

Catholic nuns in transnational mission, 1528–2015*

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Abstract

From the Counter-Reformation to the present, women in a variety of contexts of colonization, decolonization, and slavery crossed the threshold from missionary congregation to missionary workforce to live in Catholic religious community. Comparative, transnational analysis provides insights from a variety of angles into the myriad local factors that fashioned their understandings of the relationship between the spiritual and material benefits so gained. Their experiences were uneven, shaped by the race, gender, and status politics of each ecclesiastical and secular context, by their usefulness to the wider missionary project and the state, and by shifts in ecclesiastical rulings that were prompted by changes in the Vatican's temporal status. In the later twentieth century, some became activists and advocates, using their symbolic power to work in the interests of women and poor people, and to reform the patriarchy at the core of the church.

Keywords Catholic, colonialism, feminism, nuns, slavery, transnational

Introduction

As a case study at the intersection of transnational and gender history, Catholic nuns have much to offer. Members of arguably the oldest transnational organization, one with universalist aspirations as well as a wide variety of local manifestations, their history, particularly when studied comparatively, can enrich global history by providing a gendered dimension often omitted from studies of the Catholic Church and a Catholic perspective frequently missing from the history of women missionaries.

In a contribution to this journal, Merry Wiesner-Hanks argued that there has been relatively little intersection between transnational and gender history, though one field where

* I would like to thank Alanna Harris, Kathleen Sprows Cummings, and Carmen Mangion for their invitation to address 'The Nun in the World' conference, at the London Global Gateway of the University of Notre Dame, USA in 2015. Though this article bears little resemblance to that address, the invitation prompted me to return to the subject and to think about its transnational implications. I would also like to thank my colleague Peter Ross, the editors of the *Journal of Global History*, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

gender is making an impact is in studies of colonialism and imperialism.¹ Within this field, however, the work of Catholic nuns remains, as Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock have argued, 'one of the less understood areas of research'.² And yet, while this is true of studies of the British empire, significant new research on nuns in Latin America and early modern Europe has emerged in the two last decades, as well as studies of nuns in early modern Asia.³ These complicate understandings of 'mission', inviting conversations of longer duration and wider span. After the Reformation, Catholic 'mission' meant ministering not only to 'pagans' outside Europe who had never been exposed to Catholicism, but also to Christians outside the Western Catholic Church and to the faithful overseas.⁴ Further, recent work on early modern nuns rejects the sharp dichotomy between the contemplative and the active life, arguing that sixteenth-century mystics in enclosed convents understood the cloister as a site of missionary vocation.⁵

This new research offers the opportunity for comparative transnational studies. Here Jo Ann McNamara's *Sisters in arms* (1996) was a pioneer. Vast in scope and brilliantly written, this book, like much of the feminist historiography that 'discovered' nuns in the 1990s, tended to the celebratory. But it put women at the centre of 2,000 years of church history and, following Martha Vicinus' *Independent women*, it declared single women living in community as worthy of serious research. Since then other historians have brought close analytical focus to different global perspectives on nuns. Siobhan Nelson's *Say little, do much* (2001) explored the history of nursing sisters in nineteenth-century Canada, Australia, and the United States, crossing the confessional divide to draw out similarities in their experience with the first German deaconesses. Silvia Evangelisti's *Nuns: a history of convent life* (2007) provided a colonial dimension to the history of early modern nuns in western Europe by including their missions in New Spain and New France. A collection edited by Carmen Mangion and Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Gender, Catholicism and spirituality* (2011), retained the focus on Britain and Europe but traversed the temporal barriers between medieval, early modern, and modern convents.⁶

This article seeks to contribute to the transnational historiography of nuns by drawing together recent research that focuses primarily on colonized women, African American

1 Merry Wiesner-Hanks, 'Crossing borders in transnational gender history', *Journal of Global History*, 6, 2011, pp. 357–79.

