

Rethinking the Model and Modeling

Through Comparative Practices in Late Medieval Piety¹

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Abstract *In this paper, modeling is used as a historiographic technique to fill gaps in historical semantics and to describe historical change. The aim is to understand how the treatise “De imitatione Christi”, written by Thomas a Kempis, was received. In order to reconstruct the model that mediated between the general whole of the underlying concept and the individual case of action, the recourse to practices of comparing is instructive. Changes in the conception of “imitatio Christi” can be described in this way, although from a historical perspective no semantics or concepts are available for the initiated changes. Of essential importance is the transition of a self-comparison with Christ to a process of ethical subjectivity, which can also be reconstructed as a practice of comparing, but in which the structure of comparison has changed significantly.*

The cultural technique of modeling can be understood as a practice that correlates theoretical assumptions about concrete contexts and situations, for example conceptions of the world, with specific actions.² The model occupies a place between the general whole of the underlying concept and the individual case of action. To put it in another way: it enables mediation and orientation between the concept and the way of acting. Models do not necessarily have to be made explicit. They can belong to the latent pool of knowledge of certain *communities of practice* that is actualized in habitually performed operations. It is therefore a worthwhile task of historical research to examine the latent, implicit, but culturally effective historical model formations. Consequently, changes in the practice of modeling make it possible to detect historical change.

Especially if one wants to sketch out a contingency-sensitive theory of historical change, it is necessary to heuristically assume semantic and conceptual gaps in the

1 This contribution was written as part of my Heisenberg project funded by the German Research Foundation. A modified German version of this text appeared in the first issue of the new international yearbook on religious knowledge and German literature of the late Middle Ages and early modern period *Pietas litterata* 1 (2023), 46–75.

2 For the underlying concept of “modeling” see the introduction to this volume, esp. XX–YY.

historical process. Change occurs precisely where contemporaries are initially unable to grasp this very change because the new is incommensurable with the old. For this reason, it can often be observed that change has not been adequately described at the historical level. Historiographical reconstruction, in turn, faces the danger of measuring the historically older according to the categories of a later, transformed cultural entity and thus arguing teleologically. This happens especially often when the *tertium* of the comparison comes from the cultural context of the younger *comparatum*: the comparison is asymmetrical.

Here, “the decidedly symmetrical view”³ plays an essential role, which attempts to avoid the asymmetry: we are trying not to categorically order the historically older according to the categories of a later,⁴ transformed cultural entity, but we first compare two historical situations with each other, considering the “allelopoietic”—this expression alludes to the mutual constructedness—moment of productive reciprocity in the historiographical arrangement.⁵ Thus, history is not always already previous history, but fundamentally complementary history.⁶ Following methodologically developed questions, units on the “meso level,” for example certain practice formations, are compared with each other on the basis of *tertia*, which, if possible, originate from the meta level; wherever recourse to the object level cannot be avoided, this must be reflected. It is precisely the reconstruction of implicit models that can lead to symmetrical comparisons in the sense of complementary history. The implicit models abstract from the semantics of the historical sources and must be explicated using methodologically reflected concepts.

In the following case study, I will take a closer look at late medieval piety and the connected self-concepts that cannot be captured in theological systems. Rather, the effect of medieval piety can be described by implicit models of the self-concept. But how does one methodically ascertain these historically unexplained models? One must proceed case by case. In order to be able to reconstruct the model, it is first necessary to refer to theories that come from cultural analysis, for example, and make

3 Cf. Anita Traninger, *Disputation, Deklamation, Dialog. Medien und Gattungen europäischer Wissensverhandlungen zwischen Scholastik und Humanismus*, Stuttgart 2012, 13.

4 Differentiated approaches are currently being developed for a “symmetrical historiography,” cf. for example: Caroline Arni/Simon Teuscher (eds.), *Symmetrische Anthropologie, symmetrische Geschichte* (Historische Anthropologie, 28), Wien/Köln/Weimar 2020, esp. 5–8. In this approach, however, the reference to the present plays a dominant role.

5 In this sense, aspects of transformation theory can also be made fruitful for the question of historical change, cf. Hartmut Böhme et al., *Transformation. Ein Konzept zur Erforschung kulturellen Wandels*, Paderborn 2011.

6 From here, the complementary history approach can also be distinguished from Foucault’s genealogy, which I do below. The approach of complementary history is further elaborated in a monograph I am currently writing: *Konturen des Selbst in der christlichen Reform an der Schwelle zur Neuzeit*.

it possible to describe self-concepts on this side of historical terminology. These theories—here the “aesthetics of existence” developed by Michel Foucault—are then modified regarding a historical case from the late Middle Ages—the reception of a widespread tract of *Devotio Moderna*—and used to create a model of self-concepts. In this specific case, however, comparative practices will prove to be particularly fruitful. Not only can the reception of the treatise be described through comparative practices; it is through the changes in comparative practices that the emergent new can be grasped.

Self-concepts are an example of models that mediate between concepts and actions. As is well known, far-reaching changes took place here in the late Middle Ages, which of course must be considered in a larger historical process. In the context of individuals’ self-fashioning, it is of course worth recalling Michel Foucault’s thoughts on the “aesthetics of existence,” which can be grasped in works that appeared between 1980 and 1984, particularly *L’Usage des plaisirs* and *Le Souci de soi*—volume two and three of his *Histoire de la sexualité*⁷—but which are also apparent in numerous smaller writings and interviews. Questions about the genealogy of the self and the history of subjectivity directly address the connection of an aesthetics of existence with an art of living that mediates between the “external formability of the subject” and the “internal formability of the self.”⁸

In these contexts, Foucault’s reflections should not be understood as a monolithic entity, but as cases affected by the specific movement of argumentation. While before the posthumous publication of the fourth volume of the *Histoire de la sexualité*, *Les Aveux de la chair*,⁹ it might have seemed as if Christianity contrasted fundamentally with the ancient art of living and its ethos¹⁰—even though antiquity offered “no concrete alternatives, but placeholders or signs for the fundamental formability and transformability of self-references”¹¹—the contrastive approach is increasingly

7 Cf. Michel Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs*, Paris 1984; Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi*, Paris 1984.

8 Cf. Martin Saar, Die Form des Lebens. Künste und Techniken des Selbst beim späten Foucault, in: Daniel Defert/François Lagrange (eds.), *Michel Foucault. Ästhetik der Existenz. Schriften zur Lebenskunst*, Frankfurt am Main 2007, 321–343; cf., also in the sense of an “analytical philosophy of politics,” Daniele Lorenzini, *Éthique et Politique de Soi. Foucault, Hadot, Cavell et les Techniques de l’Ordinaire*, Paris 2015.

