

SEEKING
SPIRITUAL
INTIMACY

Journeying Deeper with Medieval Women of Faith

GLENN E. MYERS

Foreword by JAMES M. HOUSTON



IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

BX
4272
.M94
2011

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com
E-mail: email@ivpress.com

©2011 by Glenn E. Myers

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from InterVarsity Press.

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, write Public Relations Dept., InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 6400 Schroeder Rd., P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895, or visit the IVCF website at <www.intervarsity.org>.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version ®, NIV ®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

While all stories in this book are true, some names and identifying information in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

Excerpts from Mechthild of Magdeburg: *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, translated by Frank Tobin, Copyright ©1998 by Frank Tobin. Paulist Press, Inc., New York/Mahwah, NJ. Reprinted by permission of Paulist Press, Inc. www.paulistpress.com

Excerpts from Hadewijch: *The Complete Works*, translated by Mother Columba Hart OSB, Copyright 1980 by The Missionary Society of St Paul the Apostle in the State of New York. Paulist Press, Inc., New York/Mahwah, NJ. Reprinted by permission of Paulist Press, Inc. www.paulistpress.com

Design: Cindy Kiple

Interior design: Beth Hagenberg

Cover image: *Lady in a white cap* by Hans the Younger Holbein. National Trust/Art Resource, NY.

Interior photographs taken by the author.

ISBN 978-0-8308-3551-5

Printed in the United States of America ∞



InterVarsity Press is committed to protecting the environment and to the responsible use of natural resources. As a member of Green Press Initiative we use recycled paper whenever possible. To learn more about the Green Press Initiative, visit <www.greenpressinitiative.org>.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Myers, Glenn E., 1958-
Seeking spiritual intimacy: journeying deeper with medieval women of faith / Glenn E. Myers.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 978-0-8308-3551-5 (pbk.: alk. paper)
1. Beguines—Spiritual life. 2. Spiritual life—Christianity. I.
Title
BX4272.M94 2011
274'.04082—dc22

2010052965

P	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Y	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11		

Contents

Foreword by James M. Houston	9
Introduction	
<i>Invitation to a Deeper Life</i>	13
1 THE BEGUINES	
<i>Believers Following Hard After God</i>	19
2 RADICAL FAITH	
<i>Mary of Oignies Takes Initiative</i>	36
3 DESIRING GOD'S PRESENCE	
<i>The Beguines Cultivate Prayer and Soak in Scripture</i>	50
4 SEASONS OF THE SOUL	
<i>Beatrice of Nazareth Explores Modes of Loving God</i>	67
5 CREATIVE COMMUNITY	
<i>The Beguines Model Spiritual Friendship</i>	83
6 SAVORING INNER SWEETNESS	
<i>Hadewijch Gives Invaluable Wisdom on Spiritual Experience</i>	101
7 VALIANT KNIGHTS AND UNTAMED WILDERNESS	
<i>Hadewijch Challenges Us to Take the Risk</i>	116
8 FLOWING IN AND OUT OF GOD'S PRESENCE	
<i>Mechthild of Magdeburg Offers a Balance of Solitude and Service</i>	134
9 INTIMACY WITH THE LORD	
<i>Drawing Near as the Brides of Christ</i>	150

10	TRANSFORMATION THROUGH TRIALS	
	<i>Mechthild Summons Us to Embrace Suffering</i>	165
11	BEAUTIFUL LIFE OF FREEDOM	
	<i>Devout Women Share Their Secret of Dying to Self</i>	179
12	LOST IN GOD'S LOVE	
	<i>The Beguines Welcome Us into the Divine Depths</i>	191
	Acknowledgments	203
	Notes	204
	Suggestions for Further Reading.	215

Before retiring for the night, the young woman takes time to pray at the wooden kneeler alongside her bed. Her desire for Christ runs deep. Tomorrow will be a new opportunity to hear God's Word and to cultivate her intimate relationship with Jesus.

The place: Belgium. The year: 1200.

THE BEGUINES

During the two decades before the opening of the thirteenth century, middle class women across Belgium, the Netherlands, northern France and Germany began to establish Christian households where women could pursue a life of spiritual growth. Sisters, mothers, aunts and friends pooled their resources to buy large homes in emerging towns across Europe, and here they gathered to live with like-minded women of the faith. These devout lay-women were called Beguines.¹

This was the height of the Middle Ages. Kings and queens reigned while knights jousted to prove their loyalty to their ladies. Europe's armies had launched two crusades, conquering Jerusalem and gaining territory in Palestine as they sought to protect Europe in the ongoing struggle between Christendom and Islam. Minstrels praised noblemen for their gallantry and sang of the unrequited love endured by women of the castle. Towns in the northern European lowlands and along the Rhine River flourished due to growing commerce and booming textile production. Although most of Europe was Christian, at least in name, many hungered for a more personal faith that they could live day to day.²

During this time a young woman named Mary of Oignies established one of the first Beguine communities in Belgium. Shortly after her marriage, Mary and her husband John consecrated their lives to work with lepers. Soon women began to gather around Mary and her ministry. Mary and these women of kindred spirit formed a loose community and were among the first wave of women to experience a spiritual renewal that would soon flood

northern Europe in the age of chivalry.

