Analysing Late Medieval Devotional Practice

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Introduction: Depicting Devotional Practice in Nürnberg 1449

In 1449 the family Starck donated an epitaph to St Sebald Church in Nürnberg. The upper part of the image shows a depiction of the Birth of Christ centred between clusters of mythological, symbolic and allegorical images all referring to the birth-scene in the middle. Four Old Testament images show Gideon asking God for a sign of victory (a prediction of the Virgin Birth); Moses with the burning bush (a reference to Mary’s purity); the flowering staff of Aron (a symbol of Mary’s virginity, or as a version of Biblia Pauperum from around 1450 comments: ‘Hic contra morem producit virgule florem’); and Ezekiel before the closed gates of the temple (symbolizing that none other than God could enter the womb of Mary). The importance of the Virgin Mary in the Incarnation is accentuated. The bottom part of the image, clearly separated from the rest of the image by a painted boarder, shows the members of the Starck family, all kneeling in prayer with their heads turned upwards. Their bodily positions are exact copies of the Old Testament persons depicted above.

This image contains information about the two central aspects of late medieval religious life: it depicts a late medieval comprehension of the theology of the Incarnation and it depicts the ways in which the Incarnation was appreciated by a medieval devoted family. Or, to rephrase, the image depicts the interaction between theology and devotion, how actual devotional acts articulate – or is articulated by – specific theological ideas; the members of the Starck family gaze upwards and kneel in devotion as if they were inspired by the Old Testament figures performing their devotional poses right above. As such, the image informs the beholder – both the modern interpreter and the medieval devotee – about the performative and theological aspects of devotion, or what I have decided to call devotional practice.

The following paper will attempt to develop a concept of practice adequate for studying late medieval devotion. The paper will attempt to answer two focal questions; what is devotional practice and how can it be studied in a historical perspective.

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1 This paper is a first draft of a Theory of Science-paper and should be read as work in progress. Thoughts on habitus and performance have not yet been fully developed and Bourdieu’s concept of practice is so far only mentioned in passing.
Towards an understanding of late medieval devotional practice

Devotion or *devotio* was the preoccupation of the late medieval religious mind and continuously dealt with in visual material, such as the Epitaph Starck, as well as a large body of spiritual, contemplative and theological writings. In the much copied and widely popular devotional text *De Imitatione Christi*, Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471), wrote: ‘At the Day of Judgement, we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done; not how eloquently we have spoken, but how holily we have lived.’ Devotio was the personal and collective establishing of interaction with God as opposed to a dogmatic teaching of God belonging to the premises of theological study. It was the heartfelt expression of faith and to live holily was to acknowledge that life came from God and then actively and repeatedly pay tribute to Him and the whole of Creation.

The medieval concept of *devotio* had an immanent aspect of something done, what we might call practice. Practice is not a medieval term, contrary to devotion, but a modern term that can be applied as a concept summarizing and characterizing all these different devotional doings. Practice is, thus, the active expression of devotion. Analysing devotional practice is concerned with the acts of religion, where they were performed and by whom, the instruments used and the experiences obtained. The acts could be anything from silent prayer to violent self-inflicted pain or pilgrimage; the position could be a pilgrimage sight, a local church (during ritual performances or in a quiet corner) or at home; the devotee could be a celibate nun who had devoted her whole life to Christ or a peasant working the fields most hours of the day; the materials could be images, prayer books, written ‘amulets’ or medals and the experiences could be of eternal bliss, love or presence of God. Devotional practice was expressed in various ways, always combining many of the above mentioned factors in complex ways. Practice are the ways in which devotees communicated with God and the world around, expressed through, as well as inspired and instructed by, a variety of different modes of communication: language, gesture, space, music, visuals, rituals and ceremonies.

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Devotional practice is, if defined as above, a vast field of study and the following considerations are therefore confined to referring mainly to devotional practices performed inside the church by the visiting congregation with the use of images.

