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THOMAS NETTER: PUSHING BACK THE BOUNDARIES OF AFFILIATION IN THE CARMELITE ORDER[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article has its origins in a doctoral dissertation, subsequently published in book form, which examined the surviving work of the Carmelite theologian and provincial superior Thomas Netter of Walden, who died in 1430 in France.[2] His claim to fame rests on a three-volume refutation of the popular form of Wycliffite teachings known as Lollardy[3] written partly in the early years of the fifteenth century whilst still a graduate student at Oxford and partly in the 1420s at the invitation of Pope Martin V.[4] Although his reply may have come late in the day as far as Lollardy was concerned, Netter's efforts are recognised by almost all commentators as a massive achievement. He is considered by some as standing on the cusp between scholasticism and modern theology.[5] His *opus*, the *Doctrinale*, was required reading

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[1] This article was originally presented as a paper on May 16, 2003 at a symposium held in York, UK, to celebrate the 550th anniversary of the issue of the bull *Cum nulla*.

[2] K. ALBAN, *The Teaching and Impact of the "Doctrinale" of Thomas Netter of Walden*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2010.

[3] There is a long-standing debate regarding the relationship between Wyclif, his teaching and later popular movements. For the latest view see P. HORNBECK, *What Is a Lollard?: Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

[4] The edition of the *Doctrinale antiquitatum fidei catholicae ecclesiae contra Wiclevistas et Hussitas* used here is that of Blanciotti, published in three volumes in Venice between 1757 and 1759. It is the most recent and reliable edition. The usual way of citing the *Doctrinale* using this edition is by volume and column, thus: 2:120 = volume 2, column 120.

[5] See for example, A. MORISI, *'Traditionalism, Humanism and Mystical Experience in Northern Europe and in the Germanic Areas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries'* in G. D'ONOFRIO ed. *History of Theology III: The Renaissance* Collegeville, Minnesota, 1998.

in the English college at Douai[6] and mined by several renowned later authors such as Bellarmine and Suarez.[7]

Netter is largely remembered as a polemicist, replying to the heresy of his day with an overwhelming response. However, it is the hypothesis and the contention of this article that Netter ought also to be remembered for his dedication to the Carmelite Order and preservation of its particular charismatic identity. Recent scholarship has emphasised that although the Carmelite order adapted to western medieval society by adopting many mendicant practices from the Franciscans and the Dominicans, nevertheless certain spiritual strands from an earlier eremitical existence on Mount Carmel are not lacking.[8] Netter himself was very aware of the Order's origins and valued the more secluded lifestyle which allowed greater opportunity for prayer and contemplation. One aspect of his appreciation seems to be his encouragement of certain anchorites and anchoresses to live apart from the world. In following this line of action Netter not only demonstrated his fidelity to the ancient charism of the Order, but was part of the pre-*Cum nulla* tradition which had already opened Carmel to a wider range of people than the traditional group of male friars.[9]

This article begins with a short biographical sketch of Netter, followed by a description of his views on the religious life and contemplation as found in the *Doctrinale*. A third section looks at Netter's practical approach to the same questions first through the medium of his letters which fortunately survive from the period when he was provincial in England (1416-1430). Secondly, Netter's 'operative theology' is examined in the light of his encouragement and sponsorship of a number of anchorites in the early 15th century. In this

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[6] T. F. KNOX, *The First and Second Diaries of the English College Douay*, London, 1878, Introduction.

[7] M. M. HARVEY, *'The Diffusion of the Doctrinale of Thomas Netter in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries'* in SMITH, L. ed. *Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Margaret Gibson*, London and Rio Grande, 1992, 281-294 gives a list of points in Bellarmine's *De controversiis* which rely on Netter. A revised version of this article appeared in J. BERGSTRÖM-ALLEN and R. COPSEY eds, *Thomas Netter of Walden: Carmelite, Diplomat and Theologian c. 1372-1430 Carmel in Britain: Studies in the Early History of the Carmelite Order*, vol 4, Faversham: St. Albert's Press, 2009.

[8] See J. SMET, *'The Carmelite Rule after 750 Years' Carmelus* 44 (1997), 21-47 and E. BOAGA, *'Dal secolo XII al secolo XVII: la teologia spirituale nella tradizione carmelitana pre-teresiana'* in *La teologia spirituale Atti del Congresso Internazionale* Rome, 2001.

[9] See J. SMET, *Cloistered Carmel: A Brief History of the Carmelite Nuns*, Rome, 1986, especially 10-18 for the history of lay involvement with Carmel before the issuing of *Cum nulla*.

way Netter's theology can be compared with his practice to give a picture of a man dedicated to lay involvement in Carmelite spirituality not only on paper, but also in life.

2. A Brief Biography

2.1. Early Training and Oxford

In 1955 David Knowles commented that Thomas Netter was 'perhaps the most distinguished friar of any order between the age of Ockham and the Dissolution'.[10] The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* has a substantial entry on Netter by Anne Hudson, as will the *Biographical Register of the Medieval English Province of Carmelites*, compiled by Richard Copsey.[11]

Of Netter's early life very little can be stated with any certainty. Thomas entered the Carmelite Order in London where he completed his noviciate and initial studies.[12] He was ordained to the various ministries of the Church while still a member of the London house: acolyte in September 1394, subdeacon in 1395 and priest at Holy Trinity priory Aldgate, on 23rd September 1396.[13]

At this point Netter moved to Oxford to begin higher studies in theology, probably becoming a bachelor of theology in 1403.[14] In 1410 Netter is described as a doctor and therefore most authors assume he had taken the degree of D.Th by 1409.