Similar groups were forming in nearby towns, often following the same pattern: one woman of God engaging in outreach followed by others who desired to help her and learn from her. Although some of the women associated with the early Beguine communities were married, these groups primarily consisted of widows and single maids who had moved to the towns of northern Europe to find employment. Men were fewer in number because of the crusades, and many women needed to provide for themselves. Beguine houses offered a safe environment in which to live and work as well as an atmosphere conducive to spiritual growth. Not content with institutional religion, women dedicated their lives to Jesus.

The Beguine movement gained strong support from James of Vitry, a priest who was elevated to become bishop and then cardinal of the church. James knew firsthand the vibrant faith and deep devotion of these women, having received spiritual direction and encouragement from Mary while living in the town of Oignies. He helped to secure papal approval for the Beguines, as well as chronicling Mary's life and the early years of the movement. James described the early development of these households:

Many holy maidens . . . scorned the temptations of the flesh, despised the riches of the world for the love of the heavenly bridegroom in poverty and humility, earning a sparse meal with their own hands. Although their families were wealthy, they preferred to endure hardship and poverty, leaving behind their family and their father's home rather than to abound in riches or to remain in danger amidst worldly pomp.³

These laywomen were first known simply as *mulieres religiosae* ("spiritual women") or *mulieres sanctae* ("holy women"). Later they were referred to as Beguines. Although no one knows for sure how the name emerged, a number of theories are in circulation, the

most plausible being that the word was derived from the Old French *bèguer*, meaning "to stammer," since these women were known for ecstatic prayer as well as public preaching.⁴ Whatever the source, it is clear that the term began as a pejorative one. Within a few decades, however, Beguines were respected for their chaste lifestyle and service to the poor. The derogatory overtones of the title faded away, and *Beguine* became the standard word for women living in Christian community without becoming members of an established religious order.

Unlike nuns, Beguines took no permanent vows. The communities provided unprecedented opportunity for spiritual formation, offering a middle ground between monastic seclusion and the active life in the world.⁵ Beguines remained laywomen who were committed to celibacy and obedience to the household rules as long as they remained in the beguinage. They were free to leave the community if they chose, and some did in order to marry. This meant, however, that they had to relinquish the home they had helped to build. Therefore the vast majority of women who joined the Beguines remained in the community with its common way of life.

During the early thirteenth century, hundreds of Beguine communities were formed, especially in Belgium and Germany. Most accommodated about a dozen women, with one older sister serving as mistress and spiritual director for the household. As many as ten thousand of these devout women lived in German-speaking territories, with the city of Strasbourg boasting one thousand Beguines and Cologne two thousand (see map, p. 87).

WOMEN IN LOVE WITH JESUS

Unashamedly in love with Jesus, the Beguines pursued a singular devotion to him. One of their number, Mechthild of Magdeburg, expressed her passion for Jesus thus:

I delight in loving him who loves me, and I long to love him

to the death, boundlessly, and without ceasing. Be happy, my soul, for your Life has died for love of you. Love him so fiercely that you could die for him. Thus you burn ever more without ever being extinguished as a living flame in the vast fire of high majesty.⁶

Athirst for Jesus, these women established households where they could grow spiritually and pursue a deeper life in the Lord. That pursuit included several facets.

First, many of the early Beguine communities came together around the common task of ministering to the sick. They sought to serve Jesus by serving the needy, providing medical care for the sick and offering comfort to the terminally ill. In doing so they organized some of the first hospitals in Europe. There were the leprosaria led by Mary of Oignies as well as other facilities established just before the year 1200. In the city of Leuven, a group of women who served the infirmary developed into a community of some three hundred Beguines over the coming decades. Hand in hand with service to the sick came care of the dying and preparation of bodies for burial. Hospice work became the Beguines' specialty. In time the term *Beguine* became virtually synonymous with the tending of lepers, feeding of the hungry and caring for the dying.