2 Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, 'Women and cultural exchanges', in Norman Etherington, *Missions and empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 p. 189.

3 On Europe, see the bibliography and notes in Laurence Lux-Sterritt and Carmen M. Mangion, eds., *Gender, Catholicism and spirituality: women and the Roman Catholic Church in Britain and Europe, 1200–1900*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. On Latin America, see Margaret Chowning, 'Convents and nuns: new approaches to the study of female religious institutions in colonial Mexico', *History Compass*, 6, 5, 2008, pp. 1279–1303; Brianna Leavitt-Alcantara, 'Holy women and hagiography in colonial Spanish America', *History Compass*, 12, 9, 2014, pp. 717–28. On Asia, see Haruko Nawata Ward, *Women religious leaders in Japan's Christian century, 1549–1650*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009; Nhung Tuyet Tran, 'Les Amantes de la Croix: an early modern Vietnamese sisterhood', in Gisele Bousquet and Nora Taylor, eds., *Le Viet Nam au féminin*, Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2005, pp. 51–66.

4 Etherington, *Missions and empire*, p. 262.

5 Laurence Lux-Sterritt and Carmen M. Mangion, 'Introduction', in Lux-Sterritt and Mangion, *Gender, Catholicism and spirituality*, pp. 1–18.

6 Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996; Martha Vicinus, *Independent women: work and community for single women 1850–1920*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985; Siobhan Nelson, *Say little, do much: nurses, nuns, and hospitals in the nineteenth century*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001; Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: a history of convent life 1450–1700*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; Lux-Sterritt and Mangion, *Gender, Catholicism and spirituality*.

women, and women in early modern Asia, who went from being subjects to being agents of Catholic mission. Focusing on non-European nuns in the age of European imperialism provides insights from ‘below’ into two major fields in imperial and colonial history – gender and missions. Recent research in these fields has sought to transcend binaries between victimhood and agency, colonized and colonizer: studies of women and gender see the status of agent and victim ‘not at two poles and mutually exclusive’ but existing in ‘inter-related space’;⁷ studies of missions reject the assumption that missionary Christianity was ‘a reflex of imperialism’, emphasizing its ambiguous effects and the ways in which it was shaped by its subjects.⁸ Studies of convents and nuns have also moved beyond the dichotomy between patriarchy and empowerment; some have argued that putting spirituality at the core of analysis can decentre patriarchy.⁹ At the same time, recent national inquiries into children in Catholic institutions have stimulated studies that restore the significance of nuns’ subjugation within the church, arguing that at worst the spirituality of self-sacrifice gave rise to contexts abusive of the children and women in their care.¹⁰ These divergent trends point to the value of a long, comparative, transnational approach focusing on women who crossed the threshold from the missionary congregation to the missionary workforce. Holding narratives of universalism in tension with micro-histories of specific sites, it can offer insights from a variety of angles into the multiple operations of the intimate missionary frontier.

Two main questions draw on research from the Counter-Reformation to the present. First, why did women become nuns and how did changing relationships between race, social status, class, and colonization shape their opportunities? Second, how did they influence church teachings while remaining subject to them, and how were their contributions shaped by their changing relationships with states and their role as cultural brokers? There is no attempt to be comprehensive here: the case studies chosen reflect the desire for breadth of comparison and a sampling of recent literature.¹¹ Taking a broadly but not strictly chronological approach, the analysis is arranged around shifts in Catholic rulings and the dynamics of imperialism. The first section focuses on Vietnam and Japan during the Counter-Reformation, sites where there was no formal empire and where local women converts were valuable evangelists, paradoxically at a time when Catholic reformers in Europe sought to strengthen female monastic enclosure. The second section compares missionary encounters in the early stages of development of two colonies, Mexico and New Zealand – before resources were diverted from Indigenes – and discusses their contrasting legacies. The third section deals with settler societies during the period from the French Revolution to the Second Vatican Council, noting the loss of the Vatican states as a turning point: it examines the creation of Afro-American orders in

7 Claire C. Robertson and Nupur Chaudhui, ‘Editors’ note: revising the experiences of colonized women: beyond binaries’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 14, 4, 2003, p. 12.

