Religious Poverty, Mendicancy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages

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Abstract
The idea and the ideal of religious poverty exerted a powerful force throughout the Middle Ages. “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff,” Christ had commanded his apostles. He had sternly warned, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter into the kingdom of God.” And he had instructed one of the faithful, who had asked what he needed to do to live the most holy sort of life, “if you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Beginning with these biblical injunctions, voluntary poverty, the casting off of wealth and worldly goods for the sake of Christ, dominated much of medieval religious thought. The desire for a more perfect poverty impelled devout men and women to new heights of piety, while disgust with the material wealth of the church fueled reform movements and more radical heresies alike. Often, as so clearly illustrated by the case of the Spiritual Franciscans and fraticelli in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the lines separating devout believer from condemned heretic shifted and even reversed themselves entirely depending on how one understood the religious call to poverty. Moreover, the Christian ideal of poverty interacted powerfully with and helped to shape many major economic, social, and cultural trends in medieval Europe. As Lester Little demonstrated over two decades ago, for example, developing ideals of religious poverty were deeply intermeshed with the revitalizing European economy of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries and did much to shape the emerging urban spirituality of that period.

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Religious Poverty, Mendicancy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages

MICHAEL D. BAILEY

The idea and the ideal of religious poverty exerted a powerful force throughout the Middle Ages. "Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff," Christ had commanded his apostles. He had sternly warned, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter into the kingdom of God." And he had instructed one of the faithful, who had asked what he needed to do to live the most holy sort of life, "if you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." \(^2\) Beginning with these biblical injunctions, voluntary poverty, the casting off of wealth and worldly goods for the sake of Christ, dominated much of medieval religious thought. The desire for a more perfect poverty impelled devout men and women to new heights of piety, while disgust with the material wealth of the church fueled reform movements and more radical heresies alike. Often, as so clearly illustrated by the case of the Spiritual Franciscans and fraticelli in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the lines separating devout believer from condemned heretic shifted and even reversed themselves entirely depending on how one understood the religious call to poverty. \(^3\) Moreover, the Christian ideal of poverty

1. An early version of this essay was presented at a symposium on medieval poverty held in November 2000 at Claremont Graduate University. I would like to thank Nancy van Deusen for organizing the symposium and inviting me to participate. I am also grateful to Robert E. Lerner for reading a later version of the article and offering valuable comments and suggestions.

2. Matthew 10:9–10, 19:24, and 19:21 respectively; quotes taken from the New Revised Standard Version. All other translations in this article are my own.


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interacted powerfully with and helped to shape many major economic, social, and cultural trends in medieval Europe. As Lester Little demonstrated over two decades ago, for example, developing ideals of religious poverty were deeply intermeshed with the revitalizing European economy of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries and did much to shape the emerging urban spirituality of that period.4

Ideals of voluntary poverty continued to interact with other social and cultural forces in the later Middle Ages as well, throughout the fourteenth century and particularly in the early fifteenth century. This form of poverty was, needless to say, a matter quite apart from the very real and entirely involuntary privation that beset so many people in medieval Europe. Yet, because of its powerful religious overtones, the idea of poverty was as powerful and compelling, in different ways, as its reality. My principle focus here will be on the relation of voluntary poverty to religious reform, and some of the diverse results that developed from the interaction of these two powerful religious ideals. The idea of reform had been central to the church throughout the Middle Ages, indeed since the earliest days of Christianity.5 Especially in the late Middle Ages, however, reform became an overriding concern in many areas of Christian society, as it would obviously remain throughout the profound religious upheavals of the sixteenth century.6 Religious reform was always, to some extent, concerned with questions of religious poverty, given that poverty was such a central Christian ideal. Nevertheless, approaches to poverty—what sort of poor life was proper, and for whom—could and did vary considerably. The religious clergy differed from the secular, religious orders differed amongst themselves, and even within individual orders, sometimes dramatically different approaches to poverty might prevail.7 Beyond cloister walls and the confines of parish churches, the idea of poverty also seized many among the laity of Europe.

7. Again the Franciscans are the most obvious example. See above, n. 3.
Concerned over the moral implications of wealth, lay people often felt themselves drawn to and inspired by the impoverished *vita apostolica* practiced especially by the mendicant orders of the church, lavishing on these poor orders tremendous support and, somewhat awkwardly, great material wealth. Certain lay people even felt themselves called to participate directly in this life. When they did not enter the established mendicant orders outright, they became semiregular tertiaries, or they became beghards and beguines, associated loosely and informally at best with the approved religious orders.

Here I want to focus on two examples that will highlight all of the issues just mentioned—poverty, and especially mendicancy, as an issue for both secular and religious clergy, different approaches to poverty between religious orders and even within individual orders, the attraction poverty held for many lay people, and the hostilities and conflicts that all of these complex and intermeshing approaches to poverty could instigate or, at the very least, in which debates over poverty could be developed. The first example will be that of the so-called Basler Beginenstreit, a prolonged and bitter series of attacks on beguines, including Franciscan tertiaries, directed at the allegedly illicit voluntary poverty and mendicancy practiced by these devout, semireligious lay people. This extended and extremely successful wave of persecution occurred in the city of Basel from 1405 to 1411 and was orchestrated mainly by a friar from the Dominican priory in that city named Johannes Mulberg. The second example will con-

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cern the intense debate about the beguine way of life, again centering mainly on the issue of the beguines' poverty and mendicancy, which took place some two decades later at the great ecumenical Council of Basel, and the profound defense of beguines and lay poverty in general made there by the Dominican theologian Johannes Nider.\textsuperscript{11}

These two examples share many similarities that make a comparison between them interesting and intriguing. First, and rather mundanely, they both occurred in the same location, namely the city of Basel. Also, the main points contested in each instance were virtually the same, both ostensibly and in reality as well (for the actual points of conflict and dispute often lay hidden beneath the apparent issues under debate). Finally, in each case, the central figure was a member of the Dominican order. Yet Johannes Mulberg and Johannes Nider had far more in common than just the shared habit of the black friars. They were both leading members of the observant movement, that is, the movement for reform, within the Order of Preachers. In fact, the two men knew each other personally. The younger friar, Nider, had served for a time as a traveling companion of the older Mulberg and deeply admired his mentor in the reform.\textsuperscript{12} Although they shared the same deeply held reformist convictions, however, Nider and Mulberg reached completely opposite conclusions in terms of the virtue and value of beguines. Mulberg was a harsh persecutor, while Nider was one of the most ardent defenders of the beguine status in the early fifteenth century. As I shall demonstrate here, the real factors underlying suspicion and persecution of beguines in the late Middle Ages involved issues of poverty. Thus the different approaches taken by Mulberg and Nider to beguines were shaped largely by their attitudes toward and concerns over poverty as developed in the context of the reform movement within their own order. Ultimately, that their positions on beguines differed so completely was due to a subtle yet

\textsuperscript{11} Nider is best known as an important authority on witchcraft. See now Werner Tschacher, Der Formicarius des Johannes Nider 1437/38: Studien zu den Anfängen der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen im Spätmittelalter (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2000); and Michael D. Bailey, Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). In addition to witchcraft, my book also discusses Nider's writings on what he termed the "lay religious"—see esp. 64–73. Also on this subject see John Van Engen, "Friar Johannes Nyder on Laypeople Living as Religious in the World," in Vita Religiosa im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Kaspar Elm zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. Franz J. Felten and Nikolas Jaspert, Berliner historischen Studien 31, Ordensstudien 13 (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1999), 583–615. Another recent general study is Margit Brand, Studien zu Johannes Niders deutschen Schriften, Dissertationes historiae fasc. 23 (Rome: Institutum historicum Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1998).