Second, very few individuals or families in the Middle Ages owned a Bible. Copied by hand, volumes of Scripture were expensive and rare, and those who wanted to learn God's Word needed to join a spiritual community. So the Beguines combined their resources, purchasing Bibles in addition to buildings. At the time, the Scriptures were being translated into the vernacular languages of Europe for the very first time. Although the church hierarchy was wary of these popular translations since they were not always accurate, it allowed them to be used for personal devotion and public evangelism.⁷ Many of the young women who joined Be-

guine communities were able to read and write in the common languages, and each day they would gather in a large room to hear Scripture read. Because these gatherings were the only times when they had access to a Bible, many women would virtually memorize each day's passage and reflect on it throughout the day.

Another reason women became Beguines was so they could enjoy fellowship with other fervent followers of Christ. Young women sought wise older sisters to mentor them in the faith and provide direction and encouragement along the way. It is of little wonder that so many hungry believers joined the Beguines as the movement blazed across northern Europe.

Finally, and above all, the Beguines created communities where they could cultivate an intimate relationship with Christ. Their households offered them sufficient space and solitude to pursue a recollected life. The Beguines were ardently in love with the Lord, and rather than using the term "personal relationship" as we might today, they employed the language of intimacy, viewing themselves as brides of Christ. Hadewijch of Brabant articulates their dedication:

Oh, it is truly fitting, if anyone belongs exclusively to his Beloved, that his Beloved, in return, belong exclusively to him! As the Bride says in the Song of Songs: My Beloved to me, and I to him! (Song 2:16). Oh, to whom else should anyone belong exclusively but to his Beloved?⁸

SIMPLICITY

The Beguines sought to live lives of simplicity with regard to material possessions so they would have resources available to give to others. Well-to-do women gave away their possessions to help the less fortunate. Even the many poorer Beguines who eventually joined the movement donated to the needy as they were able. As one observer in their day noted, "In those houses many are so

poor that they have nothing but their bed and chest of clothes, but they are burdensome to no one; by working with their hands . . . they earn so much daily that they not only derive a modest livelihood but they . . . give alms [to those in need]."⁹

Other women earned a living and served the community by teaching children, especially poor girls who had no other possibility of receiving a basic education. The Beguines became well-known as teachers. They established their own schools for girls and taught them not only the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, but also Christian character. At one point the school in Antwerp had fifty-seven girls living with the Beguines and receiving instruction.¹⁰ These schools were so popular that the large beguinage of Leuven eventually had to limit the number of schools there to ten.¹¹

EXPLOSION

The Beguine movement, which had begun as a few scattered gatherings of laywomen, soon mushroomed. In the 1230s and 1240s, women joined the Beguines first by the hundreds and then by the thousands. Catapulting the movement forward, Pope Gregory IX—a good friend of James of Vitry—gave his written approval on May 30, 1233, for women to continue forming these communities. This papal support not only provided official recognition, it gave the Beguines legal support. In some locales jealous clergy resisted this newfangled Christian lifestyle and sought to close down Beguine households; in other areas town councils wanted to tax their communities. Papal approval helped the Beguines hold their ground against such opposition.

The second development that opened the door for the Beguines' rapid growth was the donation of land and funding from members of the nobility who appreciated the work these Christian women were doing. Johanna, countess of Flanders, and her sister Margaret contributed tremendous sums of money in the two decades after

1234 to establish and sustain Beguine communities in a dozen towns across Flanders.¹² Likewise, the dukes of Brabant supported the beguinage of La Vigne (The Vineyard) in Brussels and other communities across the duchy.¹³ These endowments were substantial because most Beguine complexes held several hundred women. Other members of the landed gentry, as well as several bishops and abbots, made similar donations. The support of these key figures further buttressed the Beguines' legal position.

With these open doors, the Beguine movement exploded. So great was the spiritual thirst for community that within two decades, Belgium alone was home to well over ten thousand Beguines. In addition to more than a hundred smaller Beguine houses there, some sixty Beguine complexes held over a hundred women each. Three of these complexes were of enormous proportion. St. Elizabeth's beguinage in Ghent, founded by Countess Johanna, housed seven hundred women by the late 1200s. St. Christophe's in Liège numbered one thousand women, and the Great Beguinage in the city of Mechelen eventually held between fifteen hundred and nineteen hundred Beguines.¹⁴

EVANGELICAL AWAKENING

The Beguines were part of a massive evangelical awakening in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that spawned a series of revivals across Europe and led to the establishment of a variety of new orders, not the least of which was that of St. Francis. In fact, Francis of Assisi was so intrigued by the saintly women of Belgium who lived together in Christian community that he attempted to visit the district where Mary of Oignies had lived. Unfortunately, he was unable to make the journey, but it is clear from his interest that he felt great affinity for their cause.

