

The Second International Conference on the Beguines

In October of 2023 I found myself in Essen, Germany, for the Second International Conference on the Beguines, hosted by the umbrella organization, Dachverband der Beginen e.v.,¹ which was established in 2004. Beguine Brita² had been researching the history of the beguine movement, a lifestyle she had been living for some years, and felt strongly that the German beguines needed to know their heritage. She with several other beguines founded this umbrella organization, which has a Board, to gather and unite German beguines. They are primarily interested in growing a contemporary movement of beguines, helping beguine communities connect with one another, as well as educating women who identify as beguines on the historical movement.

Few of these women actually knew much that was accurate about the historical movement of beguines, who these women were, what their lives were actually like (let alone the diversity of lifestyles), their spirituality, and the important impact beguines had on Christianity and European culture. Beguine Brita, who has done research on the beguines, has been determined to change this.

At the Conference, I was invited to deliver a paper with the title, “The Wisdom of the Beguines, Europe-wide.” As this same organization arranged for my book to be translated into German [Die Weisheit der Beginen], I addressed the topic in light of recent scholarship that was published after my book. Sarah Hoyer, PhD from the Baden-Württemberg State Archives delivered a paper based on an old ledger found in the archives that lists purchases for three years (1501 – 1504). She modeled how scholars use seemingly innocuous items in archives to flesh out a piece of history; here we learned that the beguines of one community ate very well for these years (lots of fish and cheese!). And Jörg Voigt, PhD of the Niedersachsen State Archives provided screen shots of documents and explored that age old question: Were Beguines Heretics? And always it depends on one’s perspective: One person’s heretic is another’s saint.

During the question-and-answer portion of the conference the greatest learning seemed to be that most participants were not aware that the medieval beguines had a spirituality. While I pointed out that their spirituality was diverse (thus “spiritualities” is more accurate), yet they

¹ <https://www.dachverband-der-beginen.de/startseite> for German Beguines. I am told there are more than 600 beguines in Germany alone.

² This is how she prefers to be called/named.

were deeply spiritual people and their spirituality was expressed in many ways. Thus we discussed what this might mean for today

I was keenly aware that many of these contemporary beguines have been deeply wounded by institutional church (whether Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Reform). A few were actively involved in a faith community; a few had a meditation practice; and one small community in northern Germany had a Celtic worship practice (as they understood this). Beguine Brita and I agreed in private conversation that if this movement was to survive into the next generation, they would need to resolve this issue of spirituality as the “fuel” for the movement.

Germans and Belgians had some awareness of the historical movement of beguines due to the old beguinages that survived multiple wars.³ Some of the older beguinages⁴ have served as affordable housing, and especially for writers, musicians, artisans, and artists. Others are open as museums for tourists.⁵ This model gave rise to women seeking to live alongside like-minded women in affordable and safe housing. In Germany communal housing is often coordinated with the local government, and in some cases the women built/purchased the buildings for the purpose of creating a beguinage.

Beguine Brita was the driving force behind designing and building a beguinage in Bochum, which is located in a suburb of Essen. It was planned so as to welcome women of all ages, including single women with children. It was built around an old chapel that they could use for gatherings and prayer. Unfortunately the Catholic Parish was uncomfortable with these women using the old chapel and had it torn down. The women were heartbroken and hope to find the funds to build their own one day. The Bochum community does include children (who now have many “aunties and grannies”) and the children enjoy a small playground.

³ Thirteen have been designated as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. See, for example, **An Independent Women’s World from the 12th century to the Present**, The Herve van Caloen Foundation, n.d. and Hans Geybels, **Vulgariter Beghinae. Eight Centuries of Beguine History in the Low Countries**, Brepols, 2004.

⁴ While my hosts would say “beginen” I will use the more common term in English as several language groups were present at this gathering.

⁵ Especially notable is Wijngaards in Bruges, Belgium, which is occupied by Benedictine nuns (originally from France and Switzerland). One home has been restored as might have been occupied by beguines, and several of the nuns wear “beguine-ish attire and serve as docents to tourists. Another house is their store, specializing in books on liturgy, and they have a guesthouse. Otherwise the Benedictines continue their monastic observance. In Diest, Belgium [considered the best preserved beguinage], while affordable housing, a docent greets you at the church and answers many questions around the history of the place.

In Essen a building that was originally occupied by the Nazis (complete with an eagle atop the entrance which was later torn down), then a tax office, now houses a beguine community. Besides lovely apartments, they have seven infirmary beds on each of two floors for women who need support and care, yet are treated as members of the community. They have both a communal gathering space and a meditation room. This community has a board responsible for the community and to the local housing authority. This group helped host the International Gathering.

Outside Essen on our way to Köln we met young beguines who occupy a farm house owned by a non-profit organization. They are involved in environmental and immigration issues, and host an assortment of groups, facilitate meetings, and have space for hermit experiences.

In Köln the beguinage we visited was designed with input from the women would first move in, again with a lovely gathering space and big kitchen. Each apartment had a deck (most flowing with flower pots). This community is nestled into a residential neighborhood with a public school across the street.

My hope is that Begine Brita, now aware that most of her fellow German beguines do not understand “spirituality” as separate from “institutional church,” will encourage a study of spirituality. These women are spiritual which is expressed through their commitment to social justice. They are intentional about living simply; they actively care for one another, build community beyond their group, and are involved in immigration and environmental issues. So much of their commitment and work is prayer; they just didn’t seem to be aware of this.

Among the participants were to women from Ireland. They are connected to the beguine community—An Croí⁶—established by Dr. Geraldine Holton and Carmel Boyle outside Dublin. They have a ministry of spiritual formation known as An Croí Wisdom Institute, which offers assorted programs including spiritual direction formation. Unfortunately neither Ger nor Carmel was able to attend this gathering.

While I met beguines from Switzerland and Italy, they were not as well organized but hoped to grow their movements at home. Silvana Panciera has been active in promoting knowledge of the beguine heritage⁷ but was not present. The participants mentioned two online

⁶ <https://ancroi.ie/>

⁷ <https://beguines.info/?lang=en>

communities who fashion themselves after beguines: the Bellecoeur Sisterhood,⁸ founded by Sibyl Dana Reynolds, and The Community of Saint Anna⁹. The Community of Saint Anna live independently in our own homes while supporting one another in our ministry of prayer, welcoming all as Christ,” praying for all – no exceptions – and compassionate “listen[ing] with the ear of the heart” to others, as inspired by the Benedictine Rule. This community grew out of the Monasteries of the Heart movement initiated by Sr. Joan Chittister in 2012, and now are developing their identity as an international ecumenical group of women. They are currently ten members living across the US, Canada, Great Britain, and Belgium.

There are several online communities that I find “come and go—unknown why. Yet after this gathering my curiosity is piqued and I’ll be more observant as to the goings on as the contemporary beguine movement grows.

⁸ <https://pcseminary.teachable.com/p/belle-coeur-formation>

⁹ <https://saint-anna.com/>