

The beguines: the brave, religious women of the middle ages

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Women were expected to be two things in the Middle Ages, they either live under the charge of a husband in the household or dedicated herself to the Church in a convent as a nun. However, something unfamiliar happened in the late 12th century in parts of Europe, especially the Lowlands, Germany and Italy.

Women who were called “beguines” gained prominence as they questioned those stereotyped concepts of being women and lived outside of those boundaries. During the Middle Ages, women who entered Beguinages (Beguine houses or convents) were not bound by permanent vows, in contrast to women who entered convents.

It would seem that these women responded spontaneously to the work of the Holy Spirit to live a simple communal life of prayer, to care for the poor, the sick, lepers and orphaned, to teach, make lace, garden and anything else which enables them to be economically free in their respective communities. They also read and taught the Scriptures in the vernacular. The beguines had a very special devotion to the Eucharist and to the Passion of Christ. The beguines were ordinary women who were in a certain world, but not really part of it.

They are pious women whose devotional ardor often surpassed that of cloistered nuns. Like them, they dedicated their lives to God in a disciplined lifestyle, but unlike them they did not profess religious vows. In sum, it was the lifestyle of the early beguines, a lifestyle founded on intense spirituality, which differentiated them on the one hand from other laywomen and on the other from nuns. Women could enter beguinages having already

been married and they could leave the beguinages to marry. Some women even entered the beguinages with children.

Various debates exist with regards to their origins, but around 1150, groups of women, eventually called beguines, began living together for the purposes of economic self-sufficiency and a religious vocation. The attitudes of the clerics towards blossoming beguine movement were ambivalent at first. They deemed that these were groups of religious women who were dedicated to chastity and charity, which could not be condemned in any way. The fact that they existed and existed without men, except for priests and confessors to lead them, was suspect to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

For this and many other reasons, many beguines came to be known as heretics and were brutally persecuted. Though they were never an approved religious order, at one point they were granted special privileges and exemptions customary for approved orders. The Church, however, did not approve of their lack permanent vows. Women were not supposed to have that much freedom. What is particularly interesting about the Beguines was that, unlike most of those considered heretics, most of them considered themselves orthodox, but still beguines.

Some strongly identified themselves as such and while in court testified to that effect, demonstrating self-identification with the group. Yet, the group was diverse and is hard to define. This diversity was due in part to the geographical distribution as well as to the individual autonomy of each community. However, the beguines' great devotion to the Eucharist emphasized the real presence of the incarnated Lord. At the height of the

beguine movement the Feast of Corpus Christi was decreed by Pope Urban IV in 1264, and there is no doubt that the Eucharistic piety of the beguines attributed to the keeping of this feast.

Indeed, the beguines wanted to imitate their Lord and to live as the Spirit inspired them. The first beguines were not subject to a rule of life, neither did the beguine have to make a life-time commitment. She was free to leave or to marry. Such a way of life was very attractive to the devout woman, and it is not surprising that their numbers grew swiftly. It was a welcome alternative to the cloister or marriage, although for women to live without the protection of the convent or a husband was quite revolutionary in the early medieval period.

Undoubtedly, the beguines had become an important fragment not only in the history of women's movement, but also the development of the Catholic faith. Origins of the Beguines Two important movements in the 12th century had their impact on those who became known as beguines. The Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090- 1153), especially from his writings on The Song of Songs emphasized the importance of a personal relationship between the soul and the Lord. He allegorized this relationship as being similar to that of the bride and the heavenly Bridegroom.

This union between the beloved and the lover was a foundation upon which the feminist mystics, including beguines, developed an intimate spirituality with their Lord. Of course the receiving of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament was the outward act of this union. Closely associated with this nuptial image of Bernard was the "reasonable mystic" and "learned lover" of his friend,

William of St. Thierry (1085-1148), who happened to live in Liege, the birthplace of the beguine movement.

He appealed to the soul to know God in perfect love, which also appealed to these mystics (McNichols, 2002). Another factor contributing to the birth of the beguine movement was the *vita apostolica*, which St. Francis of Assisi had preached by returning to the ideals that our Lord had preached to His disciples: poverty, simplicity and a burning desire to preach the Gospel. The acceptance of this Franciscan preaching and mendicant order in 1215, even though no new orders were supposed to be have founded, gave inspiration to like-minded souls (McNichols, 2002).

