

Review Article with reference to five recent titles dealing with religious women

Valerie G. Spear, *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries*, Boydell, 2005;

Amy Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany*, University of Chicago Press, 2005;

Annemiek van der Veen and Dolly Verhoeven, *We Agreed to be Different: Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy 1960-2000*, trnsl. Annelies J. Wing-Wirth & Alison Roy, Hilversum Veloren, 2005;

Rosemary Raughter (ed.), *Religious Women and Their History: Breaking the Silence*, Irish Academic Press, 2005;

Anne O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, 2005.

Three of the above books deal with female religious life within Roman Catholicism, each in a different era; the remaining two, while dealing more broadly with Christian women serving their Churches, contain chapters on Catholic women religious. All were published in 2005; the authors of four of the books and all contributors to the fifth are women academics and all except one are lay. All are currently pursuing their careers as historians in Britain, Ireland, the United States of America or Australia.

This summary reminds us that any critique is written at a particular time and is subject to considerations in the present state of play in the area under discussion. What is apparent by the middle of this first decade of the 21st century is that there has been an escalating interest in the broader field of women and religion and, as illustrated by the above texts, in the history of female religious. From the early 1990s, a shift has become apparent, within the general context of feminist historical analysis, in interpretations of vowed religious women, their aims and motivations. Initially, they received small attention, as in Jane Rendall's *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (Macmillan Publishers, 1985). Further writing came to view them with more recognition in view of their numbers and ubiquity but implicitly as victims somehow caught up, more or less witlessly (at least to an incidental reader), in the power machine of the Roman Catholic Church. Redemption was achieved only by the occasional rebel.

From the early 1990s, however, with more specifically focused and more accurate contextual research, the stress has been more prominently on the sheer agency, not only of individual women religious, but also of the communities they founded and/or led. Among these studies, at least in English, the following are representative: Elizabeth Rapley's *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) and Sarah A. Curtis' *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth Century France* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2000). Each of these studies, as their titles indicate and as the contents reveal, is by an author well versed in French social and religious history. A forerunner in this shift with reference to an English-speaking situation is Mary Peckham Magray's *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, and Cultural Change, 1750-1900* (Oxford University Press, 1998), to be followed by Barbara Walsh's *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales 1800-1937: A Social History* (Irish Academic Press, 2002). Each of the authors mentioned is a lay academic.

Together with the appearance of these texts, in some cases stimulated by them, there have emerged spreading networks of scholars interested in the history of women religious and which have generated several series of conferences. In 1989, the History of Women Religious network in the USA held its first conference, to be followed by others, held triennially, which have become increasingly international. The Institute of Religious Studies in Sydney (its network now associated with the Australian Catholic University's Golding Centre for Women's History, Theology and Spirituality) sponsored three similar conferences from 1992, while more recently a network of women academics

in the British Isles have initiated annual university-based conferences on the history of women religious in Britain and Ireland. These networks are also in interaction with each other, stimulating further research. What is noteworthy about this later research are the concern for authentic contextual siting, awareness of complexity and avoidance of polemic. There has been increasing endeavour to discover and exercise an exacting historical hermeneutic, more possible now with a higher level of accuracy, given the current proliferating studies in varied fields of social history.

However, what these studies, usually specifically limited by time span and location, can, and often do, evidence is lack of awareness of the long evolution of religious life forms for women in the Western Church. Forms of religious dedication predate, and in various world religions have been of continuing incidence with, the forms evolved within Christianity, and have hence historically exhibited a universalism. Within early Christianity, because of their essentially voluntary, 'private enterprise' nature, the widespread eremitical movement and the communal monasticism which largely displaced it did not draw official Church attention until 451 when, at the Council of Chalcedon, the Emperor Marcian secured the enactment that monasteries required the approbation of the local bishop to be legally recognised. This was occasioned by the incidence of wandering monks intervening in political disturbances. From this time, in both civil and canon law as they evolved in medieval Europe, dates the requirement of episcopal approbation for the recognition of religious communities as corporate entities. As so many instances show, in the emergence of the European nation states, the approbation of the relevant civil authority was also required.