9 Michel Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair*, Paris 2018.

10 Cf. Clemens Kammler/Gerhard Plumpe, Antikes Ethos und postmoderne Lebenskunst. Michel Foucaults Studien zur Geschichte der Sexualität, in: *Philosophische Rundschau* 34 (1987), 186–194.

11 Cf. Martin Saar, Die Form des Lebens, 331: “[...] keine konkreten Alternativen, sondern Platzhalter oder Zeichen für die grundsätzliche Gestaltbarkeit und Transformierbarkeit von Selbstbezügen”; cf., on the late Foucault, Paul Veyne, The Final Foucault and his Ethics, in: Arnold I. Davidson (ed.), *Foucault and his Interlocutors*, Chicago/London 1997, 225–233.

marginalized, or at least it is changing. In order to grasp the relationship more precisely, it is worthwhile to first describe the respective segments in terms of complementary history, but by starting from analytical parameters that arise from historiographical interest.

For my argument, it is of particular importance that in Foucault the question of subjectivity is connected to ethics. In this context, the works of Pierre Hadot deserve special attention. Hadot, instead of reconstructing a philosophical system, has focused on the “way of life” of the philosophizing individual himself: “La vraie philosophie est donc, dans l’Antiquité, exercice spirituel.”¹² Although it is important to keep in mind the differences between Hadot and Foucault,¹³ the question of the “aesthetics of existence” thus appears as a variation of the *manière de vivre*, the *mode de vie*: “The element of attitude or ethos that is related to morality is always an expression of self-relation, of positioning oneself as who one is and as who one may and should act as.”¹⁴ In this case ethics and aesthetics—the latter understood as the shaping of life—are brought close together.

Especially *Les Aveux de la chair*—a work that was published posthumously but written before volumes two and three of the *Histoire de la sexualité* and which revolves around penitential practice, virginity, and marriage—promise clarification in historiographical terms, for these prove the continuity of Christian norms and modes of subjectivation with ancient ethics.¹⁵ Of no importance for my reconstruction are Foucault’s critical points on the present. From his critical perspective these techniques suggested that he could ask: “Mais la vie de tout individu ne pourrait-elle pas

12 Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris 1987, 51 (the relevant section of the *Exercices spirituels* from which the quotation is taken was first published in: *Annuaire de la Ve Sectio’ de l’École Pratique des Hautes Études* 84 [1977], 27–70, which Foucault referred to in the preface to *L’Usage des plaisirs* and in *Le Souci de soi*); cf. Arnold I. Davidson/Frédéric Worms (eds.), *Pierre Hadot. L’enseignement des antiques, l’enseignement des modernes*, Paris 2010; Werner Beierwaltes, Nachruf auf Pierre Hadot, in: *Jahrbuch der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 2010, München 2011, 173–176.

13 Cf. esp. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels*, 229–233; Pierre Hadot, Überlegungen zum Begriff “Selbstkultur,” in: François Ewald/Bernhard Waldenfels (eds.), *Spiele der Wahrheit. Michel Foucaults Denken*, Frankfurt am Main 1991, 219–227; Arnold I. Davidson, Ethics as Ascetics. Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought, in: Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge 2003, 123–148.

14 Cf. Saar, *Die Form des Lebens*, 328: “Das Element der Haltung oder des *Ethos* einer Moral ist immer Ausdruck einer Selbstbeziehung, eines Sich-selbst-Positionierens als der, der man ist und als der man handeln darf und soll.”

15 Cf. Karsten Schubert, Die christlichen Wurzeln der Kritik. Wie Foucaults Analysen der Kirchenväter neues Licht auf die Debatte um Macht und Freiheit werfen, in: *Zeitschrift für philosophische Literatur* 7 (2/2019), 60–71, see 67.

être une œuvre d'art?"¹⁶ I will also leave undecided whether a critical potential is inherent in the act of speaking the truth about oneself that is crucial for the Christian penitential ritual.¹⁷

What is important is that the dichotomous dissociation between a pagan ethos of the art of living and the Christian law,¹⁸ which was identified in the past, cannot be sustained.¹⁹ However, in *Les Aveux de la chair* Foucault, on the one hand, clearly draws on late antiquity. On the other, he declares the question of "how to govern" to be "one of the fundamental questions of the fifteenth or sixteenth century."²⁰ Therefore, the question of the aesthetics of existence, understood as a "practice- and exercise-mediated approach to truth,"²¹ seems to overlook a fundamental historical constellation. And this is not about the vanity of the medievalist who complains that Foucault, who with regard to the Middle Ages had considered above all the effect of the Fourth Council of the Lateran, also jumps from antiquity to Descartes' meditations in another context.²²

If one assumes a long historical process in which subjectivity can be understood as an effect of self-techniques,²³ which in a power-critical perspective can be comprehended as different from systems and laws and which can be grasped within the framework of forms of life, one can once again pose the question of what an aesthetics of existence means before the age of an emphatic understanding of art and in the

16 Michel Foucault, À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique. Un aperçu du travail en cours, in: Daniel Defert/François Ewald (eds.), *Dits et Écrits II: 1976–1988*, Paris 2001, 1202–1230, see 1211.

17 Cf. Schubert, *Die christlichen Wurzeln der Kritik*, 69.

18 Cf. Kammler/Plumpe, *Antikes Ethos und postmoderne Lebenskunst*, 191: "Die antike, im Ethos der Polis vor allem garantierte Balance von Selbst und Sozialität ist zerbrochen; das Selbst wird von den kodifizierenden oder normalisierenden Instanzen der Religion oder des Staats absorbiert, 'Selbstbeherrschung' durch Abrichtung, 'Selbstsorge' durch Expertokratie ersetzt."

19 Niki Kasumi Clements, Foucault's Christianities, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89 (2021), 1–40, see 16: "The arts of living in antiquity rely on the critical ability of subjects to actively conduct themselves instead of being subjected to others. But this signals a continuity more than a break: Foucault does not oppose 'pagan ethics' to 'Christian morality'—indeed his interest in the former stems from his recognition of the dialectical development of these histories."

20 Michel Foucault, Qu'est-ce que la Critique (Critique et Aufklärung) in: *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 84.2 (1990), 35–63 (with discussion), 37: "Comment gouverner, je crois cela a été une des questions fondamentales de ce qui s'est passé au xv^e ou xvi^e au siècle."

