Theological and Social Time: The Case of the Beguines

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Despite many similarities and close contact with the Cistercians, the Beguines were, as far as we can tell from their Vitae, not part of an emerging religious movement that encouraged enthusiasm for monastic life. Rather the Beguines worked in the world, caring for the terminally ill and the dying, especially for lepers, trying to face the human suffering in the world by imitating Christ’s sufferings. Moreover, scholars working on early Beguine piety, using Jacques de Vitry’s *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis* (1215), the earliest example of Beguine Vitae,¹ as well as other Vitae, see the characteristics of the *multi - eres religiosae*²—their good works—as not totally accounted for by referring

¹ The earliest example of such a Vita is Jacques de Vitry, *Vita beatae Mariae Oigniacensis* (vmo), ed. Daniel von Papebroch, in *ActaSS Junii* iv (1707), pp. 630–666, *Iacobvs de Vitriaco, Vita Marie de Oegnies*, ed. Robert Burchard Constantijn Huygens (Turnhout, 2012 [ccc 52]). The Vita of Mary and other examples are available online and can be read in the *Acta Sanctorum database*: http://acta.chadwyck.co.uk/. For an English translation see Jacques de Vitry, Thomas de Cantimpré, *Two lives of Marie d'Oignies*, trans. Margot H. King, Hugh Feiss osb (Toronto, 2003). Daniel von Papebroch undertook the classifying into capitula that correspond to the thirteenth-century manuscripts, even though the wording occasionally varies. His titles can probably be traced back to Jacques de Vitry. Papebroch also divided the text into larger sections and added consecutive numbering of paragraphs. His numbering is used here to make the quotations clear. Papebroch’s counting, which uses chapter 11 twice, for the concluding chapter of the Vita’s prologue and for the first chapter of book i, is adopted to avoid confusion. I have used quotations from the Vita of Mary indicating the prologue, book 1, or book 11 as sources. Joseph Greven provides evidence that the women described in the Vita’s prologue are all identical with those for whom the term “Beguines” is used. See Joseph Greven, *Der Ursprung des Beginenwesens nach den Legenden, der geschichtlichen Literatur und den Aussagen der Quellen* (Münster i.W., 1911), p. 46f, and *Die Anfänge der Beginen* (Münster i. W., 1912 [vrf 81]), p. 46. Greven works with the story of a witness concerning a Cistercian from Aulne (vmo, prologue, cap. 4) that Jacques de Vitry uses later in one of his sermons. See Jacques de Vitry, *Sermo ad viduas et continentes*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Pitra, *Analecta novissima Spicilegii Solesmensis, Altera Continuatio* 11 (Paris, 1885–1888).

² Jacques de Vitry used this term. The word “Begine” was originally a dirty word that subsequently was adopted by the women themselves. For this term and its meaning, see Vera von der Osten-Sacken, ‘Dangerous Heretics or Silly Fools? The Name ‘Beguine’ as a Label for Lay
to their pursuit of poverty and virginity, that is, by their harsh ascetic practices, their dedicated Eucharistic devotion, and the mystical excesses by which they imitated the suffering of Christ. Jacques de Vitry, Thomas de Cantimpré and other theologians who wrote the *Vitae* of the Brabantian women, were introducing them to representatives of the traditional clergy as new models for female sanctity.

Biographers of the first Beguines often split the women’s lives into two periods, but not necessarily chronological ones. The *vita exterior* and *vita interior* of Marie d’Oignies, for example, illustrate two different aspects of her entire life: first, her works of active charity, associated in many cases with the biblical figure of Martha, reported as practical ministries, for the first Beguines were engaged in activities such as tending to the diseased or the terminally ill; second, her devotion to Mary in contemplating both the incarnated and the risen Christ as her mystical bridegroom, in preparing for physical death in order to reunite with Christ. The domains of Martha (temporal) and Mary (eternal) were thus brought together in the life of one person.

Indeed, in many *Vitae* women seem to exist between time and eternity. An especially dramatic example of this is Christina Mirabilis whose *Vita* is narrated *post mortem*. Thomas de Cantimpré thus begins the description of her life with her death. She returns to the physical world when asked whether she wants to enjoy eternal blessedness with the risen Christ or to fight alongside the incarnated Christ against the devil and against sin. She says she wants to rescue as many souls as possible from purgatory. Her *Vita* is the

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4 Maria Grazia Calzà, *Dem Weiblichen ist das Verstehen des Göttlichen ‘auf den Leib’ geschrieben. Die Begine Maria von Oignies (†1213) in der hagiographischen Darstellung Jakobs von Vitry (†1240)* (Würzburg, 2000), p. 45, considers the life of Mary as evidence for a new specifically female perception for which she established the German term “Somatophonie.”