It is during his postgraduate studies at Oxford that Netter came into direct contact with the proponents of John Wyclif's doctrines. In an autobiographical note in the *Doctrinale* he writes, 'I was suddenly called to action in Oxford university, along with my brother William to dispute touching pilgrimages, the eucharist, the religious life and voluntary mendicancy'.[15]

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[10] Knowles, D., *The Religious Orders in England, vol, II The End of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1955 p. 144.

[11] A. Hudson, 'Netter [Walden], Thomas (c. 1370-1430), theologian and Carmelite friar', *Oxford of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004) 40: 444-447.

[12] Netter, *Doctrinale*, 3: 272.

[13] Bishop Braybrooke, *Register* London, Guildhall Library, Ms. 9531, fos. 37, 40, 43v.

[14] See A. Cobban, *English University life in the Middle Ages*, University College London, London, 1999, especially 165ff for a description of the studies and exercises required in the medieval faculty of theology in Oxford.

[15] Netter, *Doctrinale* 1:7-8. Translated in J. Gairdner, *Lollardy and the Reformation,* Macmillan London, 1911, 190.

2.2. Heresy Trials, Councils and Royal Service

Netter's activities were not confined to academic disputations, for his presence is noted at a number of trials for heresy, as well as at the councils of Pisa (1409) and Constance (1414). He was invited by the prior general John Grossi to attend the council of Pavia-Siena in 1423, but declined.[16] Netter's role in the two councils he did attend was varied:[17] his part in Pisa was as a *regius orator* and although his contribution was probably not extensive, it was significant enough for John Bale to preserve two of his addresses to the council.[18]

Regarding the council of Constance, much ink has been spilt in arguing for or against Netter's presence. It now seems unlikely that he was one of the official delegates, however, he might have been present as a royal observer or in some other capacity mandated by Henry V.

Between the councils of Pisa and Constance, Netter was present at the trials of many leading supporters of Wyclif, or Lollards.[19] He may have been present at the 1409 Oxford committee to produce a list of Wyclif's condemned conclusions. The following year finds Netter freshly adorned with his doctor's cap at the trial of John Badby. In 1413 he was present among the group of theologians attending the trial of Sir John Oldcastle. Again in 1423 he attended Taylor's trial and in 1428 that of Whyte.[20]

It is about the time of Oldcastle's trial that Netter attracted the attention of Henry V who appointed him his confessor. Netter's role, however, went beyond that of the cure of souls. In 1419 he was sent

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[16] See the letter from Netter to Grossi in K. ALBAN, 'The Letters of Thomas Netter of Walden' in P. FITZGERALD-LOMBARD, ed., *Carmel in Britain: Studies in the Early History of the Carmelite Order*, vol 2, Rome, Institutum Carmelitanum, 1992, 343-380, Letter XLI.

[17] See N. MINNICH, *'The Voice of Theologians in General Councils from Pisa to Trent'* in *Theological Studies* 59 (1998), 420-441 for an overview of the various ways of participating in councils.

[18] J. Bale in Bodley MS 73, fo. 204v.

[19] F. URQUHART, *'Lollards'* in *The Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. IX*, Robert Appleton, New York, 1910 is still a good short summary. See also the standard account in G. LEFF, *Heresy in Later Middle Ages, The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent, c. 1250 – c. 1450*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1967, 494-605.

[20] A record of these trials appears in the *Fasciculus zizaniorum magistri Johannis Wyclif cum tritico*, edited by W. W. SHIRLEY, HMSO, London 1858. This collection of anti Wyclif and anti-Lollard materials was probably begun by John Kenningham in the 1370s and '80s, continued by Netter in the early fifteenth century and subsequently by others in the middle of that century. It is a Carmelite text, but not exclusively of Netter's authorship, which the frontespiece of the 1858 edition suggests. See J. CROMPTON, *'Fasciculus zizaniorum'* in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 12 (1961), 35-45, 155-166.

on a mission to the king of Poland to draw up a truce between Poland-Lithuania and the order of Teutonic knights.[21] Netter was successful and in 1422 accompanied Henry V to France, where on 31 August that year the king died at Valenciennes. Netter preached the funeral sermon at Westminster and became tutor to the young Henry VI. In 1430 he is found in France again with the king and on 2 November Netter died in the Carmelite house in Rouen.[22]

2.3. The Doctrinale

Netter's achievements as religious superior, royal ambassador, diplomat and participant in two general councils would have assured him a place at least in the footnotes of the history of the anti Lollard response. However, beyond all these achievements, Netter is remembered for his comprehensive written reply to the errors of Wyclif in the *Doctrinale antiquitatum fidei catholicae ecclesiae contra Wiclevistas et Hussitas*. The composition, structure and dating of this work have been discussed at some length by Margaret Harvey and Anne Hudson and much of what follows is culled freely and directly from their work.[23] The *Doctrinale* is usually divided into three physical manuscript volumes and the same convention has been followed in the printed versions. The first volume contains four books, composed no later than 1415, the second, book V, written perhaps between 1422 and 1423, and the third volume, book VI, which from the reference to William Whitehead's trial *hoc anno* suggests it was written from 1428 onwards and finished before his last trip to France in 1430.

Books I and II deal with the philosophical roots of Wyclif's errors, the doctrine of God and Jesus' headship of the Church which is his body. The format of each topic is clear and precise: extracts from Wyclif's writings (most frequently from the *Trialogus*) are quoted, counter arguments from the Fathers follow to show the error of Wyclif's ways. In contrast, books III and IV are more generalised in their connection with Lollardy, rarely quoting Wyclif himself, and

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[21] See J. Röhrkasten, *'Thomas Netter Carmelite and Diplomat'* in J. Bergström-Allen and R. Copsey, *'Thomas Netter'*, 113-135.