Studying medieval devotion as practice is a strategic direction of the analysis towards an anthropological optics as well as it is an attempt to introduce modern concepts as constructive elements for understanding history (this will be expanded on below). It does not imply that practice is a special feature characterizing some devotions, or that practice and devotion are two separate things. Practice cannot be reduced to form and devotion cannot be regarded as substance. The medieval Veronica-legend, which was often depicted in late medieval altarpieces, is an illustrative example: When Christ walked the long way to Calvary, a woman, Veronica, dried his face with a piece of cloth. Miraculously, the face of Christ was imprinted on the cloth. After the Crucifixion of Christ, Emperor Tiberius was cured from a deadly illness upon showing devotion to the image in the cloth. The imprint had the same powers as if the Lord had been present, but only because Tiberius articulated it as such and approached it with a devoted heart. His actions towards the image were completely intermingled with what he in his heart believed to be true. In the actual performance of devotional practice, substance and form becomes intermingled to such an extent, that it becomes impossible to decide which is which.

This inseparable connection between devotion and the practice of it is closely connected to the medieval distinction between body and soul, or the inner and outer man. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) writes about the homo interior and the homo exterior as two different human natures. The exterior man is the one who sins and is connected to the world by his senses. The inner man is the man who seeks God, the new man, the good man. The exterior man has to be removed in order to reveal the inner man, as when a sculptor removes bits of wood to reveal the perfect sculpture inside the rough log. An important part of the exploration of the interior man is in fact the actual taming and scraping away of the exterior man. The exterior man is not repudiated but used actively in the devotional work. Gerard Zerbolt (1367-1398), a central figure in the devotio moderna which spawned The Netherlands

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in the 14th century, characterized the spiritual life as ‘a battle between man’s natural desire to creaturely things and his innate desire to ascend to God in whose image and likeness he was created.'\(^7\) The spiritual ascension was an inner practice, but at all times connected to the taming of the body and worldly matters. Devotional practice was a matter of both body and soul as well as it was a matter of intellectual practice and a way of being in the world.\(^8\)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has argued that a person never relates to practice with his intellect alone but is involved with his body and the bodily recollection and memory.\(^9\) Similarly, medieval devotional practices were in the world; they related to it and interacted with it as a part of the social sphere.\(^10\) Devotional actions performed in church integrated the sacred space and its materials and this bodily aspect of devotional practice was most likely an important reason for the widely accepted use of devotional materials as intercommunicative channels for obtaining interactions with God. Images (the medieval term *imago* covered both painted and carved images) in the churches became one of the most popular of such instruments for interaction. At one and the same time they functioned as devotional devices and inspiration and instruction in devotional practice.\(^11\) Thomas a Kempis described the following practice in *De Imitatione Christi*:

> Remember the purpose you have undertaken, and keep in mind the image of the Crucified. Even though you may have walked for many years on the pathway to God, you may well be ashamed if, with the image of Christ before you, you do not try to make yourself still more like Him. The religious who concerns himself intently and devoutly with our Lord’s most holy life and passion will find there an abundance of all things useful and necessary for him. He need not seek for anything better than Jesus. If the Crucified should come to our hearts, how quickly and abundantly we would learn!\(^12\)

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\(^7\) Gerrits, G. H.: *Inter Timoren et Spem. A study of the theological thought of Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (1367-1398)*. Leiden: Brill 1986, p.237. The perspectives on the two nature of man are developed in Gerard Zerbolt’s two spiritual treatises *De Reformazione* and *De Ascensionibus*.


\(^10\) *In Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* from 1912 Emile Durkheim argued that religion is part of the field of the social because it was lived and expressed in social settings. Durkheim and Max Weber as well, were preoccupied with normative aspects of religion; the rituals, the morals and the magic practices, and did not regard act as participation.


