



Beguines

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Learning Objectives

- Social conditions of the 12th and 13th centuries that promoted lay religious institutions
- Rise of the Beguines and Beghards
- Beguine communities
- Spiritual Beliefs
- Famous Beguine writer
 - Marguerite Porète and the *Mirror of the Little Soul*
- Condemnation of the Beguines

Beguines

- **Beguinares** were Roman Catholic lay religious communities active in the 13th and 14th centuries, living in a loose monastic community but without formal vows
- Predominately women
- Identified themselves as orthodox Christians
- Their numbers, influence and public prominence increased widely (1100 – 1500 CE)
- Illustrates both the process by which monastic ideals inspired religious life of the laity
- Questioning or even subversion of the monastic ideal

Social Context of Women

Late Eleventh Century CE

- Independence and authority - severely limited
- Ecclesiastical and civil officials were determined to remove women's authority
- Women of the nobility had two options: marriage or the cloister
- Women of lower social classes
 - Enter a trade and possibly remain single (marriageable women outnumbered the men)

Other Sects

- Waldensians, Lollards, Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit, Spiritual Franciscans, Apostolici, Albigensians, Joachimites and Flagellants
- Their protest movements grew more apocalyptic and extreme as the thirteenth century wore on
- Common thread running through these religious groups was the tremendous appeal of the *vita apostolic*

Terms

- *Vita apostolic* - a return to primitive Christianity, with zeal for souls and a simple life in common
- Mendicant orders - The term **mendicant** (from Latin: *mendicans*, "begging") refers to begging or relying on charitable donations

Beguines and Beghards

- Beguines (women) and Beghards (men)
- Lay religious movement
 - Combined many features of the hermits and penitents
 - Consisted almost entirely of women
- Etymology of Beguine
 - 'beguine' was derived from the root *begg-* to mumble or mutter prayers
 - From Lambert le Bègue and priest of Liège
 - Derived from Albigensians

Origins of the Movement

- The Beguines were a spontaneous women's movement
 - No founder, no constitution
 - Each Beguine community was autonomous
- Began in the diocese of Liège in Brabant (now Belgium)
- Communities arose in the Low Countries (Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg) France and Germany

Different Ways of Serving God

- Some lived with their families and were devoted to good works, prayers and penance
- Others served as spiritual beacons to the urban community from their homes, following in the tradition of recluses
- Still others acted as ambulant miracle workers and informal preachers

Beguines' Reputation

- The clerical and lay supporters regarded them as “religious women”
- Concept of religious life “in the world” - 12th century emphasis on inner spirituality, personal relationships with the divine, and growing criticism of formalism
- What was new – women practiced it in such great numbers and organized themselves without much male or clerical supervision

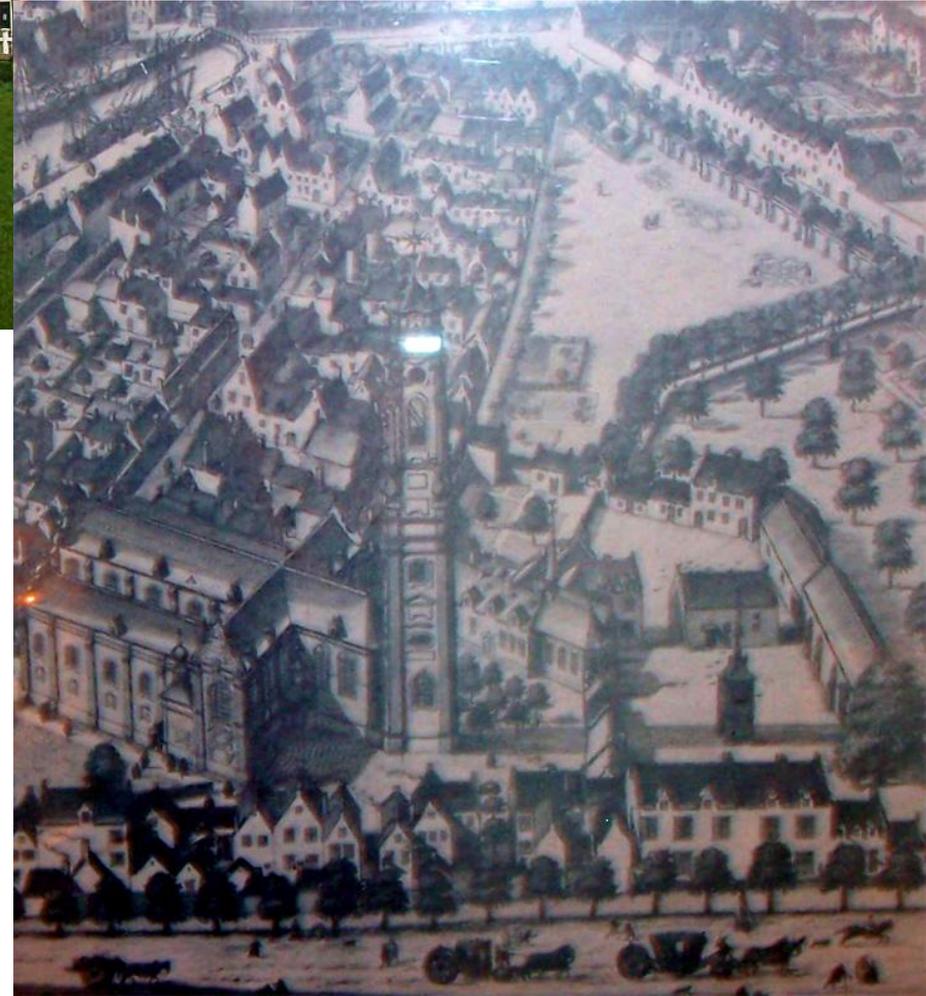
Beguine Communities (beguinages)

