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A pragmatic path to salvation

*The meaning of the Decalogue in fourteenth-century Dutch catechetical teaching**

MARTA BIGUS

Introduction

The popularity of the Decalogue in the Low Countries of the fourteenth century is attested by a considerably large number of vernacular texts devoted to this topic. We currently know of no less than forty Middle Dutch writings on the Ten Commandments dated between circa 1300 and circa 1420.¹ Like many other contemporary vernacular religious works, most of them were based on various Latin sources, which are often difficult to identify. Alongside the *Latinitas*, authors from the Low Countries also used the French tradition as a repository of catechetical knowledge. The Middle Dutch corpus of the fourteenth-century Decalogue literature can be roughly divided into three categories.² The first group comprises short formulaic enumerations of the ten precepts without further clarification, which occurred individually or within larger texts. Such general overviews of the commandments served as mnemonic tools in the elementary catechetical education of the laity, or as a basis for the examination of conscience in preparation for confession. The second category consists of elementary explications, sometimes supplemented with examples of actions that violate the commandments and with instructions on how to behave in order not to break the divine precepts. These texts can be considered a ‘catechetical mainstream’ and comprise the minimum of necessary knowledge and instruction that every Christian should be familiar with. Such explanations often formed a part of larger catechetical *summae* that contained explanations of other tenets of the faith, for example the Seven Deadly Sins, the virtues, or the creed.³ Finally, there are elaborate explications that

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¹ Preliminary partial overviews of the explications of the Ten Commandments can be found in Desplenter 2010, 5–9, Spaapen 1940, Troelstra 1903, 18–64. For an overview of the German, and partially also Dutch, tradition, see also Suntrup et al. 1999, vol. 10, cols 1484–1503.

² This typology applies only to the explanations of the Decalogue and not to catechetical works in which they are found in general. A similar typology of German texts was proposed in Baumann 1989, 127 and in Störmer–Caysa 1998, 201–203 as well as in Weidenhiller 1965, 25–201.

³ The term *summa* was originally used in the context of scholastic learning to denote a system of arranging the entirety of knowledge required from students of the individual *ars* according to the scholastic principle. The aim of such ordering was to present a vast body of knowledge in a systematic manner in order to make learning easier. The Middle Dutch authors of the texts investigated for the purpose of this article do not use this term to denote their works (except the translator of the *Somme le roi*). As authors of other vernacular works of religion, they rather use the term *spieghel* (Eng. mirror, compare Tinbergen 1907, 16), which in Middle Dutch was synonymous to *summa*. Following the tendencies in modern scholarship, I use this term in reference to vernacular works that explain the elementary catechetical tenets, such as the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, the articles of faith,

complement the elementary meaning of each commandment with multi-layered explanations. Such texts add an extra theological dimension to the basic meaning encountered in the second group. Devotional, meditative or even mystical passages are frequently incorporated into explications of this kind. Most of these extensive expositions take the form of treatises devoted exclusively to the Decalogue.⁴

The Middle Dutch writings on the Ten Commandments first appeared in the late thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century in the form of short enumerations included in texts written by the two most famous and prolific Middle Dutch writers: Jacob van Maerlant and Jan van Boendale. Maerlant listed the commandments in his partial translations of Petrus Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* and Vincentius of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*, written respectively in 1271 and 1290. Boendale included brief enumerations of the commandments in *Jans Teestyne* (Jan's Opinions) and in *Der Leken Spieghel* (the Laymen's Mirror), both written circa 1330.⁵ The first more elaborate expositions date from the middle of the fourteenth century.⁶ A significant rise in popularity of the Ten Commandments in the Low Countries, as well as in the neighbouring language areas, occurred after circa 1350.⁷ Most of the preserved fourteenth-century Dutch Decalogue texts were written after this date. This development has been linked to the 'pastoral offensive' triggered by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.⁸ The twenty-first canon of this council prescribed compulsory yearly confession for every Christian. Vernacular treatises on the Decalogue are often interpreted as tools that facilitated the implementation of such regulations in the centuries after the council: reading through the commandments and the examples of their violation helped to remind a penitent of his or her own sins, which were supposed to be confessed at least once a year.⁹ Indeed, the enumerations of the commandments

virtues, beatitudes, gifts of the Holy Spirit, works of mercy, as well as (optionally) explications of the *Pater Noster* and *ans moriendi*. It is important to realize that the extent and intellectual level of explications of various tenets within one catechetical *summa* can vary considerably. For example, the part devoted to the Decalogue in the Middle Dutch *Wech van Salicheit* is relatively concise and theologically not particularly advanced. However, the same work features chapters on sins, sacraments and virtues that exceed the Decalogue part in scope and complexity.

4 An example of such an extensive Decalogue treatise, which adds an extra dimension to the standard catechetical explanation of the commandments, is the text by Jan van Leeuwen preserved in manuscript Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, ms IV 401, f. 1r–50v. An elaborate Decalogue explication of a very different type (yet belonging to the same category) is the part devoted to the Ten Commandments in Dirc van Delf's Middle Dutch scholastic *summa Tafel vanden kerstenen ghelove* available in modern edition Daniëls 1937, vol. II, 204–238.

5 For the current research on these authors see Van Oostrom 2006, 502–549 (on Jacob van Maerlant) and Van Oostrom 2013, 137–175 (on Jan van Boendale). For the Ten Commandments passages in Maerlant's adaptation of *Historia Scholastica* see Gysseling 1983, vs. 4563–4628; for the Ten Commandments in *Der Leken Spieghel* see De Vries 1844–1848, vs. 85–102; for the Ten Commandments in *Jans Teestyne*, see Snellaert 1869, vs. 2544–2583.

6 The oldest extended explication of the Ten Commandments is Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, ms 920, which contains a translation of the introduction to Bonaventure's *Collationes de Decem Praeceptis*. According to Kwakkel 2002, 257, the part of this convoluted manuscript that contains the Ten Commandments text is dated c. 1350. *Der Seelen Troost*, a collection of catechetical teachings on the Decalogue and exempla arranged according to the Ten Commandments is thought to have been written in the same period according to Schmitt 1959, 118–131.

7 For the rise of the Decalogue literature in fourteenth-century German-speaking lands, see Suntrup et al. 1999, vol. 10, cols 1489–1502, Baumann 1989, 198–222; for development in England: Cawley 1975, 129–134; Kellogg 1960, 345–349.

8 See for example Bast 1997, 3–6; Bracha 1997, 119–120; Cawley 1975; Desplenter 2010, 6; Kellogg 1960, 345–346; Németh 2005, 78; Suntrup et al. 1999, vol. 10, col. 1487.

9 The interpretations of Decalogue texts as tools for the preparation for yearly confession occur in the

formed an essential element of both Latin and vernacular late-medieval manuals for confession. However, hardly any of the more elaborate (types two and three in the typology outlined above) fourteenth-century Middle Dutch Decalogue explications clearly mentions the preparation for confession as its function. Neither do the textual elements in these works univocally point to such use. In addition, there seems to be very little evidence for the institutionally controlled implementation of the catechetical decrees of the Council in the form of the production of vernacular treatises. Therefore, it is questionable whether the greater emphasis on confession inspired by the Fourth Lateran Council really had that much influence on the growth of the number of Decalogue texts in the second half of the fourteenth century. Moreover, there is a gap of almost a century and a half between the Fourth Lateran Council and the proliferation of the more complex Middle Dutch Decalogue texts. It seems more likely that the increased prominence of this topic was a part of a broader, multi-layered process in the late medieval culture of the Low Countries. From the last quarter of the thirteenth century on, and especially after 1350, we can observe a significant growth in the production of vernacular texts whose main function was the transmission of knowledge. These didactic tendencies embraced diverse disciplines, from medicine and various applied sciences to profane ethics and religious knowledge.

The proliferation of texts covering the last category, ranging from explications of elementary tenets of faith to translations of the Bible and extensive theological treatises, was particularly striking.¹⁰ It does not seem probable that this process was a top-down initiative of the church. Most authors remained anonymous but a significant number of those whose identity has been established were not theologians working at the behest of ecclesiastical authorities. Many of them were professional scribes, artisans, members of the secular clergy, lay brethren or mendicants who unapologetically profited themselves as teachers acting on their own initiative.¹¹ These (predominantly) urban dwellers, educated most probably in town schools, many of which were in the hands of mendicants, had access to monastic and academic learning through Latin handbooks and compendia and to theological works in other vernaculars, in which the French tradition was particularly important. At the same time, they had a good understanding of the needs of potential readers of vernacular religious literature. Their audience consisted of lay and (semi-)religious people, including lay brethren, beguines and beghards, novices of both sexes, religious women, and towards the end of the fourteenth century and later also brothers and sisters of the common life and members of the Third Order of Saint Francis. By making theological knowledge available in Middle Dutch, they acted as cultural intermediaries between the *Latinitas* and those who were literate and emancipated, but not learned. It should be stressed that these intellectual middlemen were often flexible, if not selective in their deal-

publications regarding various vernacular traditions: in the Low Countries Desplenter 2010, 6; Spaapen 1940, 90; Meder 1990, 349. For similar interpretations in the German tradition see Bast 1997, 3–6, Feistner 1996, 4–5, Störmer-Caysa 1997, 507–509, Störmer-Caysa 1998, 205–207, Suntrup et al. 1999, vol. 10, col. 1487. Similarly for the English tradition, in Cawley 1975 and for Central Europe Bracha 1997 and Németh 2005.

