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SPIRITUALITY TODAY

The Beguines: Feminine Piety Derailed

The Beguines, a little-known medieval feminine movement, offers a unique spirituality and community life for spirituality today.

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THE Medieval period gave birth to many novel groups who have continued to command the attention of curious observers. Among the associations emerging from that era which have served both to fascinate and intrigue a steady number of inquirers was a company of women name Beguines. Theirs was a distinctive, popular religious movement whose presence, growth and demise have captured the attention of historians, sociologists, those interested in literature, religion, spirituality, and a variety of others who have found themselves drawn to ponder the style of life and impact these women had on the societies in which they flourished. Their story, woven from the fabric of another age, has within it some very contemporary threads.

It is generally conceded that the Beguine movement, one which exhibited a rich diversity and a complex and heterogenous flavor, had its origin around 1170-80 in Liège in present-day Belgium and that it spread rapidly to France, Germany and to the Latin countries. Ernest W. McDonnell maintains that the movement acquired a male branch, referred to most frequently as the Beghards, and by the mid-fifteenth century, its free growth and expansion had come to an end, though in Belgian cities its membership flourished until the French Revolution (passim). Current visitors to Belgium may still encounter some who are called Beguines. Francine Prose was somewhat surprised to discover eight of them, who ranged in age from 75 to 94 years, in residence at St. Elisabeth in Saint-Amandsberg, an outlying district of Ghent (44).

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The Beguine movement was born in a twelfth-century Europe that was a bubbling cauldron of diverse and colliding energies, fired by an immense mixture of conflicting concerns. As feudalism declined, a new class of people arose in urban communities. These merchants and tradespeople of the towns appeared during the transition from a gift economy, in which goods and services were exchanged, to the market economy, in which things were expected to have an assigned value. Lester K. Little, in *Religion, Poverty, and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* has centered on the effects the economic shift had on medieval society, and he treats the Beguines as one example of its results.

Cult of Voluntary Poverty

The sharp contrast between wealth and poverty became more striking in the towns, as the ranks of urban poor swelled. Many revelled in the new opportunities for acquiring fortune and for indulging consumption. Still others were repelled, seeing in these opportunities the lure of Satan. These latter often felt impelled to renounce all property, power and privilege. Such craving for renunciation cut across all class distinctions, so as to include even the merchants who derived the most material benefit from these new conditions, like Francis of Assisi, or Peter Waldo, founder of the Waldensians, a group later deemed heretical by the church. Peasants, too, whose poverty was unavoidable, sought a more extreme destitution which they understood as meritorious in the eyes of God.

Nobles, artisans, those with a substantial education, secular clergy who protested against the worldly pomp of ecclesiastical prelates — persons from all walks of life were attracted to the cult of voluntary poverty. Some were itinerant laborers who had gained employment through the developing cloth industry.

As these workers traveled along trade routes and spread their devotion to poverty, they found both audience and followers from among the participants of life in medieval town society.

Central to the preaching of these voluntary poor was the return to the *vita apostolica*, the hallmarks of which were poverty, humility, charity, a life lived as a witness to the faith, that is, which was in accord with the beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12). They had an acute sensitivity to the dynamics of gospel spirituality and the primitive church, especially as it was described in the Gospel of Luke (10:1-10). Often they were condemned as heretics.

Early in the thirteenth century the mendicant orders arose, whose male membership led active lives in conformity to those ideals espoused by supporters of the *vita apostolica*. While these wandering preachers won the devotion of the urban masses, and vast numbers of laity joined them as Dominican and Franciscan tertiaries, midway through the century they lost much of their primitive fervor, and their prestige slackened.

M.D. Chenu describes an "evangelical awakening" which captured the imagination of women and men alike and motivated their deeds (see ch. 7). Outbursts of religious enthusiasm were manifest in many locations throughout Europe. The urgent desire to embrace the cult of voluntary poverty and the apostolic life were two significant features of medieval life that contributed directly to the emergence of the Beguine movement. A third important element was that the Beguines were women. According to Carolyn Walker Bynum in *Jesus as Mother*, theirs can be identified as the first ostensible appearance of a "women's movement" in western history (14).