21 Cf. Saar, *Die Form des Lebens*, 342.

22 Cf. Michel Foucault, L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté, in: Daniel Defert/François Ewald, *Dits et Écrits II: 1976–1988*, 1527–1548, see 1541–1542.

23 Cf. Christian Moser, *Buchgestützte Subjektivität. Literarische Formen der Selbstsorge und der Selbstthermeneutik von Platon bis Montaigne*, Tübingen 2006.

context of a Christian *ordo*.²⁴ In this way, an alterity of art comes into view that does not assume a categorical difference between aesthetics and ethics, but rather understands art in the sense of the medieval *ars* as a complex of case-related effective rules that are appropriated in a longer process. Regarding the aesthetics of existence, this means an *ars vivendi*—Greek: τέχνη του βίου—that forms technologies of the self beyond mere norm fulfillment and following of rules.

It is likely due to the dominance of secular self-descriptions of modernity that, in contrast to the normative character of Christian ethics, the genuinely Christian art of living receives little attention in scholarship.²⁵ Yet it plays an important role for the practice of piety up to the present moment, especially in an interdenominational perspective. In 2008, Peter Bubmann and Bernhard Sill published a volume on the “Christian Art of Living” that was aimed at the practice of piety. In the introduction they define the Christian Art of Living as a “stylish appropriation” (Christian Schwindt) of the reality of Christ and as a form of discipleship.²⁶

With Bubmann’s and Sill’s emphasis of the *imitatio Christi* (the succession of Christ) in the context of the art of living the Foucauldian framework of an aesthetics of existence seems to have been overcome. This impression, however, is deceptive. For if one follows the consequences of philosophy as a way of life that Pierre Hadot emphasizes—“constant self-examination, meditation, focus on the presence of conscious life, inward withdrawal for the sake of inner freedom and self-knowledge”²⁷—then the contrast with Christian practices of piety, and especially with

24 Clements, Foucault’s Christianities, 25: “Foucault—in *Confessions of Flesh* and in his lectures, interviews, and monographs from the 1970s and 1980s—frames Christianity both as continuous with the ancient world and as importantly inaugurating mechanisms and technologies that will come to define modern subjectivity—notably through regimes of truth and forms of governmentality predicated on obedience and confession, on individuation and totalization, on desire and law.” This reconstruction has meanwhile been criticized especially with regard to Foucault’s interpretation of Augustine and Cassian, cf. Herman Westerink, *The Subject of Desire and the Hermeneutics of Thoughts. Foucault’s Reading of Augustine and Cassian*, in: *Foucault Studies* 33 (2022), 24–47.

25 Cf. the following important exceptions: Juliusz Domański, *La Philosophie, Théorie ou Manière de vivre? Les controverses de l’Antiquité à la Renaissance*, Freiburg/Switzerland 1996; Pierre Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la Philosophie antique?*, Paris 1995, 379–407; John Cottingham, *Philosophy and Self-improvement. Continuity and Change in Philosophy’s Self-conception from the Classical to the Early-modern Era*, in: Michael Chase et al. (eds.), *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Ancients and Moderns*, Malden 2013, 148–166.

26 Cf. Peter Bubmann/Bernhard Sill (eds.), *Christliche Lebenskunst*, Regensburg 2008, 9–22, see 15: “[...] als ‘stilvolle Aneignung’ (Christian Schwindt) der Wirklichkeit Christi und als Form von Nachfolge.”

27 Cf. Beierwaltes, Nachruf auf Pierre Hadot, 175: “[...] ständige Selbstprüfung, Meditation, Konzentration auf die Gegenwart bewussten Lebens, Rückgang ins Innere um der inneren Freiheit und der Selbsterkenntnis willen.”

forms of late medieval piety that emerge literally on the threshold to modernity, is lost (this is not a contingent event, as the historical context that can be associated with Neoplatonism clearly shows).

Although the imperative of the *imitatio Christi* is undisputed in its significance for Christianity, there are a variety of different opinions about what this significance contains. To begin with, there is a range of widely divergent answers to the question of how the relationship of *imitatio* understood as “imitation” and the commandment to follow Christ should be defined.²⁸ Accordingly, Julia Weitbrecht was able to state that scholarship uses the term *imitatio* “unspecifically.”²⁹ There are good reasons for this claim: “imitation” has recently been identified as a comprehensive cultural principle of the Middle Ages.³⁰ I argue, however, that the concept depends on a specific constellation that promises to shed light on historically specific model formations.

In order to reconstruct the implicit models, we must resort to the structure of the *imitatio Christi*: in certain contexts, this can be grasped as a comparative practice.³¹ It is important to emphasize that not every form of *imitatio Christi* can be described as a comparative practice. If we look at the diversity of legends, for which typological comparisons³² have a special significance in principle, and therein also only at the possibilities of narrating martyrdoms, a considerable breadth becomes apparent: witnessing and martyrdom are originally closely linked, but gradually diverge, and can eventually be brought back together in new ways.³³ In this context the *imitatio Christi* can initially be understood in terms of a subsumption³⁴ that means, on this side of comparative structures, the fulfillment of various criteria with recourse to different traditions. To the extent that the respective subsumption appears to be disputed, however, implicit as well as explicit comparative practices can move in here as well.³⁵

28 Cf. Hans Jürgen Milchner, *Nachfolge Jesu und Imitatio Christi. Die theologische Entfaltung der Nachfolgethematik seit den Anfängen der Christenheit bis in die Zeit der devotio moderna – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung religionspädagogischer Ansätze*, Münster 2004.

29 Cf. Julia Weitbrecht, “Imitatio” und Imitabilität. Zur Medialität von Legende und Legenden-spiel, in: *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* (PBB) 134 (2012), 204–220, see 205.

30 Cf. Andreas Büttner et al. (eds.), *Nachahmen im Mittelalter. Dimensionen – Mechanismen – Funktionen*, Köln et al. 2018.

31 This is only one facet of the importance of comparative practices for pious self-constitution. Cf. in this volume the contribution of Antje Flüchter, esp. on “manuals of confession” XX–YY.

32 Cf. Volker Bohn (ed.), *Typologie*, Frankfurt am Main 1988.

33 Cf. Julia Weitbrecht et al., *Legendarisches Erzählen. Optionen und Modelle in Spätantike und Mittelalter*, Berlin 2019, esp. 112–113.

34 Cf. Ulrike Davy et al., *Grundbegriffe für eine Theorie des Vergleichens. Ein Zwischenbericht. Working Paper 3 des SFB 1288*, Bielefeld 2019, see 19–23, [<http://doi.org/10.4119/unibi/2939563>].