\textsuperscript{12} Of Mulberg, Nider would write, "socius itineris sepe esse merui huius sancti viri." Johannes Nider, Formicarius 2.1, ed. G. Colvenen (Douai, 1602), 99–100.
profound shift in the observant Dominican attitude toward poverty that occurred precisely between the periods when these two men, only a generation apart, were most active.

The reform movement within the Dominican order, like reform movements springing up in many—indeed, ultimately, most—other religious orders of the church in the late Middle Ages, was deeply concerned with issues of proper religious poverty, both within the order and in the world at large. The first proponents of Dominican reform were, as we shall see, extremely strict in their interpretation of proper religious poverty and equally zealous in the application and enforcement of their understanding. The early observant position on poverty caused tremendous strife within the order—one need only think of the better known conflict between spiritual and conventual Franciscans to appreciate the divisions that disagreements over poverty could generate in a religious order—and, from all appearances, would have condemned the reform movement to ultimate failure. Critical to the examples under consideration here, the early observant position on poverty also seems to have generated significant conflict between proponents of reform and the devout laity, those who sought to share in the Dominican order’s mendicant ideal.

The first phase of Dominican reform gave way, however, to a very distinct second phase, and the first generation of observants gave way to a second generation, no less zealous in their ideals, but more pragmatic and flexible in their strategies to attain their goals. This second generation of reformers ensured the ultimate success of the observant movement within the Dominican order. From a small minority they grew, by the end of the fifteenth century, to dominate the Order of Preachers (a situation mirrored in many other orders as well, in which observant movements ultimately came to dominate). This second generation also returned to a position, more traditional for the mendicant orders, of close support for devout lay beguines. More generally they returned, it seems, to a position common to many religious orders of the late medieval church, advocating an essentially monastic morality and spirituality for the laity, to whatever extent the

laity were willing and able to accept it. All these developments, the examples considered here will make clear, were closely bound up with issues of poverty, both within the Dominican order and in the order’s perception of and reaction to lay beguines. Beyond the Dominican order and the events explored here, these developments helped shape the religiosity and drive the religious history of Europe in the century before the Reformation.

Before we come to these examples directly, however, in order to be in a position to understand the broader scope of these developments and to clarify the underlying circumstances that informed these events, both the attack on beguines in Basel in the early 1400s and the defense of beguines written in that same city in the 1430s, some background on the general situation of the beguines in the later Middle Ages is necessary. It has often been noted that this situation was frequently, indeed nearly constantly, precarious. Ever since beguines first appeared in the early thirteenth century, and especially since the Council of Vienne in the early fourteenth, these devout lay women had faced condemnation and persecution from both ecclesiastical and secular authorities. The point I want to stress here is that, whatever the explicit nature of the accusations and charges brought against beguines at any particular time, the issue of lay poverty and mendicancy, and the profound clerical ambivalence towards these practices, almost always lay at the root of the conflict.

I. BEGUINES AND LAY POVERTY IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

Throughout the later Middle Ages, the beguines and their far less numerous male counterparts the beghards had been a problem for ecclesiastical officials, especially bishops trying to order religious life in their dioceses, and other clerical authorities such as canon lawyers and theologians, attempting more basically to define the character of proper religious life for different social groups and classes. Unable to fit beguines into any established category, neither lay nor religious, neither cloistered nor secular, authorities looked on such people with suspicion at best. Their borderline status made them easy targets for

challenges of heresy, and many clerical authors began to use the term "beguine" freely as a synonym for one of the most detested heresies of the later Middle Ages, namely the heresy of the Free Spirit.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps even more dangerous than charges of heresy, however, which beguines could at least deny, were attacks on their very form of life. Even though almost all beguine communities eventually placed themselves under the supervision of the mendicant orders, and many actually entered the orders as communities of lay tertiaries, their position remained a perilous one. Many clerics were profoundly uneasy with the notion of lay people, especially lay women, attempting to lead a strict religious life by following vows of chastity, obedience, and of course poverty.

The condemnation of beguines by clerical authorities began almost as soon as the beguines themselves appeared, but such attacks escalated significantly in the wake of the Council of Vienne, held in 1311 and 1312, and with the famous decrees against the beguines that emerged from this council (although they were in fact only finalized and formally issued several years later by Pope John XXII in 1317).\textsuperscript{16} As one scholar has noted, the century from Vienne to the Council of Constance (1414–18), marked a "hundred years' war against beghards and beguines" carried out by the church particularly in German-speaking lands.\textsuperscript{17} The Vienne decrees \textit{Ad nostrum} and \textit{Cum de quibusdam mulieribus} (entering canon law as part of the Clementines—Clem. 5.3.3 and 3.11.1 respectively) precipitated this war, in which the final major engagement was the wave of persecution in Basel in the early 1400s, and they did much to define the issues around which the war was, ostensibly, fought. \textit{Ad nostrum} described beguines and beghards in terms of an organized heresy, an "abominable sect of certain wicked men, who are commonly called beghards, and certain faithless women, who are called beguines." The decree then listed eight errors of which these people were supposedly guilty, essentially defining the antinomian heresy of the Free Spirit that so concerned clerical authorities in the later Middle Ages. \textit{Cum de quibusdam} went even further, beyond charges of specific heresy, and condemned the beguine form


\textsuperscript{16} On the history of the Vienne decrees, and possible variations between the original conciliar and later published versions, see Jacqueline Tarrant, "The Clementine Decrees on the Beguines: Conciliar and Papal Versions," \textit{Archivum Historicum Pontificum} 12 (1974): 300–308.

\textsuperscript{17} Kieckhefer, \textit{Repression of Heresy}, 19.
of life per se. The decree described "certain women, commonly called beguines . . . [who] debate and preach about the highest Trinity and the divine essence, and assert opinions contrary to the Catholic faith concerning articles of faith and church sacraments." Seeing the beguines as such a profound threat both to themselves and to the souls of others, *Cum de quibusdam* then continued, "the status of these [women] must perpetually be forbidden . . . and completely abolished from God's church."  