- By 1230 onward, Beguines who lived together informally began to
 - Acquire property jointly
 - Elect one of their group as their superior
 - Arranged for access to church services
- By 1270's encompassed entire neighborhoods, walled off from the rest the city
 - Lived in small houses or larger units gathered around a church
 - Set up hospitals for poor or elderly women
- St. Catherine's of Mechelen - more than 1,500 Beguines



Begijnhof Amsterdam

St. Catherine's Beguinage
Brussels



Not an “Order”

- The Beguine were not nuns
 - Did not take vows
 - Could return to the world and wed when they chose
 - Did not renounce their property
 - Supported themselves by manual labor
- Attended mass and the canonical hours of the day at the local church
- Each local community remained autonomous
- Communities of men who imitated the lifestyle were called beghards – developed independently but remained of modest size

Rapid Spread of Beguine Ideal

- Clerics promoted Beguines as living examples of orthodox piety
- Popular appeal of beguinages was also rooted in broader social and cultural changes
 - Age of the Crusades and the land teemed with desolate women
 - Urban economies offered employment as textile laborers, hospital workers or teachers
 - Safe havens – mutual support

Authorities and Beguines

- Magistrates and feudal overlords sometimes aided in setting up beguinages - the women fulfilled real social needs while providing cheap labor
- Church men perceived a harmonious complementarities between priestly functions and lay, female devotion

Opposition

- Opponents saw potential for heresy, *scandalum* and subversion of church authority
- Popular sentiment was initially skeptical
 - “Beguine” derived from the root *begg* – to mumble mutter prayers
 - Beguina denoted a fake devotee – a woman who claimed to be devout but whose utterances were not to be trusted

Beguine

- *Vita apostolic*
- First hundred years or so - drew many members from the wealthier classes
 - Beguines did not obligate their members to poverty
 - Manual labor was valued as the way to humility, apostolic poverty, and the ability to serve the needy
 - Expected to live modestly – not too luxuriously or too simply



Beguine Spirituality

Zeal for Souls

- Defeat of Heresy
 - Supported the Crusade against the Albigensians
 - Beguines in Belgium were regarded as a bulwark against heresy
- Some Beguines may have preached
- Use of the vernacular languages
 - Provided devotional literature in the language that people could understand
 - Ecclesiastical officers were against this practice

Eucharist

- Desire to receive communion frequently – not a widespread attitude
- Annual reception of the Eucharist had to be mandated for most groups
- Most religious orders might receive it three times a year
- Beguines wanted weekly communion

Stigmata

- First appears in 13th century
- Especially common among women
- Mary of Oignies may have been the first stigmatist
- Women acquired a reputation for sanctity through the stigmata

