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Beguines & Beghards

The etymology of the names *Beghard* and *Beguine* can only be conjectured. Most likely they are derived from the old [Flemish](#) word *beghen*, in the sense of "to [pray](#)", not "to beg", for neither of these communities were at any [time mendicant orders](#); maybe from Bega, the [patron saint](#) of Nivelles, where, according to a [doubtful](#) tradition the first Beguinage was established; maybe, again, from [Lambert le Bègue](#), a [priest](#) of [Liège](#) who died in 1180, after having expended a fortune in founding in his native town a [cloister](#) and church for the [widows](#) and [orphans](#) of [crusaders](#).

As early as the commencement of the twelfth century there were [women](#) in the [Netherlands](#) who lived alone, and without taking [vows](#) devoted themselves to [prayer](#) and good works. At first there were not many of them, but as the century grew older their numbers increased; it was the age of the [Crusades](#), and the land teemed with desolate [women](#)--the raw material for a host of [neophytes](#). These solitaries made their homes not in the forest, where the [true hermit](#) loves to dwell, but on the fringe of the town, where their work lay, for they served Christ in His [poor](#). About the beginning of the thirteenth century some of them grouped their cabins together, and the community thus formed was the first Beguinage.

The Beguine could hardly be called a [nun](#); she took no [vows](#), could return to the world and wed if she would, and did not renounce her [property](#). If she was without means she neither asked nor accepted [alms](#), but supported herself by manual labour, or by teaching the children of burghers. During the [time](#) of her [novitiate](#) she lived with "the Grand Mistress" of her [cloister](#), but afterwards she had her own dwelling, and, if she could afford it, was attended by her own servants. The same aim in life, kindred pursuits, and community of worship were the ties which bound her to her companions. There was no mother-house, nor common rule, nor common general of the order; every community was complete in itself and fixed its own order of living, though later on many adopted the rule of the [Third Order](#) of Saint Francis. These communities were no less varied as to the social status of their members; some of them only admitted ladies of high degree; others were exclusively reserved for [persons](#) in [humble](#) circumstances; others again opened their doors wide to [women](#) of every [condition](#), and these were the most densely peopled. Several, like the great Beguinage of [Ghent](#), numbered their inhabitants by thousands. Such was this semi-monastic institution. Admirably adapted to the spiritual and social needs of the age which produced it, it spread rapidly throughout the land and soon began to exercise a profound influence on the [religious](#) life of the people. Each of these institutions was an ardent centre of [mysticism](#), and it was not the [monks](#), who mostly dwelt on the country side, nor even the [secular clergy](#), but the Beguines, the Beghards, and the sons of Saint Francis who moulded the thought of the urban population of the [Netherlands](#). There was a Beguinage at [Mechlin](#) as early as

1207, at [Brussels](#) in 1245, at [Louvain](#) in 1234, at [Bruges](#) in 1244, and by the close of the century there was hardly a commune in the [Netherlands](#) without its Beguinage, whilst several of the great cities had two or three or even more. Most of these institutions were suppressed during the religious troubles of the fifteen-hundreds or during the stormy years which closed the eighteenth century, but a few [convents](#) of Beguines still exist in various parts of [Belgium](#). The most notable are those of [Bruges](#), [Mechlin](#), [Louvain](#), and [Ghent](#), which last numbers nearly a thousand members.

The widespread religious revival of which the Beguinage was the outcome brought forth also about the same [time](#) several kindred [societies](#) for men. Of these the Beghards were the most widespread and the most important. The Beghards were all of them [laymen](#), and like the Beguines, they were not bound by [vows](#), the rule of life which they observed was not uniform, and the members of each community were subject only to their own local superiors; but, unlike them, they had no private [property](#); the brethren of each [cloister](#) had a common purse, dwelt together under one roof, and ate at the same board. They were for the most part, though not always, men of [humble](#) origin--weavers, dyers, fullers, and so forth--and thus they were intimately connected with the city craft-guilds. Indeed, no [man](#) could be admitted to the Beghards' [convent](#) at [Brussels](#) unless he were a member of the Weavers' Company, and this was in all probability not a unique case. The Beghards were often men to whom fortune had not been kind--men who had outlived their friends, or whose [family](#) ties had been broken by some untoward event, and who, by reason of

failing health or advancing years, or perhaps on account of some [accident](#), were unable to stand alone. If, as a recent writer has it, "the [medieval](#) towns of the [Netherlands](#) found in the Beguinage a solution of their feminine question", the establishment of these communities afforded them at least a partial solution of another problem which pressed for an answer: the difficult problem of how to deal with the worn-out workingman. Albeit the main object of all these institutions was not a temporal but a spiritual one, they had banded together in the first place to build up the inner [man](#). Nor whilst working out their own [salvation](#) were they unmindful of their neighbours in the world, and thanks to their intimate connexion with the craft-guilds, they were able to largely influence the [religious life](#), and to a great extent to mould the religious opinion of the cities and towns of the [Netherlands](#), at all events in the case of the proletariat, during more than two hundred years.

Bearing in [mind](#) the wretched and down-trodden class from which the Beghards were generally recruited, and the fact that they were so little trammelled by [ecclesiastical](#) control, it is not surprising that the [mysticism](#) of some of them presently became a sort of [mystical pantheism](#), or that some of them gradually developed opinions not in harmony with the [Catholic Faith](#), opinions, indeed, if we may [trust John Ruysbroek](#), which seem to have differed little from the religious and political opinions professed by [anarchists](#) today. The [heretical](#) tendencies of the Beghards and Beguines necessitated disciplinary measures, sometimes severe, on the part of [ecclesiastical](#) authority. Various restrictions were placed upon them by the [Synod](#) of Fritzlar (1259), [Mainz](#)

(1261), [Eichstätt](#) (1282); and they were forbidden as "having no [approbation](#)" by the [Synod](#) of [Béziers](#) (1299). They were condemned by the [Council of Vienne](#) (1312), but this [sentence](#) was mitigated by [John XXII](#) (1321), who permitted the Beguines, as they had mended their ways, to resume their mode of life. The Beghards were more obstinate. During the fourteenth century they were repeatedly condemned by the [Holy See](#), the [bishops](#) (notably in [Germany](#)), and the [Inquisition](#). It should be noted, on the other hand, that in spite of widespread abuses, men of [faith](#) and [piety](#) were found among the Beghards. In their behalf [Gregory XI](#) (1374-77) and [Boniface IX](#) (1394) addressed [Bulls](#) to the [bishops](#) of [Germany](#) and the [Netherlands](#). An echo of the [theological errors](#) into which the Beghards fell is found in the [doctrine](#) of [Quietism](#).

Nor did the Beghard communities of the [Netherlands](#) escape the [fate](#) which sooner or later overtakes all human institutions: before the close of the [Middle Ages](#) most of them were in full decadence. Not, as so often happens, that their life was crushed out by the weight of gold; though, as [time](#) went on, they acquired endowments, they were never rich; they waned with the waning of the cloth trade, and, when that industry died, gradually dwindled away. Their crazy ships were sorely tried by the storm of the fifteen-hundreds; some of them went to the bottom, some weathered its fury, but were so battered that they afterwards sank in still water; a few, somehow or other, managed to keep afloat till the hurricane of the [French Revolution](#) at last dashed them to pieces. The highest number of these [medieval](#) foundations in [Belgium](#) were 94. They were reduced (1734) to 34 and (1856) to 20. Their membership in 1631

was 2,487; in 1828, 1,010; in 1856, about 1,600.

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