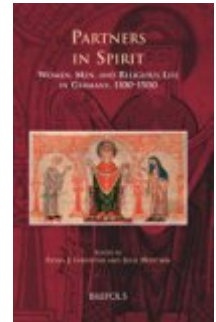


Fiona J. Griffiths, Julie Hotchin, eds.. *Partners in Spirit: Women, Men, and Religious Life in Germany, 1100-1500*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014. Illustrations. x + 427 pp. \$130.00, cloth, ISBN 978-2-503-54096-2.



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The gender relationship in the Middle Ages was considerably more complex and interrelated than we might assume today, especially in the area of spirituality. Monasteries were not intellectual islands in splendid isolation, but they were centers of learning and religious devotion, most of them closely connected with a filiation system or collaborating with a network of other monasteries, easily across gender lines. Since the early thirteenth century, countless new women convents were formed, especially in Germany, and by the late Middle Ages we witness the fascinating phenomenon of the beguines with their own houses. The essays assembled in this volume address a wide range of situations in which women either received highly needed support from their male confessors (*curia monialium*), or in which they even enjoyed enough authority to teach and preach to their male counterparts, or the public for that matter. We know of many “Doppelklöster,” comprising a house for monks and a house for nuns next to each other and interconnected within one organizational principle. Simi-

larly, the beguines were highly active and popular throughout the late Middle Ages and could appeal to a wide audience of their time despite the papal ban at the Council of Vienne in 1311-12. Sources reveal that there were extensive negotiations and contacts between both women and men who were not limited by their convent walls and who found a variety of social frameworks in which they could engage with each other in spiritual or economic matters. In this volume, the focus rests on the situation in medieval Germany, but the insights can be applied to medieval studies at large.

The case of Doppelklöster in the Swiss regions is the topic of Elsanne Gilomen-Schenkel’s piece, in which she offers a most helpful survey of how many women’s convents existed, where they were located, and when they were established. However, until the middle of the thirteenth century, the sources are fairly elusive, and necrologies just list names and dates of the women living in their part of the monastic communities. Only since then were more documents produced and preserved, giving us, as the author points out, many more in-

sights into the situation, especially of the Doppelklöster of Engelberg and Interlaken. Susan Marti's essay examines how the existence of Doppelklöster was reflected in a variety of manuscript illuminations produced at those locations, such as Marbach-Schwarzenethann in the Alsace, Admont in Styria, Muri in Aargau, Engelberg, and Interlaken.[1] She admits, however, that there is hardly any evidence of a clear effort to reflect on the status of having two monasteries side by side, one for women and one for men. Eva Schlotheuber introduces the institution of a "Frauenstift," a community of religious women who lived a pious life but had not taken their vow and veil, such as in famous Gandersheim in northern Germany, where Hrotsvit composed much of her admired plays and religious narratives during the late tenth century (she is, however, not mentioned anywhere in this volume). Schlotheuber concentrates on the role of the female provost and discusses the historical transformation of that function in several convents, such as Lippoldsberg (northern Hesse) and Lamspringe (near Hildesheim, Lower Saxony), but then also in the Archdiocese of Rouen, France. While in Germany monastic reforms had brought many changes for women, subordinating them under the church administration, they continued to enjoy considerable freedom and independence in Normandy.

Fiona J. Griffiths highlights the figure of Guibert of Gembloux who had affiliated himself closely with the female convent founded by Hildegard of Bingen out of deep respect for her prophetic powers. Griffiths illustrates the extensive exchanges and communication between Guibert and Hildegard by way of studying their intensive correspondence, which also involved the entire community of Rupertsberg, whom he provided with much-needed pastoral care. Shelley Amiste Wolbrink discusses the close cooperation between nuns and monks at the Premonstratensian monasteries of Füssenich and Meer near Cologne between 1140 and 1260, a time of considerable freedom for women and men to interact. This

went so far that nuns and monks shared leadership roles and cooperated in a variety of ways with each other.

Some contributors examine personal correspondence among monks and nuns in spiritual friendship. Anthony Ray, for example, focuses on the correspondence between Thomas, Cantor of Villers, and his sister Alice, nun at Parc-les-Dames. Sara S. Poor brings to light several Middle High German and Dutch texts reflecting on pious women who had enough authority to teach visiting priests.

The other topic of considerable importance is the role that beguines played in late medieval cities, such as in Würzburg, studied by Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, or in Cologne, studied by Wybren Scheepsma. Scheepsma looks at the function enjoyed by the Dominican Hendrik von Leuven (d. 1302/03) as the priest in charge of the local beguines, which found expression in a letter he composed to one of his confessants. Sigrid Hirbodian studies the pastoral care provided by Franciscan priests for women convents in Strasbourg, whose members seem to have been molested by some of the priests, which created a most rocky relationship, not to forget numerous other conflicts affecting both women and men. Pastoral care, as Hirbodian emphasizes, was one of the most important vehicles for direct interactions between the genders within the church, making even the tightest and tallest convent walls rather permeable for intellectual and spiritual exchange.

Poor examines remarkable exchanges between confessors and their spiritual unlearned daughters, such as between Sister Catherine and Meister Eckhart. Unlearned women who were deeply inspired by divine visions often stunned their confessors and gained influence over them because of their inner knowledge. This also found reflections in secular text collections under the title "Die fromme Müllerin" (The pious miller's wife), as composed by Heinrich Kaufringer (circa 1400). Another example is Dorothea von Hof, who

wrote a major volume with religious excerpts in 1483 and intended it for teaching purposes, thus claiming considerable authority within her social context. Undine Brückner has recently presented a critical study of this fascinating text (*Dorothea von Hof: "Das buoch der götlichen liebe und summe der tugent": Studien zu einer Konstanzer Kompilation geistlicher Texte des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts* [2015]). Sabine Klapp concludes the volume with an investigation of the canons in late medieval Frauenstifte, especially St. Stephan in Strasbourg, who regularly cooperated with their partners in other "Stifte."

Each essay is thoroughly researched, and rounded off with a detailed bibliography of primary and secondary material. The authors have regularly resorted to archival documents and bring to light many new perspectives that underscore how much fairly intensive communication there was between both women and men of the church on many different levels. Several essays were translated into English. The editors have taken great care in preparing this volume, and have even produced a most welcome index. The book title clearly captures the central theme pursued here, "Partners in Spirit," which promises to launch new approaches to gender issues in the Middle Ages.

Note

[1]. Marti's essay, originally titled "Doppelklöster im Bild? Streiflichter auf den Buchschmuck südwestdeutscher Reformklöster," was first published in *Nonnen, Kanonissen, Mystikerinnen: Religiöse Frauengemeinschaften in Süddeutschland*, ed. Eva Schlotheuber, Helmut Flachenecker, and Ingrid Gardill (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 203-219. See my review of *Nonnen, Kanonissen, Mystikerinnen: Religiöse Frauengemeinschaften in Süddeutschland, Mediävistik* 23 (2010): 347-350.

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