[22] Bale records the epitaph on Netter's tomb and also that although miraculous signs were reported there, the brothers were unwilling to promote Netter's cult. See Bale, BL MS Harley 1819, fo. 117. The Carmelite general chapter of 1908 decreed that Netter's cause be introduced, but little or no progress was made with it. Cf. P. Caioli, *'Decreta Cap. Generalis anni 1908'* in *Analecta Ordinis Carmelitarum* 1 (1909), 8-10.

[23] M.M. Harvey, *'The Diffusion of the Doctrinale'* and A. Hudson, *The Premature Reformation, Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, 50-55.

offering a wider defence of the religious life and religious orders. The change in format suggests that these two books were written separately and earlier than books I and II and possible incorporated into the *Doctrinale* at a later date. Book V (the second volume) deals with the Sacraments and book VI with the sacramentals of the Church.

Once the *Doctrinale* had been approved in Rome, as the prefatory letters indicate, it enjoyed enormous success as its manuscript history testifies. Almost immediately 'working' copies were made, such as that of the Bolognese prior provincial Giacomo Pelegato, recently unearthed in the order's archive in Rome.[24] Other copies of the *Doctrinale* were made for presentation to the king and other notables, such as that presented to Lincoln College, Oxford by its founder Richard Fleming or to the Carmelite house in Paris.[25] Margaret Harvey has traced the extant manuscript copies of the *Doctrinale* from the earliest, Lincoln College's copy, which was almost certainly produced while Netter was still alive, given that the donor, Fleming died in 1431, to the early sixteenth century copies surviving on the continent in Munich, Ghent and the Vatican.

As a text whose academic pedigree was assured, and yet which dealt briskly and succinctly with the Lollard heresy, the *Doctrinale* enjoyed immediate success. The *Doctrinale* was used at the council of Basel in 1434, it was quoted in several sessions of the Council of Trent, appeared on the syllabus of the English College in Douai and was mined by both Suarez and Bellarmine as they compiled their respective encyclopaedic theological works.

3. Netter on the Religious Life and Contemplation

3.1. The Religious Life

One of the objects of criticism and attack by the Lollards,[26] and indeed society at large,[27] was the religious life and especially the 'new' orders of mendicant friars. Both Wyclif and his followers saw no

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[24] Rome, Archivium Ordinis Carmelitarum, III Pers. 1(1-3).

[25] Lincoln MS Lat. 106 and Paris Bib. Nat. MSS Latin 3377, 3378 and 3379 respectively. For full details see R. Copsey, *'The Carmelites in England 1242-1540, Surviving Writings'* in *Carmelus* 43 (1996), 175-224 and revisions in *Carmelus* 44 (1997), 188-202.

[26] See P. Gradon and A. Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, vol. iv Oxford, 1996, 134-145.

[27] See for example Chaucer's description of a friar in the *Canterbury Tales, General Prologue*.

justification or use for these slick spongers, although there may have been a certain sense of common purpose in their initial charisms in their devotion to the poor and marginalised. Netter defends religious life in general by claiming that it goes back to the Old Testament itself, in the person of Samuel and in a more particular way to the prophets Elijah and Elisha who established groups of followers on Mount Carmel. Here Netter is drawing on an accepted patristic position that Elijah was the founder of the religious life[28] and the strong tradition in his own order that Elijah and to a lesser extent, Elisha, were responsible for the foundation of the Carmelites themselves. In his description of this process, Netter was undoubtedly aided by a book of recent publication in Spain and of which he had probably obtained a copy, the *Institute of the First Monks* or as it was known to him, *The Letter of John XLIV of Jerusalem to the Monk Caprasius*.[29] In a recent study of Carmelite historiography, Andrew Jotischky notes that Netter seems to have drawn on the method used in the *Institute* in constructing his own ecclesiology.[30] In his reply to Wyclif, Netter attempts to justify Church practices and beliefs by relating them to Scripture and the Fathers to show that their antiquity gives them validity. Thus he traces the development of the religious life from the Old Testament, through the New to the Fathers ending with Augustine and Ambrose. He promotes a certain pluralism in the forms of religious life, which again he justifies in Scriptural and patristic terms, and spends some time describing the vows and their effects. Netter also admits that one living in the world might be holier than an enclosed religious not because the lay state is holier, but because many lay people lead lives of virtue above and beyond that of the religious life's demands. Those who practice these superogatory works are not bound by any vow and therefore are more meritorious than religious who are bound. The lay person in this circumstance is demonstrating what is essential in the religious life: sacrifice, which is the greatest act of love. The lay person makes sacrifices freely without any sense

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[28] See the texts collected by E POIROT, *Le Saint Prophète Élie d'après les pères de l'église*, Bellefontaine, 1992.

[29] Netter asks the prior general for a copy of the work: K. ALBAN, *'Letter XXVIII To John Grossi'*. The *Institute* purports to be the early history of the Carmelite order but was compiled by the Catalan prior provincial Felip Ribot († 1391). It is a matter of some debate how much of the material is invented and how much may genuinely reflect Carmelite origins.