¹⁰ Warnar 2004, 121; Warnar 2005, 118–119; Warnar 2007, 236–237; Warnar 2011, 259.

¹¹ Warnar 2004, 118.

ing with their sources, often choosing contents that advocated their own agendas and were deemed relevant for their intended audiences. They dared to formulate their own viewpoints and to be critical of secular and ecclesiastical elites.¹² The extended explications of the Decalogue formed a part of the religious–didactic literature authored by these middlemen. Such texts provided guidelines for righteous Christian living, which, though derived from learned theological traditions, were not directives imposed by the Church. As will be demonstrated later in this article, they contained instead the ideas of proper conduct as envisaged by the middlemen.

In order to reconstruct such guidelines and define what kind of behaviour was held up as righteous Christian conduct, one could inquire into the way in which individual commandments were explained.¹³ The present article, however, addresses more essential questions that should perhaps be answered prior to such a reconstruction: how did the Middle Dutch authors define the Decalogue as a whole and how did they explain the importance of the observance of its precepts? Assuming that following the commandments was considered important, which arguments did the authors use to encourage their readers to do so? What interests us here is the general meaning of the Decalogue as a whole presented to various groups of Christians. I therefore selected six fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Dutch texts that are representative of the ‘catechetical mainstream’, that is, the second category within the typology outlined above. In what follows I will first introduce the selected works and subsequently proceed with an analysis of the main aspects of the definitions of the Decalogue found in the corpus investigated, focussing on catechetical, theological and social aspects brought to the fore by the Middle Dutch authors.

Selected corpus

The oldest explication of the Ten Commandments in the selected corpus is included in the *Nieuwe Doctrinael* (the New Manual) written in rhymed verse around 1350 by a surgeon and author Jan de Weert from Ypres.¹⁴ The 400-verse passage devoted to the commandments is placed after the first part of De Weert’s *Doctrinael* in which the Seven Deadly Sins are discussed at length.¹⁵ The second selected text is the Mid-

¹² Warnar 2002, 33, 38; Warnar 2004, 121 on access to both worlds, Warnar 2007, 235 on the urban context of the fourteenth century Middle Dutch didactic–religious literature; Warnar 2007, 239–240 on the role of mendicants in the education of the ‘middle class intellectuals/men of letters’.

¹³ I am currently working on a doctoral dissertation about the Decalogue as an instrument of vernacular moral instruction in the Low Countries of the fourteenth century.

¹⁴ On Jan de Weert’s origin and profile, see Brinkman 1991, 101–120 and Van Oostrom 2013, 132–137. The edition of the work is Jacobs 1915 (for the Ten Commandments vs. 1559–1967), further referred to as *Doctrinael*.

¹⁵ The *Doctrinael* is preserved in two manuscripts: Brussels, KBR, MS 15642–51 (Brabant, c. 1400–1450), which contains the full text and in the fragmentary manuscript Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS Ltk 194 (Northern Low Countries? c. 1450–1475). In the Brussels manuscript, the *Doctrinael* comprises folios 61v–87v. The Leiden manuscript consists only of 15 folios containing some 1500 verses of the text. For descriptions of both manuscripts see Jacobs 1915, 176–179. On the Brussels manuscript and its contents, see Deschamps & Mulder 1998–2015, vol. VIII, 29–31 (with references to older publications), Klunder 2004, 25–40, 28–31 and Klunder 2005, 138–142. The Brussels manuscript is a collection of ten moral–didactic fourteenth-century texts written in rhymed verses. It opens with a Middle Dutch adaptation of the Latin *Elucidarium*, followed by the *Doctrinael* and a series of short tales,

dle Dutch translation of the *Miroir de l'ame*, the first part of the *Opus Tripartitum*, a catechetical treatise written at the end of the fourteenth century in both French and Latin by Jean Gerson, chancellor of the university of Paris, most probably during his stay in Bruges.¹⁶ The Middle Dutch rendition, which is dated around 1400 and localized in the region between Ghent and Brussels, is a faithful translation from the French. The greater part of the text is devoted to the Ten Commandments, each of which is treated in a separate chapter. This discussion of the commandments is preceded by several short paragraphs on the Creation, the Trinity, the fall of humankind and the first coming of Christ.¹⁷ The third text, namely the *Wech van Salicheit* (Way to Salvation) is preserved in the same manuscript as the Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame* (Wiesbaden, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, MS 3004 B 10, see note 16).¹⁸ This elaborate catechetical *summa* comprises over seventy chapters, covering the essentials of the Christian faith. The Ten Commandments are discussed rather briefly in the fourth chapter.¹⁹ The text was written around 1400 by a priest, most probably in the western part of present-day Flanders.²⁰ The fourth work in the investigated corpus is *Spiegel*

three of which are known as works of a professional teller of stories, Augustijnken of Dordrecht. The collection closes with *Van den coninc Saladijn ende vanden Hughen van Tabaryen* by the Brabantine poet Hein van Aken, which provides a moral-didactic exposition of knightly values and virtues. Nothing is known about the medieval owners of the Brussels manuscript. Klunder 2005, 138 suggests that the codex could have been made and used in a milieu of civil servants, because it has a narrow and high format and it consists of thick paper quires (ten bifolia), both codicological features being characteristic of the record books of this period. Klunder's interpretation seems probable but it is merely an informed guess as no information about actual ownership of the book is available. The book was purchased by the Royal Library of Belgium from the collection of a Ghent bibliophile, Karel van Hulthem (1764–1832). It is not known how he acquired the codex. The presence of the *Elucidarius* and an exposition of knightly virtues can be interpreted as an indication of a worldly owner. However, despite its profane ethical tone, the French *Elucidarium* was read by both religious and lay people. This has been discussed in Ruhe 1987, 48–49.

16 McGuire 2011, 12–13, Schepers 2008, 148–154. Edition of the Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame* can be found in Kienhorst & Schepers 2009, 291–311 (f. 45va–50vb in the Wiesbaden–manuscript), further referred to as the Middle Dutch *Miroir*.

17 The text is preserved as a full text only in the manuscript Wiesbaden, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, MS 3004 B 10, f. 45va–50vb (edition in Kienhorst & Schepers 2009, further referred to as the Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame*) with neither French nor Dutch title. This singular copy also lacks an indication of the author of the French original. The text is indicated as *corte scrijfture* (a short writing) on f. 45va, cf. Kienhorst & Schepers 2009, 291 and Schepers 2008, 149. Schepers 2008, 152 demonstrates close textual relationship between the French version and its Middle Dutch translation.

18 This manuscript is a unique collection of more than seventy religious texts accompanied by numerous pasted-in drawings. The *Wech van Salicheit* opens the compilation, followed by the Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame*. According to Kienhorst & Schepers 2009, 20, the codex served lay people who showed an above average interest in spiritual life, but lacked formal theological training. The codex landed via an unknown way in a Premonstratensian monastery in Arnstein an der Lahn south-east of Koblenz, which is a (admittedly scant) piece of evidence for a later use of the text within a religious community. As noted in Deschamps 1972, 245–246, it is unknown how and when the codex was brought to this monastery. It remained there until 1802 when the monastery was closed down. After short stays in several German archives, it was placed in its present location (Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv) in 1881.

19 *Wech van Salicheit*, f. 4vb–5vb, vs. 212–337. Several passages from the same Middle Dutch translation have also been used in a Decalogue treatise preserved in manuscript Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS Ser. nov. 12869, f. 1–31, see Schepers 2008, 153.

20 The author reveals that he is a priest in the closing lines of the text: 'Pray with love for the priest who compiled this book from Latin sources and put it together in Flemish out of love for the teaching of lay people' ('Ende bidt met minnen over den priester die dit boec ghetrect heeft uten latine ende vergadert ten vlaemsece, ter leeringe van simplen menschen uut minnen'). *Wech van Salicheit*, f. 44va, vs. 4569–4572.

der Leyen (Mirror of Laymen).²¹ This tripartite catechetical *summa*, written partly in rhymed verses, partly in prose, was compiled around 1400 in the borderland between the North-Eastern part of the Netherlands and the North-Western part of Germany. The author remains anonymous but the scope of this work makes it probable that he was a clergyman.²² The first two books cover all the tenets of the Christian faith, organized around several questions regarding sin, whereas the third book deals with the sacrament of penance.²³ The Decalogue is discussed on three occasions: in the second part of the first book under the question ‘What is sin?’; in the second part of the second book under the question ‘How to redeem somebody from sin?’; and in the third part of the second book, under the question ‘How to be on one’s guard against sin’.²⁴ The next catechetical *summa* that concerns us here is *Des coninx summe*.²⁵ This Middle Dutch translation of the Middle French *Somme le roi* consists of six separate treatises, notably on the Ten Commandments, Twelve Articles of the Faith, Seven Deadly Sins, *Ars Moriendi*, the Pater Noster and the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are only loosely connected to each other and form individual chapters.²⁶ The Middle Dutch translation of the first four books was accomplished in 1408 by Jan van Brederode, a nobleman from Holland who served as a lay brother in the Carthusian monastery in

21 The *Spiegel* is preserved in two manuscripts: Münster, Diözesanbibliothek–Bibliothek der Franziskanerklosters, MS G4 57 (Münster, 1444) and Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS BPL 839 (c. 1460–1470, Holland). For a detailed description of both manuscripts see Roolfs 2004, 333–355 (Roolfs 2004 is also the modern edition of this text, further referred to as *Spiegel der Leyen*). Both codices contain only the *Spiegel*. While nothing is known about medieval ownership of the latter manuscript, the colophon of the Münster codex informs us that it was made and used in the house of Brethren of the Common Life in this very city. Transcription of the colophon in Roolfs 2004, 347 reads: ‘Written in the house of the Brothers of the Common Life Springbron in Münster in the year 1444 by brother Gherard Buck van Buederick of this house’ (‘Ghescreuen yn der frater hues Ten spryncgbrone. bynnen Monster Int iaer vnse heren m.cccc.xliiii. vermiddels Gherardum Buck van Buederick enen [...] broder des vorscreuen huses [...]’).

