

Beguines

Beguine (Latin: *beguina*) was the name given in medieval Europe to a woman who led a religious life without taking solemn or perpetual vows. Although the Beguine lifestyle initially drew strong criticism and some Beguines were persecuted as heretics, they gained a certain respectability in parts of northwestern Europe, where the single-sex communities formed by such women (known as Beguinages) survived until the late twentieth century.

The earliest evidence of Beguine life can be found around 1200 in the region of what is now Belgium, where in various places lay women started to devote themselves to asceticism, charity, and prayer while living alone or with their families. By the 1230s, their numbers in cities like Liège, Leuven, Ghent, and Bruges had grown significantly, enabling them to pool their resources, buy property for communal residence, and create organizations for mutual support. While some Beguines continued to live as solitaires, most of them lived together in small Beguine convents or in larger Beguine courts (enclosed neighborhoods arranged around a church, a hospital, and other service buildings), which in many cities of the [Low Countries](#) and the adjacent Rhineland could house several hundreds to one thousand or more women. The Beguine movement spread before 1300 to the rest of Germany, Switzerland, and northern France, with extensions into southern France and central Europe.

The status of such women was controversial from the very beginning. Despite their evident religious interests, Beguines never formed a recognized religious order, and significant differences existed between the various communities, which drew up internal regulations and elected their own superiors independently from each other. Women who joined a Beguinage promised to obey such internal rules, to observe a simple lifestyle, and to refrain from sex, but they did not give up property, nor did they assume a lifelong obligation. The arrangement thus allowed single women to exercise a profession in the urban economy as laborers, nurses, or teachers, while participating in an informal religious life that was not only more flexible than traditional monasticism but also provided these women with greater opportunities to carve out their own spiritual itinerary, with the assistance of male clerics.

In a society deeply suspicious of female sexuality, adult women who were neither under the control of their husbands nor bound by perpetual monastic vows easily aroused skepticism and distrust, as the name *Beguina* (from the Indo-European root *begg*-signifying "to mumble," hence "to simulate") indicates. While certain clerics praised individual Beguines and even wrote hagiographical texts to support the movement (Jacques de Vitry's *Life of Mary of Oignies*, written in 1215, became the most popular of such vitae), the more conservative figures of the Catholic Church disapproved of their intellectual activities, in particular their teachings on mysticism, for which Beguine writers such as Hadewijch of Brabant and Mechtild of Magdeburg became well known in the thirteenth century. When in 1310 the French Beguine Marguerite Porète was condemned as a heretic for alleged antinomianism in her treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, the movement as a whole became the target of large-scale investigations and sporadic persecution by Church authorities, resulting in the suppression of many Beguine communities. Beguines of northern France and the Rhineland were forced to adopt a recognized religious rule (usually the Third Rule of St. Francis) or to give up their lifestyle. The large court Beguinages of the [Low Countries](#), financially more secure and often protected by influential members of the ruling classes, remained largely unscathed but gradually adopted stricter rules of discipline and submitted to greater outside control, especially under the influence of the Modern Devotion movement of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century closed down the last Beguine houses in Germany and in most of the Netherlands. In Belgium and in the predominantly Catholic parts of the Netherlands, however, the Beguine courts were revived and even flourished again during the seventeenth-century Counterreformation, now with full support of the Catholic Church. In the late twentieth century, dwindling fervor for the religious life among Catholics finally put an end to Beguine traditions in Belgium and the Netherlands; a few small communities of women invoking the Beguine example were newly created in Germany, Switzerland, and the [United States](#).

see also [Monasticism](#).

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Walter Simons