the soul, and, consequently, to explain the relationship between the soul and God. In this respect the celestial bodies are not only used as an illustrative metaphor but also as a literal analogy and a physical intermediate between the human soul and God.

Conclusion

For a long time the somewhat unsystematic and repetitive use of mystical concepts and language proved an obstacle in fully recognizing the *Dialogue's* importance. The text was considered to be a work not fully sketched out, a somewhat disorderly text, and therefore not representative of the great Middle Dutch mystical tradition.

By using a variety of approaches and methodologies this book offers a new understanding of the *Dialogue* and tries to take its full complexity into account. The text has emerged as a multi-layered work. The new, revised role division shows how the two protagonists each played their specific parts, but were at the same time subtly characterized. In this way they embody the two-faced nature of the text and its social criticism.

Without a doubt, the *Dialogue* was one of the most important witnesses of a process of spiritual modernization and democratization which would change the very fabric of fourteenth century spiritual life. The text proved especially influential where it translated abstract theology into statements on concrete religious attitudes. It is on this practical level then, that we encounter the ideas which seem to embody the spirit of the historical Meister Eckhart.

But the *Dialogue* didn't provide its readers with a fully detailed theology or spiritual program. Rather, it can be seen as a product of an experimental era in which, at the eve of the Modern Devotion, lay people with a spiritual orientation were still deliberating on the proper steps towards building a life dedicated to God. These doubts on how to proceed can be deduced from the tension between statements on 'high' theology, always safe and orthodox, and the more daring statements at the level of 'low' and practical theology. This duality gave the text the flexibility to on the one hand formulate fundamental social criticism, and on the other hand provide an orthodox and strategically safe and measured answer to the frustrations which gave rise to this criticism.