8 Etherington, *Missions and empire*, p. 1; Jason Bruner, ‘British missions and missionaries in the high imperial era, c. 1857–1914’, in Robert Aldrich and Kirsten McKenzie, eds., *The Routledge history of Western empires*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, p. 1005.

9 Chowning, ‘Convents and nuns’, p. 1293; Lux-Sterritt and Mangion, *Gender, Catholicism and spirituality*.

10 Anneliese van Heijst, ‘The disputed charity of Catholic nuns: dualistic spiritual heritage as a source of affliction’, *Feminist Theology*, 21, 2, 2012, pp. 155–72; Jo-Anne Fiske, ‘Spirited subjects and wounded souls: political representations on an im/moral frontier’, in Myra Rutherdale and Katie Pickles, eds., *Contact zones: Aboriginal and settler women in Canada’s colonial past*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005; Nicola Yeates, ‘The Irish Catholic female religious and the transnationalisation of care: an historical perspective’, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 19, 2, 2011, p. 77–93; David Pilgrim, ‘Child abuse in Irish Catholic settings: a non-reductionist account’, *Child Abuse Review*, 21, 2012, pp. 405–13.

11 Comparison with Buddhist nuns would also offer rich insights but space does not permit here.

the United States in the context of early nineteenth-century Catholic revival; and the employment of nuns in Canada and Australia from the late nineteenth century on government-sponsored missions in the context of geopolitical race anxiety and ultramontane assertion. The final section deals with the years after the Second Vatican Council, using case studies from Africa, the Philippines, and Australia to examine how the influence of feminism and liberation theology saw nuns moving into the public sphere as activists and advocates for the first time. It analyses the Vatican's backlash against feminism from the 1990s in the context of the shift in the demographic locus of the church to the global South.

Advocates of the *longue durée* have long proclaimed its ethical imperative. For David Christian, who pioneered the teaching of world history some thirty years ago, a global perspective is a means of fostering a sense of shared humanity that might act as a bulwark against 'the likelihood of catastrophic conflict'.¹² More recently, Jo Guldo and David Armitage issued a *History manifesto* calling on historians to 'speak truth to power', arguing that knowledge of the *longue durée* offers the unique opportunity to do so. While it was criticized for its method and tendency to overstatement, the serious intent of this work and the debate it generated speaks to historians of the Catholic world.¹³ In the last twenty years victims of abuse, feminist theologians, dissidents, openly gay Catholics, and lay activists have become new actors who, in a context of the church's lost legitimacy following inquiries into abuse, have worked in some measure to 'provincialize Rome'.¹⁴ Church teachings on gender, sexuality, and women's reproductive rights, however, continue to rebound negatively on children, women, gays, and the world's poorest people, particularly in countries where, as Rosemary Radford Ruether has put it, 'Catholic power has a significant presence'.¹⁵ The present pope's efforts to reform some aspects of the Vatican show a willingness to change and, though manifest less in relation to gender than other areas, add to the timeliness of big history's insights.

Japan and Vietnam and the Counter-Reformation

Following the Reformation, the gathering of souls on new fields of mission and the control of women were integral to the Vatican's campaign of advancing its moral and territorial ambitions after the losses in north-western Europe. The contours of this history are well established. Women had long been seen as in need of protection and predisposed towards sin, but after the Council of Trent (1545–63) and its heated debates over clerical celibacy, preachers and confessors became increasingly preoccupied with containing women.¹⁶ New laws were passed tightening the rules of enclosure and stipulating that convents be subordinate to the general chapters of their corresponding male order.¹⁷ These laws 'became an obsession'

12 David Christian, 'History and global identity', in Stuart Macintyre, ed., *The historian's conscience: Australian historians on the ethics of history*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004, p. 140.