35 Cf. Weitbrecht, *Legendarisches Erzählen*, 115–136.

Fundamentally important in the context of legends is the comparison between Christ and the saint, which can become a sign of the saint himself: This is particularly clear in the example of St. Francis.³⁶ The manifold comparative practices finally culminate in the assertion of a *conformitas* between Francis and Christ, which is broadly elaborated by Bartholomew of Pisa in the compendium *De conformitate vitae beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Iesu nostri Redemptoris*.³⁷ For the comparison between Christ and a saint, for example, by a hagiographer, we propose the concept of external comparison (“heterosynkrisis”), in order to distinguish from it practices of comparing the self with Christ or saints (“homosynkrisis”).³⁸ If one is interested in the significance of the imperative of the *imitatio Christi* for a genuinely Christian art of living, these connections play a role in the sense of more general reception theory,³⁹ if, for example, the believing recipient sees himself prompted by the legend to engage in a self-comparison with the saint and, indirectly or directly, also with Christ. However, this represents—to the persistent suggestion of the saint as *imitabile*, which proceeds from André Jolles’s definition of the legend as a “simple form”⁴⁰—just one possible perspective of reception, since the life and death of the saint also qualify him as an *intercessor*, whom one does not necessarily follow, but whom one invokes in distress.⁴¹

In distinction from comparisons with others (‘heterosynkriseis’) like the one between Francis and Christ, the self-comparisons with Christ or saints (‘homosynkriseis’) have consequences for one’s own way of life and can be part of a Christian art of living. Basically, beyond the legends, all genres of ‘fideal’ narrative—neither ‘fictional’ nor ‘factual’ texts that are ‘believed’ by their readers⁴²—come into play here,

36 Cf. Krijn Pansters, *Imitatio imitationis*. In the Footsteps of the Imitation of Christ in Early Franciscan Texts, in: Volker Leppin (ed.), *Schaffen und Nachahmen. Kreative Prozesse im Mittelalter*, Berlin/Boston 2021, 373–389.

37 On this treatise, which has hardly been studied so far, cf. Carolly Erickson, Bartholomew of Pisa, Francis Exalted: *De conformitate*, in: *Medieval Studies* 34 (1972), 253–274.

38 “Hetero-” and “homosynkrisis” are to be located in the same cultural framework and are therefore away from the “Self-Other problematic,” that has been criticized from a postcolonial perspective, cf. Haun Saussy, *Axes of Comparison*, in: Rita Felski/Susan Stanford Friedman (eds.), *Comparison. Theories, Approaches, Uses*, Baltimore 2013, 64–76, see 69.

39 Cf. Peter Strohschneider, *Weltabschied. Christusnachfolge und die Kraft der Legende*, in: *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 60 (2010), 143–163.

40 Cf. André Jolles, *Simple Forms*, trans. by Peter J. Schwartz, London/New York 2017, see 19–48 (german original: Jolles, André, *Einfache Formen. Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz*, Tübingen 1968, see 23–61).

41 Cf. Daniela Blum, *Intercessio*, nicht nur *imitatio*. Konzepte der Nachahmung Christi in hagiographischen Texten des 13. Jahrhunderts, in: Volker Leppin (ed.), *Schaffen und Nachahmen*, 407–421.

42 Cf. Elke Koch, *Fideales Erzählen*, in: *Poetica* 51 (2020), 85–118, esp. 102: “Worauf es beim fidealen Erzählen ankommt, ist deshalb nicht die Wahrheitsliebe der Äußerungsinstanz, sondern

which not only aim at speech or cult acts, but lead to the formation of a certain *habitus* in the sense of a Christian art of living. The binding to codified norms is, of course, preserved here—albeit in an intricate way.

With a 'homosynkrisis' understood in this way, however, one is still quite far away from self-techniques, which could be understood in such a way that subjects develop the principles of their actions from within themselves in a thoroughly experimental way, and thus, in a more comprehensive sense, one could speak of an aesthetics of existence. This, however, changes significantly, on the one hand, in genuinely mystical discourses,⁴³ which cannot be dealt with here, and on the other hand in the context of the *Devotio moderna*, without having to use the usual anachronistic labels: 'reformers before the Reformation, educators before the Renaissance, pious ascetics before Catholic Reform, democrats before the Revolution, laity before bourgeois piets.'⁴⁴ Following in particular the theses of Anton G. Weiler on new possibilities of self-constitution,⁴⁵ in the following one treatise of Thomas a Kempis will be consulted in order to understand in a broader sense in what 'la formation d'un habitus nouveau selon les codes de la *Devotio Moderna*'⁴⁶ is based.

The *Devotio moderna* is a movement of piety with a critical attitude towards institutions.⁴⁷ It originated with the son of a patrician, Geert Groote from Devent, and it was further consolidated as an organization by his student Florens Radewijns, who founded the first house of the 'Brothers of the Common Life.' In addition to the friars' convents, communities of sisters were also established. Finally, Radewijns also founded the Convent of Windesheim (canons regular), which was quickly joined by numerous convents. The Windesheim congregation, founded in 1395, played a significant role in the 15th-century reform. An essential aspect of the devotional prac-

ihre Überzeugung in der Haltung des Glaubens. Glaube ist eine Haltung, die wie Intentionen oder Gedanken keinen symptomatischen Ausdruck findet, sondern durch Handlungen (Sprechhandlungen, Kulthandlungen, Lebensführung) mitgeteilt werden muss."

43 Cf., for the meaning of *imitatio Christi* in mystical texts post Eckhart: Lydia Wegener, *Der "Frankfurter" / "Theologia deutsch."* Spielräume und Grenzen des Sagbaren, Berlin/Boston 2016.

44 John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*, Philadelphia 2008, 3.

45 Cf. Anton G. Weiler, Recent Historiography on the Modern Devotion. Some Debated Questions, in: *Archief voor de geschiedenis van de Katholieke Kerk in Nederland* 26 (1984), 161–179, see 173–176; Anton G. Weiler, La construction du soi dans les milieux de la *devotio moderna*, in: Jean-Marie Cauchie (ed.), *La dévotion moderne dans les pays bourguignons et rhénans des origines à la fin du XVI^e siècle*, Neuchâtel 1989, 9–16; Anton G. Weiler, De constructieve van het zelf bij Geert Grote, in: Werner Verbeke et al. (eds.), *Serta Devota in memoriam Guillelmi Lourdaux, Part 1: Devotio Windeshemensis*, Leiden 1992, 225–240.