*Ad nostrum* and *Cum de quibusdam* generated a wave of persecution directed against beguines, beginning in 1317 in Strassburg even slightly before the official publication of the *Clementines* and spreading to many other Rhineland cities, including Basel. Attacks on beguines in Germany continued with varying degrees of intensity, but with no overall abatement, for the next century. In all these outbreaks of persecution, the Vienne decrees continued to appear in the intellectual and legal apparatus of the persecutors. Yet actual allegations of heresy, either the heresy of the Free Spirit as outlined in *Ad nostrum* or the more vague doctrinal errors of *Cum de quibusdam*, rarely figured prominently among the charges brought against beguines. Rather, at the heart of most of the attacks directed against the beguines by ecclesiastical authorities (and often by secular authorities as well) lay concern over and objections to lay religious poverty and especially the practice of lay mendicancy, and at the root of these issues lay ultimately the more basic and longstanding conflict between the secular clergy and the mendicant orders of the church.


The secular-mendicant conflict originated practically with the inception of the mendicant orders themselves in the early thirteenth century. Charged with preaching and pastoral care of souls, the mendicants presented a direct competition to the regular parish clergy for the hearts and souls, not to mention the coin purses, of the laity in the rapidly growing urban centers of Europe. In moral terms, the secular clergy objected to mendicants usurping many functions of parish priests. In political terms, bishops objected to mendicant orders operating in their diocese but essentially independent of their control. In economic terms, objections were raised to the very practice of mendicancy so central to these new orders. In fact, not so much through their active begging as through the massive amount of alms that these very popular orders began to receive, mendicants were drawing away a significant amount of financial resources that might otherwise have gone to other areas of the church. Of course, the secular clergy could not object to people giving voluntary alms to approved religious order, nor could they really object to mendicant begging, as the orders had official papal sanction for their actions. Instead it was the “lay religious,” beguines and beghards seeking to emulate the voluntary poverty and other aspects of the vita apostolica, who became easy targets. The beguines especially were closely associated with the mendicant orders, above all with the Franciscans. Even if they did not formally become tertiaries, communities of beguines often placed themselves under the moral supervision and pastoral care of the mendicant friars. They may have sometimes engaged in begging to support themselves, although this was far more typical of the itinerant male beghards than of settled communities of female beguines. As beguine houses became more established and more popular, however, they began to receive their own share of voluntarily given alms. Thus attacks on beguines might raise all the same issues on which secular clerics opposed mendicant privileges but without the need to confront the official sanctions that the mendicant orders enjoyed.

As early as the mid thirteenth century, beguines had been attacked for illicit mendicancy in Paris by William of St. Amour, the leader of the secular clerics at the university, as a part of his overall opposition

to the mendicant orders. Most of the persecutions in the Rhineland throughout the fourteenth century, going back even to the initial outbreak sparked by the Vienne decrees in 1317, were clearly if covertly motivated by secular-mendicant conflict. And the intense persecutions in Basel in the early fifteenth century, too, originated to a large extent in tensions between the secular and mendicant clergy in that city, especially the mendicant friars of the Franciscan order.

II. The Basler Beginenstreit

The campaign against the beguines in Basel pitted the beguines, Franciscan tertiaries, and the Franciscans themselves against the bishop, the secular clergy of Basel, and the Dominicans of the city led by Johannes Mulberg. The crisis seems to have been brewing since the very beginning of the fifteenth century, when the Franciscan Rudolf Buchmann issued his brief Positio pro defensione beguniarum. Outright conflict erupted when, on June 25, 1405, Mulberg delivered a sermon attacking all beguines, including Franciscan tertiaries, as leading an illicit form of life. In August of that year, the bishop of Basel, Humbert of Neuchâtel, ordered an inquisition against the local beguines and tertiaries. In October he excommunicated them, and they were ordered out of the city. The Franciscans, incensed at this attack


26. Preserved in Mulberg’s Tractatus contra beguinam et beghardos. I cite here from the recent edition in Heusinger, Johannes Mulberg, 133–73, which is based on Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS A IX 21, fols. 91v–109v.

on their third order, appealed quickly to the Bishop of Constance, and then to the Cardinal-Protector of their order, Odo of Colonna. Both the bishop and the cardinal issued statements demanding that all action against the tertiaries be halted; the bishop summoned Mulberg to appear before him, and the cardinal ordered the Dominican to Rome while action against the tertiaries was suspended. The seven houses of beguines in Basel associated with the Dominican order, the one house of entirely unaffiliated beguines, and the one or two houses of behiards in the city had no such defenders to come to their aid, and in late 1405 they were driven from Basel never to return.

Meanwhile, from 1406 until 1411, the case of the Franciscan tertiaries dragged on before the papal curia in Rome. By 1409, the tertiaries too had been driven from Basel and their property seized. Then, on June 26, 1409, the Council of Pisa elected Alexander V, a Franciscan, to the papacy. In short order, the Friars Minor were able to call their tertiaries back to Basel. Alexander, however, died on the third of May that following year. In addition, a new city government had taken control in Basel and was more hostile to the tertiary cause than the previous town council had been. In 1410 and 1411, the antiteriary group pressed its advantage. Acting together, the Bishop of Basel and the new town council banished all the remaining tertiaries and seized their property again and for the final time. At this point, the conflict essentially ended with the complete victory of the opponents of the beguines. Several years later, a few individual beguines began to reappear in Basel, but they never again formed large communities in the city.

Throughout all of this strife, charges of heresy leveled against the beguines played only a small role. The real focus of conflict centered on issues of lay poverty and mendicancy. The Franciscan Rudolf Buchsmann, in his initial defense of beguines, had written not about heresy, but about evangelical poverty and how mendicancy was an approved and laudable form of life. Likewise Johannes Mulberg attacked beguines on the issue of what he perceived to be their illicit mendicancy. He believed strongly that only the mendicant orders

28. Bishop Marquard of Constance’s summons of August 1, 1405, is found in Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS E I 1k, fols. 486r–488v, while his decision of November 28, 1405 protecting the tertiaries is found in ibid., fols. 380v–389r. A brief version of Odo of Colonna’s letter, dated November 10, 1405, is found in Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS E I 11, fol. 29v. Full versions are in ibid., fols. 105v–108v, and Basel, MS E I 1k, fols. 480r–484r.