Only with the Fourth Lateran Council, held in 1215 - in a new age of proliferating religious movements inspired by a fresh wave of evangelicalism - did papal approbation come to be required for the legal recognition of religious institutes. By this date there had been considerable growth from the mid-eleventh century in the parallel and mutually validating canonical and civil law systems, the *utrumque ius* based on Roman law, chiefly the Code of Justinian. (See, for example, Manlio Bellomo, *The Common Legal Past of Europe 1000-1800*, trnsl. Lydia G. Cochrane, Catholic University of America Press, 1995.) From this time a member of a papally approved institute – legally a religious order - acquired this status by pronouncing solemn vows of religion, analogous to solemn feudal oaths and solemn marriage vows. A solemn vow or oath created a public commitment to which one could be legally held. To this definition was added, through the papal decree *Periculoso* in 1298, the requirement of enclosure for women – for long culturally expected and observed with varying degrees of interpretation. At the same time there continued many communities – Beguines, Beatas, Mantellate, Third Orders – whose members were not legally recognised as religious. If they made vows, these were simple or private; they had no legal effects and could be dispensed by the authority witnessing them.

The two canonical studies of Elizabeth Makowski – *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculoso and Its Commentators 1298-1545*, Catholic University of America Press, 1997, and "*A Pernicious Sort of Woman*": *Quasi-Religious Women and Canon Lawyers in the Later Middle Ages*, Catholic University of America Press, 2005 – trace these two levels of commitment evidenced by medieval religiously inclined women. (Despite its title, as Makowski illustrates in her second book, the status and freedom, financially and otherwise, of quasi-religious women were legally recognised; condemnation, where it occurred, came from other causes.)

Allied to this growing legal definition and precision went the rising social profile of those men and women canonically recognised as religious. Both Bellomo (p.55) and historians of monasticism such as Janet Burton in her *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300*, Cambridge University Press, [1994] 1995 (p.8), refer to the triple ranking of feudal society: those who fought (*bellatores*), those who worked (*laboratores*), and those who prayed (*oratores*). The latter were those legally and canonically recognised as religious and whose status was loosely allied with the military aristocracy. This was the legal understanding on the eve of the Reformation, while the distinction between those with solemn and those with simple vows – religious and lay respectively - remained the canonical understanding of the Church until the end of the 19th century.

Within this summation lies the broad enviroing context of the books taken for discussion here.

Valerie G. Spear's *Leadership in Medieval Nunneries* takes as its time span 1280 to 1540, roughly from the aftermath of Lateran IV to the effective dissolution of England's religious houses. The women

she deals with are nuns, that is, women canonically of religious status. While taking a broader reference group for comparative purposes, she focuses detailed research on sixteen monastic houses, comprising both abbeys and priories, all under either the Benedictine or Augustinian Rule. (One, Syon Abbey, added the Brigittine constitutions, devised for a community of women, to the Augustinian Rule.) While this is primarily a study of the nature and effectiveness of the leadership exercised by successive abbesses and prioresses – some 240 in all – the author builds a comprehensive picture of female monastic life in England over the period taken.

She begins with the comment: 'The image of the worldly and ineffectual nun, delineated progressively by Eileen Power in *Medieval English Nunneries* and *Medieval People* and recycled by later historians, has been challenged directly or implicitly by a number of scholars' (p.xiii), of whom she gives examples. In the course of her text she returns to this claim, using her own widely spread research as well as corroborating data from these other predominantly contemporary researchers. While instancing specific examples of both effective and ineffective, even disastrous, leadership, she is careful not to imply generalisation until she has established the frequency or otherwise of such instances. Using extant records of the houses themselves, reflecting in particular their economic activity, she has explored a wide range of further documentary evidence, including episcopal registers with their visitation records, account rolls, plea rolls, chancery documents, petitions, medieval literature and the comparative material from the additional nunneries she has surveyed.

Firstly she looks at the election process required in both rules. All professed nuns freely elected their leader - at the time and until later administrative evolution a position held for life - on criteria of which they were the judges. Though vested with theological authority, both rules posited a service style of leadership. However, in practice, its effectiveness depended heavily on the leader's own personal and moral sway. She had also to consult the community on every major initiative and her wishes could be countermanded by a majority vote. As each house was completely independent of other monastic houses, a community was capable of withholding compliance and of outright defiance, of which Spear gives some isolated examples. She notes that experience had led to the Lateran IV legislation that bishops of the dioceses where monasteries were situated were to carry out regular visitations to ensure good order and to detect abuses. They were thus to interview each nun. As Spear realises, various personal stakes and their accompanying dynamics could become involved in this procedure. However, the wide range of such visitation records, together with both qualifying and corroborative other data, has led her to a firm conclusion: most leaders had the backing of, and oversaw, well-ordered communities.