22 Roolfs 2004, 454–484 and 485–493.

23 For a detailed overview of the content, see Roolfs 2004, 434–441.

24 *Spiegel der Leyen*, I, 2, 16–27, f. 21v–24v; II, 2, 28, f. 148r–152r; II, 3, 40, f. 172r–173v.

25 The Middle Dutch *Des coninx summe* has come down to us in twelve fifteenth century manuscripts, for a list of which see Tinbergen 1907, 197–204. Tinbergen does not mention MS GILLÈS DE PÉLICHY (Izegem): n.s., made in 1487 in the Carthusian monastery of Saint Salvador in Utrecht (*Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* database, consulted in December 2015). Three codices made in the first half of the fifteenth century are relevant for the early reception and actual readership of this catechetical *summa*: The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 75 G 11 (1437), Brussels, KBR, MS 2079 (Brabant? 1400–1450) and Brussels, KBR, MS 2883 (Brabant? 1408–1450). While nothing is known about the owner of the first manuscript, the latter two were owned by Augustinian Canons, respectively in Herent near Louvain and in Hoeilaart near Brussels (Groenendaal). In the sixteenth century, and probably in the earlier period too, they were meant to be read by or to lay brethren. A sixteenth-century note on a pastedown page of manuscript 2079 reads: ‘This book belongs to the Holy house of Bethlehem for the lay brethren’ (Dit boeck hoert toe den gods huijsse van beddeleem den vor die leeke broedere). Manuscript 2883 contains the following fifteenth century ownership note on f. 2v: ‘This book belongs to the monastery of Groenendaal located in the Sonian forest (Dit boeck hoort toe den clooster van gruenendale in zonien ghelegen)’ and on f. 3r a sixteenth-century note saying: ‘This book belongs to the lay brother in the refectory and is marked with a letter g’ (‘Desen boeck hoort toe den leecken broeders inden Reefter es gheteeckent met die letter g’). In both codices *Des coninx summe* appears as the first text followed by a number of shorter religious writings, mainly prayers and dicta. The descriptions of these codices, including the lists of texts they contain and the transcriptions of the ownership notes quoted above can be found in volumes III (MS 2883) and IX (MS 2079) of Deschamps & Mulder 1998–2015.

26 As established by Tinbergen 1907, in the French tradition these treatises circulated as separate texts. They were not translated into Middle Dutch as separate texts. We find them only in the Middle Dutch *Des coninx summe*.

Zelem near Halen in the present-day province of Limburg in Belgium.²⁷ The two remaining parts were added later in the fifteenth century. Their translator remains unidentified.²⁸ Finally, the *Nuttelijc boec* (Useful Book) is a collection of Dutch sermons for each Sunday of the liturgical year.²⁹ The sermons cover topics typical for catechetical handbooks, including the elementary creeds. The Decalogue occurs twice in this compilation.³⁰ Firstly, it occurs in a template for confession consisting of all basic tenets of the Christian faith at the very beginning of the work. The second occurrence of the Decalogue is in the sermon for the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost based on a pericope from Matthew 22, 34–40.³¹ Since *Nuttelijc boec* is a collection of sermons, we can assume that it was compiled by a cleric.³²

The translators and compilers of the listed works form an all but homogenous group. The author of *Wech van Salicheit* and most probably also the compiler of *Nuttelijc boec* belonged to the clergy. Jan van Brederode lived a semi-religious life as an educated noble lay brother in a Carthusian monastery, whereas Jan de Weert was an artisan fully involved in secular life. They unanimously described their intended audience as ‘simple (lay) people’. This label matches groups such as nobility or urban middle class, but also religious women (lay or professed), lay brethren, beguards, beguines

27 For a brief biography of Jan van Brederode, see Van Oostrom 1996, 119–126. For an edition and an excellent study of the *Des coninx summe* tradition see Tinbergen 1907 (further referred to as *Des coninx summe*).

28 The phased genesis of the Middle Dutch translation of *Somme le Roi*, see Tinbergen 2007, 90.

29 The *Nuttelijc boec* is preserved in 33 manuscripts, fifteen of which contain the complete sermon collection for all Sundays of the liturgical year. For a full list of manuscripts and printed books containing (fragments of) the *Nuttelijc boec*, see Ermens 2001, 282–283. Six codices date from the first half of the fifteenth century: Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, MS Thott 70 fol (Holland, c. 1400), The Hague, KB, MSS 73 G 15 and 73 G 27 (Holland/Utrecht, c. 1401, the two manuscripts originally formed one codex), The Hague, KB, MS 135 F 7 (Holland? 1404), Brussels, KBR, MS 11079 (? 1425–1450), Berlin, SBB-PK, MS germ. fol. 1612 (Holland/Utrecht, 1430–1440) and SBB-PK, MS germ. qu. 1089 (Utrecht, 1446). Three out of the six were donated to nunneries by either secular or religious donors. According to the information in the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* database (accessed in December 2015) based on annotations in the codices, the manuscript formed by The Hague, KB, MSS 73 G 15 and 73 G 27 was donated in an unknown year in the fifteenth century by Godscalc de Wolf (nothing is known about this man) to Tertiaries in Weesp. Manuscript The Hague, KB, MS 135 F 7 was donated in 1437 to sister Griet Aentsdochter of an unknown female convent by her uncle canon Willem Jacobszn uutten Briel. According to Stooker & Verbeij 1997, vol. I, 366, this man can be identified as Willem Jacobszn, canon of St Peter’s church in Middelburg and of St Adriaan’s in Naaldwijk, who also served as chaplain of lord Hugo of Heenvliet and as a regular canon in the monastery of St Elisabeth in Bruges. According to the database Manuscripta Mediaevalia (accessed in December 2015), manuscript Berlin, SBB-PK, MS germ. qu. 1089 was written by an anonymous female copyist and owned by the monastery of Regular Canonesses of St Augustin–Nazaret in Guelders founded in 1418 (present day German state of Nordrhein–Westfalen). As mentioned in Defour et al. 1989, 138, manuscript Berlin, SBB-PK, MS germ. fol. 1612 was owned by Heinrijc Hoep, a lay inhabitant of Utrecht, and subsequently bought from him by another layman, a cloth maker whose name remains unknown. The name of the Utrecht cloth maker who purchased the manuscript from the Hoep family was erased from the note in the manuscript. Warnar 1988–1989, 296 and 298 pointed to possible reception of the *Nuttelijc boec* at the court of the duke of Holland in The Hague, because two of the early manuscripts, notably Copenhagen, DKB, MS Thott 70 fol and The Hague, KB, MS 135 F 7, were made in the same manuscript atelier (most probably based in Utrecht) as other books owed by the Duke.

30 As there is no published edition of the *Nuttelijc boec* available, I used an unpublished transcription of the text from manuscript Copenhagen, DKB, MS Thott 70 fol prepared by dr Daniël Ermens (University of Antwerp), further referred to as *Nuttelijc boec*. I thank dr Ermens for sharing this material with me. Because of its rich catechetical content, the *Nuttelijc boec* can be called a catechism in the form of a sermon collection, as proposed in Warnar 1988–1989, 290. On collections of vernacular sermons for reading, see for example Williams–Kropp 2002, 246–249.

31 *Nuttelijc boec*, f. 4rb–4vb and f. 171rb–173vb.

32 Possibly Willem, the confessor of the Duke of Holland, as argued by Warnar 1988–1989.

and brothers and sisters of the common life, who in the fifteenth century often joined the Third Order of Saint Francis.³³ The thematic variety within the texts seems to confirm that the authors' vision of the intended audience was broadly inclusive.³⁴ Jan de Weert, for example, condemns clandestine abortions and criticizes malpractices of magistrates, such as levying heavy excises and other cunning taxes.³⁵ The Middle Dutch *Miroir* touches on similar worldly issues, such as the poor integrity of judges, all forms of cheating in business transactions, simony in both worldly and ecclesiastical offices and levying too high taxes.³⁶ Likewise, numerous passages in the *Spiegel der Leyen* deal with unmistakably worldly problems. Chapters 39–40 in the third part of the second book cover marriage guidance for spouses and advice on how to run a household.³⁷ Such passages seem to be aimed primarily at lay audiences. However, their presence does not necessarily exclude readership in religious circles. Groups such as beguines, beghards, brothers and sisters of the common life, as well as male and female monasteries of the Third Order of Saint Francis also formed a part of the urban and rural social landscape. These groups often participated in the economy at various levels and were involved in teaching and catechising activities for which the catechetical texts could have served as didactic sources.³⁸

Alongside the profane topics, most of the works investigated also contain numerous theological and meditative sections, which could have been of interest to both religious and lay people who strove for a deepening of their spiritual life. The *Spiegel*, for example, discusses the nine grades of sin according to Augustine in chapters 4–10 in the first part of the first book. *Des coninx summe* contains elaborate passages on chastity, and the *Wech van Salicheit* closes with an extensive eschatological vision.³⁹ Moreover, the manuscript dissemination shows that the texts did indeed reach a diverse audience already in the early stages of their circulation. They are preserved in codices that were owned by nuns, lay brethren, brothers of the common life, and possibly also urban middle class people and even the members of the ducal court in The Hague.⁴⁰

33 On the broad meaning of the term 'laymen', see Burger 2001, 87–91; Steer 1983, 354–367 and Steer 1984, 764–786.

34 The observations listed in this paragraph refer to entire works and not only to the Decalogue explanations that they contain.