31. Buchsmann, Positio (Heusinger, Johannes Mulberg, 131).
were allowed to live from alms and to support themselves through begging.\textsuperscript{32} “It is entirely illicit,” he wrote, “for [other] clerics, just as for healthy lay people, to lead a life of mendicancy,” and “to live from begging is entirely illicit for other clerics, that is to say other than the mendicant orders, and for healthy lay people.”\textsuperscript{33} Rather, such people were required to support themselves from the productive labor of their own hands. Mulberg’s treatise against the beguines, based mainly on his sermons against them in Basel, is largely devoted to examples and citations supporting this general opposition to lay mendicancy. Only after he had finished attacking the mendicant practices of the beguines did he resort to charges of heresy. Here, however, he did not accuse the Basel beguines of specific errors but only rehearsed in a general manner earlier condemnations of beguines, such as \textit{Ad nostrum} and \textit{Cum de quibusdam}, the decision of a Mainz episcopal synod in 1318, and the rulings of several bishops in Strassburg against the beguines in their territory. The only contemporary support that Mulberg obtained for his actions against the beguines, a decision from the theological faculty of the University of Heidelberg, dealt exclusively with mendicancy.\textsuperscript{34}

There were real, if hidden, economic, political, and social reasons (to say nothing of gendered reasons) that the town government and especially the secular clergy in Basel might be hostile to the beguines. They attacked them primarily as a means of striking at the mendicant orders, above all the Franciscans, to whom many beguine communities were closely attached. For the Dominican Johannes Mulberg,

\textsuperscript{32} As mentioned above, female beguines rarely, if ever, seem to have actively begged. The most thorough study of beguine forms of life and activities, focusing on the region around Lake Constance just to the east of Basel, is Andreas Wils, \textit{Beginen im Bodenseeraum} (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1994). Attacks on “lay mendicancy” were perhaps made because active lay begging was more easily condemned than the passive reception of alms, or perhaps to link such attacks on beguines more emphatically to criticism of the mendicant orders. As will be seen below, the later Dominican author Johannes Nider, in his defense of lay poverty, was careful to separate the issue of alms from that of full mendicancy (see below, esp. n. 82).

\textsuperscript{33} “Licet de patrimonio crucifixi uiuere sit altario seruientibus debitus, nec non aliena stipe sustentari, ordinibus mendicantibus sit a fure concessum, mendicitate tamen se transigere est tam clerici quam laycis ualidis uniuersaliter illicitum,” and “de mendicitate uiuere sit aliis clerici, aliis scilicet a mendicantibus ordinibus et laycis ualidis uniuersaliter illicitum.” Mulberg, \textit{Contra beguinas} (Heusinger, \textit{Johannes Mulberg}, 141, 142).

however, the motivation to participate in such action was far more "idealized." His order, too, had several communities of beguines under its care, and these would, and did, suffer from any attack on the status of lay poverty. Moreover, any assault on the moral and religious value of mendicancy might also threaten the position of the mendicant orders themselves, not just the beguines. Yet this was precisely the point on which Mulberg pressed his attack. For him, the poverty and mendicancy of the beguines was itself a serious threat. The reason for his conviction in this matter has to do with his deep commitment to religious poverty as informed by his involvement in the reform movement within his own order. In order to understand his position, we must therefore consider the origins of the Dominican observant movement and its early position on poverty.

III. Early Dominican Reform and Poverty

Founded in the early thirteenth century, the Dominican order had by the early fourteenth lost much of its initial discipline in terms of poverty and other aspects of religious life. Toward the end of the fourteenth century, a coherent movement for reform emerged within the Order of Preachers. Shaken by the horrors of plague and papal schism, and objecting to the increasingly lax adherence to the rule and initial constitutions of the order maintained in most convents, many Dominicans wanted a reform founded in a strict observance of the early principles, and a strict interpretation of the early documents, of their order. At the general chapter meeting in Vienna in 1388, Konrad of Prussia, a friar from Cologne, proposed to his master general, Raymond of Capua, that every province of the order should maintain at least one house dedicated to strict observance. Konrad himself was appointed prior of the first such convent at Colmar in 1389. Among his early disciples there was Johannes Mulberg. For these men, poverty was an issue of central importance, and they adopted a severe


position, stressing both individual and communal poverty.\textsuperscript{37} To some extent, they seem to have regarded poverty as a moral good in and of itself, almost more of a Franciscan approach as opposed to the traditional Dominican attitude that poverty and mendicancy were simply means to an end, namely more effective preaching and contemplative activity. This attitude, far more stringent and perhaps more morally pure than that held by the order as a whole, caused certain problems for the reformers, not the least of which was added difficulty in spreading the reform.

Consider the fact that in 1395, Johannes Mulberg was dispatched from Colmar to reform the Dominican male convent in Würzburg. His attempts met with intense resistance, and ultimately he was driven from the convent and forced to return in defeat to Colmar.\textsuperscript{38} We know little about the exact nature of the resistance to reform in Würzburg, but another early, and failed, attempt to spread strict observance to the female Dominican convent in Nuremberg helps to shed some light on the key issues involved. In 1396 Mulberg and Konrad of Prussia had successfully reformed the men’s house in that city, and in late 1397, master general Raymond of Capua appointed Konrad as vicar over the women’s convent of St. Catherine. Clearly, Konrad began trying to institute changes. A year later, however, on December 8, 1398, Raymond was forced to issue a statement guaranteeing the sisters of St. Catherine’s their old observance and pledging that no further attempt would be made to introduce reform against the sisters’ own wishes. Tellingly, he specifically guaranteed that the property of the house would never be alienated without the sisters’ consent.\textsuperscript{39} Clearly the stricter property and poverty demands of the reformers had played a significant role in rousing opposition, both within the convent and probably in the town as well. Wealthy convents, as repositories for the excess daughters of the aristocracy and urban merchant classes, enjoyed the protection of powerful political


\textsuperscript{39} Thomas Kaeppeli, ed., Registrum litterarum fratris Raymundi de Vineis Capuani, magistri ordinis 1380–1399, Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica 19 (Rome: Institutum historicum Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1937), 160.
patrons who would have been deeply concerned about attempts to impose strict poverty on the nuns.\textsuperscript{40}

Yet, despite whatever setbacks or conflicts might arise, the early leaders of the Dominican reform, including Mulberg, continued to cling to their commitment to a more complete and genuine poverty. This commitment, I am convinced, played no small part in Mulberg’s involvement in the actions against the beguines in Basel. In a detailed investigation of the economic affairs of the mendicant orders in Basel, Bernhard Neidiger has revealed how the Franciscans, more limited by their claims of absolute poverty than either the Dominicans or Augustinian Hermits were by their more moderate approaches, often used their tertiaries to facilitate financial dealings, having them hold or convey property that the Franciscans themselves could not possess.\textsuperscript{41} He then suggests that the other mendicant orders in the city, especially the Dominicans, resented this stratagem, and that this resentment helps explain the indifference, at best, with which they responded to attacks upon the beguines, the great majority of whom, after all, were Franciscan tertiaries.\textsuperscript{42}

Mulberg, of course, went far beyond mere indifference. He was instrumental in directing these attacks. Specifically in terms of tertiaries, he argued repeatedly that members of the Franciscan third order were not religious clergy, but remained simple laity, and therefore they were not allowed to beg or receive alms when healthy, but needed to engage in productive labor.\textsuperscript{43} In fact, a contemporary, although clearly biased, account of the campaign against the beguines in Basel reported that Mulberg not only attacked tertiaries, but that he even called for all Franciscans in Basel to be excommunicated for protecting their third order. This account then went on to allege that Mulberg had claimed that the rule under which the tertiaries lived

\textsuperscript{40} When St. Catherine’s was successfully reformed thirty years later by Johannes Nider, the observants again faced resistance from the Nuremberg town council; Theodore von Kern, “Die Reformation des Katharinenklosters zu Nürnberg im Jahre 1428,” \textit{Jahrbuch des historischen Vereins im Mittelfranken} 31 (1863): 1–20, esp. 3–6. The following year, when Nider came to Basel and reformed the Dominican priory there, the wealthy female house of Klingental successfully resisted reform, thanks in part to the sisters’ powerful relations on the Basel town council. See Hillenbrand, “Observantenbewegung,” 236; Renée Weis-Müller, \textit{Die Reform des Klosters Klingental und ihr Personenkreis}, Basler Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft 59 (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1956), 15–16.