Following her analysis of internal leadership, she next looks at 'Leadership and Lineage', concluding that the great majority of the abbesses and prioresses, particularly later in the period, came from local gentry and mercantile upper bourgeois families rather than the earlier predominating aristocracy – this in itself reflecting shifts in English society. These women remained closely connected with their families and shared their concerns and business acumen, as numerous writs and litigation, together with wills and family exchanges, indicate. Although the houses taken for detailed research differed widely in size, resources and prestige, all were monastic domains with tenants, mills, bakeries, live-stock and pastures of which the abbess/prioress had ultimate oversight. Many monasteries had also various clerical livings within their gift and responsibility. Such monastic communities were in active interaction with their surrounding populations. As well, they offered accommodation to retired women, often at the request of the king or a local patron, while also providing religious and social upbringing for children entrusted to them. With these multifarious demands, most women's monasteries had, in fact, a continual struggle to make ends meet, this requiring considerable business capability in their leadership.

Succeeding chapters deal with monastic leaders in their interaction with external authorities, more immediately the king and, at a further remove, the pope. To both were owed obligations and from both favours could be sought. Despite *Periculoso's* mandating enclosure for all nuns – for which there was mostly acceptance, but some resistance – there were understood occasions when abbesses/prioresses could leave the enclosure. Also, English nuns, with the compliance of their bishops, made home visits of a short specified length, these ensuring further close-knit association with family networks. The abbess of a royal monastery was officially of baronial class; most did not hesitate to defend the rights of the complex estates for which they were responsible.

Though a number of Spear's examples are chosen thematically rather than in chronological sequence, evolution over the centuries taken is perceptible. The chief era for reportage of abuses – some few sexual, most concerned with good order in the community – occurred in the 14th century and especially at the time of the devastating bubonic plague. This was the general European picture, to be followed by reform movements within the various branches of monasticism by the final years of this century. Spear rejects the widespread notion of universal and progressive moral decline among enclosed religious women in the era prior to the English Reformation. The intercessory role of religious – the *oratores* of the feudal socio-political order – remained focal for their patrons through the whole period she examines. 'That such intercession and other services continued to be valued by the secular community', Spear states, 'is clear from a wealth of documentary material, including charters, wills, letters and account rolls.' (p.158) She also states that records at the time of the Dissolution are known to be tainted by the efforts of royal officials to discredit the religious.

However, the era of the Reformation with its religious crises rode on deep-seated social and political change which brought new needs and demanded new responses – now recognised as an interlinked front of adaptation - both from the churches of the reform and from within the old church.

Amy Leonard's *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany* takes us into the heart of the continental Reformation, in practice a more diffuse phenomenon in the various cities of Germany than in the highly centralised monarchy of England. Where Spear claims her study is ungendered, Catherine Stimpson of New York University, editor of the 'Women in Culture and Society' series in which Leonard's book appears, claims in her Foreword that the nuns 'embodied an unacceptable ideology of gender' (p.viii): contrary to the proclaimed message of the reformers, 'they had chosen celibacy over reproductive sexuality and the enclosure of the convent over that of the home'. The title is drawn from Martin Luther's view that a woman is 'like a nail driven into the wall', a vivid metaphor, Stimpson says, 'for her obligation to hold up a heterosexual household in which she is her husband's cherished but obedient, submissive partner'.

Where Spear covers a wide range both geographically and chronologically, Leonard takes as her focus three Dominican convents in Strasbourg over a fairly short time span. With her extensive use of German references and collaborative evidence from English-language works such as Lyndal Roper's *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg*, Clarendon Press, 1989, and Charlotte Woodford's *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Germany*, Clarendon Press, 2002, she establishes that her three communities were not unique in their vigorous retention of their Catholic religious commitment. She explores in depth and detail reasons for their tenacity.

To situate her three convents - St Nicholas-in-Undis, Ss. Margaret and Agnes (the result of an earlier merger) and St Mary Magdalen – Leonard traces the history of the Dominican Order (of which the female branch was actually the earliest) from its origin in the early 13th century. For the women, contrary to the centralised structure created by Dominic for the men, each community remained autonomous under the protective jurisdiction of the local Dominican male provincial. As canonically nuns, they were bound by enclosure; they elected their prioress who, like the Benedictine abbess, was obliged to consult the community regarding any out-of-routine undertaking. Also, like older monastic orders by this date, the community came to be divided into choir and lay members. The former pronounced solemn vows and carried out the *opus Dei* (Work of God) - the canonical hours of the Office- in choir, while the latter, whose role had developed from servants within the monastic domain, made simple vows, hence the appellation 'lay'.

The 14th century saw a low point for the Dominicans as for the other medieval orders. This consisted in relaxation of their constitutions, retention of personal funds and the development of a more individual life-style, which could be accompanied by moral lapses – all symptomatic of a loss of morale and direction in changed circumstances a century after the new religious impulses of the Lateran IV years. By the early 15th century, under vigorous new leaders, came the call to return to origins, to the full earlier observance. Leonard rightly labels this resurgence, evidenced across western Europe and in every monastic family, as the observance reform. It was taken up by some Dominican convents and resisted by others. Leonard's three convents had all adopted the reform, a point she stresses as significant, in the course of the 15th century and were the only Dominican convents to survive in Strasbourg.

