
Though scholarly interest in the lay and semireligious movements of the High and Late Middle Ages has undoubtedly increased in recent years, Walter Simons provides new and refreshing insight into the topic. His book on beguine communities in the medieval Low Countries, chronologically focused on the period from the beginning of the thirteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century, will become indispensable for scholars and graduate students who seek to familiarize themselves with this subject. As Simons points out in his preface, though much work elucidating the rise in female semireligious movements during the late Middle Ages has been done, a perspective from social and cultural history was still lacking. Simons fills this gap as he moves beyond studies such as Herbert Grundmann’s influential work on religious movements in the Middle Ages or Charles de Miramon’s work on the ‘donné(e)s’ and related semireligious groups in France that examine the religious and spiritual motivations of women who were drawn to such heterogeneous groups as the beguines. Simons’ study is more in line with Giles Constable’s works on the social aspects of the beguines at the same time as he revises and demystifies numerous commonly held views. His arguments, to which I will turn in more detail below, are convincing and thoroughly researched. Clearly, and as Simons himself points out repeatedly, definitive primary sources are often lacking. Yet, Simons manages to extract viable information from the few accessible sources such as vignettes, beguinage registrars, and chronicles. He also considers beguines in a wider historical perspective from three points of view: as a religious movement of the laity; as a movement shaped and promoted by urban conditions; and as a movement characterized by the gender of its participants. This approach is particularly useful from a feminist perspective as it draws from all aspects of women’s lives, specifically in chapters three and four, where he discusses the beguines’ involvement in the health care professions, charity, teaching, and manual labor and the opportunities the new urbanism provided for single women.

Simons keeps his introduction very broad and general, familiarizing readers with the geography of the medieval Low Countries and the nature of the information at our disposal. In his exploration of women’s participation in movements of reform or dissent, the author stresses the importance of the beguines during times of church reform. The significance of lay groups is often disregarded in this context as the focus usually shifts to doctrinal theology upheld by the institutional church. The influence of individuals such as Lambert le Bègue and comparisons to other reformers, the Cathars for instance, are at the heart of this discussion.

Simons underlines the heterogeneity of the early beguine movement when women lived together with men in a variety of arrangements while in chapter two, he extrapolates from the evidence that the beguines began to form much
more structured, female-only communities during the first decades of the thirteenth century. The proof we have today are the remnants of the many court beguinages which must have dotted the landscape of the medieval Low Countries and, of course, the collection of beguine vitae written primarily by Jacques of Vitry. According to Simons, beguines began to acquire property around 1230, which they used to build enclosed courts segregating them from other religious institutions as well as from the urban community in which they lived (37).

The answer to the question that probably enters every reader’s mind at this point in the text – i.e. what motivated married women to leave behind husband and children in order to join a semireligious group of women – is the subject of the next two chapters. Though there were devotional reasons, Simons convincingly shows that a significant number of women were most likely motivated by more practical considerations such as professional opportunities or the harmonious mix of the contemplative and the active life that also offered single women the necessary social and financial protection for a devotional existence coupled with a professional life. His examples include beguines as teachers, nurses, and artisans. Simons revises the commonplace argument that it was the discrepancy in the number of men and women eligible for marriage that caused the influx into beguinages during the thirteenth century. He argues that women frequently chose not to marry in order to live a life of independence, liberated from the yoke of marriage and childbearing. Further, the more loosely controlled life of a beguine may have been more attractive to many young women than that of a nun, which would also explain the increasing popularity of the court beguinages. Simons confirms the growing number of court beguinages, which existed only in the Low Countries, with maps and statistical data. In this context he also briefly touches upon the more extreme forms of religious isolation, such as anchoresses and recluses.

The growing poverty of court beguinages and the ill-defined regulation of beguine life and social and religious status led to mounting criticism and accusations of heresy in the fourteenth century, culminating in the denunciation of a set of heretical beliefs attributed to the beguines at the Council of Vienne (1311-12). The decline in the number of beguine communities is the subject of the last chapter. Simons concludes his work with a succinct contextualization of beguine communities within female religious and social history. His notes and bibliography of primary and secondary sources are very informative and extensive and attest once more to the completeness of his research. As an appendix he includes a repertory of beguine communities in the Low Countries, complete with area maps and their dates of existence as well as brief descriptions of the individual beguinages. A second appendix offers information on the population of select court beguinages such as of those in the main urban centers of Ghent, Liège, and Bruges. A word and name index concludes the work. To sum up, I can only echo David Nicholas’ comment on the book’s jacket: “A tour de force.”

—Christine McWebb, University of Alberta