SUMMARY

This book treats of a special kind of religious institution for women: the 'begijnhoven' of the county of Holland en Zeeland in the middle ages.

In western Europe the 12th century witnessed a wave of religious fervor, especially among women, that resulted in new forms of monastic life. But not all religious women became nuns; those who did not were called beguines since the early 13th century. These early beguines are a phenomenon whose features are not very clear-cut. The only thing that can be ascertained about them is that they led a devout and chaste life without belonging to a monastic order. They did not bind themselves by the solemn vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They lived at home with their family or shared a house with a few other beguines. Later they came to live predominantly in beguine houses and 'begijnhoven'.

In the county of Holland and Zeeland the 'begijnhof' became the common beguine institution. It was characterized by the following features. Physically, it was a courtyard with houses round it, institutionally, a foundation with a specific aim, its own board of administrators and property. The beguines residing there were allowed to keep personal property, since they were not bound by a vow of poverty. In fact, they either needed enough property to furnish an income, or else they had to work, for beguines were supposed to provide for themselves. In general, a beguine owned all or part of the house she lived in, which she either built herself or purchased from other beguines or their heirs. In some 'begijnhoven' beguines held the houses for life only, their possession reverting to the board for resale upon the death of a beguine. Beguines were, however, always responsible for the upkeep of their houses. The last characteristic feature was the organization of life in this kind of community. Beguines lived individually, preparing and eating their meals in their individual homes for example, but they were also bound by common rules. In short, one might say that, since the beguinal condition is intermediate between that of a nun and that of a lay person, the 'begijnhof' is intermediate between a convent and an ordinary neighbourhood of town. 'Begijnhoven' appeared in the county of Holland and Zeeland after the middle of the 13th century. Before 1317, an important turning point in the beguine movement, they existed in eight cities: Delft, Dordrecht, 's-Gravenzande, Haarlem, Leiden and Schiedam in Holland and Middelburg and Zierikzee in Zeeland. Three other institutions, which perhaps never developed into 'begijnhoven' and afterwards ceased to function as institutions for beguines or to exist at

all, appeared in the countryside, near the villages of Noordwijk and Rijnsburg in Holland and in Zeeland near the village of Burgh.

In 1317 the decrees of the council of Vienne condemning the beguine movement were published. As a result, beguine houses and 'begijnhoven' were closed down and women who refused to abandon the beguinal way of life were persecuted. In Holland and Zeeland the results of the publication of the decrees were also perceptible, but from 1323 onward official rehabilitation of the movement took place, and afterwards beguines lived in peace until the Reformation.

At the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries several new beguine institutions appeared. 'Begijnhoven' were founded in the cities of Amsterdam, Brielle, Heusden and Rotterdam. In Leiden, apart from the old 'begijnhof', which probably did not develop into a full-grown 'begijnhof' until the 15th century, two beguine houses were founded. These, however, never became full-fledged 'begijnhoven'.

In its appearance the 'begijnhof' was a small town. Separated from the outside world by walls, canals, or simply by a row of connected houses, it was only accessible by a gate, which was kept closed at night. The management was in the hands of the 'meestersen' or mistresses, of whom there were usually more than one in charge at the same time. As a rule they were elected by their fellow beguines for a period of two years, but the mistresses in Middelburg and Zierikzee were appointed for life. The mistresses were assisted by a council of old and experienced beguines and saw to it that the statutes of the 'begijnhof' were obeyed. These statutes regulated the contacts of the beguines with the outside world, enforced a frugal, chaste and devout way of life and stipulated rules concerning the selling of houses in the 'begijnhof' to prevent outsiders from coming into possession of them. Often consent of the mistresses was necessary to sell a house, and sometimes a beguine could purchase a house from the mistresses for her lifetime only, which was the most suitable way of restricting its possession to beguines. Disobedience to the statutes could in extreme cases be punished by banishing the transgressing beguine from the 'begijnhof', in which case she lost her house and could never return.

In addition to the individual houses where most of the beguines lived, institutions with a charitable aim or some charitable features existed in most 'begijnhoven'. Sometimes they were autonomous foundations with their own boards and property. Among these were infirmaries, housing disabled and poor beguines, and the so-called convents, which could have several purposes, such as providing housing for poor beguines, or for young beguines serving their period of probation, or, as in Haarlem, for a group of beguines who, probably influenced by Geert Grote, sought a religious life in common. Infirmaries and convents provided board and lodging, though not always for free. In some 'be-

gijnhoven' 'vrijwoningen' were founded, houses with only free lodging. These special institutions were often founded by beguines, and supported with the alms of both beguines and outsiders.

Every 'begijnhof' had its own church or chapel. Some 'begijnhoven' dating from the 13th century had been totally detached from their original parishes to form new ones. All other 'begijnhoven' had at least their own chapel and in most cases employed a priest as their rector, to celebrate the divine offices, administer the sacraments to the beguines and provide for burial in the chapel cemetery.

