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Beguines modeled creative response to crisis

by Dana Greene



The restored begijnhof in the heart of Amsterdam, the Netherlands (Dreamstime)

The historian Barbara Tuchman called the "calamitous" 14th century a "distant mirror" of our own times. Its predecessor, the 13th century, seems not to offer the same possibility for contemporary reflection. After all, Christendom was at its height. This was the age of Aquinas, of universities and Gothic cathedrals, of Crusades, of the centralization of church power, and a period of great devotion that spurred the founding of the Franciscan and Dominican orders.

But it was also an age when crisis and the need for church reform became acutely evident. Urbanization and increased material wealth were the context that prompted both this incipient crisis and responses to it.

And so the 13th century too serves as a "distant mirror," offering a glint of the creative reaction of devout and independent women who confronted both personal need and the impending crisis, which revealed itself in full force in the Protestant Reformation. These were the Beguines, contemplative, chaste women who served the poor and outcast, but lived under no rule or vow and were free from both marital and ecclesiastical constraint.

Although their movement was small and often beleaguered, it nonetheless gives evidence that crisis, when wedded to desire, can produce an imaginative way through.

The importance of the Beguines was not their numbers. The movement was at its height in the 13th century and proliferated in what is today Belgium, the Netherlands, France and northern Germany. Although it is impossible to calculate their total membership, there is evidence that in one century in the area around Cologne, Germany, alone a hundred new Beguine houses were founded, supporting some 1,000 women. Beguine numbers declined steadily after the 15th century. In Amsterdam, the Netherlands, for example, the last Beguine died in 1971.

Their scant numbers have relegated the Beguines to a footnote in church history; however, their significance lies in their ability to create a flexible structure that met their need for prayer and service and to do this within the context of a medieval ecclesial system. Beloved to those whom they taught, nursed and cared for, Beguines were nevertheless suspect by the church. Their spirituality was mystical, and they answered to no external authority.

At one point in 1311 the Council of Vienne condemned the movement, describing Beguines as afflicted with a kind of madness in their discussions of the Trinity and matters of faith and sacraments. Since they were obedient to no one, did not have a rule, and would not give up their property, their way of life was forbidden and their communities ordered to dissolve. Ultimately, a policy of tolerance was established and they continued, albeit in weakened form.

The remnants of the Beguine past are few. Their communal living places remain, reconstructed and now accessible to tourists. They usually lived individually or communally in groups of 10 to 50 members within enclosed sanctuaries in towns with each *beguinage* or *begijnhof* functioning independently. The best preserved of these *beguinages* are in Belgium, which boasts some 40, about half of which are open to visitors, and several of which are listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The most important of these are in Bruges, Antwerp and Ghent. In the Netherlands, the Amsterdam *begijnhof* is restored, and offers a tranquil respite from the bustle of that vibrant capital city.

The history of the Amsterdam *begijnhof* is instructive. The causes for its creation in the late 12th century were typical of all Beguine houses. Its members were urban, middle-class single or widowed women, often alone as a consequence of wars and crusades, which had diminished the male population. A subsequent prohibition against the creation of new religious orders and female exclusion from some newly founded orders eliminated the possibility of these unattached, non-aristocratic women entering convents.

One can suspect that some Beguines wanted neither to be married nor become nuns, hence the *beguinage* provided both an alternative living arrangement as well as a community of devotion and service to the poor, orphaned, widowed and sick. As Fione Bowie suggests in *Beguine Spirituality*, their virtues were not poverty, chastity and obedience, but charity, humility and companionship.

Beguines were self-supporting, usually working in the textile trade. They were frugal but owned their own property, and were guided by their own local female leader, sometimes assisted by local parish priests. Since they did not make vows they could leave their communities at will.

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Constructed in the 14th century, the Amsterdam *begijnhof* was originally a women's island, cut off by water from the rest of the city. It was a unique example of city planning, with individual Beguine houses facing a courtyard, which included a church. In 1587 during the "Alteration," when Amsterdam was taken over by the Protestants, the city council seized the Beguine church and designated it as the English Reformed church. It was there that English pilgrims prayed before moving on to Leiden and their voyage to the New World.

During this period Beguines and other Catholics worshiped clandestinely in their homes, but given Amsterdam's tradition of religious tolerance, the one-third of the city's population that remained Catholic was not persecuted. By the late 17th century the Amsterdam Beguines were permitted to build a new chapel within their courtyard.

Ensnared behind a wall in the heart of cosmopolitan Amsterdam, the restored *begijnhof* can be visited. Its English Reformed Church continues to serve the city's English-speaking Protestant community, and the restored Beguine chapel is used by resident Catholics and tourists. The *begijnhof* contains the oldest wooden domestic dwelling in the city, and 100 non-Beguine women live in the surrounding courtyard. A pastoral center offers outreach services to the community.

While the reconstructed *beguinages* and *begijnhofs* stir the imagination about these holy women, shards of their contemplative lives are found in the writings of some of their notable members: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch of Brabant and Marguerite Porete, the latter a mystic and preacher whose book, *A Mirror for Simple Souls*, was burned, as was she, after being condemned by the church's canon lawyers.

What unifies the spirituality and the themes of these various Beguine writings is a mystical intensity focused on eucharistic devotion, the Incarnation, and the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. Reflecting the chivalric tradition of courtly love, these Beguines wrote of a mystical love relationship with God. For example, in her poems Hadewijch of Brabant writes:

The madness of love
Is a blessed fate;
And if we understood this
We would seek no other:
It brings into unity
What was divided,
And this is the truth:
Bitterness it makes sweet,
It makes the stranger a neighbor,
And what was lovely it raises on
high.

It was the Beguines' mystical grounding in an experience of communion with God that gave them an authority by which they could critique the church, which had become increasingly corrupt and distant from its purpose. Mechthild of Magdeburg, when attacked for her comments about a tarnished church that disgraced the Christian faith, condemned her accusers as "murderers and wolves." She wrote: "Alas, crown of holy priesthood, you have disappeared, and you have nothing left but your external shape -- namely, priestly power -- with this you do battle against God and his chosen friends."

In the "distant mirror" of the 13th century, the Beguines offer inspiration and affirm hope in creative response to the crisis of our time. They confronted calamity with their desire to lead contemplative lives

and to serve those in need. Although not modern women, they are women for our time.

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Web site

Amsterdam begijnhof and chapel

www.begijnhofamsterdam.nl/index_engels.html

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