13 Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The history manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014 (text updated 2015).

14 Adapted from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

15 Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Women, reproductive rights and the Catholic Church', *Feminist Theology*, 16, 2, 2008, pp. 184–93. See some changes in the Philippines, however, in Esperanza Cabal, 'Reproductive health law in the Philippines', *Journal of the ASEAN Federation of Endocrine Societies*, 28, 1, 2013, pp. 26–9.

16 Elizabeth Rapley, *The dévotes: women and church in seventeenth-century France*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990, p. 4.

17 Evangelisti, *Nuns*, p. 44.

for many Catholic rulers but the extent to which they were applied is unclear. Some convents of aristocratic Europe continued to be used by nuns for networking and conducting family business, often enjoying visits from the monarch, state councillors, and papal nuncios.¹⁸

Further, despite efforts to strengthen the cloister, the Counter-Reformation saw the emergence of new active orders, keen to participate in the re-Catholicization of the world. Christian women had worked in forms of ‘quasi-religious life’ since antiquity but in the late Middle Ages they flocked to them.¹⁹ Beguines in northern Italy and *beatas* on the Iberian peninsula took simple vows and engaged in various works of charity. Many were married women or widows who had no desire to enter formal religion or who were unable to do so because of low birth or lack of wealth.²⁰ What distinguished the initiatives of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from older forms was that they sought admission to the church’s ‘inner life’ while working in the world.²¹ In their first round, most were either reined in or quashed altogether. The Ursulines, who began their active works in 1544 while living independently, were gradually institutionalized, though they became teachers within enclosure.²² Mary Ward, who modelled her ‘Institute of English Ladies’ on the Jesuits, refused to submit to enclosure, after which her institute was abolished and she was imprisoned. By 1700, however, the ‘religious energy’ of hundreds of women had opened up a new form of religious life to women – the uncloistered active congregation. They had founded ‘a massive complex of charitable institutions and hospitals’ in France. One of the earliest, the Daughters of Charity, recruited sisters from the peasantry and the urban lower class; they were willing to do the hard manual work of ‘washing and medicating diseased bodies’ and they filled an enormous need: by 1660, they had 51 houses; by the eve of the French Revolution, 439.²³

In the new missions in Asia, local women converts embraced Christian evangelism with a degree of authority and freedom at variance with Tridentine reforms. Recent research on Vietnam and Japan reveals similarities in the conditions of conversion. In Vietnam, political turmoil and the diversity of existing traditions – the ‘triple flower’ of Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Taoism – meant that local populations were more receptive to Christianity than they were in either Siam or Malacca.²⁴ Japan’s ‘Christian century’ (1549–1650) was similarly the product of a turbulent transitional period where feudal lords in over sixty kingdoms fought for land, and women ‘lived precariously’ as marriage was used to broker strategic alliances.²⁵ Perceptions of Christianity as ‘a healing religion’ were doubtless appealing to women at a time when, as Barbara Watson Andaya has put it, ‘every conception was a potential death knell’.²⁶ The communities of women that arose in these regions shared a range of characteristics: they built on existing traditions of female leadership; they were initiated by female converts; noblewomen were important patrons but they attracted women

18 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

19 Marit Monteiro, ‘Power in piety: inspiration, ambition and strategies of spiritual virgins in the Northern Netherlands during the seventeenth century’, in Lux-Sterritt and Mangion, *Gender, Catholicism and spirituality*, p. 119.

20 Jacqueline Holler, *Escogidas plantas: nuns and beatas in Mexico City, 1531–1601*, ACLS Humanities E-book electronic edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, para. 21.

21 Rapley, *Dévotes*, p. 5.

22 Evangelisti, *Nuns*, p. 210.

23 Rapley, *Dévotes*, pp. 193, 6–7.

24 Tara Alberts, *Conflict and conversion: Catholicism in Southeast Asia, 1500–1700*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 5, 72–83.