In the early twelfth century a new order, Premonstratensians, was founded in Liege by Norbert of Xanten who allowed religious women to be "attached" and to do charity work in the world. However his successor reversed this role and all nuns were expelled from the order by the end of the century. In a way, these sisters were the forerunners of the beguines (McNichols, 2002). In addition, when the church structures were becoming increasingly inaccessible to women in the 13th century; where convents were overcrowded and entrance dowries were expensive; women's orders were scarce and subject to male oversight.

At this time in Liege and Antwerp, on the peripheries of urban centers, self-supporting communities of women began to appear. They lived by the work of their hands, often caring for the poor, the sick and the dying, and carried on regular devotional practices. They sought "an unstructured, nonhierarchical spiritual life that was both active (in the sense of ministering

to the needs of others) and contemplative (in the sense that meditation and visionary experience were highly valued and developed)" (Petroff 1994, p. 51-52). This was the seed of what would become the beguinages.

More elaborately, Walter Simons explained in the preface to *Cities of Ladies Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (2001) that the most widely held scholarly opinions about the origins of the beguines both have their source in medieval materials. James of Vitry's second Sermon to Virgins, written sometime between 1229 and 1240, provides Joseph Greven with his argument that the beguines were "nuns manquees, women who became beguines because they could not be nuns" (p. x). Similarly a statement on the origins of the beguines made by a clerical committee who visited the beguinage of St.

Elizabeth of Ghent in 1328 became the basis for Karl Bucher's argument that the beguine movement was the result of a "surplus of women" in the urban areas of the Southern Low Countries and other parts of northern Europe. As Simons summarized that the two materials of James of Vitry and the bishop's men at Ghent agreed on several points: they argued that large numbers of young women of the best families, in their desire to live chastely, attempted to join a nunnery, but that many of them could not find a convent that would accept them: there were simply too many candidates.

The Ghent report added that women could not afford the entrance gift, the *dos*, required in most monasteries – an obstacle to their entry that James tactfully omitted. It further differed from James in its assessment of the primary motive that drove women to the convent: it was the inability to

conclude a suitable marriage that prompted these women to the monastic life; when the latter proved impossible, they joined the beguinage (p. xi).

Seen from the perspective of the committee at Ghent, particularly as reread by Bucher and others, the beguines were driven primarily by economic and social forces and beguinages were "thus just female versions of guild organizations" (p. xi). Grundmann, as Simon noted, was the first to write about a "religious movement by women" ("religösen Frauenbewegung") and to understand the specifically religious motivations behind the beguine life style, particularly their emphasis on poverty and labor in the pursuit of the apostolic life.

Grundmann goes on, however, to describe in detail the complex negotiations between the papal curia, the mendicant orders, and the women's religious communities whereby the mendicants were eventually persuaded-sometimes pressured-into taking over the "care of souls" and often institutional responsibility for women's houses (Grundmann's most detailed examples of this process involve communities that became Dominican convents).

Implicit within the narrative of Religious Movements in the Middle Ages, then, lies the argument that orderly communities of beguines desired and ultimately succeeded in becoming more traditional convents, most often within the mendicant orders. Beguines were forced to give up ideals of individual poverty and self-support and to possess sufficient corporately owned property to maintain a community of enclosed nuns.

Hence ecclesial concerns for women's chastity and religious propriety required that women's religious ideals be transformed. As Grundmann argues, the result is the spiritualization of poverty within the writings of the thirteenth-century beguines and their heirs among both male and female Dominican authors. Without directly contesting Grundmann's arguments, which for the most part pertain to Germany, Simons presents a significantly new picture of the development of beguine communities in the Southern Low Countries.

Simons divides the history of the movement into two periods: the first, from 1190-1230, saw the emergence of laywomen living alone or together in "loose communities without institutional attachments" (p. 36). The primary sources pertaining to this period are eleven hagiographies devoted to individual holy women involved with the movement from 1190-1250. Often written shortly after their death and in each case by male clerics or monks interested in promoting cults around the holy women, none of these women were ever canonized nor did they all maintain the beguine lifestyle.