Mysticism

- Individual human soul could be directly united to God
- Stressed love as the way to divine union – combined Cistercian teaching with the medieval notions of courtly love
- Autotheism
 - Minority Protestant view that since faith itself alone is sufficient to attain salvation, adherence to religious is not necessary
 - Linked with the Free Spirit – a mystical and antinomian sect

Three Most Famous Beguines

- Hadewijch of Brabant (13th century)
 - Wrote in Flemish
- Mechtild of Magdeburg (c. 1208-1282)
 - Wrote in Middle Low German
- Marguerite Porète (d. 1310) Burned at the stake in 1320
 - Wrote in Old French

Beguine Writers

- Mechtild and Marguerite employ a dialogue between the soul and God or sometimes between the soul and *Minne* (Love)
- Under the name of *Minne* the Beguine mystics had a powerful feminine metaphor for God
- Wrote in the vernacular and were the first to treat of spiritual matters in these emerging languages

Marguerite Porète

- May have translated the bible into vernacular French
- Identified herself as a Beguine
- Mid 1290' - Ecclesiastical authorities try to censor her
- Burned at the stake at the Place de Grève in Paris 1 June, 1310
 - Unwillingness to discuss or denounce the teaching in her great mystical work, the *Mirror of Simple Souls*

Mirror of Simple Souls

1296-1306

- She wrote it herself - in Old French
- Published in the 20th century as an orthodox text
- Knowledge of important mystical texts of the 12th century and of the Bible
- 60,000 words in 100 folios
- Handbook offering spiritual guidance
- Mystical treatise which explores the relationship of human and divine love and its capacity to bring the soul in union with God

Mirror of Simple Souls

- Organized as a dialogue between *Amour* (Love) and *Raison* (Reason)
- Extensive passages in prose and also includes poetry
- Main characters, Love and Reason other characters burst on to the scene unannounced
- Incorporates chivalric and courtly ideals

The Soul's Mystical Ascent

- Provides a description of the soul's mystical ascent to God through seven stages
- First four stages – traditional orthodox mysticism
 1. Soul touched by God's Grace
 2. Soul moves beyond what God has commanded and strives to accomplish all it can to please God
 3. Soul moves to break the will of the spirit
 4. Soul drawn by love to the level of meditation and relinquishes all exterior labors

The Soul's Mystical Ascent

- Departs from more traditional forms of mysticism – movement of the soul into a mystical state on earth
 5. Soul is left to consider that God is the source of all things and the soul is nothing
 6. Soul is completely liberated and purified and sees only God
 - The “annihilated “or “liberated soul”
 - Described with the characteristics of a Seraphim
 - Freed from the traditional means of approaching God
 7. Soul has left the body for eternal glory in paradise

Marguerite Condemned

Burned for Heresy 1310

- Guy II bishop of Cambrai condemned her teachings – Order her to stop teaching
- Tried by William of Paris and a commission of 21 theologians
 - Refused to appear before the tribunal
 - Refused to take the required oath
- Commission reviewed 15 excerpts taken out of context
- Condemned as relapsed heretic



Mirror of Simple Souls

Was it Heresy?

- Marguerite sent the *Mirror* to three authorities
 - John of Quaregnon – Book inspired by Holy Spirit
 - Dom Franco – asserted he had proved from scripture all that appears in the *Mirror*
 - Godfrey of Fontain – noted that it was a book only for the strong of spirit
- Threat seemed to be that Marguerite refused to obey the church and *Mirrors* was very popular

Condemnations

- Council of Vienne (1311-12) – Two key documents
 - *Ad nostrum* – described Beguines and Beghards as an “organized heresy” - described the errors of which such people were supposedly guilty
 - *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* – condemned the Beguine form of life
 - Debate and preach
 - Concludes with an escape clause – women who are faithful, promised to chastity and living in their homes allowed to continue
- Vienne decrees generated a wave of persecutions

Pope John's Bull *Ratio Recta*

- A Pope John issued the bull *Ratio recta* – explaining that the majority of Beguines were not guilty of heresy – it did not stop persecutions
- Beguines in Germany suffered wave after wave of persecutions
- After 15th century large-scale persecution of Beguines began to drop off esp. after the Council of Constance
- Status of the Beguines remained suspect, and debate over their way of life raged again at the Council of Basel

Summary

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