25 Ward, *Women religious leaders*, p. 5.

26 Barbara Watson Andaya, *The flaming womb: repositioning women in early modern Southeast Asia*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006, pp. 95–6.

across the social spectrum; and they provided a refuge from local men. Missionaries were warned to 'exercise extreme caution' when dealing with the 'pagan' women of the East Indies; reports of their 'insatiable sexuality' were common.²⁷ In the face of these fears, missionaries could envisage women playing a leading role in evangelization and female converts were highly prized.

Despite these similarities, recent research has emphasized the different appeal of Christian community to women in these two areas. From her reading of the daily accounts of the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris (MEP) in Vietnam, Nhung Tuyet Tran concludes that poor and marginalized women were the main adherents of the early church and that those who joined the Amantes de la Croix did so as a 'survival mechanism against the pressures of subsistence agricultural life and gendered expectations in seventeenth-century An Nam'. Living in community and pooling their resources gave them access to housing, education, and various forms of mutual aid not otherwise available.²⁸ The conversion of highborn converts, many of whom were women, was essential to the mission's precarious status, but its female evangelists were largely poor women living in clandestine community. Their work as leaders, teachers, preachers, and catechists gave them a mobility they would not have had in family life. Tran argues that conversion to Catholicism continued or increased their agency and authority rather than introducing it.²⁹ It built on patterns of female leadership in Buddhist and Taoist traditions where important female deities and ritual specialists undermined Confucian models of female piety and obedience to male relatives; and in Vietnam women were significant traders.

Haruko Ward's research on women in early modern Japan also draws out continuities in explaining conversion. The founder of the Miyako no Bikuni (Nuns of Miyako), the highborn Naito Julia, had been a Buddhist nun, so there was a natural continuity between her old and new vocations. Indeed, Japan's Christian century coincided with 'a golden age' of Buddhist nuns. Unlike Tran's study, Ward's focuses on the women of the court, about whom far more is recorded.³⁰ Jesuit sources show that women actively engaged in theological debate. Ward argues that Christianity's appeal derived in large part from that fact that Shinto and Buddhism 'offered little hope of salvation for women after death', but she stresses the women's spiritual autonomy – not all became Christian. Naito Julia and the Miyako no Bikuni carried on an active apostolate engaging in 'persuasive conversations' with noblewomen and noblemen. Supported by networks of like-minded women, they performed baptisms and other rites of passage in the absence of priests, converting many women and men to Christianity between 1600 and 1612.³¹

Just as these case studies reveal different attractions of living in Christian community, they suggest different patterns in women's relationships with churchmen. If the Amantes were often left to develop their own forms of Catholicism without priestly oversight, a practice at odds with Tridentine reform, it is also true, as Tara Alberts has argued, that the very foundation of the Amantes was an attempt to impose a more regular norm of female piety on the mission field.³² Women were already living together in two houses before the MEP representative was prompted to 'create some regulations' in 1670.³³ And they were soon subject of rumours and

27 Alberts, *Conflict and conversion*, pp. 170–4.

28 Tran, 'Amantes de la Croix', pp. 51–3.

29 Cited in Alberts, *Conflict and conversion*, p. 169.

30 Ward, *Women religious leaders*, pp. 68–9, 14, 61, 31.

31 Haruko Nawata Ward, 'Jesuit encounters with Confucianism in early modern Japan', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 40, 4, 2009, p. 1055.