46 Weiler, La construction, 11.

47 Cf. van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*; Werner Williams-Krapp, *Die Literatur des 15. und frühen 16. Jahrhunderts. Teilband 1: Modelle literarischer Interessenbildung*, Berlin/Boston 2020, 457–503.

tice was daily meditation, with the life and suffering of Jesus as a central theme. This created a connection to the Franciscan *Meditationes vitae Christi* that was widespread in the Middle Ages.

For the question of an art of living that is based on the *imitatio Christi* and can be summarized under the rubric of an aesthetics of existence, the most widely handed-down treatise of Thomas a Kempis on the *Imitatio Christi* is a relevant source. It consists of four treatises likely completed around 1427. They were initially titled after the incipit of the first chapter of the first book *Qui sequitur me*, before the designation *De imitatione Christi*, which is still common today, became established.⁴⁸ Their sequence is based on the preserved autograph (Brussels, KBR, Ms. 5855–61, 1441) and is still a matter of discussion.⁴⁹ In any case, the entire treatise is programmatically open⁵⁰ and has been handed down in a variety of selections and sequences. To understand the importance of the treatise for a Christian art of living, it is helpful to rethink the receptive model along the lines of comparative practices.

To anticipate my central thesis: Thomas a Kempis's treatise fleshes out processes of reflection within the Christian *ordo* that configure a self that can be understood as a moral subject. The individual human being forms principles of its own actions that refer to Christian revelation but are simultaneously formed within itself. In this comparative structure, which I would like to call 'autosynkrisis', as opposed to 'homosynkrisis', Christ is no longer a *comparatum* with which the individual human being compares itself regarding the respective *tertium comparationis*; rather, an ideal formed in relation to the situation makes up the *comparatum*. I will deal mainly with the first two books of the treatise and, for reasons of space, leave out the last two books, which are also characterized by a different literary communication situation.⁵¹

48 Cf. Rudolf Th. M. van Dijk, Askese oder Mystik? Der entscheidende Rang des "Buches der inneren Tröstung" in der "Nachfolge Christi" des Thomas a Kempis, in: Ulrike Bodemann/Nikolaus Staubach (eds.), *Aus dem Winkel in die Welt. Die Bücher des Thomas von Kempen und ihre Schicksale*, Frankfurt am Main et al. 2006, 173–187, see 176.

49 For example, one has suggested a mystagogical orientation of the treatise: cf. van Dijk, *Askese oder Mystik?* This question deserves a renewed discussion against the background of the deviating order, which historically quickly became established, especially since it was objected that the integral mystagogical dynamics is emphasized precisely in the Jesuit reception, cf. Reinhard Gruhl, *Thomas Kempensis redivivus. Neuzeitlich-lateinische Bearbeitungen der Imitatio Christi* (Sebastian Castellio, Thomas Mezler, Sebastian Sailer, Claude d'Arvisenet), in: Achim Aurnhammer/Johann Anselm Steiger (eds.), *Christus als Held und seine heroische Nachfolge. Zur Imitatio Christi in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin/Boston 2020, 61–82, esp. 66.

50 Cf. Ulrike Treusch, "De imitatione Christi." Nachahmung in christlicher Frömmigkeit im Spannungsfeld von Kompilation und Neuschöpfung, in: Leppin (ed.), *Schaffen und Nachahmen*, 391–405.

51 Cf. Inigo Bocken, The Language of the Layman. The Meaning of the Imitatio Christi for a Theory of Spirituality, in: *Studies in Spirituality* 15 (2005), 217–249, see 227–228.

In the autograph manuscript, which places the book on the Eucharist at the end, the treatise begins with a reference to John 8:12:

Qui sequitur me non ambulat in tenebris: dicit Dominus. Haec sunt verba Christi quibus admonemur, quatenus vitam eius et mores imitemur: si velimus veraciter illuminari, et ab omni caecitate cordis liberari. Summum igitur studium nostrum sit: in vita Iesu Christi meditari. Doctrina Christi omnes doctrinas sanctorum praecellit; et qui spiritum haberet: absconditum ibi manna inveniret. Sed contingit quod multi ex frequenti auditu evangelii parvum desiderium sentiunt: quia spiritum Christi non habent. Qui autem vult plene et sapide Christi verba intelligere: oportet ut totam vitam suam illi studeat conformare. (l,1; p. 5, line 7–p. 6, line 2)⁵²

‘He that followeth Me, walketh not in darkness,’ saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are admonished how we ought to imitate His life and manners, if we will be truly enlightened, and be delivered from all blindness of heart. Let therefore our chiefest endeavour be, to meditate upon the life of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of Christ exceedeth all the doctrines of holy men; and he that hath the Spirit, will find therein an hidden manna. But it falleth out, that many who often hear the Gospel of Christ, are yet but little affected, because they are void of the Spirit of Christ. But whosoever would fully and feelingly understand the words of Christ, must endeavour to conform his life wholly to the life of Christ.⁵³

The treatise programmatically refers to the *imitatio vitae et morum Christi* that can be achieved by means of meditation. The details of what this form of the *imitatio* looks like, however, are not revealed; rather, Christ is set apart from the saints and, as I understand it, a hidden stock of knowledge, the *absconditum manna*, is mentioned, which is, however, relevant for salvation. The phrase refers to Rev 2:17; the ‘secret and non-public gift of salvation’⁵⁴ is here given a decidedly hermeneutical twist: the mere, albeit consistent reception of the revelation is not sufficient and has to be accompanied by a ‘special spirit.’ This spirit is reflected in a special ‘formation of life’, the principles of which are not mentioned at this point. In what follows they are merely distinguished from theological speculation.

Spiritus, meditatio, conformatio—these are terms that at first sight do not strike us as particularly surprising in the context of the *imitatio Christi*. Yet in combination with the *absconditum manna* they acquire an additional meaning that becomes clear with respect to the saints, whose teachings are distinguished from those of Christ.

52 The Latin text is quoted according to the following text edition: Thomas Hermeken a Kempis, *Opera omnia*, ed. by Michael Pohl, vol. 2, Freiburg 1904.