These nuns, with the substantial dowry requirements for entry, came from the urban patriciate and wealthy burgher class. As Leonard has traced, the same names appear repeatedly among these daughters of powerful inter-connected families. The close-knit political and social world of the free imperial city of Strasbourg, she discovered, was replicated in its female Dominican communities – to become a bulwark when extinction threatened.

She next turns to the theories of Protestant reformers on the non-utility of the cloister, basing her analysis on numerous pamphlets, beginning with Luther's, and the many preserved letters of Protestant family members to daughters and sisters they sought to entice out of the convent. These arguments portrayed monastic life as having no scriptural warrant, the solemn vows of religion (upheld by law) as contrary to Christian freedom and the long hours spent in religious exercises as wasteful and useless. Instead, all women should marry and care for Christian households, adding to this care of their neighbours. In the extant replies, the nuns answered with equal spirit, defending their choice and the right to make it. As Leonard carefully distinguishes, the German situation differed basically from the English: Luther himself proved ambiguous in his evaluation of the worth of religious communities. Where a centralised government and a ruthless public policy were able, in a few years, to effect complete destruction in England, each German city, under its municipal council, made its own decisions, with the prudent compromises demanded by the checks and balances in any local socio-political situation.

It would seem, in fact, reading the pamphlet literature, that the desire was to *secularise* the communities rather than destroy them, to eliminate the high civic and canonical status that had evolved over centuries and to produce a Christianity based on a common lay spirituality. The monasteries, it was claimed (erroneously), were originally schools for the young but became perverted into fostering a false pseudo-religious caste system. A number of religious houses were hence allowed to survive, including Strasbourg's three Dominican convents, as they became more broadly engaged in an emerging 16th century style of education for women (which was also beginning to be implemented, for example, among new religious life initiatives in France).

Leonard next traces the actual experiences of the three convents as Strasbourg's reformers confronted them. The city's influential bourgeoisie, principally under the influence of Martin Bucer, had gone over to the reform movement by the mid-1520s. As she observes, 'For the majority of monastery and convent residents, the council's mixture of pressure, bribery' – through the offer of generous pensions – 'propaganda, and outright force (at least towards the men) was effective'. (p.74) But her Dominican women fought back; they were not daughters of the city (p.10) for nothing. In their resistance, they evidenced a remarkable political astuteness, now playing their cards as vulnerable women, now calling successfully on the Catholic emperors, under whose general jurisdiction Strasbourg lay in a highly volatile political and military situation. They successfully rejected even Bucer's personal attempts to sway them. Meanwhile, prominent Strasbourg citizens continued to send their daughters to the convents for education and, further, allowed them to continue entering these communities.

Leonard situates her study within a perceptive and well referenced analysis of the Reformation in Germany and sees her work as significant for a fuller grasp of the social history of the time. For example, she raises the issues of how far the Protestant programme penetrated city life and exactly what adherence to the new religion entailed, especially when it was challenged by these women. The council's willingness to compromise in the daily give and take of urban affairs, she claims, modifies theories of rigid confessionalisation in the German situation. However, in 1592, in the case of one convent, St Nicholas-in-Undis, the council's patience ran out.

The Peace of Augsburg had led to increasing Catholic confidence in an Alsace which had remained two thirds Catholic, while the prioress of this convent became more publicly outspoken in her views. Also – a key factor as Leonard sees it – was disunity in her community: the solidarity of the convent communities was another significant feature in their successful resistance. A disaffected clique first raised a charge of misuse of convent funds, then went on to charges of sexual misconduct on the part of some of the nuns with the barber-surgeon during his calls to the infirmary. An escalating series of further charges developed, no doubt from a core of some truth, into a witch hunt style of judicial enquiry whose true dimensions are now lost. The community was forced to disband with provision made for a number of the nuns to continue their religious life at Ss. Margaret and Agnes. This convent

and St Mary Magdalen then continued their peaceful and useful existence within the city until the French conquest in 1681, when the nuns were there to welcome Louis XIV and to witness the public restoration of Catholic practice.