Medieval Attitudes Toward Women

Medieval attitudes toward women were inconsistent and contradictory at best. In "The Position of Women" Eileen Power writes that women were looked upon as objects worthy of pedestal worship, since they compared favorably to the virgin mother of Christ or were seen as sources of temptation who

lured others toward a bottomless pit, and, as such, were denigrated as obstacles in the way of those who sought salvation. Illustrative of the latter viewpoint was the assertion attributed to the Premonstratensian Abbot Conrad of Marchtal: "the wickedness of women is greater than all other wickedness of the world...the poison of asps and dragons is more curable and less dangerous to men than the familiarity of women...,"[1] a declaration that was at least mildly suggestive of the male fear of female sexuality that was characteristic of the time.

The female population greatly outnumbered males, due to the hazardous effects of wars, crusades, feuds, and other mostly male endeavors. Viewed as a surplus commodity, paltry value was placed upon female life and welfare. Women banded together for mutual support, security and protection, and they would not allow themselves to be excluded from expressions of religious opportunity that permeated their society.

While Cistercian and Premonstratensian monasteries were closing their doors to them and resisting their requests for pastoral care, women formed groups like the Beguines who were sometimes referred to as semi-religious. They did not conform to the uniform rigidity of female monastics, nor did they live as recluses in a cell attached to a church or chapel, the other option available to pious women and a way of life closely regulated by the clergy. Although the medieval church had not given full range to the religious energies of women, women refused to be ostracized from a life of authentic evangelical piety. Such an explosive combination of feminine desire and institutional prohibition prompted the development of a proliferation of new religious roles for women. A Benedictine abbess of the late twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) issued the opinion that the decadent society and church of her time were the result of masculine weakness of a kind that must be overcome through the agency of women of integrity. This, she said; "was the *tempus muliebre*, the era of woman."[2]

Characteristics of Beguine Life

Beguine life afforded women a novel and attractive alternative to the more traditional cloistered existence. The earliest

Beguines were not regulated by vow or rule, and while chastity was always upheld as a value, they did not necessarily renounce the possibility of marriage. Some, by mutual agreement, lived apart from their husbands so that they could devote themselves totally to the apostolic life. Marie d'Oignies (1177-1213) often considered the prototypical Beguine, the person whose holiness of life was admired and celebrated by Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240), future Bishop of Liege and cardinal-legate to Pope Gregory IX, chose that option (Petroff 174, 179-183). Others separated from a husband for a time and rejoined him upon his return from a crusade or when they themselves wished to resume their former lives. Some were single or widowed.

They gradually gathered into informal groups under the unofficial guidance of friendly and sympathetic clergy. However, the Beguines did not wish to relinquish the right to regulate their own households, the rules about their own form of community and spiritual life, and their devotional activities. Often they lived in their own houses or those of friends and relatives and did not completely withdraw from the world. In most cases, they earned their own living and thereby obtained a self-sufficiency not based on the income from property, but upon their labor. They made lace, gardened, taught, nursed, or even managed shelters for women and children employed by the cloth industry, and otherwise engaged themselves in socially useful tasks. In this, they exemplified Heer's description:

> The inner schizophrenia of the waning Middle Ages is clearly shown up in the gulf between prevailing theories and their social reality. Women, feared by monks and theologians and disdained as the least valuable of all human material, contributed largely by their labours to both urban and rural economic life (265).

Feared and scorned as they became, the Beguines made significant contributions to socio-economic life, something women had done for centuries.

Beguine spiritual heritage is replete with emphasis on intense devotion to the humanity and passion of Christ, especially as

revealed in the eucharist. The reception of the eucharist was regarded as the culmination of a mystical marriage between the soul of the Beguine and Christ, the heavenly bridegroom (Bowie 27). In *Holy Feast, Holy Fast,* Caroline Walker Bynum has given considerable attention to the significance of food as central to the contemplative and ascetic spirituality, as well as the charitable activities of pious women in the medieval period (115-129). Bynum's descriptions demonstrate that the Beguine spirituality is quite representative of the period. Popular accounts of the lives of Marie d'Oignies, Beatrice of Nazareth, and other Beguines described them as submitting themselves to intense mortification and asceticism with regard to food, a deprivation that often resulted in illness and led to unusual stigmata-like bleeding. Prolonged fasts served to unite the Beguine with the suffering Christ and to produce states of ecstasy accompanied by mystical visions. The Beguine's ascetic imitation of Christ's sufferings was seen as a way of substituting for the suffering of others for the salvation of the world. Her body, sustained by holy food alone, was given over to become sustenance for others, just as the broken body of the suffering Christ had been handed over in redemptive death.