\(^12\) ’Memor esto arrepti propositi, et imaginem crucifixi tibi propone. Bene verecundari potes inspecta vita Jesu Christi, quia necdum magis illi te conformare studiasti, licet diu in via Dei fuisti. Religiosus qui se intente et devote in sanctissima vita et passione Domini exercet, omnia utilia et necessaria sibi abundanter ibi inveniet. Nec opus est ut extra Jesum aliquid melius quærat. O, si Jesus crucifixus in cor nostrum veniret, quam cito et sufficienter docti essamus. Religiosus fervidus bene omnia portet et capit, quae illi jubentur.’ Thomas a Kempis: *De Imitatione Christi* book 1, chapter 25. Translation from the original by the author.
In the description above the movement from the outer level of conscience to the inner is expedient. By internalizing the image of the Crucified Christ into the heart, and concern himself with his life and passion, the devotee is immediately linked with Christ. The image, a physical material representation of Christ, actualizes the devotional conscience in the mind and becomes productive for devotional progress at the same time as the person it depicts is actualized and venerated. Beholding an image was a physical and mental practice venerating God while at the same time being an attempt towards devotional progress (in itself an act of veneration).

The logic of devotional practice

In the Starck Epitaph the members of the family are all positioned in the same way; kneeling with folded hands. This was the standard devotional pose – it is continuously described in texts and depicted in images – and here it is also used by The Virgin Mary, St Joseph and the Old Testament figures. The image postulates a historical connection between ancient Judaic devotional practices and contemporary 15th century practices. Being brought up in a religious society and taught by devotional norms, the bodies of the members of the Starck family have an innate recollection of the devotional meaning this particular pose had. This stresses an important feature of late medieval devotional practice, namely repetition. In devotional life several practices were continuously repeated; kneeling with folded hands, recitation of the three most common prayers Pater Noster, Ave Maria and Credo, the use of images, rosaries or prayer books and the hearing of Mass. Images also contained numerous repetitions of biblical stories, moral themes, symbols, theological themes or devotional practices. These practices were all part of a collective cultural memory. Faith and the practice of it constituted a collective understanding of the world as well as it was constituted by it.

But devotional practice was not always performed in the same way. Devotion could – and should – be expressed in various ways, which was a common theme explicitly expressed in devotional literature (and implicitly in other modes of expression);

Not everyone can exercise the same devotion, one suits this person, another that, and different exercises are suitable for different times, some for feast days and some again for weekdays, while others are needed in times of temptation and others for days of rest and peace. Some are suitable when we are sad, others when we are joyful in the Lord.¹³

¹³ ‘Non possunt omnes habere exercitium unum, sed aliud isti, aliud illi magis deservit, et pro temporis congruentia diversa placent exercitia, quia alia in festis, alia in feriatis magis sapiunt diebus, alii indigemus tempore tentationis, et alii tempore pacis et quietis. Alia, cum tristamur, libet cogitare, et alia, cum laeti in Domino fuerimus.’ Thomas a Kempis: book 1, chapter 19. English translation from the original text by the.
Edward Said has argued that ‘texts within the Judea-Christian tradition, at whose centre is Revelation, cannot be reduced to a specific moment of divine intervention as a result of which the Word of God entered the world; rather the Word enters human history continually, during and as a part of that history.’\(^\text{14}\) This resembles Hartmann Tyrell’s characterization of Christian devotion as communication with God, a communication going both ways. Devotional practice is, if understood according to Said and Tyrell, always guided by some degree of divine communication and, in many late medieval examples, even direct divine interaction and inspiration. The late medieval theologian and chancellor of the University in Paris, Jean Gerson (1363-1429), wrote two treatises on mystical theology and stated the following observation:

> It is apparent how someone is easily brought in this or that way to contemplation, for the actions leading to such activities are latent in the persons who experience them. For the senses are inclined to obey the spirit manifesting itself from above, provided it has its proper sign, meaning that it is appropriate for the person taken up in that spirit.\(^\text{15}\)

The choice of practice is, thus, not a matter of completely free choice but of understanding and obeying what is manifested from above. The medieval devotee is guided by some sort of inner sense of practice, an inner disposition and not an intellectually accepted or affected idea. Godly intervention was indeed a recurring topos in Late Medieval Spiritual writing and images to the extent that one might argue that divine inspiration was a sort innate logic of the practice of devotion. To let oneself be guided by intuition in devotional practice is often praised in devotional texts such as *Modus Orandi Sancti Domini* which described and depicted nine different ways of prayer of the Holy St Dominicus. His practice of applying different bodily positions and ways of talking/praying according to his immediate inspiration was regarded as an extreme expression of holiness. Medieval devotional practice was never one-dimensional but always unique and bound to the specific situation.