The evangelical awakening that gave birth to the Beguines, the Franciscans and other movements had begun a century earlier as clergy and laypeople alike began to experience a spiritual renewal

and commit themselves to a gospel lifestyle.¹⁵ Although Europe had been spiritually dry for hundreds of years, the first sparks of revival ignited as a host of devout monks and hermits came out of seclusion and began to proclaim the gospel in town and countryside alike.

These evangelical preachers painted a new portrait of Christ. Rather than presenting him primarily as a vengeful king at the Last Judgment, they offered a Jesus who reached out to humanity and a Good Shepherd who drew the lost to himself. As they crisscrossed Europe proclaiming the good news in various local languages, itinerant evangelists welcomed the crowds into a personal, transformational encounter with the Lord. Many people heard the gospel message for the first time. Although little is known of it today, this spiritual renewal brought untold numbers into a vital relationship with Christ.

Perhaps one of the most significant figures during this time was the fiery preacher Bernard of Clairvaux. An influential early leader of the Cistercian Order, Bernard toured France and beyond calling people to personal conversion, exhorting them to leave their worldly ways and material pursuits in order to surrender their hearts to Christ. Using the biblical imagery of Christ as the bridegroom and the church as his bride, the abbot of Clairvaux invited his hearers into a love relationship with God, who is love himself, and depicted a tender encounter with Jesus.

About the same time that Bernard was preaching, Robert of Arbrissel was also traveling around France drawing large crowds and summoning nominal Christians to a sanctified lifestyle and genuine pursuit of the Lord. His followers became known as the "Poor in Christ" and soon formed the Order of Fontevault.

Two decades later, the priest Norbert of Xanten began to rove about, calling clerics as well as laypeople to repentance. Because keeping a concubine was common for clergy in that time, many of Norbert's fellow priests resisted his message. However, he re-

ceived papal permission for his itinerant ministry and traversed Belgium, France and Germany, leading thousands to a vibrant walk with Christ. So many people began to follow him that he was forced to found a new monastic order, the Premonstratensians, or Order of Prémontré.

Women in particular responded to the invitations of Bernard, Robert, Norbert and the other itinerant preachers. Young and old, they joined communities where they could live side by side with other sincere believers and commit themselves to lives of prayer and spiritual devotion. Thousands sought to enter the Cistercian Order because of its moral integrity and the robust spirituality nourished by the bridal imagery of Bernard of Clairvaux.

Multitudes also poured into houses tied to Fontevrault and Prémontré. Fontevrault and the Premonstratensians were unique for their time in that they received women from all levels of society, not just those of noble birth. In fact, Fontevrault convents were known to have more than a few former prostitutes living alongside ladies of the nobility.¹⁶ And as one observer of the Premonstratensian movement noted:

The power of Christ [is] working in wondrous fashion—we daily see women, not only farmers' daughters or the poor, but even rich and noble widows and young girls, who after scorning the pleasures of the world hasten to these monasteries for the sake of conversion . . . so that we think that today there are more than ten thousand women in them.¹⁷

Soon all of these cloisters were filled to capacity and closed their doors to new members. Nevertheless, revival continued to spread. By the mid-twelfth century, another priest, Lambert le Bègue of Liège, in present-day Belgium, stepped forward as a revivalist preacher. He likewise summoned the clergy to renounce their immoral lifestyle, repent and turn to a true life of serving God. In addition, he translated portions of Scripture into Dutch—

Middle Flemish—so that common people could have God's Word in the language they understood. Some priests joined ranks with Lambert, along with a large following of laywomen.

Spiritual renewal was also catching fire elsewhere in Europe. In southern France members of the Waldensian movement spread the gospel from town to town and translated portions of the Bible into local dialects. Because the Waldensians' preaching threatened many local bishops, they were eventually excommunicated from the church and became what some consider the first Protestants. Some twenty years later, just after 1200, the two great orders of friars were founded: the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Like all of the renewal communities, they were often resisted by local clergy and bishops, who felt that the itinerant preachers were encroaching on their turf. Despite opposition, throngs of people came to faith in Christ through their ministry.

All of these evangelical movements, including the Beguines, were characterized by a clear conversion message and ministry to others. Their walk with Christ began with inner repentance and the renunciation of worldly ways, especially worldly wealth.¹⁸ During this time trade was rapidly expanding in Europe, and the merchant middle class was amassing unprecedented wealth, often through unethical practices. Instead of caring for the needy, these merchants often squandered their newfound fortunes on their own pleasures. In protest, thousands of genuine believers renounced their inheritance and committed themselves to the *vita evangelica*—the evangelical lifestyle or gospel way of life. They sought to follow Jesus' instruction to the twelve when he commanded them to preach the gospel, taking "nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic" (Luke 9:3). In obedience, many sincere Christians abandoned their family's fortunes, donated their wealth to the poor and turned to follow Jesus.