[30] See A. JOTISCHKY, *The Carmelites and Antiquity Mendicants and their Pasts in the Middle Ages* Oxford, 2002, 188-189.

of obligation deriving from a vow; the religious through the vow of obedience are in effect offering sacrifices all the time. The vow has the transformative power to take all acts of charity and sacrifice and render them holy. The lay person may well achieve the same quality of holiness, or even surpass the religious, but without the vow the continuous, lasting nature of the acts of charity will be absent. Similarly, the vow of poverty is a type of martyrdom and therefore intrinsically sacrificial.[31]

3.2. Contemplation

One of the most stinging criticisms levelled at religious was that they refused to work and preferred to ask for handouts as beggars. Netter admits there is some truth in this when he advocates manual work for religious as a way of keeping them occupied. However, there are some important exceptions: scribes and scholars are one set, as are those involved in administration. The other group which is excused is the contemplatives: 'In no way are we able to oblige the contemplatives to undertake manual work, that is, those who have imbibed of the holy headiness of the Spirit,…'[32] Their duty is to cultivate contemplation, which Netter describes as:

> It is the holding fast to the love of God and of neighbour with the whole mind. It is resting from external actions and a single-minded desire to cling to the Creator, so that no action is pleasing, but with all cares pushed to one side, the mind burns to see the face of its Creator. [33]

There are a number of points to notice in this definition of contemplation: first and most importantly, contemplation is not some abstract mental exercise; it is not principally an intellectual exercise. It is a process of love (*caritas*) for God and for neighbour; it is the logical extension of the whole purpose of the religious life – to become perfect in charity to God and neighbour. This is nothing new for Netter because it is a common view in monastic literature; but it is significant for modern readers, used as they are to a more cerebral view of contemplation.

Secondly, the love of which Gregory speaks is directed at God and at neighbour. There is no distinction or dichotomy between the divine

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[31] Netter, *Doctrinale* 3.1.19: 'Voluntaria paupertas est unum genus martyrii…'

[32] Netter, *Doctrinale*, 4. 2. 28.

[33] This is a quotation from Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelem prophetam*, II, II, 8 in PL, LXXVI, 953 and *Corpus Christianorum*, CXLII, p. 230, lines 191-196.

and the human in this definition; service of neighbour and service to God will advance the Christian along the path of contemplation. The attitude of wholeness also applies to the subject of contemplation as well as the object: *'tota mente'* recalls the primary task of the believer, 'to love your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength'.[34] It is tempting to see in this definition the potential for the laity to practice contemplation, for there is nothing here that is peculiar to the religious life as such.

Netter offers a second definition of contemplation which proceeds from the supposition that the mind has withdrawn from external preoccupations in order to concentrate on 'inner realities'. This is a common position in tracts on prayer and contemplation and the scriptural episode used most frequently to emphasise this point is Luke 10: 38-42, the story of Martha and Mary.[35] In this context Netter quotes from John Cassian when he asserts:

> 'Theoria' then, i.e., contemplation of God, is the one thing, the value of which all the merits of our righteous acts, all our aims at virtue, come short of.[36]

The term *'theoria'* comes from Greek philosophy and has the sense of knowledge gained from a passive receptivity, from a meditative reflection on reality rather than knowledge gained from active enquiry. It is often contrasted with practical, pragmatic knowledge.[37] In a realistic appreciation of medieval life-styles, only religious men and women could be expected to have enough time and resources for them to cultivate the conditions for this type of contemplation. Indeed Giles Constable draws this same conclusion

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[34] Deut 6:4 'audi Israhel Dominus Deus noster Dominus unus est diliges Dominum Deum tuum ex toto corde tuo et ex tota anima tua et ex tota fortitudine tua...' The so-called *šema* or summons to faith.

[35] Medieval biblical scholars were well aware of the difficulties in interpreting this story. Some texts prefaced this sentence with 'Only a few things are necessary, indeed only one…' to soften the force of Jesus' saying. Other commentators took the 'one' to refer to the number of dishes Martha was plying Jesus with and his comment as a polite refusal. See G. CONSTABLE, 'The Interpretation of Mary and Martha' in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought*, Cambridge, 1995.

[36] *'... vna et sola est theorica, id est contemplatio Dei: cui merito omnium iustificationum merita, universa virtutum studia postponuntur'* Cassian, *Conferences*, XXIII, "The Third Conference of Abbot Theonas". On Sinlessness. Chapter III, i in *Patrologia Latina* and *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiaticorum Latinorum*. XIII, 642.

[37] See C. CATENA, *'Contemplazione e azione attraverso i secoli'* in *Carmelus* 15 (1968), 57-122.

from his studies of the Martha and Mary paradigm in the 12th century.[38] However, by the early 13th century a shift had taken place in the exposition of this Lucan episode and there was a tendency to promote the idea that both the active and the passive should be combined in one attitude of contemplation. This is a return to the Gregorian definition of contemplation which sees love of neighbour in acts of charity as a contemplative exercise or disposition, as much as the love of God in prayer. In this respect Netter seems to reflect both traditions in his chapter on the religious life and its summit, contemplation. It is true, nonetheless, that in his theology Netter does not really explain the relationship between the two definitions, nor does he offer a gloss on Luke 10:42 (*unum est necessarium…*) which explains Jesus' statement in a convincing way.

4. Netter's Approach to the Religious Life and Prayer

4.1. The Letters

This is not the place to enter into a long discussion about the letter book of Thomas Netter that John Bale copied into his notebook probably as a young priest in the 1520's. It is enough to note that the survival of this correspondence is of great value to medieval historian and that it provides a priceless insight into the care and affairs of a 'working provincial'. These letters are preserved today in Bodley MS 73 and contain precious information given the paucity of records of English medieval Carmelites.[39]

One of the most striking aspects of Netter's correspondence is his fidelity to the religious life and his insistence that the brothers must be given the right opportunities and environment in which to pray and meditate. Part of his attitude is attributable to a fairly widespread vision of the religious life in the later middle ages which sees the ideal friar devoted to the recitation of the Office and the common observance of the vows. This is precisely the sort of community that Netter promises Henry V he will send to Caen in northern France to staff a French Carmelite house, perhaps abandoned when Henry's troops captured the town in 1417-1418.[40]

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[38] Constable, *Three Studies*, p. 78.

[39] The letters were transcribed by B. Zimmerman and published in *Monumenta Historica Carmelitana*, Lérins, 1907.