32 Alberts, *Conflict and conversion*, p. 177–9.

33 Tran, 'Amantes de la Croix', p. 55.

gossip. By the early 1680s the MEP and the Jesuits were accusing each other of inappropriate innovations, and some lay people were accusing the Amantes of being ‘deceived and lost women’. In 1684 the MEP priest Guillaume Mahot dispensed the Amantes of their vows, telling them to go home to their families, in part because he was frightened that they would be butchered by the mandarins, but also because he feared that one of his colleagues was visiting them too freely. This attempt to suppress their communities reflected a wider growing anxiety over women on the mission fields. But the Amantes did not disperse. They split into three and continued, in a less conspicuous manner.³⁴

Naito Julia and the Miyako no Bikuni seem to have been less vulnerable to clerical restraint than either the Amantes or the orders in Europe, perhaps because of Julia’s high status and ‘extraordinary’ gifts. Like Mary Ward she aspired to found an order of nuns modelled on the active apostolate of the Jesuits and, though the Jesuit constitution forbade them from working with women, Naito Julia established a house next door to theirs in Kyoto. Unlike Mary Ward, Naito Julia’s work was not stifled by the Jesuits but it was suppressed by the government. In 1615 the Miyako no Bikuni were captured, tortured, and exiled to Manila, where, in contrast to Kyoto, they lived in seclusion. Ward argues that their enclosure was less a reflection of Tridentine reforms finally catching up with them than the fact that their ministry was not needed in the Philippines, and that, since they came from a near-homogenous society, they were unused to multicultural Manila.³⁵

Vietnam and Japan offer insights into the various factors influencing the religiosity of women who became nuns. In Vietnam, the communal life of the Amantes offered impoverished women greater opportunities for survival; in Japan, Catholicism offered women the hope of life after death. In both places the conversion of women of high status gave the missions a foothold and eased their relationships with the ruling authorities but did not in the end guarantee their freedom. In the relationship between Christian women and missionary priests, race was significant, but not paramount. If clerics saw all women as ‘a paradoxical constituency’, ‘pagan’ women were particularly dangerous. Those who converted were thus highly prized.³⁶ The perilous circumstances of both missions increased the importance of nuns as mediators and evangelists to local populations and gave them greater freedom than their counterparts in Europe.

Mexico and New Zealand and early colonialism

The significance of enclosure was different under colonialism. Separated by 300 years and operating in different relationship to different colonial regimes, Mexico and New Zealand are unlikely subjects of comparison. But, despite their differences, they shared commonalities that invite further research into the role of religion in the earliest stages of colonial conquest. In both places the initial mission was to the Indigenous but it was rapidly diverted by the needs and desires of colonists; in both places, institutions for Indigenous women were established in contexts of colonial violence; and in both the abrupt endings of the missions left Indigenous women vulnerable. As in Vietnam and Japan, the sources that furnish insights into women’s conversion and community come from male missionaries, but historians of Indigenous women

³⁴ Alberts, *Conflict and conversion*, pp. 187–9.

³⁵ Ward, *Women religious leaders*, ch. 4.

³⁶ Alberts, *Conflict and conversion*, p. 179.

in Mexico and New Zealand venture fewer generalizations explaining their choices, outlining instead narratives of the early encounters. Though brief, these encounters are telling of the choices facing women who were subjects of missions where resources were diverted after a short time. Their legacies, both symbolic and material, were various and significant.

In Mexico, the context in which Indigenous women came to a 'quasi-religious life' was different from New Zealand – and indeed from Vietnam and Japan – because they were converted as children not adults. Between 1528 and 1543 some ten 'Colegios de Niñas Indies' (residential schools) were established in New Spain for Indian girls, each serving about 300 pupils and staffed by Spanish *beatas*. Jacqueline Holler has argued that these schools at first found favour with parents, who saw them as preserving their daughters from partners of whom they did not approve.³⁷ Asunción Lavrin argues that, given Texcoco's 'chaotic circumstances' at this time, it is probable that the large number of widows and daughters of the Aztec nobility who crowded the first school were seeking protection. By the early 1540s, however, the experiment had ended. In explaining this, Lavrin emphasizes the resistance of Indigenous parents who objected to their daughters' enculturation in foreign customs.³⁸ Holler emphasizes the role of city officials and, to a lesser extent, the clergy in their demise. The clergy considered the Spanish *beatas* 'disorderly', inappropriate role models but, rather than abandon the mission, they wanted fully professed Spanish nuns to run the schools. However, their request to city officials was ignored. Fearful of the large native population surrounding the city, local officials did not wish to foster an Indigenous presence within it.³⁹