The Beguines had a great deal to do with the propagation of a eucharistic piety that gave fresh emphasis to the real presence and the incarnation. While Juliana of Cornillon was the chief inspiration behind the eventual establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi within the liturgical year, (August, 1264 in the Bull *Transiturus* issued by Pope Urban IV), it is worthy to note that she came from a suburb of Liège, the so-called birthplace of the Beguine movement and that she had extended contact with them at critical junctures throughout her life.

Concomitant with this eucharistic devotion and its emphasis on the real presence was vigorous stress on the incarnation and on the conceptualization of Jesus as child, adult, person of the Trinity and as the crucified one. Stigmatization was often recorded as the result of extended contemplation on the suffering Christ. One became a living crucifix. While the reading of the canonical hours and other religious practices were part of

their everyday devotional life, it was the distinct features of eucharistic piety and the accent placed on the human Jesus and his passion that were particularly underscored by the hagiographers of Beguine women.

The risk of heresy and aberration inherent in practices surrounding enthusiastic attachment to the passion of Christ is quite real in every age. An overzealous craving for the miraculous associated with the eucharist, exaggerated ecstasies and the visionary trances that came to be associated with the spirituality of some Beguines were destined to become the source for later suspicion as to their conformity to orthodox belief. Yet, as Bowie has indicated:

> In a society which undervalues female perceptions and accords women little authority, mystical or ecstatic experience enable a woman to transcend the normal boundaries of her existence and to claim direct inspiration from God. This power is often used to good effect, providing a woman with a platform from which to enter and challenge the male world.... It was the conviction that they were in communion with God which gave Marguerite Porete and Mechthild of Magdeburg the courage to criticize those in the Church who fell short of the mission entrusted to them. (28-29)

The very formlessness of the *Beguinages* (the name later given to their common dwelling-places), their simplicity of life, its accessibility, and the ministries in which they engaged, such as education, care of the sick, the orphaned, and lepers, made them an attractive choice for many devout women of the day, and it is no surprise that their numbers grew swiftly.[3]

Flowering in the Thirteenth Century

During the centuries in which they flourished, the most dynamic moments were from the initial period to the latter part of the thirteenth century. It was in this time that they gained notoriety and perhaps made their greatest impact on medieval life. At first, they were warmly received by pope, royalty and common folk alike, admired as they were for their piety and

service. But their situation was ever a precarious one. The pursuit of a new kind of religious life began to make the institutional church and society uneasy, for it was a time that was deeply suspicious of incipient heresy, real or imagined. Reformers who sought after the ideals of voluntary poverty and a deepened commitment to the apostolic life often pointed an accusing finger at wayward clerics and a wealthy church with vested interest in the social and economic structures of the day (Chenu, ch. 6).

Even so, Jacques de Vitry gained for them a kind of quasi-legal recognition through Gregory IX's papal bull of 1233, *Gloriam virginalem.* Ironically, this acknowledgement and the protection it afforded also brought to the movement increasing clerical control and a more stringent organization. Beguine freedom was curtailed. In their last stage of development their houses were structured into parishes (Devlin 184).

Making the *Beguinages* legal religious and civil entities while granting them certain privileges also brought them directly under ecclesiastical authority, thus greatly reducing their autonomy. Despite the favorable disposition of those respected clerics like Jacques de Vitry and others sympathetic to the Beguines, the very efforts exercised to save them from shipwreck were destined to turn the winds and tides of fortune and opinion against them.

Demise of the Movement

The many factors which signaled the rise of the Beguines and the complicated web of interrelated reasons that eventuated in their demise can be analyzed. There were at least three elements that resulted in the dissolution of the movement.