[40] See C. Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy 1415-1450 The History of a Medieval Occupation*, Oxford, 1983, especially chapter 4, 'Caen: An "English" Town', 81-122.

> About thirteen of our brothers, your servants, are coming to you, most clement prince, including some who already live in the area. We are sending to you a brother who for ten years was prior of Sandwich and made a good job of it; a graduate in theology and a third who was Sub-prior in London for a long time: all are well-known preachers. There are also other junior priests to celebrate the office, whose names I have inserted in the commission of the superior. A Master of Theology will follow these men, all of whom in my honest opinion are of good report both in their way of life and behaviour.[41]

The two graduates in theology mentioned by Netter would have given classes to the novices and young friars in 'initial formation'. They also would have been licensed by the local bishop to preach and hear confessions. The 'junior priests', both in the sense of the younger ones whose training was not complete and non-graduates were to devote themselves to the Office. Netter, for all his own involvement in the affairs of state as a loyal servant and confessor to Henry V, does not expect his community in Caen to be similarly occupied:

> I beg of you to provide such help and protection to the prior of the convent that he had his brothers may live in perfect peace and to this end: that they may not be employed outside the house in the service of lords and court officials and thus withdrawn from the service owed to God.[42]

Netter may also have been influenced by the recently published spiritual work *De institutione primorum monachorum* which purported to be an early history of the Order and whose authorship and provenance is still debated. As mentioned above, there does seem to be some indirect influence on Netter's view of the history of the Order and of the Church.

In addition to the friars' duty of singing the Office and some study, Netter also held that there was a smaller group who were dedicated in a special way to prayer. In a slightly earlier exchange with the King, Henry asks for prayers and Netter writes to his brothers to

> … give thanks also for all that our benign God has done for our lord the king, and even more pray for what he might do. I say these things to

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Allmand does not deal with the fate of religious houses directly but he notes on p. 84 the wide divergence of opinion on how many people left the town when it fell: from 25,000 to 500.

[41] Letter xi To the King [Henry V] in K. ALBAN, *'Letters of Thomas Netter'*, 348 It would seem that there were some Carmelites living already in Caen.

[42] Ibid.

> each and every one of my brothers, but not to all equally. I appeal to those particularly who know the secret of holy contemplation and exercise it more frequently. You, my dear fathers, my brothers, do I beg urgently and exhort earnestly, without ambiguity, to remember the lord our king from the bottom of your hearts.[43]

There is a definite sense in which Netter appreciates the sublime state of contemplation is part of the Carmelite vocation, but not necessarily for all. However, contemplation is not foreign to a concern with the world and its problems; Netter is completely in line with the definition of contemplation which he knew from Gregory the Great:

> It is the holding fast to the love of God and of neighbour with the whole mind. It is resting from external actions and a single-minded desire to cling to the Creator, so that no action is pleasing, but with all cares pushed to one side, the mind burns to see the face of its Creator.[44]

Netter, like many provincials before and after him, also had to deal with his own brethren, some of whom could prove awkward at times. The plain disobedient were brought to brook swiftly, and without much ceremony:

> There is one fellow-brother, Lawrence Clerke of the Sandwich Community, who because of the current plague in our London House where in the course of a year twenty-four people have died, has been removed by the written order of our Provincial Chapter at Ipswich. But without our intervention by letter or word of mouth, after waiting for 11 weeks to carry out this order, he at last departed in apostasy and, from the information of his Prior, stirred up trouble among the lay-people inciting them to kill the Prior and to burn down the monastery. Since he has written to you personally, we would be most surprised if he were forgiven without some punishment. At the very least you should do nothing at all until you have received a full report because unless it were under great pressure, such an outrage cannot be left unpunished. Reverend Father, we are your sons in obedience and we believe more so than one profligate can possibly be. Nor do we consider it right that he alone should enjoy your favour while we are the object of his contempt and disrespect. Nor are we intent on cruelty as God knows nothing is further from us, but we would rather one wicked man to be punished properly than a hundred seep to be lost as the result of his not being punished.[45]

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[43] K. ALBAN, *'Letter IX to the Brothers of his province'*.
[44] See footnote 30 above.
[45] K. ALBAN, *'Letter XLIV to the Prior General'*.

Other brothers, not content with the rigours of Carmelite life, sought greater mortification in monastic orders. One such Carmelite, John Boxhole[46] asked to transfer to the Carthusians because the Carmelites did not obey the Rule perfectly. Netter's reply sheds a lot of light on his personal spirituality, on his view of Carmelite life and on his 'working philosophy' when dealing with these cases. First, the essence of the religious life is not keeping the Rule to the letter:

> …even if they do not observe the whole Rule punctiliously and for the sake of their cloistered life they change or omit some things, as long as they do not stop living a sober, just and pious life to the best of their ability. Therefore, he who thinks that he is a perjurer because he does not keep the Rule to the letter seems to show inadequately what he has vowed.

The Church, and the orders within it are a mixture of good and bad, observant and lax, but Christ does not condemn this, rather it is a lesson for all:

> For from among the weak and the strong, Christ has assembled the church, and the strong do things that the weak cannot do. And this experience will show something about our brother as regards the observance of the Rule: that the strong and those already perfect will observe points of your Rule which Brother John does not care for as yet.

Not only is Boxhole incapable of keeping the Carthusian Rule perfectly, but he seems to have been less than observant as a Carmelite:

> Certainly he could not [be good] because he did not want to be good, and he could not be good unless he was willing. Was not good St Michael there, and Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel and the glorious number of heavenly powers and the tripartite order of angels in their splendour.