35 *Nieuwe Doctrinael* f. 65r–65v, vs. 337–415; f. 66v–67r, vs. 515–548; f. 71r–72r, vs. 1093–1115; f. 79r, vs. 1846–1879. On urban context of Jan de Weert, see Brinkman 1991. Van Oostrom 2013, 133–137 also qualifies Jan's 'moral theology' as distinctively urban.

36 Relevant passages in the Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame* are: venality of judges (second commandment) f. 47ra, vs. 219–226; obedience to the worldly and ecclesiastical rulers (fourth commandment) f. 47vb, vs. 320–333; cheating in business situations (sixth commandment: Thou shalt not steal) f. 48r, vs. 379–389; simony (sixth commandment: Thou shalt not steal), f. 48rb, vs. 402–406; taxes (sixth commandment: Thou shalt not steal), f. 48rb–48va, vs. 415–436.

37 *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 3, 39–40, f. 170v–173v and III, 2, 32–33, f. 215v–220v.

38 A good example of the economic and social involvement of (semi-) religious communities is provided by the beguinages, particularly in Flanders, as was demonstrated in Simons 2001. The beguine lifestyle was largely formed on the model of monastic discipline. However, they participated in the wool and cloth trade and earned money as nurses and teachers. They divided their days between such commercial activities and religious contemplation.

39 Roolfs 2004, 27–38; Tinbergen 1907, 442–445; Kienhorst & Schepers 2009, 237–287.

40 See notes 15, 17, 18, 21, 25 and 29 above for a brief summary of the manuscript dissemination of the discussed texts. In general, the ecclesiastical ownership of (vernacular) religious books is much better documented than the ownership by lay people, especially those belonging to the middle class. The number of records of lay middle class

All in all, the selected texts were intended for, and indeed read by, various lay and religious groups across different strata of medieval society.⁴¹ This makes them particularly suitable as sources for the reconstruction of the general definition of the Decalogue available to a broad and diverse audience.

The Decalogue and the pursuit of salvation

In defining the Decalogue and its importance, scholastic theologians were especially concerned with justification of its validity. They constructed elaborate arguments explaining why this part of Jewish law was binding for Christians, while hundreds of other God-given precepts from the Pentateuch were not. One of the most important reasons given by the theologians was the fact that Christ re-validated the Old Law and summarized it in the double commandment of love (Matthew 22, 34-40), which he proclaimed to be the most important commandment on which the Law of Moses and the Books of the Prophets were based.⁴² In the Middle Dutch catechetical teaching, however, the validity of the Ten Commandments seems to be taken for granted. Their Judaic origin was neither concealed nor problematized. The Sinai narrative of Exodus 19-20 was not particularly relevant for Middle Dutch catechists. They usually only stated that the commandments were written by God Himself on two stone tablets presented to Moses on Mount Sinai.⁴³ The singular, more elaborate descriptions of the events on the holy mountain that are found in the sermon from the *Nuttelijc boec* and in Jan de Weert's erroneous account form rare exceptions.⁴⁴ Likewise, the incor-

ownership of books in Derolez et al. 1997-2011 is relatively small compared to the ownership by secular and regular clergy and (libraries of) religious institutions. Not surprisingly, Gillespie 1989, 319 describes a similar situation in England. This makes the broad readership of vernacular religious literature sometimes difficult to prove. However, the unmistakably lay-oriented passages, as well as hints in the colophons and the patchy instances of documented lay ownership seem to be enough to prove readership of the same works in both lay and religious circles.

⁴¹ Such diverse readership was common across the Medieval West. It was attested for German literature, for example, by Burger 1989, 404-405; Steer 1983, 362; Williams-Krapp 2002, 240. For similar cases in the English tradition, see for example Barratt 2008, 345-347; Gillespie 1989, 321-335 and Gillespie 2007, 405.

⁴² Smith 2014, 26-28.

⁴³ See for example *Spiegel der Leyen*, I, 2, 27, f. 24r, vs. 5-6 and vs. 16-17.

⁴⁴ *Nuttelijc boec*, f. 171vb-172va, vs. 27-53. Jan de Weert mingled the story of Moses' first encounter with God on Sinai in Exodus 3, 1-6 with Moses' later sojourn at the holy mountain in Exodus 19-20. In the former passage, God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush and announced the imminent exodus of Israelites from Egypt. In the latter section, God appeared to Moses several times in a thick cloud (Exodus 19, 9 and Exodus 20, 20). During one of these latter encounters, he received the tables of the Decalogue. Jan de Weert paraphrased the details of Exodus 3, 1-6, such as the appearance of a bush that was on fire but did not burn and Moses taking off his shoes, but concluded that these were circumstances in which the Ten Commandments were given to Moses (*Nieuwe Doctrinael*, f. 76r, vs. 1572-1595). The Middle Dutch Bible paraphrases (notably Jacob van Maerlant's thirteenth-century verse adaptation of the *Historia Scholastica*, the mid-fourteenth-century Old Testament paraphrase from the northern Low Countries and the so-called Bible translation of 1360 from the southern Low Countries) unmistakably follow the Vulgate. It is possible that Jan's misunderstanding had its basis in a visual source, although I encountered only one explicit mention of an illustration (dating from the middle of the fifteenth-century) where the commandments are given to Moses by God who speaks from a burning bush, namely in Thum 2006, 41. A quick survey of the database of illuminated manuscripts from the Royal Library of The Netherlands in the Meermann Museum of the Book in The Hague has shown that the depiction of this scene in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts is either in accordance with the biblical account, that is, with God in a form of a cloud, or God depicted in a human posture.

poration of the Law of Moses in Christ's commandment of love did not receive much attention. It is referred to in the discussed corpus only once, namely in the sermon from the *Nuttelijc boec*, which teaches that the double commandment of love cannot be fully understood without the knowledge of the Ten Commandments. Thus, the explanation of the Decalogue is introduced in order to reveal the full meaning of the double commandment of love.⁴⁵

Clearly, Middle Dutch writings do not strictly correspond with the main themes touched on by the scholastics. Rather, they place their own emphases. The crucial aspects of the medieval theological understanding of the Decalogue that dominate in the selected corpus are its covenantal nature and its incorporation in the New Testament theology of grace and salvation. Both facets are clearly formulated in the sermon from the *Nuttelijc boec*. In this text, the introduction to the elucidation of individual commandments reads:

God chose the Israelites and revealed his will to them through the prophet Moses. God wrote the Ten Commandments, which contained His will, with his own finger on two stone tablets, and He gave these tablets to the prophet Moses on a mountain called Sinai and ordered Moses to bring the tablets down. Should the Israelites be obedient and submissive to the will of God, they would be rich and blessed in their earthly life. Were they to disdain the commandments and not observe them, they would become poor and ill-fated.⁴⁶

Scorned by the Children of Israel, the commandments were later given to Christians, who should observe them in order to achieve the salvation:

These holy Ten Commandments of God, which the Children of Israel disdained and did not want to observe, are now given to Christians who are commanded to live in accordance with them. Blessed are those who strictly observe God's commandments and live in accordance with them, because this is a clear sign that they love God and are chosen to live the eternal life.⁴⁷

45 The double commandment of love is however often discussed in the explications of the first commandment. *Nuttelijc boec*, f. 171vb, vs. 28–29. The double commandment of love is also briefly mentioned in the *Wech van Salicheit*, albeit in a different context. The text introduces the double commandment of love as a justification of the division of the commandments into two tablets. The anonymous author reminds his readers that all commandments are based on love, and since love is bipartite – love of God and love of neighbour – the commandments are divided into two tablets: the commandments on the first tablet regulate the relation between god and his people while the commandments of the second tablet regulate the relations between people (see *Wech van Salicheit*, f. 4vb–5ra, vs. 223–233). This was a popular explanation of the division of the commandments used in medieval theological texts; see for example Smith 2014, 65–75. The very same reference to the double commandment of love as the basis of the division of the commandments is also present in Aquinas' sermon on the first commandment, see Leget 2008, 46–47.

46 *Nuttelijc boec*, f. 171vb–172ra, vs. 33–44: 'Ende want God dat volc [the Israelites] hadde uutvercoren, hieromme ontboet hi hem mit dien prophete Moyses sinen wille [...]. Ende God screef tien ghebode mit sijns selves vingher in twee steenen tafelen, daer sijn wille in gheroert was, ende gaf die tafelen dien prophete Moyses op enen berch, die Synag gheheiten was, ende beval Moyses dat hi die tafelen soude ofdraghen [...]. Ende waer dat sake dat si [the Israelites] hem daerin ghehoersamich ende onderdanich waren [...], so souden si op eertrike rike ende salich wesen [...]. Ende waert sake dat si die gheboden versmeden ende niet houden en wouden, so souden si arm ende onsalich worden [...].'

