The Beguines of Medieval Europe: Mystics and Visionaries

Who were these single or widowed medieval women who moved from farms to cities to live together as a religious community, yet were not officially nuns? The women, known as ‘beguines,’ *(to speak unclearly)* came together to pray and minister. Free to leave their religious vocation at any time, they willingly embraced lives of simplicity, contemplation, and apostolic poverty.

‘Beguines’ (the original meaning is lost to history) came from every social class and sought lives of prayer and service without the church structure of religious vows *(stability, obedience, and conversion of life)*. (Celibacy was always understood as fundamental to religious life).

The Beguine movement grew from the work of Mary of Oignies (1177-1213) a native of Belgium. She was drawn to the ideals of service to others and voluntary poverty, the attraction so strong that she renounced her marriage, gave away all her possessions, and worked for a time in a leper colony. Others were drawn to her; thus, the birth of the beguine ‘community.’

Unlike religious orders of the day who answered to church hierarchy, beguines were not subject to clerical oversight nor did they follow an established ecclesiastical rule. These women did not live in convents, but while some chose to remain in their own homes or in the homes of relatives, most were housed in beguinages or “God Houses,” *(Gotzhaus)* self-sufficient clusters of individual houses surrounding a central courtyard (Harrington, 2018). These residences, frequently donated by wealthy members, were usually located near a parish church or chapel. “God-Houses” began to appear around the late 12th century first in the Catholic Low Countries, modern day Netherlands and Belgium, then expanding into parts of southern Germany and France where a new apostolic piety had begun to spread. Each beguine residence was under the care of a woman known as a “Magistra,” selected by the group for her authority, spirituality, and knowledge of theology (Swan, 2014).

The women in each beguinage created their daily horarium and managed their own affairs, financial and otherwise. Their independence and self-reliant lifestyle, unknown by other medieval women, often met with abrasive criticism from many prominent men, especially clerics, who referred to the beguines as ‘pious fools’ or ‘pernicious females; however, many of men’s derogatory comments sprang from simple misogyny (Harrington, 2018).
Beguines lived and worked in burgeoning European cities while monasteries of nuns were most often located in rural areas. This allowed a number of the beguines to earn a living working in the textile mills while others did lacemaking and fine needlework. Some performed domestic chores such as house cleaning and laundry. The beguines pooled their resources so that each would have time to pray, read, attend church, listen to lengthy sermons, and minister to the needs of others.

Plainly dressed in simple white or gray tunics and head coverings suggestive of nuns’ habits, (so as not to be mistaken for prostitutes) “some groups of beguines were termed ‘Soeur Grises’ (Gray Sisters) because of their garb” (Swan, 2014, p. 73). These ‘Gray Sisters’ developed their own statutes which clearly asserted that ministry to those in need was a viable avenue to sanctification as opposed to the merits of contemplative prayer. In fact, a call to tend a sick person in his/her own home excused the beguines from the recitation of the Divine Office. This was a radical departure from the norms in other ‘religious’ groups.

The women did ‘apostolic work’ appropriate to the needs of the surrounding area. They worked in their own infirmaries, in nearby hospitals, or in the homes of the seriously ill where they also sought to bring the words of Scripture to the ailing. They cared for lepers, who were outcasts and considered untouchable by the general population. Further, beguines prepared the bodies of the dead for burial, while many served as midwives receiving their training from doctors or other midwives. They created facilities for abandoned babies and foundlings while many beguine communities included children, be they orphans or child prostitutes. These children were taken in, supported, protected, and educated by the group. Along with ministry to the poor and ill, a number of beguines dedicated themselves to the education of youth through the establishment of coeducational schools. The beguines believed that an educated citizenry would be a boon to the local economy as well as of benefit to their own financial endeavors.

While local inhabitants regarded the women with respect, “they experienced a mixed reception from the official church” (Coleman, 2011, p. 1). A number of church leaders initially supported the beguines’ efforts; however, clerics slowly began to question the women’s activities “as they were seen journeying in pairs unattended at all hours of the day and night in order to minister to those in need” (Raber, 2015, p. 1). In addition, the beguines could be found discussing theological issues, translating scripture stories into the local language, and even dancing at religious services. All this created a level of discomfort for church leaders who feared the women’s claim to have an unmediated experience of God. In fact, some members of the clergy even considered the women socially and sexually suspect especially given the fact that
priests and other male religious were seen frequenting their homes. To appease the growing unease, a few beguine groups agreed to be supervised by neighboring religious congregations.

Life as a beguine had a number of advantages for women as they could move about freely, and those who did not marry avoided the potential risk of dying in childbirth, a common occurrence at the time (Gwendoline, 2017). Within a century, there were tens of thousands of beguines across the recently revitalized European continent.

Due to the changes sweeping across the continent, the beguines continued to flourish because a primarily peasant culture, under the control of local aristocrats and church leaders, had been replaced by merchants and wealthy land owners. The women embraced the new coin-based market economy as it allowed them to control their own lives as they pooled their resources and income to better assist the poor. At the same time, the Crusades, a series of religious wars usually between Christians and Muslims, resulted in a dearth of men to manage the new currency-based culture as well as fewer available potential spouses for single females. In addition, an 11th century ecclesiastical reform under Pope Gregory VII had resulted in an altered relationship between church and state which occasioned the building of new churches along with a growing clericalism. At the same time, members of the laity were demanding a more active role in church life (Swan, 2014).

By the 13th century, the population of Europe had expanded due to civic, church, and financial movements. This was particularly true of the German city of Cologne which saw its areas revitalized and new business centers added. “This growth resulted in the existence of 169 beguinages (‘God Houses’), each housing anywhere from a few to hundreds of members” (Harrington, 2018, p. 184). At century’s end, there were almost a million beguines on the European continent.

Soon requests for entrance into the existing beguinages exceeded the space available. To offset costs, in addition to soliciting donated buildings and land from religious and secular owners, some ‘God-Houses’ required applicants to provide a dowry or other property for entrance. At the same time traditional religious orders had to refuse some applicants due to space limitations in convents and monasteries. “In fact, the Cistercians closed their order to women for a time” (Stirler, 2008, p. 1).
Beguinages continued to spread and increase in membership. King Louis IX (1214-1270) of France, in a visit to a beguinage in Ghent, Belgium, returned to France and established the court beguinage of St. Catherine in Paris (Miller, 2014).

The Paris beguines tended the poor and ill and engaged in commercial activities as did their counterparts in other European areas; however, they also enjoyed their obvious ties to the crown as well as many wealthy area merchants. Church officials, however, were far from supportive.

Bishops in various areas began to question the beguines’ activities. In fact, some beguines were imprisoned or accused of unspecified heresy. Some of them satisfied the local ordinary by pledging oaths of fidelity to the teachings of the church. Others vacated the area while others resisted and were handed over to civil authorities who were empowered to impose fines, banishment, or even execution. Powerful community members came to their defense as did local Dominican friars who managed to intervene on the beguines’ behalf.

A number of beguines became well known mystics and writers. Among them are Hadewych of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg (who later lived at the Benedictine convent in Saxony), Beatrice of Nazareth, and Marguerite Porete (who was burned at the stake on June 1, 1310 for her allegedly heretical work entitled *The Mirror of Simple Souls*).

As a movement, the beguines successfully endured for centuries despite wars, crusades, plagues, famine, and church censure. They lived together in community, dedicating themselves to God, prayer, and service to all in need.

There is much to learn from the beguines, both their spirituality and compassionate service, as well as their example of authentic lives spent in unique communities. Is there a message here for the 21st century? (I wonder.)

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