53 The English translation is from Thomas à Kempis, *The imitation of Christ*, London 2008.

54 Cf. Klaus Berger, *Die Apokalypse des Johannes. Kommentar* (vol. 1), Freiburg et al. 2017, 314–315.

Thomas refers to them again in chapter 18; it is one of the rare places where a semantics of comparison becomes explicit:

Intuere sanctorum patrum vivida exempla, in quibus vera perfectio refulsit et religio: et videbis quam modicum sit, et paene nihil quod nos agimus. Heu quid est vita nostra; si illis fuerit comparata? Sancti et amici Christi, Domino servierunt in fame et siti, in frigore et nuditate; in labore et fatigatione, in vigiliis et ieiuniis, in orationibus et meditationibus sanctis: in persecutionibus et obprobriis multis. O quam multas et graves tribulationes passi sunt, apostoli, martyres, confessores virgines: et reliqui omnes, qui Christi vestigia voluerunt sequi. (I,18; p. 29, line 27–p. 30, line 12)

Consider the lively examples of the holy Fathers, in whom true perfection and religion shined; and thou shalt see how little it is, and almost nothing, which we do now in these days. Alas! what is our lift, if it be compared to them! The Saints and friends of Christ served the Lord in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in labour and weariness, in watchings and fastings, in prayer and holy meditations, in many persecutions and reproaches. O how many and grievous tribulations suffered the Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors, Virgins and all the rest that endeavoured to follow the steps of Christ!

The life of the holy fathers offers in the biographical form a point of orientation from which to reach perfection (*perfectio*) by means of a form (of life) that is transcendently bound back (*religio*). Contrary to what this a rare occurrence of comparative semantics seems to suggest at first glance,⁵⁵ the intended receptive connection to Thomas's *Imitatio Christi* cannot be reconstructed as a form of self-comparison that is in some way limited to the saints; rather, it can be concluded that the form of 'homosynkrisis', i.e., the comparison of one's own self with the saints as *comparata*, remains limited to an exhortative function.

If following the *vestigia Christi* is the matter at stake, such self-comparison is not sufficient. For the situations in which the individual human being is placed and in which it must make decisions are so complex and manifold that a comparison with stages of Christ's or the saints' lives and sufferings, as much as they exist in different versions, does not advance the matter. Meditation and asceticism become individual, situational practices:

55 Cf. Walter Erhart, et al., Ähnlich, Anders, Einzigartig. Sich selbst Vergleichen und die Historisierung des autobiographischen Schreiben, in: Walter Erhart et al. (eds.), *Sich selbst vergleichen. Zur Relationalität autobiographischen Schreibens vom 12. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, Bielefeld 2020, 11–52, see 27–28.

Non possunt omnes habere unum exercitium: sed aliud isti aliud illi magis deservit. Etiam pro temporis congruentia diversa placent exercitia [...]. (I,19; p. 34, lines 14–18)

All cannot use one kind of spiritual exercise, but one is more useful for this person, another for that. According to the seasonableness of times also, divers exercises are fitting [...].

While it remains true that in Thomas the search for the right, salvific life does not lead to the ‘self’ but to Jesus (II,7), it is not a matter of directly imitating life and suffering but of generating in oneself the competency to act, to form the self into a moral subject within the Christian framework. ‘Homosynkrisis’ is replaced by ‘autosynkrisis.’

The rubra of each chapter serve as *tertia comparationis*, through which the individual human being no longer compares itself to Christ himself, but to an emergent *comparatum*, an ideal derived from the teachings of Christ, and it thus constitutes itself as a subject. The focus lies not on meditating on the life and suffering of Christ, but on a general teaching of wisdom which can partly remain entirely in the inner world. Only a few pages after the issue of the programmatic imperative of the *imitatio Christi* is discussed, one recognizes what it means with respect to ‘autosynkrisis’:

Non est credendum omni verbo nec instinctui: sed caute et longanimites res est secundum Deum ponderanda. Pro dolor saepe malum facilius quam bonum de alio creditur et dicitur: ita infirmi sumus. Sed perfecti viri non facile credunt omni enarranti; quia sciunt infirmitatem humanam ad malum proclivam: et in verbis satis labilem. (I,4; p. 11, lines 21–29)

We must not give ear to every saying or suggestion, but ought warily and leisurely to ponder things according to the will of God. But alas; such is our weakness, that we often rather believe and speak evil of others than good. Those that are perfect men do not easily give credit to every thing one tells them; for they know that human frailty is prone to evil, and very subject to fail in words.

One can rightly ask what the quoted has to do with an *imitatio Christi*. In passages like these, the usually expected opposition between ‘la clarté de la Sagesse et les ténèbres de ce monde’⁵⁶ is cancelled out to the extent that inner-worldly action is no longer committed to strict renunciation of the world. In addition, the significance of the

56 Weiler, *La construction*, 16.

individual appears to be revalued in the initiated processes of consideration, since self-constitution certainly appears as a 'résultat de l'effort personnel.'⁵⁷

In our opinion, the fact that these shifts in emphasis have not yet been sufficiently appreciated by researchers is primarily because one can speak of a conceptual gap with respect to the historical situation. Thomas's treatise, whose overall structure and consequences cannot be discussed here, has no concept for what exactly it means: *rem secundum Deum pondere*, i.e., to examine (each and) everything before God, or as the translation says: 'to ponder things according to the will of God.' Here there is a warning against false counsel (*verbum*) and a decisive connection to the complex of *discretio spirituum*—the discernment of spirits in the realm of religious experience—(*instinctus*), which experiences an increase in significance in the late Middle Ages⁵⁸ and is relevant to questions of subjectivity.⁵⁹

It appears that this process can be reconceptualized as the model of 'autosynkrisis', which on this side of the sacramental order and of penance⁶⁰ decidedly practices subjectivity in everyday life 'as critical self-reflection of a foreign and inwardly effective power (evil) and continuous self-transformation (truth).'

⁶¹

If one assumes that the concepts of *imitatio Christi*, which were modified in the late Middle Ages, stimulated practices of self-comparison among the recipients, the reception of Thomas a Kempis's treatise *De imitatione Christi*, which has not yet been sufficiently clarified, can not only be understood in terms of the construction of a corresponding *habitus*, but can also be specified according to autoreflexive comparative structures that show ways to a Christian life in the everyday world: the meditation on Christ's life and suffering is replaced by generally reflexive processes that, in the confrontation with revelation but also with forms of a topically organized com-

57 Weiler, La construction, 16.

58 Cf. François Dingjan, *Discretio. Les origines patristiques et monastiques de la doctrine sur la prudence chez saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Assen 1967; Günter Switek, *Discretio spirituum*. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Spiritualität, in: *Theologie und Philosophie* 47 (1972), 36–76; Cornelius Roth, *Discretio spirituum. Kriterien geistlicher Unterscheidung bei Johannes Gerson*, Würzburg 2001; Stefan Podlech, *Discretio. Zur Hermeneutik der religiösen Erfahrung bei Dionysius dem Kartäuser*, Salzburg 2002, esp. 121–314 (*imitatio Christi*); Wendy Love Anderson, *The Discernment of Spirits. Assessing Visions and Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages*, Tübingen 2011.