Both Spear and Leonard are meticulous researchers and, with others, are raising the bar in this field of study. Leonard, however, in discussing resemblances and contrasts between the active continuance of Catholic convents in Reformation Germany and in post-Trent Catholicism, offers some interpretations now beginning to be questioned. (Here she is relying on secondary sources, some of which she acknowledges as qualifying widely received generalisations.) The recently published – and academically rigorous – books I have mentioned all use a contemplative/active differential to explain differing life-styles and spiritual/pastoral aims of the religious institutes taken for study. They stress the opposition of the Tridentine Church to any form of active apostolate for religiously committed celibate women, which Leonard also tends to accept. Historically, however, from Lateran IV in 1215, the operative differential was between those women with solemn vows and those with simple. Only the former were canonically religious and bound to enclosure. Those with simple, that is, essentially private, vows were free to form associations and carry out active works. As we have seen, there were many forms of such associations in medieval times.

Because of the charges of abuse levelled by the Protestant reformers against religious communities, Trent endorsed the legislation of Lateran IV especially with regard to enclosure. This was reinforced in 1566 by Pius V in his document *Circa pastoralis* which was addressed primarily to tertiaries, lay members of a number of religious orders whose vows were hence simple. They were sternly warned to adopt the enclosure of canonical nuns or unambiguously evidence their lay status. It was a case of legal demarcation in an area that had become socially confused as lay communities tended to adopt practices in dress and life-style of recognised religious.

Following Trent, as Leonard recognises and as **Barbara B. Diefendorf explores in her *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris*, Oxford University Press, 2004**, many communities of women, such as the Ursulines in France (of whom the pre-eminent Paris Ursulines owed only a tangential derivation to Angela Merici) actively sought enclosure with legal recognition as nuns. At the same time, within their enclosure, they extended the practice of medieval cloister schools to encompass wide-scale, pedagogically planned education for girls on the educational model of the newly founded Jesuits.

While cases did occur of pressure for some newly founded communities, such as Francis de Sales' Visitandines to accept enclosure (and which a churchman of the stature of Robert Bellarmine advised against), there was no effort or intention of imposing enclosure on the Italian Ursulines who continued either singly or in communities to carry out their pastoral and charitable works under simple vows and the general jurisdiction of local bishops. From early in the 17th century an efflorescence of such groups began to appear, especially in France. Vincent de Paul warned his Sisterhood of Charity, founded 1633, that they were not to adopt a conventual mode of living in case they were challenged for that reason to become canonically nuns. This was by no means a lone case; scores of such simple-vow congregations, as they came to be called, arose in the course of the century. For legal recognition of their corporate identity, they secured the approbation of the local bishop and the local civic authority.

After the cataclysm of the French Revolution, when religious communities were dissolved by the state – and the Dominican convents in Strasbourg finally disappeared – literally hundreds of new simple-vow congregations emerged in France alone, with the same phenomenon occurring in other countries. In the changing and industrialising world of the 19th century, they undertook all forms of social alleviation as well as extended involvement in popular education. As they crossed diocesan boundaries, often an occasion of conflict with local bishops, and began to expand internationally, Rome recognised the need to accord them a form of supra-diocesan approbation. The first such Roman approval of a simple-vow non-enclosed congregation was given in 1816. With this recognition the status of simple-vow communities rose, almost all of which were highly centralised. It was only in 1900, however, in Leo XIII's document *Conditae a Christo*, that they were recognised as canonically religious. By this time, their members had become the most widely known female religious, far exceeding the old monastic orders in numbers and public visibility.

Into this category come the subjects of the third book listed above: ***We Agreed to be Different: Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy 1960-2000***. Commissioned by the congregation and written by two Dutch social historians, this detailed book is best situated in the genre of objective documentation. With extensive use of archives, oral history and documented observations, the text is further clarified with frequent illustrations, including clear graphs and maps of each region to which these Sisters went. After a brief summary of the founding and previous history of the congregation, covered in an earlier book, *It All Began with Three Beguines* by Alix van de Molengraft, this study traces its response to the new environment, the shifting social understandings and the changing Church of the post-1960 era. It documents in detail the decisions and actions of both the central executive of the congregation and of members in their world-wide locations. It does not venture into interpretation beyond what is factually evident.

The founding women of the congregation, three beguines as they are described, were invited to Tilburg in the Netherlands in 1832 by Joannes Zwijsen, a pastor there, to begin a school for the children of poor textile workers – a typical beginning for a local, active, non-enclosed, simple-vow institute. Zwijsen, later Archbishop of Utrecht, continued his patronage and guidance as the small Sisterhood attracted further members and spread. He formulated its constitutions, leading to papal approbation in 1848, by which time it had a number of branch houses operating as a corporate body on his authorisation. Within 25 years of foundation there were over 700 members spread in 50 communities. They soon became involved in a variety of works: elementary and further education; social care, including schools for the handicapped; teacher training; hospitals, many of them large institutions; retirement homes; and, increasingly, overseas missionary work. They developed into the largest Dutch women's congregation and, in 1940, achieved their peak membership of 4,300.