Though the institutions had closed within fifteen years, some of their former pupils continued to live 'in the manner of beata'. The Franciscan chronicler Mendieta referred to them as 'good women' who assisted 'in things relating to doctrine and Christian comportment'. They had not taken vows but they were voluntarily 'exercising themselves in works of charity and virtue, in imitation of the holy women' of 'the primitive church'. They assisted the friars in the day schools attached to the monasteries outside the cities and many preferred 'to live in continence than marry'. It is not clear how many they were – many former students died in the plague of 1545–7 – but one city official referred to 'hundreds'.⁴⁰ As in Vietnam and Japan, there were some parallels with traditional practice. Mendieta observed that the Indians had 'a type of nun ... very enclosed and well guarded' who engaged in handiwork for the temples they served.⁴¹ But in this context, where the mission had been directed towards children, the range of their choices as they reached adulthood was limited. Their opportunities for marriage were likely to have been reduced: Lavrin notes that parents' objections included Aztec men refusing to marry graduates from the schools.⁴²

Some of Mendieta's descriptions elucidate the context from which their choices were made. They nursed the sick and gathered 'single women who were found wandering wasted in offence of Our Lord', a searing insight into the aftermath of conquest. Though the *beatas* succoured these 'single women', Mendieta's imagery evokes their own vulnerability. In addition to assisting the friars, they had to work in the city to support themselves. By the end of the century

37 Holler, *Escogidas plantas*, para. 83.

38 Asunción Lavrin, *Brides of Christ: conventual life in colonial Mexico*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008, pp.246–7.

39 Holler, *Escogidas plantas*, ch. 2.

40 Holler, *Escogidas plantas*, paras. 157–9, 150, 162.

41 *Ibid.*, para. 82, n. 42; Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, p. 246.

42 Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, p. 247.

so great was their poverty that they had no time for ‘spiritual works’ because they had ‘more than enough to do finding what [was] necessary for their sustenance’.⁴³ It is no wonder that by this time their ranks were thinning. The racist assumption that Indian women were ‘very inclined to vices’ was gaining ground: the Jesuit scholar Joseph de Acosta, for example, regarded their apparent discipline, honesty, and chastity as tricks of Satan.⁴⁴ In the 1560s civil regulations precluded Indian women from starting beaterios and insisted that if they wished for a religious life they should enter convents as *donadas* or servants: they could wait on but not become nuns.

And yet, in a paradox reflecting the mercurial nature of racist assumption and Catholic oral tradition, the Indian *beatas* provided the basis of a tradition of hagiography that celebrated the piety and humility of Indian women, eventually including them in the pantheon of holy women. For example, a century after her death in 1590, Madre Juana de San Jeronimo was mentioned in a chronicle of the Mercedarian order, after which her life story was reprinted and she was upheld as one of the souls ‘reaching the highest of perfections in her time’.⁴⁵ She was one of the first Mexican subjects of a long-established rhetoric – stimulated in this context by debate over the appearance of the virgin to an Indian in Guadeloupe – that simultaneously celebrated the equality of all people in the eyes of God and the humility of those who accepted their rank on the lowest rung of colonial society. Short biographies and hagiographies appeared in the seventeenth century on the Indian servants in Spanish convents.⁴⁶