59 Cf. Niklaus Largier, Rhetorik des Begehrens. Die "Unterscheidung der Geister" als Paradigma mittelalterlicher Subjektivität, in: Martin Baisch et al. (eds.), *Inszenierungen von Subjektivität in der Literatur des Mittelalters*, Königstein 2005, 249–270, see 261–266.

60 Cf. Maximilian von Habsburg, *Catholic and Protestant Translations of the Imitatio Christi, 1425–1650. From Late Medieval Classic to Early Modern Bestseller*, Farnham et al. 2011, 16–17.

61 Cf. Schubert, Die christlichen Wurzeln der Kritik, 70: "[...] als kritische Selbstreflexion von fremder und innerlich wirkender Macht (Böses) und kontinuierlicher Selbsttransformation (Wahrheit)."

mon sense,⁶² situationally reveal an ideal with which the respective subject compares himself. Moral subjectivity and divine grace are thereby conceived as a connection, without this being specifically justified: *Fac quod in te est: et Deus aderit bonae voluntati tuae* (I,7; p. 14, lines 17–18; cf. IV,12; p. 125, line 1).

Thus, the phrase *facere quod in se est*, originating from the nominalistic doctrine of grace, also reverberates—probably via Jan van Ruusbroec—in Thomas a Kempis—there, however, ‘as proof of a God-turned, meritorious existence or, in a more general perspective, for the synergism of human striving for virtue and divine grant of grace’⁶³—bypassing the complex theological contexts of justification. The abbreviations, together with the transition from an argumentative to an exhortative style, which—as also later in Geiler of Kaysersberg⁶⁴—turns the *facere quod in se est* into a *fac quod in te est*, leading to an accentuation of human self-responsibility, which brings the theological framing to a limit.

At these points, the treatise not only reaches beyond the usual framework of *imitatio Christi*, but also reveals a tension with the notorious imperative to abandon oneself (*se relinquere*, II,11): these autosynkritical practices bring to the fore an ethical subject that forms principles of action within itself while living in the world; that is, it follows Christ in its own way. In the Christian context, a model of ‘aesthetics of existence’ emerges, which is situated on this side of ecclesiastical institutions and sacraments. It carries meaning with respect to the everyday lives not only of religious, but also of semi-religious and lay people based on meditative practices that are ‘essentiellement recherche d’une éthique personnelle’ and can no longer be understood as ‘une morale comme obéissance à un système de règles’.⁶⁵

The theological preconditions for Thomas a Kempis’s modifications are to be found not only in the realm of Christology, but also in Christian anthropology in the late medieval context, which is fundamentally negative, but nevertheless allows for ‘possibilities of moral self-responsibility’.⁶⁶ Deficiency and agency arise out of each other: especially as far as self-care is concerned, the devotees differ significantly

62 Cf. Udo Friedrich, *Die Rhetorik der Gewohnheit. Zur Habitualisierung des Wissens in der Vormoderne*, Zurich 2021.

63 Wegener, *Der “Frankfurter”*, 261: “[...] als Ausweis eines gottzugewandten, verdienstlichen Daseins bzw. in allgemeinerer Perspektive für den Synergismus von menschlichem Tugendstreben und göttlicher Gnadenzuwendung.”

64 Cf. E. J. Dempsey Douglass, *Justification in Late Medieval Preaching. A Study of John Geiler of Kaysersberg*, Leiden et al. 1989 [first printed in 1966], 142; cf. Dorothea Klein, *Geistliche Diätetik. Erziehung zur Selbstsorge in Predigten Bertholds von Regensburg und Johannes Geilers von Kaysersberg*, in: Tobias Bulang/Regina Toepfer (eds.), *Heil und Heilung. Die Kultur der Selbstsorge in der Kunst und Literatur des Mittelalters*, Heidelberg 2020, 129–145.

65 Michel Foucault, *Une esthétique de l’existence*, in: Daniel Defert/François Ewald (eds.), *Dits et Écrits II, 1549–1554*, see 1550–1551.

66 Wegener, *Der “Frankfurter”*, 303: “Möglichkeiten moralischer Eigenverantwortlichkeit.”

from Groenendaal's mystical circles, by which they are nevertheless theologically influenced.⁶⁷

It should be emphasized that the developments described are not a mere previous history of moral subjectivity in modernity, but rather a complementary history, even if 'something new' emerges here: it is precisely not a matter of identifying a special beginning, even a 'discovery' of something in the area of *Devotio moderna* from the modern point of view, but rather of describing, with a view to the historical situation, how moral subjectivity emerged within the framework of the Christian *ordo*, starting from a text that was not uniformly conceived, that in the tradition of the Rapiaries integrated about 1,200 biblical quotations and allusions as well as passages from various authors (e. g. Augustine, Jerome, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, David of Augsburg, Ludolf of Saxony, Henry Suso)⁶⁸ and that took up scholastic concepts.⁶⁹ The complementary-historical approach reflects this historical constellation in a historically adequate manner—that is, in view of the semantic and conceptual gaps through which emergent processes remain latent and which are not only related to the programmatic departure from a theoretical language in the service of *praxis pietatis*,⁷⁰ but are also explained by the fact that the emergent new is often incommensurable with the old. In the sense of complementary history, it can also be about the fact that the text was later taken up in various ways and that in these contexts what initially remained latent then became manifest.

In the following, I would like to show regarding a selected constellation that what remains latent regarding the aesthetics of existence in Thomas could become manifest. In principle, there would be many examples here up to our present. But regional and temporal segments must be considered in their own context. The reception of the treatise *De imitatione Christi* persists and is in many ways part of a contemporary culture of piety, especially in Catholic reform movements and in independent church circles. Mediated through these, the process of reflection initiated by the treatise also becomes part of a popular culture, for in the question *What would Jesus do?*⁷¹ it appears even today on book covers, buttons, bracelets, T-shirts, etc., and can still be described in form as an 'autosynkrisis'. It is precisely in the subjunctive

67 For a corresponding dispute between Jan van Ruusbroec and Geert Grote cf. Anne Bollmann, *The Influence of the Devotio moderna in Northern Germany*, in: Elizabeth Andersen (ed.), *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, Leiden/Boston 2014, 231–259, see 233–234.