International expansion saw communities founded in Belgium, Great Britain and Ireland, the United States, Indonesia and Surinam in South America by the mid-1890s, to be followed in the 20th century by Germany, Brazil, The Philippines and Italy, the latter with the transfer of the generalate to Rome. This spread was pioneered by enterprising, strong and socially aware Dutch women whose central administration ran a 'tight ship'. Like most simple-vow institutes, with their generally humbler origins, there were no lay Sisters as in the older monasticism. Also by this date, all entrants were literate and underwent an intensive training programme, to be developed and adjusted as secular governments in the course of the 19th century entered the educational field with legally enacted requirements.

Zwijsen's constitutions, in keeping with many others of the time, demanded asceticism and a high degree of uniformity. They were followed unfailingly until the close of the World War II years. By then, there were winds of social change, especially in Europe, of which the Church was aware. In 1950, Pius XII convened the first of several international gatherings of women religious in Rome at which he urged updating in dress and customs, more adaptation to the demands of the time and further professional training for increasing public standards in their areas of involvement.

As for many other congregations following this direct appeal, changes began to be made in dress (for many, very minor, but for these Dutch administrators quite apparent). The constitutions were revised in 1960, ahead of the Vatican Council's call in 1965, with old customs being rapidly adjusted or abolished.

The post-Vatican years progressively brought more radical change for these Sisters of Charity. In a broad sweep, this parallels the experience of women's congregations throughout the Western Church. With the initiation of national conferences of the leaders of religious institutes and an international conference meeting regularly in Rome, congregations were well in touch with what others were doing, while not all marched in equal step. This Dutch congregation, with by this time a good representation of non-Dutch members, was in the forefront of change. Interestingly, it was only in the USA that a splinter group – comprising most of the Sisters there – refused to adapt at the same pace and formed instead a separate congregation. Throughout the book, comments of Sisters are included in boxes; one of these has suggested the title, 'We Agreed to be Different' (p.285), here meaning 'to accept differences' as more individualistic personal life-styles emerged.

These Sisters of Charity, like others, saw falling entries and a number of withdrawals of professed members. Tables from 1960 to 2005 (pp.338-41) chart yearly changes in membership as this fell from 3800 in 1960 to 941 in 2005. Figures are given for the individual countries, from some of which the

congregation withdrew. Only in Indonesia and The Philippines, with the entry of local women, was there an increase: from 50 (1960) to 220 (2005) and from 2 (1991) to 21 (2005), respectively. This reflects a general phenomenon for religious institutes in developing countries. In the final paragraph of the Epilogue (p.335), one Sister states: '...Our work is done. We answered the need when there was need in 1832, and I think we fulfilled that need. There are so many things now people can do, that they don't need religious to do'.

A number expressed hope for the future of religious life, but in a different form – as has happened in each period of climactic change in the past.

The final two books, while the writers are academic women, are aimed at a wider, less exclusively academic readership than would appear to be the interested clientele for the first two. They also include religiously affiliated women other than Catholic religious.

In *Religious Women and Their History: Breaking the Silence*, the first contributor, Phil Kilroy in 'The writing of religious women's history: Madeleine Sophie Barat (1779-1865)' draws on her searching biography, *Madeleine Sophie Barat 1779-1865: A Life*, Cork University Press, 2000. In this article, she seeks to situate Barat in the context of her time and in particular within the burgeoning development of new female religious communities in France from the beginning of the 19th century: 'Sophie Barat was part of that impulse and energy' (p.12) which saw 35 new communities emerge, including her own in 1800, between 1800 and 1820 and a further six yearly on average, 1820-80. By the time of Barat's death in 1865, her institute numbered 3,359 members with 89 houses spread across the world. Kilroy deals in particular with Barat's inner spiritual journey and the essentially spiritual motivation of her exceptionally gifted and respected leadership, held as a life assignment. A reference to Mary Ward (p.190) requires a further clarification: Ward's dilemma stemmed from her seeking full legal recognition as religious (that is, solemn vows) but without the recent Tridentine re-affirmation of the enclosure entailed for women. Her institute was free to begin and spread on episcopal approbation and, after the lifting of the excommunication pronounced against her, to continue as a simple-vow group, even within Rome itself.