According to medieval theological and devotional thinking all meaning comes from God. But, because of the fallen state of man, this meaning is obscured in creation. That is, the meaning of God is manifested in many different ways and through different channels. The medieval theological attempts to understand God and creation were sensible to all these different signs and meanings and were constantly aware of not reducing one sign to one

meaning. This idea is reflected in the *quadriga*, the four-fold analytical practice dealing with the historical, topological, anagogical and allegorical meanings of biblical texts.\(^{16}\) Biblical texts were understood to express all these different meanings at one and the same and presented as non-hierarchal. Bachtins concept of polyphony or heteroglossia – that a text has more meanings and therefore can be met with many different and equally adequate receptions – seems to be an echo of medieval understanding of meaning. Polyphony was completely institutionalized and found in all parts of the religious culture, not the least images. Not one devotional practice would be the right one in front of one specific image. Any image could be used in different ways (for commemorating the past, for paying tribute to God, for asking for help or in ritual contexts). In the Reformation debate about images, one of the Catholic opponents listed not less than six reasons for the importance of images in devotional contexts and all these reasons represent different ways these images could be used by devoted Catholics.

Devotional practice is an extremely complex structure of thought and actions and is perhaps most adequately understood in the way the concept of practice has been developed by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Outline of a theory of practice*. He argues that practice is situated, dynamic and constantly transforming and that it never performed in obedience to a rule. Bourdieu, nevertheless, also states that practice always follow some sort of social norm or theoretical model.\(^{17}\) The Epitaph Starck with its unique cluster of images represents a visual example of a devotional situation. It was donated by the members of the Starck family, most likely merchants, who wished to commemorate dead family members. The practice of donating an image to a local church was a frequently used act of devotion whereby a family took part in the communal devotional society at the same time as it represented the family-members as devoted Christians. The image showed the family members performing the same devotional practice – kneeling with their hands folded – as the Biblical figures and thereby postulating a universal practice not only used here and now by all Catholics, but in the past as well. The Starck Epitaph, thus, contains reference to what Bourdieu would have called subjective and objective structures of practice.

Bourdieu’s concept of objective structure is linked to his development of the term *habitus*. Bourdieu developed his term after reading an essay *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* by the influential art historian Erwin Panofsky who was also the farther of iconology/iconography. Panofsky had found the term in Thomas Aquinas and used it in his

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\(^{16}\) This is explained by among others Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* q.1, art.10.

attempt to understand the building of the (first?) Gothic Church St Denis by Abbot Suger as a material manifestation of theological Scolasticism. To Panofsky, habitus was an individual disposition formed by a collective discourse, a structured field of action. In his reflections on Panofsky’s text, Bourdieu developed his concept of habitus as a collective discourse, a historical totality and structure. And this collective ‘program’ (as it was called by Bourdieu) does not need an individual enterprise to be expressed and it is expressed without any strategic attempt. But whereas Panofsky and Bourdieu stress the structural aspects of habitus, Aquinas original concept was in fact much more dynamic. He used the term habitus to describe the human capacity to reiterate (repeat) actions and the structure of thought made up of all these repeated actions. Habitus determines and organizes action in a dialectic correspondence with reason and can be understood as a virtue, a disposition or form which, through the aid of reason, has stamped itself as a mark into passion. Habitus is a kind of nature, a ‘scut natura quaedam’ in the constitution of the human body and mind. According to Aquinas, habitus has a fixed centre because all actions come from and are inspired by God, but it is dynamic because it continuously attempts to recreate itself according to a virtuous ideal (in the same way as devotional practice is both inspired by God and an immanent directing in the human creature).