47 *Nuttelijc boec*, f. 171vb, vs. 33–37, 40–44, 54–60: 'Dese heilighe tien gheboden Goods die de kinder van Israhel versmeden ende niet houden en wouden, sijn nu der kerstenluden ghegheven ende bevolen te houden ende daerna te leven. Salich sijn alle dieghene die de ghebode Goods volcomeliken houden ende daerna leven, want dat een openbaer teyken is dat si Gode minnen ende tot den ewighen leven sijn vercoren.'

Both passages express most clearly the nature of the Decalogue as a document of covenant between God and his creation in both the Old and the New Testaments. The last sentence from the second fragment cited above echoes the answer Jesus gave to a young man who asked him what to do to attain the salvation: if you want to be saved, keep the commandments (Matthew 19, 16–30) and captures in a nutshell the way in which the Middle Dutch catechists dealt with this vital issue. They unanimously repeated that salvation is not possible without the observance of the commandments. In the discussed texts, such statements usually take a form of matter-of-fact passing remarks, such as the one from the *Wech van Salicheit*:

It is necessary for each person who wants to be one of the blessed who will be saved to know the Ten Commandments.⁴⁸

Some texts, however, go a step further in emphasising the dependence of salvation on the observance of the Decalogue. A passage from the Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame* preceding the discussion of individual precepts reads:

God our Lord created us in such an honourable manner above all other creatures in His own image and subsequently lovingly saved us, and this is the reason why we serve him with an absolute loyalty. There is no doubt that if we do so, He shall give us joy and glory. If we fail to do this, we shall suffer eternal pain and torment. Nevertheless, God knows our weakness and limited ability. That is why he does not demand from us that we fulfil the full duty we owe Him. Instead, He gave us a certain number of commandments. Our observance of these commandments is enough to please Him. These commandments are called the Ten Commandments of our faith.⁴⁹

The first three sentences of this fragment describe the elementary premise of the Christian theology of salvation in its most basic formulation: salvation is a result of a covenant between God and humanity. God created and redeemed humankind and for that reason man should serve God wholly (*geheelichlic dienen*) in order to obtain the gift of eternal life. If a Christian fulfils this obligation, God will certainly fulfil His promise and save him. Jan de Weert formulates this simplified conditionality of the covenant in similar way:

We cannot lack in His grace, because if we do, He will doom us altogether. He gave us His Ten Commandments so that we can live in peace, maintain friendship with Him and live with Him after this life.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Wech van Salicheit*, f. 4va–4vb, vs. 198–203: ‘Dus es wel noet elken mensche die wesen wille I vanden ghetale der salighere ende van die behouden sullen sijn dat hi kenne ende wete die x ghebode [...]’. The other texts discussed unanimously repeat this statement in similar short phrasings, cf. *Nieuwe Doctrinael*, f. 8or, vs. 1953–1956, *Spieghel der Leyen*, I, 2, 44, f. 39v, vs. 9–10, *Des coninx summe*, p. 220.

⁴⁹ Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame*, f. 46rb, vs. 108–130: ‘[...] onse here god ons heeft so werdichlike ghescepen boven andere beesten ende creaturen na sine ghelikenisse [...] ende daer na heeft ons so dierbaerlic verlost [...], so eest wel redene dat wi hem dienen gheheelichlic [...]. Ende sonder twifel: doen wi aldus, hi sal ons gheven bliscap ende glorie [...]. Ende sijn wi hier af in ghebreke dat wi dit niet en doen, wi sullen hebben eewelike pine ende torment [...]. Wel es waer dat god wel bekend onse broescheit ende cleene macht, ende daer omme en heescht hi ons niet alle den dienst die wi hem met rechte sculdich waren te doene; maer hi heeft ons gheheven I seker ghetal van gheboden, de welke, op dat wijt wel houden, het es hem genoech ende houdt hem ghepaeyt. Ende dit sijn gheheten de x ghebode vanden ghelove.’

⁵⁰ *Nieuwe Doctrinael*, f. 8or, vs. 1951–1956:

The second part of the passage from the Middle Dutch *Miroir* cited above, however, recognizes a problematic aspect of this covenant, namely human inability to serve God in a way that was adequate to the greatness of God's gift. As the creator of humankind, God knew this handicap and gave people a chance to participate in the covenant despite their impotence by providing them with a set of rules, notably the Ten Commandments, whose observance laid within the scope of human abilities. The *Spiegel der Leyen*, which also teaches that the observance of the commandments is a condition *sine qua non* for pursuing salvation, emphasizes this very aspect too:

We can perceive God's great love towards us in the fact that he did not command us to do anything difficult [in order to attain salvation].⁵¹

If God created the Decalogue in order to give man a possibility to serve Him in the right way and to work towards man's own salvation, then not observing the God-given precepts is tantamount to working against one's own salvation and to a refusal of God's charitable gift. According to the *Spiegel der Leyen*, the awareness of this refusal should be the source of great remorse, which in turn is one of the necessary conditions of the sacrament of penance. For that reason, the author of the *Spiegel* discussed the Decalogue in the part devoted to contrition.⁵² The final passage of this chapter reads:

Should it not grieve us deeply that we anger our good God so often (which is against our own salvation)?⁵³

It is important to stress that the *Spiegel* does not recommend an examination of conscience based on the rethinking of sins set against each individual commandment as a source of contrition. The Decalogue is not presented as a scheme that may help to inventory sins in the preparation of confession. Rather, the text makes clear that each trespass of any of the commandments is in fact a refusal of a divine gift and a breach of a soteriological covenant with the Creator.

The passages quoted put strong emphasis on the role of human actions in the pursuit of salvation without mentioning the importance of divine grace. They present the covenant between God and man as a construct created by God, within which

'Mer wi en moghen sijns [doghet] niet ontberen
 Ende hi verlore ons alte noede.
 Daer bi heeft hi ons sijn X ghebode
 Gheeheven, dat wy vreesam souden
 Leven ende sijn vrientscap houden
 Ende met hen leven na dit lijf.'

51 *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 2, 28, f. 150r, vs. 55-56: '[...] wi moghen de grote mynne godes to vns dar bi merken. dat he vns ghene sware sake gheboden heuet [...].'

52 *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 2, 28, f. 148r-152r. The second book of this work is devoted to the three conditions that must be fulfilled prior to the absolution of sins in the sacrament of penance: contrition, confession and penitence. The Ten Commandments are discussed in the context of the first condition. The true contrition is not based on fear for own damnation, but rather on the deep remorse for offences against God. The *Spiegel* mentions four stages that lead to deep remorse: contemplating the past, contemplating the future, contemplating the present and contemplating God's love. The Decalogue provides a framework for the last stage.

53 *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 2, 28, f. 152r, vs. 116-117: 'Vnde en mach et vns nicht iamerlike seer berouwen. dat wi teghen onse eighene salicheit den gudertieren got vake vertoernt heben?'

man is an active agent who has control over his sinfulness. He received clear instructions on how to achieve salvation. As God did not ordain man to do anything that was beyond human powers, the observance of these instructions lies fully within man's abilities. Man thus has all the necessary means to fulfil his part of the covenant and achieve eternal life. Such statements are similar to the elementary premises of what the church understood to be the fifth-century Pelagian heresy. In the official medieval interpretation based on Augustine's critiques, Pelagius supported the opinion that God gave man only such commandments as he was capable of obeying.⁵⁴ A failure to do so was a deliberate action against God and a choice for damnation. Man was naturally able to choose to do good and should also be willing to do so. Individuals would finally be judged according to whether they had fulfilled all their moral obligations in their totality. God's grace was a necessary element in the pursuit of salvation but the importance of human deeds and the will to do good was emphasized the most. It should be stressed that there is a discrepancy between Augustine's reports of the Pelagius thought on the one hand and the actual teaching of Pelagius on the other had. The British-born theologian argued that the divine grace alone cannot perfect human sanctity without the simultaneous exercise of the good will. Since the good will to do good and avoid evil was a God's gift, it is through God that man can do good.⁵⁵ Pelagius understood grace in a twofold way. First of all, it was the God-given natural human faculties of reason and will that enabled humanity to choose to avoid sin. Secondly, grace was contained in the very instruction given by God that informed humanity what its moral duties were. This instruction consisted of the Decalogue and Christ's teaching. Once it was revealed, no further divine aid was necessary.⁵⁶ Pelagius' views were fiercely opposed by Augustine. Contrary to Pelagius, who opposed the doctrine of natural sin, the church father claimed that humanity was naturally inclined towards evil, because its free will, which should choose the good, was impaired by original sin at birth. The orientation towards the good could only be restored through the operation of divine grace. Grace was not located in the law and in teaching, as claimed by Pelagius. Rather, it was a continuous divine assistance to humanity, without which man was not able to do good. For Augustine, humanity is wholly dependent on God for salvation.