Rosemary Raughter's 'Pious occupations: female activism and the Catholic revival in eighteenth-century Ireland' deals primarily with two outstanding women, Nano Nagle (1718-84) and Teresa Mulally (1728-1803). The first in Cork and the second in Dublin – and later in contact with each other - initiated the teaching of poor children and a programme of general poor relief while the anti-papery penal laws were still on the statute books but lapsing in practical application. Courage, however, was still required to test the waters. As Raughter points out, Mulally's principal supporters were well-to-do Catholic women, while Nagle was extensively helped by her own wealthy family. (While deprived of civic liberties, many Catholic families amassed wealth through their Continental trading ties.) Nagle's many-faceted relief work led to her founding the Presentation Order, while Mulally, who remained a laywoman, sought and eventually obtained a Presentation community to take over her Dublin school.

Again, a clarification: of the six independent Presentation communities founded by 1800, all, in collaboration, sought solemn-vow status, with acceptance of the mandatory enclosure, despite the opposition of Bishop Moylan of Cork who eventually bowed to their wish and obtained this for them. In the Cork convent annals, they clearly state their reason: 'We form at present but merely a religious society making annual [simple] vows – one which may in time under existing circumstances fall to the ground ...'. They sought a legally guaranteed status, as the understanding then was, for the stability of their work. The exchange of correspondence with Rome makes clear that Rome itself by this date, in view of changing legislation being enacted by national governments, no longer wished to grant solemn vows. The *utrumque ius* was breaking down; solemn vows remained prohibited in France, for example, from the time of the Revolution. Granted to the Presentations in 1805, this appears the final case for according solemn vows to an institute of actively involved religious, despite some later applications for this status.

Suellen Hoy, the one American contributor, in her 'Discovering Irish nuns in the nineteenth-century United States: the case of Chicago', deals with the many works of social alleviation, as well as education, undertaken in Chicago by Irish Mercy Sisters who first arrived there in 1846, the only female religious community for the next ten years. She focuses particularly on the capable leadership of Sister Agatha O'Brien who, though educated, had entered as a lay Sister because her large family

could not afford a dowry. The bishop of Pittsburg, where she arrived in 1844 with the USA's first group of Mercy Sisters, recognised her potential – declaring she was 'capable of ruling a nation' – and effected her elevation to choir status. She laid the foundation of Chicago's Mercy Hospital and the academy that has become today's St Xavier University.

Well researched contributions of particular interest are Janice Holmes' 'Gender, public disorder and the Salvation Army in Ireland, 1880-82' and Myrtle Hill's 'Women's work for women': the Irish Presbyterian Zenana Mission, 1874-1914'. Both retrieve little known involvements, at least beyond their own denominations and country, of the committed women who undertook these missions. In the first case, the Englishwomen who sought to bring the Salvation Army's type of evangelisation to Ulster and discovered unforeseen problems, pre-dated male Salvation Army presence there. In the second, Hill deals with the women who comprised the Zanana Mission founded in 1874 to recruit and support single female teachers and medical workers for the purpose of 'promoting Christianity among the women of the East' (p.82), in particular India, with a further outreach to China. In the brief period dealt with in the first article, 35 Salvation Army women, predominantly young and single, came to Ireland, while in the second, by 1914, 101 Irishwomen had been sent to India and China.

Both contributions raise the issues of class, gender and ethnicity in these missionary endeavours, stressing both the enterprise of these committed women and the advantages, as well as restrictions, their gender imposed. In Ulster, the Salvation Army pioneers, whose methods were seen as intrusive and causing public disturbance by the religious denominations entrenched there, were saved from physical attack only by their gender while, in India, the well educated, more middle class Presbyterian mission volunteers found a higher status and freer world in which to minister, for example as doctors, than in their home country. Both authors illustrate that women's religiously motivated commitment was as much a feature of 19th century Protestant women as of their Catholic counterparts, evidence of a wider religious phenomenon which still begs, in female historiography, a deeper and more nuanced analysis.

Maria Luddy, author of *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-century Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, has contributed the final article, 'Convent archives as sources for Irish history', detailing many issues in Ireland's social history on which convent records can throw fuller light as, for example, the network of families which produced the convent vocations. 'Through convent archives', she convincingly claims, 'we can also study the history of Irish society generally, using a wide variety of techniques and disciplines.' (p.106) Such research, as in the first two books reviewed here, will lead not only to a more comprehensive understanding of what female religious life was about, but will offer valuable insights into the societies with which the women interacted. (I have attempted a similar plea in my recently published article, 'Irish Women Religious and Nineteenth Century Australian Social History', in *The Australian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol.5, 2005.)

The book closes with a short evocative poem, 'J'ai mal à nos dents', by Irish poetess Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, capturing telling memories of her aunt who had joined a French Franciscan community in Calais and was there when the Germans invaded in the First World War. She sees both bathos and a realistic heroism in her aunt's life.

