Book Review
By Alison Lewis

136 p. $13.00

This book explores the phenomenon of the Beguine movement, a lay women’s religious movement which began in the thirteenth century, and which centered in the Rhine Valley region of Western Europe. Since there was no official rule for the movement, it meant that each group of women had a certain autonomy in how they organized and conducted their community. Unfortunately, it also means that there are no official records of the Beguines. Indeed, given the status of women, particularly lay women, at this time and within these cultures, there is very little written evidence of what was once a fairly widespread movement.

In spite of the paucity of information about these women, author Saskia Murk-Jansen does an admirable job of pulling together what is known about them and placing the few existing writings within their historical context. The work focuses on the writings of four women: Beatrijs of Nazareth, who wrote The Seven Manners of Loving; Mechtild of Magdeburg, who authored the mystical Flowing Light of the Godhead; Hadewijch, who wrote letters and descriptions of her visions, but who is best known for her poems, regarded as the finest in the Dutch language; and Marguerite Porete, who was burned at the stake in 1310 for disseminating her book, The Mirror of Simple Souls. The author examines the literary context of these works and the underlying theology they espouse, as well as the sometimes tense relations between the women and the church hierarchy.

The title of the book, Brides in the Desert, comes from the imagery used in the Beguines’ writings. Bridal and nuptial imagery is, of course, found in abundance; the author takes pains to show that this is not a stereotypical “feminine” imagery, but rather a convention that comes to them through the writings of such male figures as Bernard of Clairvaux. Interestingly, Beguines sometimes borrowed imagery from courtly love romances, and cast themselves in the male role as the knight striving to be virtuous and obedient in order to win the love of the idealized Lady, Christ. Desert imagery also abounds. It has multiple meanings, from a place of trial one has to go through in order to gain divine love, to a place one seeks to be in order to experience that love. The Beguines’ acknowledgment of not only the sweetness of divine love, but also the pain and the challenge of seeking it, serves as an important reminder for today’s Christians who are often tempted to emphasize only the positive aspects of the spiritual life.

Although the book is sometimes marred by a lack of focus and a certain repetitiveness, it serves as a welcome introduction to this overlooked aspect of female involvement in the spiritual life. Endnotes and an extensive bibliography steer the interested reader to further explore the topics broached. All in all, these women who believed that the Christian life could be lived on a daily basis, not just by men and not just by those joining religious orders, are worthy examples for study by modern seekers.

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