First, the growth of hostility manifested toward the Beguines by ecclesiastical authority played a prominent role in their final dispersion. The fact that their lives were something of a middle way between monastic and secular existence was always a source of tension. The Franciscan, Gilbert of Tourni, probable author of a tract on "A Collection of Church Scandals," a

document prepared for the Second Council of Lyons, (1274), admitted freely that he could not decide whether to call them 'nuns' or 'seculars' (McDonnell 122). They did not fit the mold, for they were women *in* the world by not *of* it. Sometimes their devotional ardor surpassed that of nuns. Robert of Sorbon declared that, at the last judgment, the Beguines would give a better account of themselves than many a learned theologian (Southern 309). They lived in a disciplined manner a life founded upon an intense spirituality, dedicated themselves to God, but yielded to no neat categorization as religious or laity. What was more important, especially in the beginning, was they were not directly responsible to any duly constituted ecclesial power. The matter was one of control.

The question was always there: would they obey the authority imposed by hierarchical jurisdiction? The notion of an apostolic life founded upon the gospel introduced the possibility of a discontinuity between an apostolic and a post-apostolic, indeed, a non-apostolic church. The notion challenged the medieval world view that had grown somewhat comfortable with the temporal ramifications of clerical and papal power. The appeal to an original past made the concept of the church historical rather than abstract and introduced a new and more critical attitude to the church conceptualized in terms of historical interpretation. The apostolic ideal which was increasingly regarded as the norm was like a mirror held up to the church which sent back to it an unflattering reflection of what it had become.

No matter how innocent or sincere the Beguine search for God through the means of poverty, chastity and honest labor might be, uncloistered women, unencumbered by tight religious strictures imposed from without, vowing obedience to no church ruler, were destined to be viewed as a threat to those in authority who had a considerable vested interest in maintaining the *status quo* and in preserving the church from assault or *pseudo*-assault.

The second matter that brought disfavor upon the Beguines centered on economic issues. While they were often engaged in

the pursuits of teaching and nursing, they also supported themselves by work associated with aspects of the cloth industry. In some instances, this made them appear to be competitors in the growing market economy of the strongly established guilds of the towns which wished to secure their own revenues. LaBarge has indicated that guilds often begrudged the Beguines the economic privileges afforded them, like those that enabled them to buy and sell freely and to avoid any term of apprenticeship. This tension with the local trade might have provided special impetus to the Beguines' insistence upon the subordination of their secular activities to their spiritual practices (117, 270-77). They were also vociferous in their denouncements of social and economic injustice and opposed to all types of institutional corruption (Boulding 446).

Because they were the recipients of benefices that were sometimes contingent upon their provision of prayer on behalf of the donor, or because they accepted what was construed as payment for their presence at funerals, and because they inherited sizeable legacies, the Beguines acquired wealth. The prospect of the alienation of riches by quasi-religious women was not perceived kindly by the then competing authorities of secular or ecclesiastical power. The antipathy aroused toward them was due in some measure to those monetary conditions.

Finally, the very fact that the Beguines were women was as powerful a condition for their retreat as it was for their advance. The earliest Beguines were able to live without the strict control of church officials or fathers or husbands. In short, they had some choice in the governance of their lives. Given the prevailing attitudes toward women, even if they were religious women who were leaders in the rise and spread of contemporary piety, liberation of this kind from dependence upon males was understood to be very dangerous. Their autonomy was envied and feared by many who would become their enemies. R.W. Southern has maintained that there were many who disapproved of the new liberty these women enjoyed, among them, "...fathers who lost daughters, men who resented the women who got away..." (328). It could also be argued that other women who

were caught up in lives less suited to their own expectations of happiness, altogether less free, envied the independence enjoyed by Beguine women. They also might have been numbered among their detractors.

The Medieval Church and the Beguines

These enthusiastic Beguines could have been incorporated into the institutional framework of the church where their gifts could have been utilized in a manner satisfactory to them and to ecclesiastical authority. Instead, at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, a decree came forth that accepted no more new orders in the church. New religious communities were told that they had to operate within the structure of an approved order (Bolton 81).

