

From [Deane, Jennifer. "Beguines" Reconsidered: Historiographical Problems and New Directions \(Monastic Matrix , August 2008\). Commentaria 3461.](#) Downloaded from <http://monasticmatrix.org/commentaria/article.php?textId=3461>. Reprinted with permission.

### ***What is a beguine?***

...one can reasonably state that women called “beguines” first appeared on the medieval religious scene in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, emerging first in the Low Countries and parts of southern Germany. A sudden and yet highly localized phenomenon, different types of communities quickly cropped up across Europe soon (and for centuries) thereafter as part of a vibrant new striving among Christian laypeople to live according to the apostolic model of chastity, poverty, and simplicity.

By the end of the High Middle Ages, a multiplicity of possible roles existed which offered greater flexibility and activity .... As unmarried or widowed women living either alone or, more frequently, in communities ranging regionally from one or two to hundreds, such lay religious women embraced apostolic ideals and usually simple (as opposed to solemn, or canonically binding) vows to a life of poverty, chastity, humility and obedience. Of particular importance to the women and to their lay and clerical supporters was their prayer life: beguines were petitioned or even required in statutes to pray for their benefactors, and in some communities the daily prayer cycle was structured along lines similar to monastic schedules.

Plainly garbed in clothing evocative of nuns’ habits, they typically supported themselves and served the town or village through their labor – often weaving, spinning, and performing domestic chores such as cleaning and laundry, tending the sick, or caring for the bodies of the deceased before burial. Individual houses usually had their own locally written rule or statute, usually based on a monastic exemplar, which stipulated the specific discipline and function of the community. Because of the women’s combination of both active and contemplative pious service, commentators frequently invoked the story of the sisters of Lazarus in Luke 10: 38-42 when discussing the beguines.

In this passage, Jesus chastises Martha for her busy-ness and tells her that Mary has the better part, yet among northern beguines and their supporters, it is the active Martha who seems most appealing and instructive. The mistress of German beguine houses was frequently called a “Martha,” for example....”

A wave of popular interest in these lay religious women is currently sweeping Europe and the United States, and single women from many walks of life, both religious and secular, have been forming 21st-century beguinages based (to greater or lesser degrees) upon the medieval model, albeit with significant variations in occupation, structure, and purpose. [...] Some live in a common house or “beguinage” while others live at home, and a priority is placed upon service and outreach to the larger community. Beginen reports modern beguine communities in thirty-two German cities, as well as in parts of Austria and Switzerland; its preamble emphasizes the independence and economic self-sufficiency of medieval beguines as a model for contemporary women ...the intriguing revival of “beguinish” life across cultures is an intriguing development....”