By the fourteenth century the Augustinian viewpoint became dominant. Theologians generally agreed that salvation was not a reward that could be earned, but rather an act of God's grace, which enabled sinners to gain something that lay beyond them.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the role of human volition and action in the pursuit of salvation was still a subject of lively theological debates. Late medieval theologians who stressed the importance of human acts are often referred to as representatives of the *via moderna*.⁵⁸ Some of them, notably William of Ockham, were openly accused of Pelagi-

54 McGrath 2011, 352.

55 Evans 1968, 66-89, Ferguson 1956, 97, Rees 1988, 33-36.

56 McGrath 2011, 354.

57 McGrath 2011, 357.

58 Gilson 1988, 487-489 and 499-500; Leinsle 2010, 231-234; McGrath 2013, 119; Van Nieuwenhove 2012, 11-13 and 253-263.

anism.⁵⁹ One important element in Ockham's soteriology was merit, which can be understood as the opposite of sin or a 'lovable quality that God rewards with eternal life. [It] requires obedience to divine precepts and is impossible without grace'.⁶⁰ A human act could only be meritorious if two conditions were fulfilled. First, it should be a freely and voluntary elicited. Secondly, it had to be accepted by God and God's grace had to be infused in it. The divine acceptance of such voluntary acts, however, was a contingent act of God, not His obligation.⁶¹ The prominence that Ockham gave to human will in meritorious acts, and, as a result, in achieving salvation, bears resemblance to the Pelagian claim that man can initiate and have an influence on his salvation. In any case, the theologians associated with the *via moderna* were of the opinion that humanity should do what is within its power in order to fulfil the conditions of the covenant and increase its chances of salvation.⁶² Jean Gerson's reception of Ockham's soteriology possibly forms a link between Pelagianism and fourteenth-century Middle Dutch elementary teaching on the Decalogue.⁶³ Scholars generally agree that in his early career Gerson, the author of the French *Miroir de l'ame*, represented the same intellectual trend in medieval theology as Ockham. His works written prior to the council of Constance (1414–1418) emphasize human moral autonomy and divine rewards for meritorious deeds.⁶⁴ The presence of passages that are clearly not in alignment with the dominating Augustinian view in a text originally written by Gerson is not evidence of his unorthodox beliefs. In spite of his excellent theological training, the chancellor of the Parisian university opposed doctrinal fundamentalism in the teaching of the laity. He was rather in favour of applying simplified derivatives of complex ideas, as they were more likely to successfully encourage devotion and righteous Christian behaviour.⁶⁵ The 'Pelagian' teaching on the Ten Commandments in the *Miroir* was probably such a not-strictly-dogmatic, yet workable explanation of the necessity of the observance of the Decalogue. The fact that a similar 'unorthodox' understanding appears in several Middle Dutch texts shows the primacy of pragmatism above dogmatism in vernacular religious teaching. It should be stressed that the presence of a Pelagian-like emphasis on the role of good deeds in attaining salvation does not mean that the Middle Dutch authors or even Jean Gerson fully embraced unorthodox ideas. It seems that they decided to choose explanations that would resonate best with the audience of catechetical works, which consisted for a large part of lay and (semi-)religious people who lived an active life. It was important to give such readers a strong motivation to do good, hence the attention to good works in the pursuit of salvation.

⁵⁹ McGrath 2013, 18–23. Wood 1999, 350–373 has argued that these accusations lack any sound theological basis.

⁶⁰ Wood 1999, 352.

⁶¹ Wood 1999, 358–361.

⁶² McGrath 2013, 121.

⁶³ Gerson did openly criticize the Pelagian heresy, but at the same time maintained that it was sufficient for salvation, especially for lay persons, to observe the precepts of the Decalogue. See on this topic McGuire 2005, 152 (Gerson's criticism of Pelagianism) and 270 (on the observance of the Decalogue as a sufficient means for achieving salvation).

⁶⁴ Burrows 1990, 467–470; Fisher 2011, 214 and 234–235. On Gerson's early interest in the Ockhamist school and his later departure from it, see Burrows 1990, 2–3.

⁶⁵ Hobbins 2011, 47 and 56–61.

Along with these theological explanations of the role of the Decalogue in the pursuit of salvation, the texts investigated also contain a more straightforward understanding of the breaking of the commandments: it was a sin, which could be avoided if the sinner was familiar with the ten precepts. The Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame* added to this definition the distinction between the breach of a commandment *met vollen wille ende consente* (with full premeditation and consent) on the one hand and the breach of a commandment as a result of a yielding to temptation on the other hand. The first type was a cardinal (or mortal) sin. Committing it led to the loss of the state of grace. This state was a precondition for being free from mortal sin, which could be pursued through the justification, that is, the remission of sins in the sacrament of penance and the voluntary reception of grace in the sacrament of the Eucharist.⁶⁶ Being free from mortal sin at the moment of death was considered to be one of the conditions for salvation. A venial sin, on the contrary, is the one committed without full consent. It leads to only a partial loss of grace. The core message here is, of course, that the knowledge and observance of the commandments helps to avoid sin and to maintain the state of grace.⁶⁷ The better one knows the commandments, the more diligently one observes them, and the better one's chances for salvation.

The observance of the Decalogue as an act of reason and source of prosperity

As demonstrated above, observance of the Decalogue was understood as a necessary condition for salvation. Parallel to this understanding, the texts contain yet another explanation of the role of the commandments. The *Spiegel der Leyen*, for example, emphasized that human reason would naturally turn to observance of the commandments, even if it did not lead to eternal life. The author of the *Spiegel* repeats this twice in his elucidation on the Decalogue in the second part of the second book.

Even if we would not deserve eternal life through it, the observance of the Ten Commandments would still be to our advantage. We could prove it with reason to all those who want to comprehend (with) reason.⁶⁸

Even if we were pure heathens, who act in accordance with natural reason, even if someone wanted to suppress it, he would always at the very least keep the commandments⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame*, f. 49vb, vs. 609-619, see also McGrath 2011, 444-445; Ritter & Gründer 1998, 598-610.

⁶⁷ Jan de Weert repeats time and again that he wrote his *Doctrinael* so that people know how to avoid sin, see *Nieuwe Doctrinael*, f. 62r, vs. 28-32; f. 62v, vs. 66-71; f. 76r, vs. 1565-1570. Similarly, Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame*, f. 46rb, vs. 129-133, *Nuttelijc boec*, f. 172rb, vs. 58-60 and the *Spiegel der Leyen*, I, 2, 16, f. 21v, vs. 2-6.

⁶⁸ *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 2, 28, f. 150r, vs. 60-63: 'Al solde wi dar oeck gheen ewich leuen an verdienen. nochtan so were uns de tien ghebode nutte ghehouden. vnde dat moghe wi claelike bi reden prouen alle de ghene de reden verstaen willen.'

⁶⁹ *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 2, 28, f. 152r, vs. 111-114: 'Vnde of wi puer heiden weren, de naturlijke bi reden wolde voertvaren, wo solde dar iemant ouer moghen. he weer vmmer ten mynsten de ghebode schuldich to holden.'

This passage echoes Saint Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 2, 14-15), in which the apostle stated that heathens who do not know the law still act in accordance with it.⁷⁰ By doing so they provide a proof that the law is written in human hearts and the observance of God's law is not a choice but a natural reflex to do what is virtuous and favourable. Although the apostle does not refer directly to the Ten Commandments, his teaching in Romans strongly influenced the medieval understanding of the Decalogue. Already in the patristic period, the elementary precepts of the natural law imprinted in the human mind were equated with the Ten Commandments.⁷¹ By referring to reason in the context of the Decalogue interpretation, the *Spiegel* brings to mind Aquinas' elucidation of the natural law and the Ten Commandments. The eternal law, which equated to the will and reason of God, was the source of all other laws. One of them was the natural law, available to all humankind, both believers and non-believers.⁷² According to Thomas Aquinas, the natural law is the light of natural reason by which man comes to know what ought to be done and what ought to be avoided. Following the natural law will always be to man's advantage. It was present in man and was self-evident for human reason but it was also revealed and made explicit in the moral precepts of the Mosaic Law.⁷³ Similar claims, that man will always choose virtue for its own sake even if there were no further consequences following from that choice, appear in Aristotle's *Nicomachean ethics* and it was also embraced by Ockham, who maintained that it is always rational and advantageous to obey divine commands.⁷⁴ By referring to the scholastic understanding of the Decalogue as a part of the natural law and its observance as a natural reflex of reason, the author of the *Spiegel* convinces his readers that breaking the commandments is not only a sin, but also an unnatural, harmful and disadvantageous act. This interpretation also formed the basis of an opinion explicitly uttered by Jan de Weert that the commandments, as natural directives of reason, were easier to keep than to break:

I want to prove that none of the Ten Commandments about which we speak here are so difficult, that they are not easier to keep than to break. They are also healthier for the soul and the body.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ On the Epistle to Romans as the source for medieval discussion on the natural law, see Kretzmann et al. 1982, 705 and Marenbon 1992, 609.

⁷¹ For overviews of medieval ideas on natural law and the role of the Decalogue in it, see the publications mentioned in the previous note, as well as Mielke 1992, 51-59.

⁷² Smith 2014, 21-22.

⁷³ See, for example, the first sermon in Leget 2008, 17; Porter 2005, 182-183 and Sweeney 2012, 139-140. Parallels to Aquinas' thinking can be found in his seniors, Alexander of Hales and John of La Rochelle, see Smith 2013, 162; Smith 2014, 18-24. For Aquinas' opinions regarding the natural law and the place of the Decalogue in it, see also Koziol 1987, 103-117; Kretzmann 1982, 711; Levering 2012, 67-80 and Smith 2013, 151-153, 155, 57-58.

