

Béguinage – Beguines

Beguine – from the medieval Latin (Beguinagius/béguinage; Beguina/béguine) – designated pious ladies of marriageable age, or widows, living in enclosed places, béguinages (the etymology is uncertain). One view is that they were first organized by Lambert of Liège ‘the Stutterer’ (French ‘Bégue’); others derive it from the word ‘beggen’ (cf. modern English ‘to beg’); others, finally, from the old French ‘Bege (beige), that is to say the grey garments of raw wool in which they were dressed. In modern usage ‘béguine’ [...]. the term beguinage means not only a community of beguines, but also the complex of buildings that grew up to house communities of beguines: the equivalent of a monastery. The béguinage has furthermore the form of a collection of houses generally arranged around a green space which sometimes becomes as large as a real city neighbourhood, including churches, hospitals, gardens, to all of which the tranquil and withdrawn life of the women who inhabit the béguinage lends a distinctly monastic appearance. These beguines live on their own or in small groups, in separate houses. They are not nuns in the full sense, for they only make two vows, of obedience and of chastity, and only for a limited time; but they are not lay women [in the normal sense] either. What we have are groups of lay women, animated by fervent piety and desirous of reform of the Church. Many béguinages appear in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the movement was helped by the imbalance between women and men (because of the high death rate of men due to war), the revival of economic life in cities, and the wretched conditions of workers.

The movement originally arose in eastern and southern Belgium; originally, they were anchoresses living in cells or huts, near to a sanctuary or a monastery, or a hospital. In 1216 Jacques de Vitry obtained from Pope Honorius III some kind of approval, and that made possible the spread of béguinages in France, protected by Louis IX. There were also béguinages with men as well as women, but the [male] beghard movement was condemned at the Council of Vienne (1311, published in 1317). With their high point in the thirteenth century corresponded a notable mystical movement, from which some currents lead to heterodox movement like the sect of the Free Spirit. The majority of the Italian béguinages were institutionalised and brought under one of the approved rules (Augustinian, Basilian, and, later, the Franciscan rule of St Clare).

MARIO SENSI

Translation David L. D’Avray

R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Pelican History of the Church, 2; 1970). R. Lerner, entry in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Strayer, 2 (1983), pp. 157-162.