\textsuperscript{42} Neidiger, \textit{Mendikanten}, 128–30.

\textsuperscript{43} Mulberg, \textit{Contra beguinas} (Heusinger, Johannes Mulberg, 168–72).
was a forgery, that Saint Francis had never written such a document, and that the whole thing was a deception of the later Franciscan order. Such wild charges, while interesting, almost certainly have no basis in fact, however, and there seems no cause to doubt the many statements made by Mulberg himself, as well as by others in his defense, that he was not opposed to the third rule or to the status of the tertiaries per se but only to what he felt were abuses being carried out under that rule. His attacks on the Franciscan tertiaries and other beguines were grounded in his commitment to reform and his convictions as a reformer. But what specifically were the abuses to which Mulberg so strongly objected? Here Neidiger’s observations become critical. The economic machinations for which the Franciscans in Basel were using their tertiaries, clearly held to be unseemly by the other two mendicant orders, would have struck a reformer like Mulberg as totally abhorrent. Here was a man committed to instilling a greater commitment to poverty within his own order. While not advocating a complete dispossession of all property, the early observant Dominicans were, I think, clearly inclined toward a valorization of poverty in and of itself that was in many ways closer to a Franciscan approach than the standard Dominican understanding of poverty as a means toward some given end. In Basel, Mulberg and his convictions would have come face to face with a Franciscan order that used its tertiaries to circumvent the very tenets of absolute poverty to which he was drawn. For this reason, he willingly threw himself headlong into the conflict over the beguines, which had been brewing since before he arrived in Basel, on the side of the secular clergy of the city and against his fellow mendicants.

That this conflict caused much suffering to many innocents, including the many beguines in houses attached not to the Franciscans but to his own Dominican order, doubtless caused him no pause. His commitment to the ideals of reform, and particularly the ideals of

44. Jacobus de Subiago de Mediolano, Relatio de factis in causa Iohannis Mulberg et conventus Predicatorum in Basilea contra fratrem OFM super beghinis, Basel, Óffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS E I 1i, fol. 458r–469r, at fols. 458r and 459v–460r.

45. Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS E I 1i, which contains a miscellany of documents relating to the campaign against the beguines, yields several documents favorable to Mulberg stating that he directed his actions only against abuses and errors, and “non contra terciam regulam” (fol. 7v), and that he did not oppose the third rule “in se, nec modus vivendi eiusdem” (fol. 8v). Mulberg himself, in an appeal of his case to Rome on August 8, 1405, maintained that he did not intend to attack the Franciscan order or even their tertiaries per se, but only “ritum tamen beghinatus, beghardorum, [et] lohhardorum ab ecclesia sancta reprobatum”: Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS E I 1k, fol. 491r.

poverty as set forth by his friend and master Konrad of Prussia, caused him to look on the poverty and mendicancy of the beguines as a deformation in the proper religious order and as a threat to the strict observance of poverty within the mendicant orders themselves. Even after the conflict in Basel had ended and all beguines had been driven from the city, the irascible Mulberg continued to decry forms of economic immorality that he saw as corrupting the world. Upon returning to Basel from Rome in 1411, he delivered a fiery series of sermons attacking usury.47 Shortly thereafter, he was exiled from the city, technically on account of his adherence to the Roman pope Gregory XII during the complex religious politics of the Great Schism, but more so, it seems, because his tempestuous personality and moral zeal had alienated him even from the other members of his own order.48 Mulberg's complete and unwavering commitment to very strict moral positions is illustrative of the zeal that characterized the early phase of the Dominican reform, as well as being instructive on some of the reasons for the early reform's lack of major success. If the observant movement was to survive and flourish within the Order of Preachers, it would have to find a way to temper some of its more extreme elements.

IV. LATER DOMINICAN REFORM AND POVERTY

During the years in which Mulberg was involved in the struggle against the beguines in Basel, the Dominican observant movement was undergoing hard times. The problems really began in 1399 with the death of the master general Raymond of Capua, who had initiated the reform and backed it with all the authority of his office.49 The next master general was Thomas of Firmo, who before his election had been provincial of Lombardy. There he had witnessed several houses pass out of his control and into the hands of Giovanni Dominici, the vicar over all observant convents in Italy.50 Thus he was not particu-

48. Heusinger, Johannes Mulberg, 78–79.
49. Löhrl, Tontoria, 1.
50. An overview of the Dominican reform in Italy can be found in R. Creytens and A. d'Amato, "Les actes capitulaires de la congregation Dominicaine de Lombardie (1482–1531)," Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum 31 (1961): 213–306, here 214–29. On Dominici's appointment as vicar, see Raymond Creytens, "Les vicares généraux de la congrégation Dominicaine de Lombardie (1459–1531)," Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum 32 (1962): 211–84, at 216. The office of vicar was a special position created by the master general of the order and answerable directly to him. Houses under the supervision of a vicar
larly inclined to favor the reformers, and without support from the highest levels, the movement came to a virtual standstill. Only in 1414, when Leonard Dati became master general, did the situation begin to improve. Although not an observant himself, he was at least not openly hostile to reform.\textsuperscript{51} In 1419 the movement expanded for the first time in over two decades when friars from Nuremberg were able to reform the male convent in Bern, and sisters from Schönensteinbach reformed the female convent of Unterlinden in Colmar.\textsuperscript{52} The revival was complete in 1426 with the election of Barthélemy Texier as master general. Like Raymond of Capua before him, he firmly believed in the value of strict observance, and he put the authority of his office behind the reform once again.\textsuperscript{53}

The movement as it reemerged in the 1420s, however, differed in some subtle but important ways from the first generation of reform. The situation behind Texier’s election as master general is instructive. Although a supporter of reform, he was actually a compromise candidate whose election was intended to prevent the order from fracturing into deeply opposed observant and conventual (or nonreformed) branches.\textsuperscript{54} Following Texier’s lead, the second generation of Dominican reformers proved more willing than the first to temper their strict moral positions and to accept certain compromises in return for practical gains. In the matter of poverty, whereas the first generation had advocated an extremely strict approach in terms of both individual and communal poverty, Texier moved the reform back towards the more traditional Dominican interpretation, continuing to stress the need for absolute individual poverty, but far more relaxed on the issue of communal property. In fact, a certain amount of communal wealth was now regarded as beneficial and necessary for supporting proper religious life.\textsuperscript{55} The leading figure of the obser-

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\textsuperscript{51} Egger, \textit{Beiträge zur Geschichte des Predigerordens}, 83.

\textsuperscript{52} Hillenbrand, “Observantenbewegung,” 232.