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus was developed in order to understand the dialectics between objective and subjective structure of practice, but this is a dialectics completely unknown to Thomas Aquinas. In his concept of habitus the repetition and dynamics are basically movements in the same direction. In Bourdieu’s distinction objective and subjective are – because of his understanding of power and symbolic power as social forces determining action – two separate forces pulling in different directions (as Victor Turners distinction between structure and anti-structure in ritual). To Thomas Aquinas conflicting directions would not be a problem, but the whole point. Transformation of norm was possible exactly because of the stability of God. Devotional practice had exactly this immanent scheme of norm and transformation. Transformation was part of the devotional practice itself; transformation of practice as well as transformation of the practitioner himself, as an inner logic of practice.

A distinction between objective and subjective dynamics of devotional practice suffers from the same constraints as the distinction between inner and outer aspects of devotion; it is

possible to foreground these features in every devotional practice, but it would be missing the point of the logic of devotional practice. What seems most appropriate is to understand late medieval devotional practices as not acting according to certain rules but as actions whose immanent logic is a constant articulation of this logic itself. To be inspired to find astonishing new ways of action, sometimes even provocative or irritating belonged to the logic of devotion. Devotional practice was, because of its immanent acceptance of variety, choice, creativity, inspiration as well as sense of collective tradition and ritual practice, an extremely dynamic factor embedded in medieval society.

Devotional practice could, however, only be practices within certain limits, although these limits were not completely defined in advance: devotion was only regarded as devotion as long as it was performed in accordance with the Christian way of thinking. Everything else was non-devotion, heresy and distortion of faith. What kind of influence these boarders had on the practice of faith within the premises of devotion is a question of importance but will not be dealt with here. I will only comment that medieval writing and images often show interest in defining boundaries and creating doctrine on the matters of faith, but at the same time keeping the room for discussion wide open. One example will have to suffice here: when the highly acknowledged and austere Cistercian monk Bernhard of Clairvaux attacked the gothic architectural style for what he regarded as superfluous ornamentation, it did not result in a dogmatic sanctioning of either gothic architecture, the devotional use of its images or Bernhard himself.

The performative quality of devotional practice

According to Althusser, and with him Bourdieu, practice only sees what it intends to accomplish, but is not aware of the strategies it uses to produce these accomplishments. But in case of medieval devotional practice this might no be a completely sufficient characterization. Devotion transformed and progressed by its innate logic and by way of interaction between different kinds of practices. The changes and continuities of devotional culture did not follow certain strategies formulated by the ecclesiastical hierarchy or the lay population. Instead its transformations can best be described as arbitrary or ad hoc. Devotion was performed out of faith in what it did, and out of conviction that it led to anticipated achievements. J.L. Austin has emphasized the performative quality of certain kinds of verbal statements, so-called speech-acts. According to his theory, words can do something when uttered under the right circumstances, such as when the priest in the Catholic Mass utters the

words ‘Hoc est Corpus’ and the bread then becomes the body of Christ. Similar research has stated that gestures, spaces and objects have parallel ability to ‘do something’ to a situation, that the performing of certain acts has transformative influence. When regarding late medieval devotional practice as performance, it is not to characterize the Performers as dancers, actors or artist (in a theatrical understanding of the term), but as interacting and doing something to themselves and the world around. By performance Ronald Grimes means actions that eliminate the dichotomy between thought and action and that focus upon the body as the centre for such fused thought-action dynamics. But the medieval attempt to create reciprocity between body and soul to some extent attempts to eliminate the distinction within the devotional experience. The distinction is important because the goal is to overcome it.

By applying a performance-perspective it is possible to investigate which specific actions triggered certain devotional experiences. A devotee articulating an image into a devotional practice, instantly performed a transformation of the self and the world around. This understanding of devotion has its main focus on the communicative actions and modes of expression themselves (the words uttered, the bodily gestures involved, the spaced inhabited, the materials incorporated and the situations they occur in) as well as what they did to the devotee. Devotional practice was, however, never solely bound to the sphere of the individual experience, but interacted with the outside world. It has been argued that for example the medieval Mass can be regarded as a performance, a staged theatre, with the congregation as spectators. But it must be underlined, that performance was first and foremost active participation. The congregation participated in the performance of the Mass, as well as the devotee participated in the ongoing devotional communication between heaven and earth. To what extend devotional practice can be characterized as rituals or ritualized is open for discussion.