It is difficult to assign an historical genre to **Anne O'Brien's *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia***, beyond placing it within a broadly feminist social history canon. Her own views of what should be and shouldn't be come through clearly while, with numerous references to, and quotations from, a variety of sources, she seeks to express a balance. However, the cogency and representative value of the sources are left to the reader's own knowledge and judgement. The book contains much that is very valuable, especially as it seeks to chart the allegiances, the motivations and the rejections of Australian women over the past 200 plus years with respect to religion and the denominations within which many were nurtured.

The author's observations are developed in four demarcated sections, encompassing nine chapters. After a preliminary chapter covering the early decades, 1788-1880, Part I deals with 'Women in the Church, 1880-1960', especially re religion and domesticity where ambiguities are highlighted and deficiencies in the institutional churches pinpointed. Part II explores the experiences and reactions of 'Willing Protestant Workers, 1880-1960', covering both home missionaries and the considerable overseas missionary involvement of a number of these Australian women. O'Brien is especially

illuminating in her coverage and analysis of missionary work among Australian Aborigines, a field of particular interest to her. Part III, 'Catholic Nuns, 1880-1960', again by means of much quotation, looks at the presence and impact of Catholic female religious and the reactions engendered in a variety of commentators by their type of religiosity and activity. Part IV, 'The Revolution and After, 1960-2004', in its discussion of 'Women, Religion and Feminism', makes clear the author's own agenda: she seeks to convey her conviction both that religion has always been influential, in however understated a public way, in Australia, and that women continue to seek spiritual values, often oriented by a childhood religious affiliation they have now rejected.

This latter is a chapter which merits careful reading, whatever the stance of the reader and whatever the degree of agreement with the book's final statement: 'Like many in the past they [the women she is speaking of] have been touched by the theologies of inclusion and equality at the heart of Christian teaching while living in a society where social hierarchies surround them. They have not relinquished the desire to eradicate those hierarchies. That desire must be the hope that sustains us'. (p.263)

Because so much of the content of the book is presented in samples, which an informed reader may accept or qualify, I shall confine my own qualifications to the section on Catholic nuns (a term O'Brien herself recognises as a popular, not accurate, usage). She takes as her representative samples four institutes whose administrative centres are all in Sydney: the Sisters of Charity; the Sisters of Mercy, where she draws her data almost solely from the Sydney-based two out of Australia's seventeen independent Mercy congregations; the Josephite congregation based in Sydney; and the Good Samaritan Sisters. These, she says, by 1950 accounted for more than half of the total number of women religious in Australia. The source quoted indicates the Presentation Sisters as the third in this list, in place of the Charity Sisters. These four owed their numerical strength to their preparedness to spread through diocesan networks of parish schools while, for others, their chosen work was more demarcated.

Re the repeated assertion, based on the selected cases, that rural vocations exceeded urban, a wider sampling would be desirable. (In the Queensland Presentation congregation, founded in Longreach in 1900, of the Australia-based entrants 1900-60, 67 out of 109 came from Brisbane (63) and Sydney (4), although the novitiate remained in Longreach until 1953!) For those who have studied convents in rural areas, the hypothesis that many women may have entered because there were few suitable Irish men to accept as marriage partners seems unlikely, especially in the absence of any specific evidence. In every rural area, as for other ethnic groups, the Irish sector was pyramidal in its social gradations.

The statement, 'all professed sisters could vote for the Superior, but once in office the Superior had total power to choose her council' (p.185), requires qualification. This procedure held in old constitutions evolved for single autonomous houses (and was non-endorsed in the 1917 Code of Canon Law). Mostly these older constitutions also stated that for the remaining office-bearers the superior, when elected, proposed names, for or against which the chapter members then voted. Communities were capable of rejecting those proposed, in which case another name had to be submitted and the voting repeated. However, in the great majority of the women's congregations present in Australia by the 1950s, the procedure evolved for centralised institutes operated: the major superior and her council members were all directly elected by the chapter. There is also no mention of the considerable involvement of 'non-missionary' Catholic women's institutes in overseas missions following Pius XII's call for such involvement after the Second World War.

It is regrettable to have to make these observations, to which several more could be added such as the occasional inaccurate date (for example, 1880, not 1900, for Leo XIII's significant document, *Conditae a Christo*, according canonical status as religious for the first time to simple-vow Sisters). The chief reservation of this reviewer, however, is that selected examples, without further situating, can easily be taken as the norm. The emphasis of this review has been to situate the given titles or, where relevant, contained articles, within an historically developmental overview of the evolution of women's religious institutes in Western Catholicism. In particular, the writer draws attention to the relevance of legal definitions and categories which have influenced this evolution, by both shaping and bounding, and which remain in a fluid state today.

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