\textsuperscript{55} Lühr, \textit{Teutonia}, 4–5; Neidiger, “Armutsbegriff,” 128–29. In fact strict communal poverty had already ceased to be an issue by 1419 with the reform of the Bern convent; see Heusinger, Johannes Mulberg, 33.
vant movement in Germany at this time, the theologian Johannes Nider, who worked closely with Texier to reform several houses, certainly agreed with his master general on this approach. He noted, for example, in a general handbook on reform, that when introducing strict observance to a convent, reformers should take care not to disrupt too severely economic activities and to continue to provide for all the worldly needs of the brothers or sisters, as these measures would help suppress any dissent.56

Nider's position on poverty also deeply affected his position on beguines and other lay religious, allowing him, in contrast to Mulberg a generation earlier, to reassert the more traditional Dominican support for beguines and to mount a defense of lay poverty and mendicancy in general.57 The setting for this defense was again the city of Basel, some twenty years after the wave of persecution that Mulberg had instigated there had subsided. More particularly, the setting was the great ecumenical Council of Basel, which met in the city from 1431 until 1449, and of which Nider was a leading member from its inception until late 1434 or early 1435, when he departed to take up a position on the theological faculty of the University of Vienna.58 Beguines were again under attack in Basel during the early years of the council. Given that there were almost no beguines in the city any more, and certainly no large communities, these attacks were more purely theoretical than twenty years earlier. They occurred within the larger context of general debates over religious reform taking place at the council. The central issues involved, however, remained the same, focusing on the much contested value of lay poverty and mendicancy. In 1433, for example, an anonymous tract on reform written in Basel included among its many points a call for all "lollards and beguines" to stop receiving alms and to support themselves through their own labor.59 In 1435, the Spanish cleric Andreas of Escobar, in his recom-

56. Johannes Nider, De reformatione status cenobitici 2.12, Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS B III 15, fols. 186v–248v, at fol. 220v. For brief overviews of this work, see Hillebrand, "Observantenbewegung," 222–24, or Kaspar Schieler, Magister Johannes Nider aus dem Orden der Prediger-Brüder (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1885), 397–401. A more extended analysis of the treatise, and Nider's reform thought in general, may be found in Bailey, Battling Demons, 75–89.

57. As noted briefly in Patschovsky, "Beginen, Begarden und Terziaren," 408.


mendations for reforms presented to the council, called for a ban on beguines altogether, while the anonymous treatise entitled The Reformation of Kaiser Sigismund, written in 1439, demanded that beguines stop begging and work to support themselves. In addition, the treatise Contra validos mendicantes, written in 1438 by the well-known opponent of beguines Felix Hemmerlin, circulated widely in Basel.

For his part, Johannes Nider wrote two treatises at the council that touched upon the status of the beguines and the validity of lay poverty, De secularium religionibus and De paupertate perfecta secularium. Both exist only in manuscript copies, although especially for the more general De secularium religionibus in a not inconsiderable number, and both have received only scant scholarly attention. For my purpose here, the earlier and more focused De paupertate perfecta secularium is of greater interest. Nider wrote this treatise probably in 1433 or early 1434, just as discussion of beguines and lay poverty was beginning to become an issue at the Council of Basel. We know that treatises were often written to affect debates taking place at the council, and De paupertate, which carries no dedication or other clear statement of purpose, was doubtless one of these. As mentioned earlier, Nider had known Johannes Mulberg personally and had greatly respected the older man, who served as a mentor to him. He was also no less committed to the principles of reform than Mulberg had been. However, Nider was a member of the second generation of Dominican reform, and thus his concept of poverty was rather less

62. On De secularium religionibus, see Van Engen, "Friar Johannes Nyder." On both De secularium religionibus and De paupertate perfecta secularium, see Bailey, Battling Demons, 64–73. For manuscript copies of both treatises, see Thomas Kaeppeli, ed., Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum mediæ aevi, 4 vols. (Rome: ad Santa Sabina, 1970–93), 2:511–12. Additional copies of De paupertate perfecta secularium are found in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 18195, fols. 243r–259v, and Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 101 221, fol. 266v (excerpt). Additional copies of De secularium religionibus are found in Emmerich, Stadtarchiv, MS 13, fols. 20r–23v (excerpts from chapters 1 and 4), and Melk, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. mell. 1833, fols. 161r–167r (Johannes von Speyer, Excerpta ex tractatu magistri Ioannis Nider de eremeta et anchoritis = De secularium, chapters 11 and 12). Here I have relied on the copies in Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS B III 15, fols. 1r–54r.
63. On dating, see Bailey, Battling Demons, 152.
strict than that held by Mulberg. The very issue that had doubtless so rankled Mulberg, that beguines and tertiaries were being used by mendicant friars to circumvent not the individual but the communal poverty to which they were dedicated, would have been a nonstarter for Nider. He did not share the older generation’s commitment to strict communal in addition to individual privation, nor, I suspect, having made this compromise already in this thinking, did he valorize poverty in general quite as much as they did. In short, poverty, while still critical to a true religious life, was not quite as critical for him, and so machinations that might be seen as attempts to shirk poverty were not quite such red-flag issues.

The fact is that Nider did not turn on the beguines at the Council of Basel, as Mulberg had done several decades earlier. Instead, he supported the beguines, lay poverty, and lay mendicancy in the strongest and most complete terms possible. During the earlier wave of persecution directed by Mulberg, supporters of the beguine cause had focused almost exclusively on the case of Franciscan tertiaries. Initially the Franciscan Rudolf Buchmann had preached in defense of all “lollards, beghards, and beguines, both within and outside of the third order of Saint Francis.” As the conflict escalated, however, the Franciscan order quickly narrowed its efforts to its own tertiaries, at the expense of other beguines. Almost every later document in defense of the tertiaries was careful to draw a distinction between the legitimate (and papally sanctioned) third order and the illegitimate beguines “condemned by the law.” A decision had clearly been made that any general support of all beguines might prove too costly or difficult, while the tertiaries alone might be more successfully protected, and this strategy obviously worked, at least temporarily, as Mulberg and his allies were forced to suspend their actions against the tertiaries but were allowed to continue against other beguines. Writing at the Council of Basel, however, Nider refused to make any such compromise, particularly in his De secularium religionibus, in which he defended first Franciscan tertiaries and then very deliberately ex-

66. A phrase used in various documents collected in Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS E I 1i, fols. 19v–20r, 21v–22r, 23v–v, and 25r. The distinction is also drawn sharply throughout the treatise strongly opposing Mulberg’s actions by Jacobus de Mediolano, Relatio de factis in causa Ioannis Mulberg.
67. As per the decisions by Cardinal Odo Colonna (Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS I 1i, fol. 29v and 107r, or MS I 1k, fol. 482r) and Bishop Marquard of Constance (Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität, MS E I 1k, fol. 381r).
tended this defense to all other beguines as well.\textsuperscript{68} An important part of his basis for this broad support lay in his understanding and approval of lay poverty and can best be approached through his earlier treatise \textit{De paupertate perfecta secularium}.\textsuperscript{69}