**Studying Practice in History**


22 Schechner has stated that performance in theatrical terms is separated from real life and is outside time whereas rituals are efficacious, meaning that they do something. He sees performance and rituals as two separate actions. Schechner, Richard: *Essays in Performance Theory*. 1977

23 One of the important aspects of performance studies has been to develop a distinction between theatre and ritual. Such theories have been developed by, among others, Richard Schechner, Manfred Phister and Ronald Grimes. For an introduction see Suydam, Mary: ‘Background: An Introduction to Reformation Studies’. *Performance and Transformation. New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*. Mary A. Suydam and Johanna E. Ziegler (eds). New York: St Martin’s Press 1999, pp. 1-25.
What is studied here is not the cultural transformation of devotional practice or, for that matter, cultural continuity. It is a study of details, a study focusing on situatedness of practice and the enormous space of action possible within this field and with an awareness of the dynamic quality of it. The choice of a specific period is not intended to insinuate a coherent devotional culture; it is a stopping of time, simply a way of slowing down the speed of continuities and changes and focus on a specific aspect of medieval religious culture at a specific moment in history in its diversity and polyphony. Approaching devotional practice as a space for creating meaning is foregrounded on behalf of synthesis or, for that matter, dynamics of change.

Hopefully the considerations made so far have indicated two central aspects of methodological approach; first of all that the methodology incorporated in the investigation of a specific historical phenomenon can be conducted as a communication between past and present ideas, and secondly, that images provide useful information about the past.

The interpreter of history always arrives, as Weber has stated, *post festum*. Medieval devotional practices are very distant in both time and ways of thinking of the world. Direct anthropological observation of these practices is not possible. Analysis of past practices relies on source material and it is a study that is in nature interdisciplinary since it has to combine all kinds of different materials; biographies, *vitae*, theological, spiritual and meditational literature, images, architecture, interior space and descriptions or depictions of rituals. An attempt to reconstruct practice by piecing these different sources together is bound to fail because of the inconsistency of the material. Furthermore such an attempt would postulate that I as historian would be able to step out of my own social and historical position and into another, which constructivists and post-structuralists for years have argued to be impossible. These methodological positions have as a consequence been preoccupied with the idea of the historical investigation as colonization of the past and its sources.

According to Michael Ann Holly it is, however, possible to approach the past without falling into the reconstruction category or the fear of colonization. She has argued that all images – and this can be referred to all sources – communicate, not only with people in the past, but also with people of today. The situation in which the communication takes place is of cause different; often the images studied have been removed from their original settings in the churches or they have been subject to changes or hard conservation and some images have been destroyed completely. The source material might not be representative of the original body of material accessible to the medieval devotee. But nevertheless, according to Holly, we
are, to some extend – able to understand the rhetorical constructs present in the images.\textsuperscript{24} Sources communicate and articulate the beholder with information on how they should be ‘understood’.\textsuperscript{25} The historical consciousness is formed by history itself. The communication between past and present is not an object-subject communication where a dead and silent object is persuaded to talk a language the modern interpreter can understand, but a subject-subject relation where the two communicative participants mutually articulate each other and constitute meaning. The application of the performance-perspective can also be expanded to say something about the performative effect medieval devotional practice has on the modern observer. To the modern interpreter understanding the iconography of medieval images, their distinct style and rhetoric and their theological and liturgical meaning, represents an intellectual challenge. We seek to understand the intrinsic iconographic meaning. But an investigation of devotional practice informs us that images could be articulated in many ways To the medieval devoted beholder, these aspects were of secondary importance whereas the devotional appeal and invitation was of primary importance.

