

Bas de Melker, *Metamorfose van stad en devotie. Ontstaan en conjunctuur van kerkelijke, religieuze en charitatieve instellingen in Amsterdam in het licht van de stedelijke ontwikkeling, 1385-1435* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2021, 550 pp., ISBN 9789087049270).

This volume is based on the PhD dissertation defended by Bas de Melker at the University of Amsterdam in 2002 but never published. After the author's death in 2018, a team of researchers prepared the manuscript for publication and added an epilogue, reviewing relevant scholarship that appeared since the original defense of the work.

De Melker's research agenda centered on the rapid transformation of Amsterdam from a cluster of four rural settlements along the Amstel, with a single parish church that grew out of a manorial chapel (the *Oude Kerk*) around 1385, into a bustling city with two parish churches, half a dozen hospitals, and no fewer than sixteen religious houses, more than any other city in Holland, by 1435. The book is thus a study of urbanization and religious change considered as interdependent processes.

Fundamental to this transformation was of course economic change: the emergence of commerce and the growth of cloth production as well as other local industries, such as construction and roperies. The accumulated capital allowed Amsterdam's elite burghers to invest in new forms of piety. De Melker argues that the changing layout of the city, with its more densely populated neighborhoods traversed by tiny alleys, reflected a new religious landscape: 'the city's outward appearance underwent a dramatic change (...) because the burgher's inner nature had changed. In that respect the city owed its transformation to a change in the burghers' devotion' (469). Three important concepts underpin his argument. De Melker distinguishes between 'participative or active' and 'instrumental or passive' devotion. Entrance into a religious house exemplified the former, since by doing so the burgher made a commitment to a more intensive religious existence with lasting personal implications. A donation to a religious institution for pious purposes belonged to the latter category: it was merely instrumental in promoting one's salvation and did not affect the person's life. De Melker further invokes the concept of a 'market for salvation', or the range of options available to the burghers of Amsterdam to further their salvation, all of which were offered by religious institutions or corporations (confraternities) in competition with each other and for comparable prices. Religious change can then be understood by shifts of behavior on that marketplace and between participative or instrumental forms of devotion.

De Melker first defines those concepts and presents the essentials of Amsterdam's urban development sketched above (Chapter 1), before outlining the contours of 'old' or 'traditional' devotion up to 1385, centered on worship at the parish church. This *Oude Devotie* was shaped by principles of collective identity and internal solidarity, typical of agrarian society; charitable giving, aimed at specific social needs, rested on Christian ideals of mercy (Chapter 2). The rest of the book (Chapters 3 to 6) focus on the 'New Devotion' after 1385, starting with an analysis of the ways in which religious houses were set up. These houses were only rarely due to a single founder. Indeed, De Melker finds that some were the product of semi-specialized developers working in tandem with the city government and clergy, while most – particularly after 1400 – were not created as monastic or semi-monastic houses but grew progressively out of informal communities of lay men and especially women, a phenomenon usually associated with the Modern Devout. Summarizing the success of that movement, De Melker observes that it came just at the right moment in Amsterdam's history, at the point when social and wealth gaps widened and sentiments of communal solidarity were waning. The subsequent feelings of alienation stimulated both instrumental and participative forms of piety among broad layers of urban society, including women. However, the newly formed 'market for salvation' proved to be a boon for instrumental devotion coupled with growing individualization, which in the next centuries dominated religious and charitable life in the city.

It is impossible within the brief space of a review to touch on all the original insights offered here, from the financial 'cost' of founding a monastery to the familial dimensions of chantries, not to mention the invaluable data on individuals and lineages of Amsterdam's elite and the importance of place and space at every juncture of the city's development. As a longtime staff member of Amsterdam's City Archives, De Melker appears to have consulted just about every document available for the period under review and beyond that – the book skips frequently to the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Sustained comparisons with other cities and other regions, however, are few. De Melker often operates in a historiographical vacuum, rarely engaging with other historians, and the world outside Holland seems nonexistent. Here, the epilogue provides useful context for his discussion of the 'market for salvation' and the process of individualization, while gently adjusting some of his findings.

For all its riches, the book does not always convince. Sometimes, De Melker's bold statements are followed by caveats and exceptions tucked away in later pages or notes, and the categorical distinctions he often suggests (for instance between participative and instrumental devotion) turn out to offer overlap in practice. The process of individualization, which De Melker sees as the running thread through many observed changes, should not be confused with inner reflection or inwardness: he is usually thinking only of individual agency in contrast with family traditions or collective attitudes, and one

suspects that in elite milieus, where lineage and social status remained vital for centuries, the individual was not as decisive as De Melker assumed. I also have doubts about the disparity between 'old' and 'new' devotions. Upon closer inspection, De Melker bases his description of traditional religion on a very small number of documents, and sometimes he ignores what does not fit his assumptions. For instance, he dismisses the beguinage, attested as early as 1346, as unimportant because it supposedly was not 'monastic', even though many historians have shown that beguine life was often viewed as a desirable alternative to the monastic. Because the surviving archives do not contain any gifts to the beguinage until 1390, De Melker even states that there were no gifts, and he concludes that the citizens of Amsterdam were little interested in the beguinage. That is hard to believe since by that time it had grown from a single house into a full-sized *begijnhof*, covering a good chunk of real estate at precisely the moment urbanization took off; it seems impossible that beguines acquired all that land solely with their own money.

In short, we should not take all of De Melker's claims at face value. Indeed, can we really expect religious practices to be transformed from 'old' to 'new' because Amsterdam's population grew from approximately 4,000 to 8,000 people? Even by fifteenth-century standards, that made it only a small city, at most, and one hesitates to endow it with the characteristics of much larger (and more modern) urban centers. Still, despite those reservations, the book remains an intriguing and important contribution to the history of late medieval religious life in the Low Countries and to the early history of Amsterdam.

Walter Simons, Dartmouth College