One complaint registered against the Beguines was that they were, of all things, too pious, an accusation that was closely related to the most persistent charge, that of hypocrisy. They were said to have the appearance of sanctity but that they actually led scandalous lives, not a novelty in the medieval period. Literature depicted them as lesbian or as consorting with, even being made pregnant by heretics (Lerner 37-41).

The Second Council of Lyons (1274) took up the concern of fringe movements like the Beguines. Pamphlets and tracts that were all quite hostile to them were written in advance of the council. The secular cleric, Bishop Bruno of Olmutz, railed against them because they belonged to no papally approved order yet dressed like religious (some did wear a form of habit by this time). He also criticized them because they wandered about without discipline and because they did not obey their parish clergy. It seemed that discipline, not heresy, was Bruno's concern, for he made no heresy charge. The Franciscan, Gilbert of Tournai, issued a very telling accusation. He complained that they had unauthorized vernacular translations of the Bible and that they read openly in public squares. He said that these editions contained heresies, though he did not specify what they

were (Lambert 175). In this case, it was mere unlicensed laity who read the scriptures in their native tongue.

Bourgeoisie, with greater leisure, resources and higher educational levels, exhibited a growing interest in reading mystical literature written in the vernacular. Thus a kind of democratization of the mystical way was on the increase, for what had been the province of the monk and nun became accessible to pious laity. The pursuit of mysticism was considered to be fraught with danger. The problem as to the exercise of institutional control over those who sought after the mystical life arose again. Could the experience of God become, in a sense, 'deregulated?' Whenever profound theological matters were presented in the vernacular, ecclesial authority grew anxious, and the Beguines had become deeply involved in mystical speculation. They were even accused of harboring a sect of heretical mystics called the adherents of the Free Spirit (Lambert 176).

If the anthropology of the medieval period characterized women as inferior beings (a safe assumption, given Thomas Aquinas' declaration that they were mere 'misbegotten males') such inferiority would almost certainly extend to their intellectual capabilities. Theological speculation, seen as the sphere of great intellects by the medievals, was not to be the domain of lesser minds. Women, therefore, were perceived as not up to the task of theological study. The Beguines were vehemently attacked for any speculation that skirted those regions. When they pondered the Trinity and the content of their visions was made public, it was often viewed with suspicion. That is not to say that men were never accused of similar aberrations, for some Beghards and others like the Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart who had friends among the Beguines, were also attacked. But the severity of the outrage was surely exacerbated by the gender of its recipients.

The climax of the attacks on the Beguines, accused as they were of unauthorized and excessive pursuit of the apostolic life, came at the ecumenical Council of Vienne (1311-12) with the decree, *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus,* issued by Pope Clement V,

with the approval of the council. It demonstrated the kind of hostility that these women encountered when they ventured into affairs considered beyond their reach:

> We have been told that certain women commonly called Beguines, afflicted by a kind of madness discuss the Holy Trinity and the divine essence, and express opinions on matters of faith and sacraments contrary to the catholic faith, deceiving many simple people. Since these women promise no obedience to anyone and do not renounce their property or profess an approved Rule, they are certainly not 'religious' although they wear a habit and are associated with such religious orders as they find congenial.... We have therefore decided and decreed with the approval of the Council that their way of life is to be permanently forbidden and altogether excluded from the Church of God. (Southern 330)

The brief visitation of the Beguines into Christian history provides some insight into the possibilities that existed for composing a life of lay female piety and evidence of the obstacles encountered by virtue of the social structures that had hold of the day. Their search for a plausible religiousity was authentic, but the institutional forms of the later medieval church could not satisfy the desire of the seekers. The failure of the medieval church was, as Gordon Leff has indicated, its inability "to meet the demands of a new spirituality that could no longer be contained within the existing structure and was not permitted new outlets" (120).