Believers of the evangelical movements also dedicated them-

selves to public evangelism and practical service. Men, such as the Franciscan friars, traversed the highways and byways of Europe preaching the gospel two by two, just as the seventy-two were sent by Jesus in Luke 10:1-24. Although such travel would have been dangerous for women, the Beguines also engaged in active ministry, usually closer to home. Inviting other women to join their communities—and at times preaching publically—they called people to repentance and conversion from a worldly lifestyle. Such evangelism was always coupled with practical service to the poor and infirm, especially the colonies of lepers found near many of the towns in Europe.

BEGUINES OVER THE CENTURIES

The Beguines flourished for many decades and then began to wane. By the end of the thirteenth century they had come under suspicion. Some of their number, especially those who refused to be incorporated into the larger Beguine communities, had apparently been propagating some of the false teachings attributed to the Brethren of the Free Spirit. These teachings emphasized personal direction from the Holy Spirit over the guidance of Scripture, rejected church authority and the sacraments, and claimed that followers were free from the moral restrictions enumerated in the New Testament.¹⁹ Because of these occasional ties with heresy, the Beguines were condemned at the Council of Vienne in 1311–1312. The council's statement exempted Beguines who were living in community and not connected with the Free Spirit, but the Vienne condemnation still undermined the movement, especially in Germany. It declined substantially during the fourteenth century.

During the spread of Protestantism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Beguine communities experienced a significant renaissance in Catholic territories. The movement also experienced a small resurgence in the nineteenth century, when a new,

large beguinage was built outside the city of Ghent. But the secularization of the twentieth century led to the closing of most beguinages, and today only a handful of Beguines are left in Belgium. Nevertheless, a number of the large Beguine complexes still stand in cities across that country. Some have been converted into quiet neighborhoods of private townhomes. Others are run by public welfare services and provide housing to the underprivileged. In 1998 UNESCO adopted thirteen Beguine complexes as world heritage sites and preserved them as historical landmarks for all to see.

Although after eight centuries the Beguines have virtually disappeared as a movement, their invitation to a deeper spiritual life lives on. By their example and through their writing, these radical believers welcome us into an intimate oneness with God—begun in this life and consummated at the great wedding feast in heaven.

REMARKABLE MODELS OF FAITH

In this volume we will meet four key women related to the Beguine movement. Mary of Oignies served as ministry leader and spiritual model for one of the earliest communities established in Belgium. She offers an outstanding example of initiative and desire.

The other three women leave written legacies that provide insights regarding the path of spiritual growth. Penned as guidebooks to encourage sisters in the Beguine communities, these writings offer us direction for our journey and challenge us to go further in our spiritual formation. All of these writings are available today in English translation, as noted in the Suggestions for Further Reading at the end of this book. Beatrice of Nazareth, who was taught by the Beguines and eventually became a Cistercian nun, leads us on an exploration of the various seasons of the soul as she describes seven stages of a love relationship with God.

Mechthild of Magdeburg depicts our inner longings for the Lord and guides us in our quest to balance our solitary times of

devotion with active service to others. She calls us to embrace suffering in this life as part of our pilgrimage.

Hadewijch of Brabant details the experience of spiritual sweetness as we fall in love with Jesus. She bids us encounter this sweetness with Jesus and assures us that the frustrations we face on our pilgrimage will ultimately lead us into the Promised Land, the oneness with the Lord for which our hearts long:

But, O free, noble, and highborn souls,
Not only called but chosen,
Spare no trouble or pain in your approach
To live in the ardor of lofty fidelity!
Let your whole life be holy affliction,
Until you are master of your Beloved.

O hearts, let not your many griefs
Distress you! You shall soon blossom;
You shall row through all storms,
Until you come to that luxuriant land
Where Beloved and loved one shall wholly flow
through each other.²⁰

Through their writings the Beguines offer spiritual guidance to believers today, helping us negotiate the twists and turns of our own spiritual pilgrimage. They caution us against placing too much emphasis on extraordinary experiences and feelings that fade over time. They also describe seasons of suffering and show us how God is at work in our lives through the most difficult times. As spiritual directors, these women of intense faith offer us courage during desert times and hope of renewed spiritual intimacy as we walk with the Lord.