The fault lies not with the system, concludes Netter, but with the man and his own will-power and all the angels in heaven are not going to make any difference. Finally, having set out his views and made his comments on Boxhole, Netter, like many superiors before and after, recognises the value of not pushing too hard, and indeed the value of a sense of humour when dealing with the brethren:

> I give you thanks, for you may be able to make him good who, and I use his own words, could not be good among us. As for the rest, if you give

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[46] Boxhole, Buxhale John, Carmelite of Hitchin when he was ordained subdeacon on 28 May 1401 in Much Hadham *Reg. Braybroke, London*, fo. 57.

> your assent and lighten our burden, I shall send you forty brothers that you may make them better, none of whom is inferior to our John, none is worse.[47]

Evidently, John Boxhole was not the only 'difficult' case to cross Netter's path as provincial. The type of spirituality that emerges from this brief survey of Netter's is one which values and promotes the traditional ideals of the order, that is, prayer and community. Observance is strict, but not fanatical; pragmatism, good humour and a sense of proportion are the human qualities Netter brings to his office. His Carmelite formation and reading have convinced him of the supreme value of prayer and contemplation; his attitude to lay people is positive since he recognizes their contribution is no less than that of the religious. He is ideally placed to sponsor, encourage and guide those lay people, including several women in a particular vocation, that of recluse, and in particular anchorite and anchoress.

4.2. Anchorites and Anchoresses

The first table shows the names of recluses and the places where they resided of those who were under the direction or patronage of the Carmelites.[48] The primary source for this is John Bale's *Scriptorium* and it is hard to know what to make of the fact that Netter seems to have been the first Carmelite provincial in England to associate lay women with the Order. Certainly he is the first that Bale takes any notice of and with reason since in the 1420s he 'veiled' no fewer than four women. This feature of his period as provincial has, however, to be set in context. On the continent there is evidence to show that from the end of the thirteenth century lay people were associated with the Carmelite Order in various ways.[49] Some lived in dwellings attached to convents in the manner of monastic *conversae*; others were received into various fraternities and guilds. It is known that several women chose to live together in community under the auspices of a Carmelite (male) convent. These were called *pinzochere* and correspond to the beguines of northern Europe. There is evidence as early as 1263 in Messina for the existence of these groups. In discussing the origins and

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[47] K. ALBAN, *'Letter XXXIV from Thomas Walden to the Prior of the Carthusians of Sheen concerning the transfer of Brother John Boxhole of London from the Carmelite Order to the Order of Carthusians, 24th March, 1415'*.

[48] From R. M. CLAY, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, London, 1914, 203-263.

[49] E. BOAGA, *'Genesi e sviluppo degli altri membri della Famiglia Carmelitana'* in *Come pietre vive per leggere la storia e la vita del Carmelo*, Rome, 1993, 157-216.

development of these associations, Emanuele Boaga, hypothesises that Netter first came across this phenomenon in Pisa when he attended the Council there in 1409 and would have heard of the *oblazione* made by Donna Bonuccia to the Carmelites in Pisa in 1390.

Attractive though this theory is, England offered plenty of examples of men and women attached to religious communities more or less loosely. The history of recluses (anchorites and hermits) who enjoyed protection and patronage either from religious institutions or lay goes back to well beyond the Norman Conquest and perhaps even to post-Roman, Celtic Britain. Clay mentions in her introduction: '…there was not a single county in England which had not at some time or other a recluse's cell…there is evidence for the existence of at least 750 cells…'[50] All through the middles ages hermits in particular fulfilled vital social functions as guardians of roads, bridges, river-crossings and even light houses. Netter and other Carmelite provincials after him were tapping into this most English institution to offer a way for women in particular to associate themselves with the Order.

Table 2 and chart 1 give some idea of the incidents of association by religious order over a period of more than 250 years, The chart demonstrates very graphically the great upsurge in lay associations across the mendicant orders in the fifteenth century. The third table analyses Clay's data from the perspective of geographical location and it comes as no surprise to see the correlation between Carmelite associations and the East Anglia region of England. This was a traditional stronghold of the order and many leading friars in the province came from this area.[51] The appearance of Northampton, which attracted both Carmelite and Domincan recluses, might be explained by the presence of a statue of Our Lady in the Carmelite church which seems to have been the object of pilgrimage.[52] There was also a statue of St Catherine of Alexandria (the 'Catherine-wheel' Catherine) who was noted not only for her own attachment to the Christian faith, but her considerable scholarship and learning which she put to use in persuading others of the reasonableness of belief. The impact of her cult was felt at all levels: as a patron of female

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[50] R.M. Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, p. xviii.

[51] A. Nichols in *Seeable Signs The Iconography of the Seven Sacraments 1350-1544* Woodbridge, UK, 1994 has argued that the 'Carmeliteness' of East Anglia made it especially susceptible to the reception of Netter's teaching on the sacraments and this is reflected in the iconography of the panels on octagonal baptismal fonts in East Anglia.

[52] See K. ALBAN, *'The Character and Influence of Carmelite Devotion to Mary in Medieval England'* in *Maria – A Journal of Marian Studies* 2 (2001), 73-104.

students, of theologians and preachers she enjoyed a certain intellectual pre-eminence not often accorded to those of her sex and this might have exercised some attraction for female recluses.[53]

The fourth table and accompanying chart show the number recluses associated with the four major mendicant orders in the whole period from 1274 to 1530. The Carmelites and Dominicans vie with one another for first place (of course, the fragmentary nature of the surviving evidence makes any dogmatic assertion extremely suspect), perhaps due in both cases to the strong mystical strand in the spirituality of the brothers of Dominic and the sons of the prophets. A comparative study of Dominican recluses might prove most illuminating from this perspective.