The Beguines channelled the restless yearning for God, symptomatic of the age, into a form eager to be placed in the service of the church, one which provided a criterion for judging the religious practice of the time:

> Such a lifestyle and spirituality were, in and of themselves, neither good nor bad; they had their strengths, but also their weaknesses.... The life that most of them apparently wanted was one of devotion to God in a search for spiritual perfection within the lay world. (Devlin 193)

Relevance for Today

The impact of the Beguines upon the Christian story was as inexorable as that of a locomotive that quickly gained momentum and proceeded on course with intense velocity. Yet the movement did grudgingly give way to pressures from within and without, and it was derailed. The particular configuration of feminine piety introduced by the Beguines was quelled. Yet they supplied a genuine religious excitement for the society and age in which they flourished and provided fresh springs of insight into a life of the spirit that bubble forth even now.

The presence of the Beguines within late medieval European society was a challenge to the assumed notions of the society itself. Assumptions about women and their 'place,' ideas about Christian lay spirituality, and the authentic apostolic life had to be reconsidered in the light of their appearance.

Today we witness the spontaneous emergence of many groupings of persons who, out of their particular religious convictions, wish to embrace a spirituality that enables them to transform themselves and the societies to which they belong. They are often composed of Christian lay people who struggle to deepen their commitment to the apostolic ideal, women and men, side by side. Conscious of history and of the many donations made by women like the Beguines to Christian life, they espouse a gender inclusivity that promises to promote and not neglect the gifts of all of their members.

There are those among these people who wish to extricate themselves from social structures that are destructively individualistic in order to form 'intentional' Christian communities (see Lee and Cowan). Such communities bond together in a common love of God, in the prayerful celebration of that love, in mutual support and service so as to be transformative agents in civil and ecclesial society. The energy that they generate as they strive to make present the love of God and neighbor that is at the core of the Christian message breeds a new hope in other believing hearts that is not unlike that kind fostered and promoted by Beguine life in the Middle Ages. Some 'dangerous memories' are revived by them as well: "that all baptized women and men are responsible for the life of the Christian

community; that all social structures — intimate ones and immense one, civil ones and ecclesial ones — are put under requirement by the Gospel..." (Lee and Cowan 1). The retrieval of those memories brings with it a prophetic *critique* that rattles the gates of any overly settled and fortified order.

The Beguine movement had a very modern ring to it. An exploration of this rich but much neglected part of our Christian heritage engenders an appreciation of the contributions that the Beguines did make and a willingness to be open to the Christian communities that authentically mediate the values of the Gospel to the contemporary world. This look at Beguine life also fosters a reluctance to accept attempts by anyone to canalize or unduly regulate the action of the Holy Spirit and a hesitancy to too speedily endorse the efforts made by the dominant religious forces of the society to suppress what appear to be the unorthodox religious expressions of the marginated in the culture.

The taint of heresy never left the Beguines. It could have caused the regrettable loss of a body of literature that stands now as a profound source of spiritual and poetic inspiration and from which we derive important information about the lives and spirituality of these extraordinary medieval women that would otherwise by missing from the chapters of Christian story.

There would scarcely be a time in the Christian era which would not welcome the presence of women like the Beguines at Liege, praised in this manner by Caesarius of Heisterbach: "In the midst of worldly people they were spiritual, in the midst of pleasure seekers they were pure and in the midst of noise and confusion they led a serene, eremetical life" (quoted in Bolton 87). Their memory is retrieved, with all due respect, so that what was good in it may be reappropriated by the Christian community for the future.

Notes

1. Quoted by Caroline Walker Bynum in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987), p. 15.

2. Quoted by Friederich Heer in *The Medieval World: Europe 1100-1350*, trans. by Janet Sonheimer (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962), 264.
3. Frederick Marc Stein, "The Religious Women of Cologne: 1120-1320" (Ph.d. dissertation, Yale University, 1977), chapter 3. This chapter documents the rapid growth of the Beguines of Cologne in the two centuries under study and serves as an excellent documentation for the surge of expansion the underwent in that region; and McDonnell, pp. 109-10, cites the incidence of a foundation of two Beguinages in 1212 that grew to 300 by 1215.
4. Bernard J. Lee and Michael A. Cowan, *Dangerous Memories: House Churches and Our American Story* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1986), *passim*. "An effort in practical theology that invites small communities of faith into mutually critical conversation between the Christian tradition and the concerns of our times" as is indicated in the preface.

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