

Gentrain Unit 6. Beguines, April 25, 2013, Dr. Cindy Ausec

Beguinages were Roman Catholic lay religious communities active in the 13th and 14th centuries, living in a loose semi-monastic community but without formal vows

Beguines and Beghards

- Lay religious movement combined many features of the hermits, and penitents
- Unique because it consisted almost entirely of women
- Diverse Origins – The Beguines were a spontaneous women’s movement, not an adjunct to any male figure or group. No founder, no constitution
- Males who imitated the lifestyle were called Beghards and had their own communities (few in number)
- Began in the diocese of Liège in Belgium

Beguines had 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
- Still others acted as miracle workers and informal preachers

Beguine Communities

- By 1230 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 they encompassed entire neighborhoods, walled off from the rest the city
 - Beguines lived in small houses or larger units gathered around a church
 - Set up hospitals for poor or elderly women
- There was never an “order” of Beguines
 - The Beguine were not nuns: did not take vows, could return to the world and wed when they chose and did not renounce their property
 - Supported themselves by manual labor (sewing, weaving, embroidery and the copying of books), working in hospitals or by teaching the children of burghers
 - Regularly attended mass and the canonical hours of the day at the local church
- Each local Beguine community remained in principle autonomous

Rapid Spread of Beguine ideal

- Influential 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 – provided safe havens with mutual support
 - Urban economies offered employment as textile laborers, hospital workers or teachers
 - Magistrates and feudal overlords sometimes aided in setting up beguinages - the women fulfilled real social needs while providing cheap labor

- Church men favorable to these development perceived a harmonious complementariness between priestly functions and lay, female devotion

Beguine Spirituality

- *Vita apostolic* – a return to primitive Christianity, with zeal for souls and a simple life in common
- Zeal for souls – provided devotional literature in the common languages
- Strong devotion to the Eucharist – wanted the rite weekly
- Stigmata appears in 13th century – gain a reputation for sanctity through the stigmata
- Mysticism – belief that the individual human soul could be directly united to God, stressing love as the way to divine union

Three most famous Beguines

- Hadewijch of Brabant (13th century)
- Mechtild of Magdeburg (c. 1208-1282)
- Marguerite Porète (d. 1310) – burned at the stake in 1310 for heresy
 - *Mirror of the Simple Souls*
 - Seven Stages of the Soul's relationship with God
- Mechtild and Marguerite employ the Augustinian style of autobiography – that is 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 provide devotional materials in these emerging languages

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 – especially that they debated and preached church doctrine
- Vienne decrees generated a wave of persecutions
- In many parts of northern Europe, Beguine communities closed their doors
- A few adopted an 'official' religious rule, for instance that of the Franciscan Third Order
- In the Low Countries the larger and well-connected Beguinages survived virtually intact – some until the 20th century
- Pope John issued the bull *Ratio recta* - attempted to explain that “common” Beguines were not guilty of heresy, lived honestly, attended church, and obeyed their parochial clergy - did not work
- After 15th century large-scale persecution of begins began to drop off mainly after the Council of Constance