It would be fascinating to know more about these women that Netter enclosed as anchorites, but in the very nature of things they lived hidden and largely unknown lives. There is one exception: Emma Stapleton who lived in a small dwelling attached to the Norwich Carmelite priory from 1421 until her death in 1442. 'She was the daughter of Sir Miles Stapleton of Bedale and Ingham and Sir Miles was part of a rich and influential family in Norfolk and Yorkshire, and a patron of book production. He had been in close contact with Julian of Norwich, as executor of a will that had benefited her. Whilst it is an overstatement to say that Dame Emma was 'Julian's follower', it seems probable that Emma knew of Julian'.[54] Thus it seems Sir Miles and his daughter may well have been part of the outer circle of English mystics in East Anglia, and in contact with an important strand of nascent theology: the vernacular, which McGinn sees as a third movement in medieval spirituality after the scholastic and the monastic.[55] Carmelite involvement in the English mystical tradition may well be comprehensible in terms of a desire to participate in the increasingly significant vernacular approach. This is, indeed, the thrust of Bergström-Allen's dissertation and further research.

There are, however other considerations to be taken into account. Netter was a supporter of these women who wished to lead an

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[53] See K. ALBAN, *"The Fabric of Worship: Liturgy and its Artefacts in the Medieval English Province of Carmelites"* in *Carmelus* 53 (2006), 111-129.

[54] Much of what follows is taken from Johan Bergström-Allen's Oxford MPhil thesis (2002), *'Heremitam et ordinis carmelitarum' A study of the vernacular theological literature produced by medieval English Whitefriars, particularly Richard Misyn, O.Carm.* Emma's dwelling is still visible as part of the remains of the Carmelite priory in Norwich, now on the site of the printers, Jarrolds.

[55] See B. MCGINN, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, New York, 1998, 18-25.

anchoritic life and no doubt his appreciation of the value of contemplation, drawn from the Carmelite tradition and perhaps re-enforced by reading the *Institute of the First Monks* He therefore appointed the prior, the sub-prior and three other friars from the Norwich community to counsel and to encourage her. These were not chosen at random. The two office holders had sufficient *locus standi* to enforce their counsels and at least two of the other three had vast experience, both academic and practical in dealing with Lollardy. One of them, Adam Hemlyngton,[56] was a contemporary of Netter's and another notable preacher against heresy. John Thorpe[57], the second counsellor, had studied at Cambridge and was present at a number of heresy trials in the first few years of the fifteenth century. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Netter was perhaps a little suspicious of anchorites given their association with Lollardy, real or imagined. However, this is not to diminish his role nor understate his encouragement of the solitary life, in line with his understanding of the Carmelite charism. It is simply to introduce a more nuanced picture of Netter's involvement and to recognize the political as well as theological and spiritual dimensions of the anchoritic phenomenon.

Netter's approach to the question of anchorites is also shown in his handling of the Carmelite mystic and apocalyptic preacher, Thomas Scrope, who inhabited a dwelling attached to the Norwich Carmelite

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[56] R. COPSEY, *Biographical Register*, Hemlington was a Carmelite of Norwich. He studied at Oxford University where he was a B.Th. by 1402 and D.Th. by 1414. He preached before the king on the feast of the Assumption 1402: Public Record Office, E 101/404/21, fo. 36v. He was present as a Doctor of Divinity at an inquisition by the Congregation of the University of Oxford on 4 March 1414 into the spread of heresy. *Reg. Repingdon, Lincoln*, fo. 151v: *Snappe's Formulary*, ed. H. SALTER Oxford Hist. Soc., 1924, 184. Hemlington was the 48th Master of the Carmelite School of Theology at Paris: Bodleian Library, Ms. 73, fo. 36: *Mon. Hist. Carm.*, ed. B. ZIMMERMAN, Lérins, 1907, 1, 407. Villiers claims that he was a prior in many places: C. VILLIERS, *Bibliotheca Carmelitana*, I, 1. He died in Norwich. J. BALE, *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum* 1548; 2, 62.

[57] Thorpe, (Thorpus, Torpe) John. He studied at Cambridge University. In 1423-4, he was possibly the John Thorpe who attended the Council of Pavia-Siena: J. SMET, *Carmelites*, Illinois, 1975, 1, 72; *Acta Capitul. Gen. Ord. Carm.*, 1, 190n. On 2 Sept 1428, he was described as *magister* when he was present at the trial of John Wardon of Loddon for heresy in the chapel of the bishop's palace, Norwich, in front of the bishop, William Alnwick. [N. TANNER, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich*, 1977, 32]. He was present at least 7 other trials of Lollards. John Thorpe was present with his brother, William, the provincial, John Kenynghale O.Carm., and Walter Hunt O.Carm. at the Council of Florence in 1438-9. They were the only English theologians present as the embassies from the king and the delegates of the other orders could not attend because of the conflict with the duke of Burgundy: T. RUDBORNE, *Historia Major* in Wharton, Henry, *Anglia Sacra*, London, 1691, 1, 268-70.

house.[58] Around 1425, he came out of seclusion and travelled up and down the countryside preaching penance and the imminent approach of the *parousia*. His message was that 'the new Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, was shortly to come down from heaven prepared for her spouse'. He wore sackcloth and an iron girdle about his waist. He was rebuked by the Netter who wrote a strong letter to the community at Norwich.[59]