In fact, as Simons points out, hagiographers from the period and region seemed particularly interested in women who moved from the beguinal milieu into more traditional forms of monastic life (p. 92). Groups of women outside convents, like the beguines, had to steer a narrow course in order to avoid "the shoals of anticlericalism and heresy that always threatened the spiritual creativity of women" (McNamara 1990, p. 237). The success and spread of the beguine movement would suggest it did answer a need felt

among women for an independent expression of their own religious creativity.

It is also important to note that beguines fall under the more general designation of *mulieres religiosae* (religious women), an umbrella term which included nuns, recluses, and virgins living at home or in small groups. The appearance of the *mulieres religiosae*, who flourished in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was a major religious development, possibly connected with factors like the Crusades, priestly celibacy and harsh physical labor, which resulted in women outnumbering men in Western Europe.

Religious motives, however, were perhaps even more important than socio-economic ones (DeGanck 1991, p. 2-3). Development of the Beguine Movement Scholars trace the development of the beguine movement through several stages, beginning with individual women (*beguinae singulariter in saeculo manentes*) living in towns but observing the evangelical principles as well as they could. These individuals eventually came together in the beguinages (*congregationes beguinarum disciplinatarum*) that are the main focus of this chapter.

Later, some of the communities took the form of cloistered communities (*beguinae clausae*); finally, some communities were reconstituted as autonomous parishes (Little 1978, p. 130). Around 1230, these loose communities of widows, virgins, and chaste wives began to acquire property, to draw up regulations governing the life of the group, and to present "themselves to the outside world as religious institutions, either in the form of small 'convents,' or as larger architectural complexes segregated in some

manner from the surrounding urban community, the so-called court beguinages" (Simons 2001, p.

36). Simons therefore convincingly demonstrates that up to and through the Catholic Reformation the beguine movement in the Southern Low Countries remains a lay urban movement characterized by the preponderance of women from a range of social classes who participated within it (p. 91-117). In addition, Simons provides invaluable information about the beguines' work in the textile industry (p. 85-87), with the sick and dying (76-80), and- perhaps most importantly for the study of spirituality-in teaching (p.

80-85). Grundmann's early argument for the centrality of the beguines' lay status to the development of vernacular religious literature here finds crucial support. Not only did the beguines themselves read and write in the vernacular, but they were also engaged in the education of girls and women who then in turn constituted an audience for vernacular religious writing. The development of the beguinages demonstrated an outgrowth of the lay religious awakening of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

It also reflected the social background of the era. Although much more positive than simply a stand against clerical mediocrity and Western feudalism, the growth of the beguinages did, nevertheless, provide alternatives to both. The beguinages represented a new way of giving religious significance to women's ordinary lives (Bynum 1987, p. 17). It was characteristic of the beguinage to combine the *vita contemplativa* and appropriate devotional exercises with the practical solution of daily problems.

The beguines customarily engaged in weaving, spinning, carding, charitable activity, sewing, and the education of children. So religious impetus and economic factors were intertwined in a beguine's life (McDonnell 1954, p. 146). Theologically, medieval women were faced with contradictory doctrines which placed them either on a pedestal or in a bottomless pit: the virgin or the temptress. In the Christian view of sacred history, the greatest source of blessing for humanity after Christ was his mother, Mary; the greatest source of grief was also a woman Eve, the mother of us all.

Clearly, Christian tradition saw women as both the greatest and the weakest (Power 1962, p. 401-403). Thus, the beguines were bound to change these by shaping their own religious experience in lay communities, where female charisms served as alternative to the male emphasis on the power of office, the beguines paralleled other women who were emerging from the feudal system and becoming economically independent through small crafts, shops, and businesses in new towns (Bynum 1987, p. 22).

Also, it has been suggested that the strength of the beguines lay in their unique combination of traditional spirituality with their freedom from the restrictions of the cloister, a combination which allowed them to experiment and break new ground. Beguines adopted a chaste way of life and dressed simply, but they were not separated from the world, nor were they bound to any ecclesiastical authority. To wit, The beguine movement differed substantially from all earlier important movements within the western church.