V. Johannes Nider on Lay Poverty

At the outset of \textit{De paupertate perfecta}, Nider identified several types of poverty, only one of which actually interested him, namely evangelical poverty—the voluntary privation of temporal goods to follow the example of Christ.\textsuperscript{70} That this form of life was both licit and laudable should have been clear to all, he maintained, yet still many authorities insisted that only clerics, and not lay people, should be allowed to commit themselves to poverty in accordance with Christ's commands. Although as a member of a religious order himself, Nider obviously felt that "the poverty of those living within a religious order is more perfect, in and of itself . . . than that of any sort of individual person living outside orders or outside a religious community,"\textsuperscript{71} nevertheless he maintained that devout lay people could still licitly and usefully take on an essentially religious vow of poverty.\textsuperscript{72}

Drawing on Thomas Aquinas, Nider identified three forms of allowable communal poverty appropriate for lay people as well as for the religious: to hold certain properties in common and to support the community from those properties, to support the community through the manual labor of its members, and to receive support from charity and alms.\textsuperscript{73} This last point was the most critical in terms of the attacks being made against the beguines at the time, which typically focused not on their poverty per se, but on their receiving aims and (supposedly) engaging in mendicancy without laboring to support themselves. For churchmen, this was essentially a moral issue focusing on

\textsuperscript{68} In chapter 3 of \textit{De secularium religionibus} (fols. 4v–5v), Nider "solvit dubium utrum fratres et sores de tercia regula sancti Francisci condempnetur per ea que contra beguinas et beghardos fulminata sunt, et ponit opinionem quod non." In chapter 4 (fols. 5v–7v), he then "solvit aliud dubium et ostendit quod non omnes beghardi vocati et beguine vocate condempnantur per iura allegata in secundo et tercio capitulo, sed triplex genus talium vivit licite in seculo."

\textsuperscript{69} Nider explicitly mentions his earlier arguments from \textit{De paupertate perfecta secularium} in \textit{De secularium religionibus}, fol. 2r.

\textsuperscript{70} Nider, \textit{De paupertate}, fol. 23v.

\textsuperscript{71} "Repondetur quod paupertas existencium in ordine perfeccior est per se . . . quam cuiuscumque singularis persone extra ordinem et extra collegium existentis." Ibid., fol. 26r.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., fol. 26v.

the spiritual value of physical labor. For secular authorities, opposition to beguines typically arose more directly from social and economic concerns. So long as the lay religious were perceived as performing useful social functions, relations with civic authorities were generally good.74 For example, even as Mulberg was instigating the wave of persecution in Basel, the beguines in nearby Bern were able to avoid a similar conflict because they were widely perceived as useful members of the community due to their care for the sick.75 Nevertheless, from either perspective the point was the same; the working poor were tolerated while the idle poor were not. Thus as Nider developed his arguments in favor of lay religious poverty, he also needed to focus on questions about the value of labor. He sought to prove not just that lay mendicancy was allowable, but indeed that a life of religious mendicancy was at least as worthwhile as, if not better than, a life spent in physical labor.

To do so was by no means simple. From the ancient curse of the Book of Genesis that man was condemned to eat bread in the sweat of his brow, on through other biblical and patristic sources, many religious authorities had pointed to the value and necessity of manual labor.76 Nider began, therefore, by distinguishing between acts that were good in and of themselves and those that were only good in their results.77 For him, of course, labor was among the latter, beneficial only in its results—the ability to obtain food and other necessities by honest means. Thus he concluded, with Thomas Aquinas, that "it is clear that [both] religious and secular people who are able to live without falsehood, without desire for the possessions of others, and without scandal, are not held to the apostolic precept to labor."78 He then went on to draw a distinction fairly standard among the religious clergy between manual labor and the spiritual labors of prayer, contemplation, and so forth. Here he could cite such authorities as

76. Nider cites Genesis 3:19, "in sudore vultus tui vesceris pane," as well as Job 5:7, "homo ad laborem nascitur" (De paupertate, fol. 28v). He also cites many early religious authorities on the value of labor, including Jerome, Ad rusticum monachum, Cassian, De institutis monachorum 1.4, and the Rule of Saint Benedict (ibid., fol. 29r).
77. Nider, De paupertate, fol. 29v.
78. "Sic ergo patet quod religiosi et secula[r]es qui sine furtu, sine concupiscencia alienarum rerum, et sine turpi cura vitam habere possunt, undecumque ex precepto apostoli laborare non tenentur." Nider, De paupertate, fol. 30r. He gives no exact citation, but is probably drawing on Aquinas, Summa contra gentiles 3.135. See Aquinas, Opera omnia, 2:105.
Augustine and Aquinas that, if manual labor impeded other more useful activities, it was better to abstain from physical work. Thus to the question of "whether the devoted voluntary poor who apply themselves privately to prayer or to reading either the Psalms or even the world of God... can be excused from manual labor," he felt he could offer an entirely positive response.

Having determined that manual labor was not necessary for a good life, even for the laity, Nider then turned to the question of whether alms were a proper way to support a life free of labor and spent in contemplation and religious devotion. He concluded, with Aquinas, that "it is better to give alms to the holy poor than to anyone else." A slightly different question was whether it was licit to support a life of contemplation through mendicancy, that is, not simply to live from charity and alms freely given but actively to beg for them. The question was subtly different, but Nider's response was exactly the same. After presenting many proofs and answering many challenges to this position, he concluded, again with Aquinas, that "mendicancy assumed for the sake of Christ not only must not be reproached, but should be greatly praised."

Finally, Nider arrived at the crux of his issue. Given that mendicancy was both licit and laudable, was it superior to a life of poverty supported by labor? The issue was a thorny one, and ultimately, while he did seek to argue for the superiority of mendicancy, still he did not want to argue completely against manual labor, which so many authorities had praised. He began by citing Henry of Ghent that labor

79. Nider, De paupertate, fol. 31r. He refers to Augustine, De opere monachorum, probably chapters 9-10 (J. P. Migne, ed. Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina, 221 vols. [Paris: Migne, 1841-64], 40: col. 555-56), and to Aquinas, probably his Contra impugnantes paupertatem 2.4, "Utrum religiosus propriis manibus laborare" (Aquinas, Opera omnia, 3:537-39).
80. "Utrum voluntarie pauperes devoti qui aut oraczioni aut leccioni aut psalmis aut eciam verbo dei... privatim possint excusari a labore manuum?" Nider, De paupertate, fol. 31v.
81. "mellius est dare eleemosynas sanctis pauperibus quam quibuscumquam alis." Nider, De paupertate, fol. 35r. He cites Aquinas' commentary on Jerome, Ad vigilancium hereticum. This is found in Aquinas, Contra impugnantes paupertatem 2.6 (Aquinas, Opera omnia, 3:543).
82. "Mendicitas propter Christum assumpta non solum non est reprobanda, sed maxime laudanda." Nider, De paupertate, fol. 42v. Again, probably referring to Aquinas, Contra impugnantes paupertatem, 2.6 (Aquinas, Opera omnia, 3:543-45). It should be noted, as mentioned above, that female beguines, who were clearly Nider's main, although not exclusive, focus in this treatise, rarely if ever actually begged, although communities of beguines often did receive a considerable amount of alms (see above, n. 32). The careful distinction of mendicancy from mere receipt of alms seems another example of the purely theoretical nature of Nider's treatise.
was superior to mendicancy, but then immediately cited Bernard of Clairvaux: "he who takes up voluntary poverty for Christ by giving up all worldly possessions, better that he should seek his sustenance by begging than by laboring with his hands." Not wishing to contradict either authority, Nider posited a distinction between those living in actual poverty, or "necessary poverty" as he termed it, and those living in voluntary poverty taken on for the sake of Christ. In the first case, for those living in real or necessary poverty, labor was preferable to mendicancy, but in the second case, for those practicing voluntary poverty, mendicancy was preferable to labor, as it would allow more time for meritorious religious pursuits. This was not a very charitable attitude toward the truly poor of the world, perhaps, but it was a position that could, if accepted, resolve the apparent discord between earlier religious authorities on the matter.