5. Conclusions

At this stage it is probably difficult to offer very much in terms of firm conclusions. Netter, and other Carmelite provincials after him, drew consciously on a particular tradition in associating recluses with the Carmelite Order. They were an ancient institution of proven worth and utility. However, some contact with Lollardy was evidently suspected and Netter reacted by providing well-trained friars to counsel his recluses and to steer them away from heresy. Although the beguines and *pinzochere* were continental traditions certainly Netter seems to have been the driving force behind their introduction into England in the context of extending the Carmelite family. To this extent he was innovative, if a little suspicious. However, his activities in associating men and women to the order who also wanted to be contemplatives also squares well with his writings on prayer and on contemplation as the highest calling of those with a religious vocation. The preservation of the Carmelite charismatic identity is no mean feat in an age when the Church was under considerable pressure not only from openly hostile movements, such as the Lollards, but also pulling in the other direction those within the institution who used it for gain and advancement. Within a Carmelite context, too, Netter deserves to be remembered for safeguarding the values of prayer and contemplation in a period which is not often considered a spiritual highpoint in the order's history. Netter was aware of the Order's traditions, yet responsive to the needs of an increasingly articulate and demanding laity. He reacted by pushing the boundaries of membership a little further by associating men and women in way consonant with the spirituality of the Order, but also well located in the best traditions of English reclusive life.

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[58] R. Copsey, *Biographical Register.*
[59] J. Bale, *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorium*, fo. 213.

LAY ANCHORITES AND ANCHORESSES ASSOCIATED WITH THE CARMELITE ORDER

Table 1

Name of anchorite/ess	**Date**	**Place**
Emma STAPLETON	1421	Holy Cross, Norwich
Agnes GRANTSETTER	1421	Cambridge Carmelite priory
Joanna CATFELDE	1421	Lynn priory
Alice WAKELEYNE	1421	?? later Northamptonshire
Thomas BRADLEY aka SCROPE	1441	St. Martin's Bridge, Norwich
John CASTLEACRE	1465	St. Martin's Bridge, Norwich
Thomas BARTON	1479	St. Martin's Bridge, Norwich
George *or* Gregory RIPLAY	1488	Boston, Lincs.
William CLAYS	1510	Lynn priory
Margaret HAWTEN	?	?

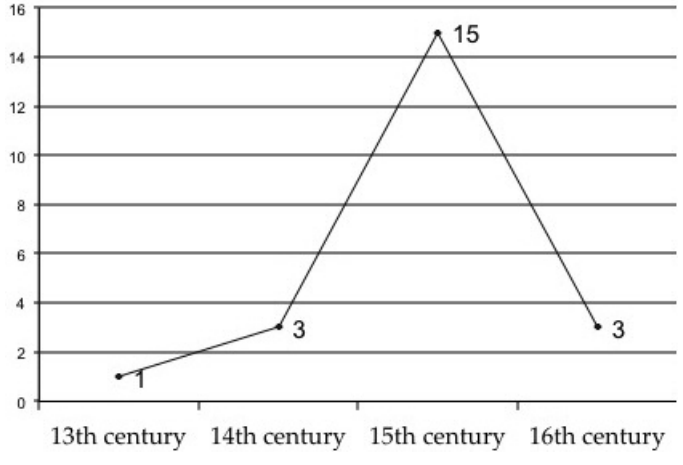
AFFILIATIONS BY MENDICANT ORDERS BY LOCATION 1274 – 1530

Table 2

Order	**Place**	**Year**
OFM	WALSINGHAM	1274
OP	SHREWSBURY	1356
OP	LANCASTER	1373
OSA	DROITWICH	1388
OP	ARUNDEL	1402
OP	NEWCASTLE	1408
OSA	THORNHAM	1413
OCARM	CAMBRIDGE	1421
OCARM	LYNN	1421
OCARM	NORTHAMPTON	1421
OCARM	NORWICH	1421
OP	LYNN	1440
OCARM	NORWICH	1441
OP	CANTERBURY	1446
OCARM	NORWICH	1465
OP	NORWICH	1471
OCARM	NORWICH	1479
OP	FISHERTON	1483
OCARM	BOSTON	1488
OCARM	LYNN	1510
OSA	NORTHAMPTON	1510
OP	WORCESTER	1530

ANCHORITE AND HERMIT AFFILIATIONS BY MENDICANTS

Chart 1



AFFILIATIONS BY LOCATION

Table 3

Order	**Place**	**Year**
OP	ARUNDEL	1402
OCARM	BOSTON	1488
OCARM	CAMBRIDGE	1421
OP	CANTERBURY	1446
OSA	DROITWICH	1388
OP	FISHERTON	1483
OP	LANCASTER	1373
OCARM	LYNN	1421
OP	LYNN	1440
OCARM	LYNN	1510
OP	NEWCASTLE	1408
OCARM	NORTHAMPTON	1421
OSA	NORTHAMPTON	1510
OCARM	NORWICH	1421
OCARM	NORWICH	1441
OCARM	NORWICH	1465
OP	NORWICH	1471
OCARM	NORWICH	1479
OP	SHREWSBURY	1356
OSA	THORNHAM	1413
OFM	WALSINGHAM	1274
OP	WORCESTER	1530

AFFILIATIONS BY MENDICANT ORDER

Table 4

Order	Place	Year
OCARM	CAMBRIDGE	1421
OCARM	LYNN	1421
OCARM	NORTHAMPTON	1421
OCARM	NORWICH	1421
OCARM	NORWICH	1441
OCARM	NORWICH	1465
OCARM	NORWICH	1479
OCARM	BOSTON	1488
OCARM	LYNN	1510
OFM	WALSINGHAM	1274
OP	SHREWSBURY	1356
OP	LANCASTER	1373
OP	ARUNDEL	1402
OP	NEWCASTLE	1408
OP	LYNN	1440
OP	CANTERBURY	1446
OP	NORWICH	1471
OP	FISHERTON	1483
OP	WORCESTER	1530
OSA	DROITWICH	1388
OSA	THORNHAM	1413
OSA	NORTHAMPTON	1510

AFFILIATIONS BY SHARE 1274-1530

Chart 2