Conducting history of practice as sketched out above, does not intend to approach a true account of the past. Instead it is an actualization of historical ideas in communication with the present in order to make the past comprehensible to a modern public. Only if the past is positioned vis a vis a modern way of thinking does it become possible appreciate its culture. To help bridging past and present ideas and create an understanding is one of the productive forces of history. Understanding devotional practice in a Catholic historical setting might – it is my hope – help to gain an overall understanding, appreciation and acceptance of different cultures and their ideas.

\textit{Concluding remarks: The Starck Epitaph Revisited}

As the sketchy description of the Epitaph Starck above has indicated, medieval devotional practice is affixed with the following characteristics: it consists of a bodily position and a subject of devotion. But not only does the image depict these actions in a void; they presented these practices to others who visited the church, they were copied and internalized. The use of


instruments in devotional practice became the meeting-point between body and soul, the inner and outer man. The family members in the Starck Epitaph present a set of devotional practices that could be copied by the beholder, and the image clearly tells the beholder how this devotional practice should come about. In copying the bodily practices of the biblical persons, the members of the Starck family not only take part in a universal practice of devotion, they also re-enact and re-actualize the devotion to and adoration of Christ. The devotional commemoration of past events makes the prototypical biblical adoration present, and the family becomes part of a long tradition. And the devoted Christian performing the same devotional practice, kneeling with folded hands, becomes part of the same history. The image thus binds different time-levels together; the devotional practices performed by the family members produce movements in three directions: it transports the members of the Starck-family and the beholder back in time as well as it makes the past present. Furthermore the image makes sure that the family is remembered in the future, in the same way as the devotee praying in front of this image will be inscribed in the constant human longing for future salvation. Finally (hopefully), in the end the portrayed members of the family and the devotee will be granted a place in heaven.

The devotional instrumentality of the Epitaph is hinted at in the image itself. Within the image, there is a subtle reference to a ‘dialogue’ between image and devotee: the upper part of the image is divided from the rest by a frame, thus simulating an image within the image. What the members of the Starck family is looking at is not the holy persons, but a depiction of the holy persons with its specific theological implications. When kneeling or saying a prayer in front of this image, the devotee would perform the same devotional practice as the Stark-family and the holy persons depicted and as a result become part of the universal practice of devotion. The epitaph Starck exemplifies how medieval devotional practice was at one and the same time universal, individual, collective and habitual; it is arranged in concentric circles of devotional levels beginning with the adoration of the Child by the Virgin Mary and Joseph, thereafter revealed in the gospels, anticipated by nature/mythology (Physiologus), adored by the Old Testament figures, presented to the Starck-family and, finally, gazed upon by devotees visiting St. Sebald. The epitaph creates a sense of devotional community, not just here and now, but across boarders of time and space. This is the habitual and collective aspect of the specific devotional practice depicted here. On the individual level, the donation of this particular image represents the Starck family’s unique choice of devotional focus. Not that devotion related to the incarnation was at all rare, or, for that matter, the practice of donating images, but by depicting the family members kneeling before
a cluster of selected images, in unique combination, the theological focus becomes highly individualized. St Sebald contains numerous donated images, all with their specific features. Performing ones specific devotional practice publicly – and this is what a donated image also does – was a way of interacting with the social. The medieval devotee was inspired by its surroundings and acted according to the things they experienced and saw. This was not a culture were people were oblivious of their position in the world. On the contrary, these preliminary investigations reveal a culture of people with great mental and bodily self awareness as well as an amazing ability to balance between the individual and the collective aspects of religion.

Bibliography


Tracing the devotional beliefs and practices of everyday people during the late Middle Ages through documents is tricky, as most were written with other purposes in mind. To make up for this, it is necessary to examine the abundant material culture that survives from this period. By analyzing a variety of finds and comparing them with well-known objects used by the upper classes, it becomes evident that ordinary people shared the same religious views and practices. To study the York play’s position relative to late medieval mnemonic practices, I frame my analysis within memory studies, enriched with the more specific insights offered by social-psychological, neurobiological and cognitivist studies of memory.