68 Cf. Williams-Krapp, *Die Literatur des 15. und frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*, 471.

69 Cf. Charles M.A. Caspers, *Thomas van Kempen en de communie. Een situering van het vierde (oorspronkelijk derde) boek van De imitatione Christi in de geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, in: *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 77 (2003), 93–124.

70 Cf. Bocken, *The Language of the Layman*, 229.

71 Cf. Daniel Shore, *WWJD? and the History of Imitatio Christi*, in: Daniel Shore (ed.), *Cyberformalism. Histories of Linguistic Forms in the Digital Archive*, Baltimore 2018, 130–153.

would that the autosynkritical moment can be recognized, because the question is not what Jesus did according to Scripture, in order to then compare one's own behavior with that of Jesus; rather, the aim is an *ad hoc* and hypothetical *comparatum*, with which one compares oneself.

The tract's paths of reception, the model it contains, and the self-practices triggered by this very model, however, not only lead to the modern era, but can be traced back to each of the various groups in the early modern period.⁷² It had a special effect on Ignatius of Loyola, who read Thomas's treatise in Manresa—a reading with consequences: the strong focus on interiorization led Ignatius to abandon his tough external penitential exercises,⁷³ and Thomas' *Imitatio Christi* also turned out to be an essential prerequisite for Ignatius' *Exercitia spiritualia*, the *Spiritual Exercises*.

In his recently published book *Spaces of Reform. Art and Art of Living of the Jesuits in Rome, 1580–1700*, Steffen Zierholz has made an argument for a genuinely 'Jesuit aesthetic of existence or art of living,' focusing on the 'use of images, prayer books, confessionals, relics, or spaces such as chapels and hermitages.'⁷⁴ Zierholz points to sculpture as a 'metaphor of self-fashioning' and thus builds a bridge from Jesuit techniques of self-fashioning within the framework of an aesthetics of existence to genuine artistic practices. To present an example, Zierholz refers to the commemorative publication for the centenary of the Jesuit Order—*Imago primi saeculi Societatis Iesu* (Antwerp 1640)—whose chapter on the *institutio iuventutis* is decorated with an emblem designed by Philip Fruytiers and engraved by Cornelis Galle, showing a sculptor working on a sculpture. In the background are a secularly dressed figure and Christ. The ideal of *christoformitas* is cited, which is differentiated in terms of process into *purgatio* (purgation), *illuminatio* (illumination), and *unio* (union): The inner man—even if an outer formation is represented here—is successively rebuilt according to Christ; the work on him presupposes a constant comparison. But here, too, a tension remains between the subscriptio of Gal. 4:19—'Donec formetur CHRISTVS in vobis' ('until Christ is formed in you')—and the representation itself, because the processual logic coming precisely from the exegetical tradition is balanced by a certain inherent right of all sculptures. The latent comparative structure of the treatise is transferred to the pedagogical context, and it becomes manifest there, although self-comparison is replaced by comparison of others from the perspective of the pedagogue. In the *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas a Kempis, one

72 Cf. von Habsburg, *Catholic and Protestant Translations*.

73 Cf. Christian V. Witt, Von der *Imitatio Christi* zur Societas Iesu. Christusnachfolge bei Ignatius von Loyola, in: Achim Aurnhammer/Johann Anselm Steiger (eds.), *Christus als Held und seine heroische Nachfolge. Zur imitatio Christi in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin/Boston 2020, 113–128, see 119.

74 Cf. Steffen Zierholz, *Räume der Reform. Kunst und Lebenskunst der Jesuiten in Rom, 1580–1700*, Berlin 2019, 17.

can recognize a movement that, according to the autograph version, leads to the union with God that takes place in the Eucharist; however, the books are handed down in different arrangements and in part also individually and then in continuing alliances, so that here, too, these parts can claim a certain right of their own—just as the different sculptures do.

Regarding the prerequisites of this genuinely Jesuit aesthetic of Christian existence, i.e., the oscillation between artistic imitation and moral imperative, Zierholz refers in particular to Neoplatonism, including its forms of appropriation in patristics. With regard to the *Devotio moderna*, not only is the emergence of the human ability to shape one's self, which remains in latency but is nevertheless effective, to be placed side by side with this; it is also to be asked on what basis an emphatic discourse on art is integrated into the contexts of the aesthetics of existence in the Jesuit context. As Andreas Kablitz has shown in his critique of Hans Blumenberg's *Legitimität der Neuzeit* (*Legitimacy of the Modern Era*), the subject's immanent possibilities could thrive once the idea of the perfection of nature was abandoned: genuinely theological knowledge represents an essential prerequisite in this context, especially Thomistic psychology and the re-accentuations of *natura humana* developed in it, which result in a complex way from the connection between Aristotelian anthropology and the Christian narrative of revelation. Here, too, a negative anthropology, in particular the deficient nature of man, offers the precondition for an inner-worldly scope for perfection.⁷⁵

Aesthetics of existence and the promise of artistic activity thus fundamentally result from inner-Christian, genuinely late medieval conditions. Historical change does not occur in a purposeful way, but originates from specific problems, whereby the approaches to solutions lead to voids, reassignments, and shifts that produce, strictly within the Christian *ordo*, subjects who develop the principles of their actions within themselves and whose activity can contribute to the 'improvement of a substantially deficient nature.'

Taking their cues from the experience of crisis not only within spirituality, but also with respect to the conception of the world in the 14th and 15th century, reforms are developing. They try to deal with an identified deficiency in proven concepts; in the case of Thomas a Kempis, the *imitatio Christi* remains significant as a concept, but it is largely modified when rendered operational. The new emphases that are the cause of historical change remain latent on the surface of the text and only unfold their effects in a model that must be located on the side of reception. This new model can be reconstructed in the historiographical analysis if it takes recourse to comparative practices. In the Jesuit reception, the model is lifted out of latency and

75 Cf. Andreas Kablitz, *Ist die Neuzeit legitim? Der Ursprung des neuzeitlichen Naturverständnisses und die italienische Literatur des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Dante – Boccaccio), Basel 2018, esp. 157–158.

becomes manifest in the exchange with an emphatic art discourse that goes back to reconsiderations of the *natura* concept in the late Middle Ages.

A theory that makes this change comprehensible must start from conceptual gaps that can be closed by way of a reconstruction of models. The groundbreaking novelty of this approach lies in the detection of the initially implicit, latent model and the formulation of reception processes based on comparative practices. What we grasp in this way is not the autumn of the Middle Ages or the dawn of modern times, but the development of ethical subjectivity, which on the one hand may still be effective in Christian discourse today, but on the other hand can hardly claim any more validity in secular contexts.

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