It would seem, then, that for the voluntary religious poor at least, Nider had definitively proven the superiority of mendicancy over labor. But then he added one final twist. What if communities of the devout laity might live partially by labor and partially by mendicancy? Still following Saint Bernard, Nider introduced the following qualification to his support for mendicancy. If the needs of the entire community could more easily be met through mendicancy than manual labor, that is, if begging left more time for spiritual pursuits, then the community should support itself from alms. If, however, begging actually took more time away from spiritual matters than working would, the community should live from labor. "I say, therefore," wrote Nider, "that in the majority of cases the voluntary poor can attain greater perfection if they live in part or entirely from alms.... This is the first conclusion." A second conclusion, however, was that if the poor were able to acquire sufficient food and other goods by limited periods of honest labor, then it was better to live by labor than


84. "Qui voluntarium paupertatem pro Christo accipit omnibus temporalibus a se abdicatis, melius facit mendicando victum quere quam manibus laborando." Nider, De paupertate, fol. 46v. Unfortunately, he gives no indication of which of Bernard's many works he is using.

85. "Duplex est mendicitas. Una que est effectus paupertatis necessie et coacte, alia que est effectus paupertatis voluntarie propter deum assumpte. Prima non est meritoria, et ideo perfectus est vivere de labore manuum quam mendicare primo modo. Secunda autem est meritoria, et ideo perfectus est vivere de mendicitate illa quam de labore." Nider, De paupertate, fol. 46v.

86. "Dico ergo quod ut in pluribus ad maiorem perfecionem possent pervenire voluntarie pauperes, si in parte vel in toto viverent de eleemosynis. ... Et hie est prima conclusio." Nider, De paupertate, fol. 47r.
by mendicancy. Yet a third conclusion was that, if it was not possible to acquire everything necessary to support the community from limited labor, but it was possible to acquire some portion of the necessary goods, then it was better to live partially from mendicancy and partially from labor.

Nider's conclusions were certainly complex and convoluted. But as a complete defense of the beguines, at least in terms of poverty, they were unmatched. For he had managed to extend not just a defense, but indeed praise and active support to every form of life the lay religious poor might adopt. Indeed, for all Nider's theoretical concern about an absolute opposition of physical labor to mendicancy and spiritual activities, most beguines in the early fifteenth century lived exactly the sort of combination of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* that he ultimately addressed and extolled. In his arguments, moreover, the workings of the new observant Dominican approach to poverty that had been adopted by the second generation of reformers become increasingly apparent. No longer was an extremely strict position held and defended at all costs. Rather a (somewhat) more easygoing and flexible understanding of poverty was evident. Certainly poverty was important, and the voluntary privation of worldly goods in imitation of Christ was a form of life both permissible and highly beneficial to religious clergy and the laity alike. Yet beyond this basic point, Nider was (relatively) unconcerned about the exact form that poverty was to take, and he proved ready to accommodate several different varieties of practice.

### VI. Conclusion

Poverty was a central Christian virtue throughout the Middle Ages, and many devout people, both clerics and the laity, sought a life of religious poverty. Yet understandings of and approaches to poverty differed considerably across Christian society and especially within the church itself, where secular clergy disputed the rights of mendicants, religious orders differed amongst themselves, and even within a single order different ideals of poverty could and did manifest

87. "Secunda conclusio est quod si aliquibus paucis horis possent aquirere totum victum suum honesto labore, plus valeret eis ad perfectionem consequendam vivere de labore manuum quam totum victum habere per mendicacionem sive per eleemosynas sibi datas et nunquam operari." Nider, *De paupertate*, fol. 47r.

88. "Tercia conclusio est quod si non possunt totum victum neccessarium paucis horis et honesto labore non implicando aquirere, possunt tamen aquirere partem, tunc plus valeret ad perfectionem consequendam ut in pluribus quod partim viverent de labore manuum, partim de eleemosynis, quam quod nunquam laborarent." Nider, *De paupertate*, fol. 47v.

themselves. All of these various interpretations of poverty, connecting and often conflicting, informed one another in complex ways. In the late Middle Ages, ideals and understandings of religious poverty encountered and interacted with broad conceptions of reform and spiritual renewal that shaped late medieval religiosity so profoundly. Within religious orders, and especially among the mendicant orders of the church, debates over the nature and extent of true religious poverty were of central concern to reform or observant movements. Yet reformers' concerns over poverty extended beyond the orders as well, to inform how religious clergy, and the church itself, would understand and respond to lay desires for poverty and especially the impoverished life of devout beguines.

The examples discussed here, the Basler Beginenstreit and the defense of beguines at the later Council of Basel, the thought and writings of the Dominican reformer Johannes Mulberg and of the Dominican reformer Johannes Nider, have touched on all these aspects of religious poverty in the early fifteenth century. When examined closely, they help to clarify some of the issues and forces swirling around this ever complex and ever vital religious ideal as it existed at the end of the Middle Ages. As the case of Mulberg indicates, the strict poverty ideals of the first generation of Dominican reformers not only raised strong opposition within the order and threatened to stymie the effective spread of reform, but also generated, or at least contributed strongly to, an uncompromising opposition to lay poverty. As the case of Nider indicates, the second generation of observant Dominicans softened their position on poverty to some extent. They did so, it seems, largely for practical reasons, and they managed to revitalize their reform movement and renew its spread, so that it ultimately would become the dominant force within the Order of Preachers. Just as Mulberg's understanding of true and proper poverty motivated his attack on beguines in Basel in the early years of the fifteenth century, I have argued here, so Nider's understanding of poverty also informed his profound defense of the beguines, and of lay poverty in general, at the Council of Basel in the 1430s. The council was actively debating the questionable status of beguines, along with other issues of lay religiosity, and Nider was an important and influential member of the council in these years. His thought on religious poverty, mendicancy, and reform, developed and set forth in this context, reveal how these various issues could and did interact and inform one another in important ways in the late Middle Ages.