⁷⁴ McGrade 1999, 274, 282, 286.

⁷⁵ *Nieuwe Doctrinael*, f. 80r, vs. 1942-1946:

'Ic wilt bewisen ende makent waer,
Dat gheen ghebod en es soe swear
Van allen X daer wi af spreken,
Si en sijn lichter te houden dan te breken
Ende ghesonder der zielen ende den live.'

That the Ten Commandments are easier to follow than to break is also the central thought in a rhymed tale devoted to the Decalogue by a contemporary professional story-teller from Holland, Willem van Hildegaersberch, see Bisschop & Verwijs 1870, 6-12.

It also relates to a socio-pragmatic understanding of the observance of the Decalogue, according to which life in accordance with the Ten Commandments not only leads to eternal life but also guarantees a good life on earth for an individual and for society. Jan de Weert pointed out that the commandments were given to humankind so that people could live peacefully on earth and that life in accordance with the commandments is healthier for body and soul.⁷⁶ The benefit of the observance of the commandments for society was also stressed in the sermon from the *Nuttelijc boec*:

Our dear Lord must enlighten our hearts and our minds with His divine grace in such a way that we can keep His commandments and love Him and our fellow Christians so (much) that we have peace and rest amongst each other in this earthly life and enter into His realm and enjoy eternal peace after this life.⁷⁷

The author of *Spiegel der Leyen* interweaves his theological elaborations with a similar statement regarding the usefulness of the commandments:

[God] did not ordain us anything that would not be good and useful for us and would not contribute to peace and rest (on earth). And even if we were not to earn eternal life (by observing the commandments), it would still be useful for us to keep the Ten Commandments. We can clearly prove this with reason.⁷⁸

This vision on the usefulness of the observance of the commandments was given a rather materialistic dimension in the third part of the second book of the *Spiegel der Leyen*. The chapter devoted to the teaching of the Decalogue within a household not only instructs the heads of the family how and why to teach catechesis to their dependents, but also points out the benefits, such as prosperity, that the head of the family can gain if he is successful in teaching his household to live righteously:

If you manage to draw them away from their bad will and bad habits, then you win their souls (for God) and you will have a share in all the good deeds that they will ever perform. You will find significant material benefits from this in your household, because the more they fear God in their daily conduct, the more diligently they serve you and care for your possessions. In this way you receive a double profit (spiritual and material). But if you fail (to draw them away from their bad habits), you will suffer a double loss from their sins, because your worldly goods will be neglected, and you will be accessory to all their sins, which can lead you to hell.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *Nieuwe Doctrinael*, f. 80r, vs. 1944-1946 and vs. 1953-1955.

⁷⁷ *Nuttelijc boec*, f. 173vb, vs. 146-149: 'Onse lieve here moet onse herten ende onse sinne also verlichten mit sijne godliker graciën dat wi [...] sine gheboden moeten houden ende hem ende onsen evenkersten also moeten minnen dat wi hier in deser tijt onderlinge malc mit andere moeten hebben ruste ende vrede ende na desen leven moeten komen in sijn rike ende gebruiken des ewighen vreden.'

⁷⁸ *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 2, 28, f. 150r, vs. 58-63: '[God] en heuet [...] vns nicht gheboden. dat en sy vns guet vnde nutte ghehouden. vnde alle den ghenen den mit vreden vnde ruste beholpen is. Al en solde wi dar oeck gheen ewich leuen an verdienen. nochtan so ware vns de tien ghebode nutte ghehouden. vnde dat moghe wi claerlike bi reddēn prouen [...].'

⁷⁹ *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 3, 40, f. 173r-173v, vs. 40-56: 'Vnde moghe ghi se van oeren quaden willen vnde ghewoente brengchen [...] so wynne ghi oere siele vnde sullen al der guden werke al dar van deelachtich werden de se vimmermeer doen sullen. vnde ghi sullen dar merkelike bate in vinden bi den huse in tijtliken dingcen: wante wo se meer gode vntseen in oerer wandelincge wo se iv vlijteliker dienen sullen vnde iuwe tijtlike goet verwaren Vnde aldus moghe ghi verkryghen dubbelde bate. [...] Vnde versume ghi dit [...]: also hebbe ghi twe schaden van oeren sunden. wante iuwe tijtlike guet wart dar bi versumet vnde ghi werden al oerer dunde deelachtich vnde ghi

An immediate advantage mentioned in the passage is worldly welfare. If all members of the household keep the commandments, they serve the family better and contribute to its prosperity. There is also a spiritual advantage: if the dependents live a godly life, then the one who taught them to live righteously has a share in all their good deeds. Conversely, if the head of the family fails to impart the Decalogue to those for whom he is responsible, their sins will count as his own. Moreover, the material well-being of the household will suffer from the misconduct of members who do not follow the commandments.

Teaching and modes of reception

Since the observance of the Ten Commandments was so important for both earthly and eternal life, it was crucial to learn, teach and understand them well. In the Middle Dutch *Miroir* and the *Spiegel der Leyen* the responsibility for teaching the Decalogue is passed on from the author to the adult readers. They are reminded that it is not only one's obligation to learn the commandments but also to teach them to children, family members, servants and other dependents, such as journeymen. Neglecting this duty is a serious misstep, warns *Miroir de l'ame* in the introduction to the Decalogue explication:

The Ten Commandments of faith, which we are obliged to know and to teach to others with great diligence, because without them we cannot avoid sin.⁸⁰

One is duty-bound to teach one's children, servants and others who are in one's care to do what was explained above (i.e. the Ten Commandments), and to teach them the road to salvation. To neglect this is not just a minor shortcoming.⁸¹

The *Spiegel der Leyen* provides us with a unique glance at medieval domestic catechesis. The fortieth chapter in the third part of the second book is entitled 'This is how husband and wife should teach and manage their household (members)'.⁸² The first rule of this Christian family management is:

You are obliged to guide, teach and turn to virtue all members of your household who live with you. Do this with kind words. You shall teach them in a friendly manner what they should and should not do. You shall teach them about the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria and the creed. You shall also teach them the Ten Commandments. In order to make it possible for you to teach the Ten Commandments easily to the members of your household, I would like to formulate them as a

moghen de helle dar bi verdienen [...].'

80 Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame*, f. 46rb, vs. 126-129: '[.] de x ghebode vanden ghelove, de welke wi sijn schuldich te wetene bi ons selven end bi andren te doene grote neersticheit om die te wetene, want anders en souden wi niet moghen scuwen de zonden [...].'

81 Middle Dutch *Miroir de l'ame*, f. 47rb, vs. 264-267: 'Ende men es schuldich te leerne ende te wisene sijn kindere, sijn dieners, ende andere die hi in sinen regemente heeft, te doene dat forseit es, ende hem te leerene den wech van zalicheden. Want dat achter te laten en es gheen clein ghebrec.'

82 *Spiegel der Leyen*, II, 3, 40, f. 172r, rubric: 'Dit is. wo man vnde wijf oer huesghesinde leren vnde regieren sullen.'

short rhyme. The young and simple people like rhymes a lot. Moreover, they can learn it more quickly and remember it better than in plain words.⁸³

In order to facilitate the teaching of the Decalogue in the context described above, the author provides a short, rhymed rendition of the commandments. He considers this form most suitable for the purpose because young and simple people remember the content better when the words rhyme. The heads of the household should regularly remind the family members about the commandments and make sure they pass them on to others.⁸⁴ As to the actual teaching methods, the author recommends an affectionate approach. The knowledge of the commandments should not be imparted with force or by oppression, but with love, care and by the use of kind words.⁸⁵ However, if these methods do not bring expected results, one is allowed to 'rail against them and strictly forbid (the sinful behaviour)'.⁸⁶ A household is not the only context in which the discussed texts were used. One of the manuscripts of *Des coninx summe* explicitly mentions the reading of religious texts to lay brethren in a monastic refectory.⁸⁷ Similar ways of teaching the commandments must have taken place in female religious communities, as several manuscripts of the discussed texts are known to have belonged to nunneries.

In both lay and religious contexts, the manuscripts containing Decalogue treatises were instruments for edification that were complementary to oral forms of catechesis, notably sermons and instruction in the church. As remarked by the author of the *Spiegelhel*, human memory is unreliable and therefore information received aurally in the church was fleeting. A reference book gave permanent access to the elementary precepts in cases when one needed to be reminded about them:

Since you hear the Ten Commandments being preached about in the church repeatedly every day, it is less necessary for me to speak a lot about them here. However, I want to discuss them briefly, so that simple lay people remember them better once they see them written down.⁸⁸

83 *Spiegelhel der Leyen*, II, 3, 40, f. 172r, vs. 1-11: 'Al iuwe hoesghesinde de mit iv wonen de syn ghi schuldich te stueren vnde to leren vnde to der doghet to trecken vnde dat mit mynliken woerden [...]. Dar umme so sul ghi se vake gudertierlike leren wat se doen ofte laten sullen. vnde sullen en oer pater noster. vnde aeu maria vnde den ghelouen leren [...]. Vnde oeck so sul ghi en de tien ghebode leren [...]. Vp dat ghi de tien ghebode iuwen hoesghesinde lichtelike leren moghen so wil ick se in korten woerden to ryme ouersetten. wante iuncke lude vnde sympel lude de moghen dat ryme vele beter vnde eer leren vnde oeck bet vntholden dan ofte dat slichte woerde weren.'