Moving from the institutional history of the 'begijnhoven', I also studied their position in medieval society. Especially in the early period before 1317, the counts of Holland and Zeeland and the female members of the comital family patronized the beguine movement and founded 'begijnhoven'. An important role was played by Machteld of Brabant, wife of count Floris IV, and her daughter Aleid of Holland. During the period of persecution of the beguines count William III even protected some of the 'begijnhoven'. Afterwards, however, the counts charged municipal authorities with the care of the 'begijnhoven' and when the dukes of Burgundy became counts of Holland and Zeeland, comital patronage seems to have ceased. The bishop of Utrecht, whose diocese included most parts of Holland and Zeeland, and other local ecclesiastical authorities also assumed responsibility for the beguines. Count and bishop cooperated harmoniously in the beginning, but in the 15th century conflicts between secular and ecclesiastical authorities arose, caused not in the least place by the ambiguous character of the beguinal way of life itself.

As the 'begijnhoven' were a typically urban phenomenon, it is not surprising to see that municipal authorities exercised some control over them. Sometimes special municipal functionaries were charged with supervision of the 'begijnhoven'. As the oldest religious institutions for women in the city in most cases, 'begijnhoven' had achieved a privileged position with regard to the payment of municipal taxes, but urban monasteries and convents, most of them of more recent origin, later came to gain more favours than the 'begijnhoven'.

In the early years the 'begijnhoven' were favoured not only by the counts, but also by the nobility and probably by the burghers, but later especially the latter rose to preeminence as patrons.

It is difficult to determine the social position of the women who were attracted by the beguinal way of life. Only the names of some of the early beguines from the 13th and early 14th centuries have survived, of which some were names of noble families, suggesting that at least a few of the early beguines were of noble origin. From the end of the 14th century the sources become more abundant and the beguine population in several cities can be studied systematically. I compared family names

from the beguine population in those cities with the names of town magistrates such as 'schepenen' (aldermen) and 'burgemeesters' (mayors). In all those cities beguines with upper-class family names could be uncovered. For instance, in Amsterdam 14% of all beguines whose names I found bore such names, in Haarlem 13%. One must realise, however, that having an upper-class family name is not absolute proof of belonging to the upper class. The custom of using family names in Holland and Zeeland was not completely established in the late middle ages, even among the urban upper class, and that means that a majority of the beguines, only indicated by a patronymic, remain unidentifiable. Thus these percentages must be considered only as an indication that women belonging to the upper class took part in the beguine movement. It is not possible to discover whether those women were predominant in the 'begijnhof' or formed a small though certainly powerful minority. In Dordrecht and Leiden in the 16th century beguines with upper-class names are no longer found, which is a clear sign that the social status of the beguines in those cities had declined. No doubt among the inhabitants of all 'begijnhoven' there were wealthy women, living off their property, but others had to earn their own livelihood. They worked in the textile industry, educated girls or were paid to pray for the spiritual welfare of the deceased. Sometimes they were employed by more well-to-do beguines as maids.

The presence of wealthy beguines must have been of vital importance to the 'begijnhof'. They had money to build or repair houses, to found infirmaries, convents or 'vrijwoningen' or to favour them with gifts, thus providing for their poor or disabled fellow beguines. It was probably among them that the mistresses were recruited who managed the possessions of the 'begijnhof'.

Besides the decline in social status of the population of some 'begijnhoven', there were more general signs of the decay of the beguine movement in the 16th century. Outsiders no longer supported the 'begijnhoven' and some were partially empty. The 'begijnhoven' thus shared in the general decline in all forms of urban monastic life in that century. Yet two 'begijnhoven', those at Amsterdam and Haarlem, still had enough vitality to survive the Reformation, offering Catholic girls in the Netherlands one of the few possibilities of following a religious way of life for centuries to come.

GEBRUIKTE AFKORTINGEN

AZG	Archief, vroegere en latere mededelingen voornamelijk in betrekking tot Zeeland, uitgegeven van het Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen.
BBH	Bijdragen voor de geschiedenis van het bisdom van Haarlem.
BMHG	Bijdragen en Mededelingen van het Historisch Genootschap.
BVGO	Bijdragen voor Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde.
JbCBG	Jaarboek van het centraal bureau voor genealogie.
NL	De Nederlandsche Leeuw, maandblad van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Genootschap voor Geslacht- en Wapenkunde.
OSU	Oorkondenboek van het sticht Utrecht, zie onder niet-verhalende bronnen onder Muller Fz., S.
VMOVR	Verslagen en mededeelingen van de Vereeniging tot de uitgave der bronnen van het oude vaderlandsche recht.