84 *Spiegelhel der Leyen*, II, 3, 40, f. 172v, vs. 28-31.

85 *Spiegelhel der Leyen*, II, 3, 40, f. 173r, vs. 35-36.

86 *Spiegelhel der Leyen*, II, 3, 40, ff. 172v-173r, vs. 34-36.

87 Brussels, KBR, MS 2883 (first half of the fifteenth century, after 1408). It belonged to the library of the Augustinian Canons in Hoelaart near Brussels (Groenendaal).

88 *Spiegelhel der Leyen*, I, 2, 16, f. 21v, vs. 11-16:

'Mer wante ghi se [the Ten Commandments] alle daghe hoert
In kerken prediken weder vnde voert.
So is de myn moet da'r van te spreken
Nochtan vp dat de sympele leken
Bet kunden vntholden als se ghescreuen staen
daer vmme wil ick se mit der korte ouerghaen.'

Such emphasis on written words as a source for vernacular learning was a commonplace in Middle Dutch texts from the late thirteenth century on. It is understood to be a sign of a growing literacy in the vernacular. This matter is discussed in Warnar, 2008, 155-171.

Jan de Weert also mentions such remembrance:

I shall teach the Ten Commandments to the lay people who do not know them or who forgot them, so that they can learn them again.⁸⁹

Such refreshing of one's memory happened by individual consultation of the reference book whenever it was necessary or during communal reading sessions within a family or in a refectory. As the numerous 'double formulas' denoting reception (to read a book or hear it being read aloud) used in the texts show, the authors seem to have anticipated the reception of their works to be through individual reading as well as through listening to a text being read aloud.⁹⁰ Communal reading of catechetical texts seems particularly important. Besides teaching it could also function as a means of strengthening the sense of spiritual community, as a means of exercising social control or as a means of promoting righteous Christian attitudes.⁹¹ Texts of the sort discussed in the present article, namely 'rulebooks outlining [...] the conduct of various forms of group life [...] generating an idealized vision of the physically and spiritually prosperous society' were particularly popular as public reading material in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Low Countries, both in households and in more formal gatherings.⁹²

Conclusion

In the conclusion, I would like to return to the questions formulated in the introduction: how did the Middle Dutch authors define the Decalogue? How did they explain the importance of the observance of the ten precepts? Which arguments did they use to encourage their readers to observe the Decalogue? The evidence presented above points to two intertwined lines of explanation and argumentation in the selected texts. The first one is theological. It focusses on the covenantal character of the Decalogue and links it with the New Testament theology of salvation. The man was given an opportunity to fulfil his part of the covenant by following the Ten Commandments. According to the discussed explanations, the observance of these precepts, which are easier to keep than to break, was a guarantee for eternal life. This statement, although not strictly correct from the theological point of view, was consequently repeated by the Middle Dutch authors, regardless of their background. Clearly, there was a difference between statements that were theologically sophisticated and

⁸⁹ *Nieuwe Doctrinael*, f. 76r, vs. 1565-1568:

'So sallic de x ghebode leren
Den leeken diet niet en weten
Of diet moghen hebben vergheten,
Dat si te kennisse weder gheraken.'

⁹⁰ Examples of the double formula (read or listen to it being read to you) are: *Spiegel der Leyen*, Prologue, f. 3v, vs. 48-49, *Nieuwe Doctrinael* vs. 25 in the redaction L, see Jacobs 1915, 293, *Des coninx summe*, 314, see Tinbergen 1907, 314. The 'listening to a text being read'-type of reception can also be assumed for the sermon in *Nuttelijc boec*, although the text does not possess a double formula.

⁹¹ Coleman 1996, 88, 138-143.

⁹² Coleman 1996, 140.

doctrinally sound on the one hand, and statements that were likely to be effective in the teaching of the laity on the other hand. Even high-ranked theologians like Jean Gerson were willing to make doctrinal concessions in their catechetical writings in order to make them more persuasive and 'workable' for the laity. Effective coaxing by means of clear explanations mattered more than doctrinal rigour.

Yet, a clear theological definition was probably not enough. Hence, a second line of explanation: a pragmatic and practical encouragement that was likely to appeal to the mentality of the readers. The main point here was the promise that the observance of the Decalogue will bring advantage and prosperity in worldly life on both individual and social level. The authors appealed to reason and pragmatic sense of their readers by presenting breach of the precepts of the Decalogue as destructive acts that bring misery in the earthly life and the damnation after death. Who would choose self-destruction when following the commandments was actually easier and more advantageous?

Was this pragmatic line of explanation a clever church propaganda? Maybe, although, as we have seen, such argumentation can be found in writings of authors of various backgrounds intended for broad audiences. Instead of thinking about the teaching on the meaning of the Decalogue in terms of strong agency of the church that tries to impose a certain way of thinking on lay and (semi-)religious Christian, I propose a more dynamic view on the formulation of catechetical teaching. The definition of the Decalogue and the explanation of the importance of its observance was adjusted to the expectations and the mentality of a broad and diverse readership. The church perhaps did aim at influencing people's lives, but at the same time the content of the catechetical teaching on such elementary tenet as the Decalogue was shaped in a way that would appeal to the readers. These observations demonstrate yet again that vernacular religious teaching, often referred to as 'vernacular theology', had its own tone and purposes.⁹³ This combination of theology and pragmatism, of spiritual and material benefits ascribed to the observance of the Decalogue were perhaps the key factors that contributed to the popularity of the Old Testament precepts in the late medieval vernacular culture. Both ecclesiastical and lay authors understood that enforcing a pure doctrine or very strict rules was not likely to bring positive results. A pragmatic path to salvation through the observance of the commandments was much more attractive and thus deserved to be propagated.

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⁹³ I adopt here Nicholas Watson's broad definition of vernacular theology as a catch-all term denoting 'any kind of vernacular writing that communicates theological information to an audience', cf. Watson 1995, 822-864.

Summary

De Tien Geboden waren een populair thema in de Middelnederlandse literatuur. Dit verschijnsel wordt vaak in verband gebracht met het volkstalige biechtonderwijs. Toch blijken de Middelnederlandse verklaringen van de Tien Geboden weinig te maken te hebben met de voorbereiding op de belijdenis van zonden. Het onderzoek waarvan dit artikel een verslag vormt heeft aangetoond dat de Middelnederlandse catechetische teksten de observantie van de Decaloog vooral als een noodzakelijke voorwaarde voor de verlossing definiëren. Daarmee wordt het bereiken van zaligheid afhankelijk gemaakt van de menselijke daden. Bovendien bracht het volgen van de geboden voorspoed en welvaart tijdens het aardse leven. Hoe meer mensen zich aan de voorschriften van de Decaloog hielden, des te voorspoediger de gemeenschap. Gelegd naast de scholastieke commentaren op de Tien Geboden blijken deze opvattingen soms ronduit onorthodox. Vaak zijn ze echter niet zozeer tegenstrijdig met, maar eerder anders dan de geldende doctrines.

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Queeste. Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden

Queeste is een internationaal en meertalig tijdschrift op het gebied van de middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden (tot 1600). Het wil recht doen aan de meertaligheid van deze regio door niet enkel aandacht te besteden aan Nederlandstalige literatuur, maar ook ruimte te bieden voor de bestudering van teksten in het Frans, Duits, Engels of Latijn. Ook teksten die niet tot de literaire canon worden gerekend, kunnen in het tijdschrift aan bod komen. De beoordeling van de inzendingen gebeurt via *double-blind peer review*.

Queeste. Journal of Medieval Literature in the Low Countries

Queeste is an international, multi-lingual, peer-reviewed journal in the area of medieval literature in the Low Countries (to 1600). The journal reflects the multi-lingual nature of this region by providing a forum for research results on literature in Dutch as well as in a variety of other languages, such as French, German, English and Latin. The journal's definition of 'literature' is inclusive rather than exclusive and studies on non-canonical texts are welcome.

Queeste. Revue de la littérature médiévale dans les anciens Pays-Bas

Queeste est une revue internationale multilingue consacrée à l'étude de la littérature médiévale dans les anciens Pays-Bas (jusqu'en 1600). Pour refléter la situation multilingue de ces régions, *Queeste* accueille aussi bien les contributions qui étudient la littérature en langue néerlandaise que les études de la littérature française, allemande, anglaise ou latine. La revue réserve également une place à l'étude de textes qui n'appartiennent pas au canon de la littérature médiévale. Tout article est soumis à l'avis de lecteurs (*double-blind peer review*).

Queeste. Zeitschrift für die Literatur des Mittelalters in den Niederlanden

Queeste ist eine internationale und mehrsprachige Zeitschrift für den Bereich der niederländischen Literatur des Mittelalters (bis etwa 1600). Sie möchte der Mehrsprachigkeit dieses Gebietes gerecht werden, indem nicht nur die Erforschung niederländischsprachiger Werke berücksichtigt werden soll, sondern auch Studien zur französischen, deutschen, englischen oder lateinischen Literatur Platz geboten wird. Auch Texte, die nicht zum literarischen Kanon gezählt werden, können in der Zeitschrift beleuchtet werden. Die Beurteilung der eingesandten Beiträge geschieht durch einen *double-blind peer review*.

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