The transfer of resources from Indigenes to settlers that took place in 1540s Mexico with the closure of the ‘Colegios’ diminished the protective value of religious institutions for a group whom Holler describes as ‘arguably more imperiled than any other by the nature of conquest and colonial society’. It promoted the development of Indian *beatas* but, without the support of the city, their autonomy was eroded within decades. After Indian women took their place as servants within convents, the groundwork was laid for them to be revered as holy and humble women of God, but only by future generations.⁴⁷ The second round of convents for Indian nuns did not begin for two hundred years when, in 1724, Corpus Christi was founded for the daughters of Indian nobles.⁴⁸

The first New Zealand mission shows similar patterns despite differences in the political context. The sources focus on the brief but remarkable life of a Maori woman who was professed in 1860. Hoke, later named Peata, was converted in 1840, soon after the French bishop Antoine Pompellier arrived in Auckland, and his status among Maori was high. He idealized the ‘noble savage’ of Oceania and his negotiation had ensured that the Treaty of Waitangi guaranteed freedom of worship to both Maori and Catholics.⁴⁹ It was an increasingly war-anxious society. Hoke was the daughter of a chief and already a widow with a child at the time of her baptism at the age of nineteen. Unlike the Indian *beatas*, she was famous in her own day, an inspiration to missionaries and their supporters in a world where Catholicism was in revival after the revolutions in France. Pompellier’s reports of her fearlessness in defending the mission from enemy attack in the 1840s and of her fervent

43 Holler, *Escogidas plantas*, paras. 156, 159.

44 *Ibid.*, para. 161; Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, p. 248.

45 Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, p. 249.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 248–55.

47 Holler, *Escogidas plantas*, para. 122.

48 Susan Migden Socolow, *The women of colonial Latin America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 113.

49 Jessie Munro, *The story of Suzanne Aubert*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1996, pp. 7–13.

devotion circulated widely: she was the 'perfect prototype Maori Christian ... a proud young woman of high chiefly birth risking all for her new faith'.⁵⁰

In 1862 Pompellier founded a new religious order, the Sisters of the Holy Family, dedicated to the teaching of Maori girls. This had been the original task of the Irish Sisters of Mercy but their energies were diverted into the teaching of wealthy settlers' daughters, a shift that eased considerably the financial problems of the mission. Peata was professed into this new order alongside the Maori woman Ateraita and three Frenchwomen. More Maori novices and postulants entered in the early 1860s. It was revolutionary indeed for Indigenous and white women to be professed on equal terms at this time; but the isolation of the mission, coupled with revivalist enthusiasm, encouraged risk-taking and Peata was a prize who, in Pompellier's reckoning, could do no wrong.⁵¹

But the Sisters of the Holy Family did not survive the decade. The most accessible account of their fate is found in Jessie Munro's biography of one of the white women professed with Peata, Suzanne Aubert, a figure who became widely admired in New Zealand. As Munro shows, Peata was largely responsible for the care of the children at the school in the 1860s and inspectors reported that they were 'happy and healthy'; by the end of the decade, however, at the peak of the wars, Maori pupils were no longer attending. The order's death knell came with Pompellier's retirement to France, leaving the mission heavily in debt. The incoming Irish bishop sold the convent property to pay off some of the debt. He disbanded the order in 1869. Suzanne was told to return to France but instead she joined the Marist Fathers' mission at Hawke's Bay. Peata was left behind. She had been losing her sight when she was professed and was now quite blind. Suzanne's eyesight was also poor. As Munro sees it, "sensible" solutions prevailed'. Peata went to live with the Irish Sisters of Mercy, where cultural differences may well have come into play. Some months later she left for, or was sent to, her country in the north: 'She wandered into the bush and her body was found eight days later'.⁵²

According to Munro, both Suzanne Aubert and the Sisters of Mercy brought 'a certain defensiveness' to their recollections of Peata: 'Their consciences were not easy'. But, unlike the Mexican *beatas*, who became enshrined in hagiography generations after their passing, Peata's pedagogical value as an exemplary Christian was excised by the tragic circumstances of her death. Missing in the public realm, her legacy can be seen in the work of Aubert. In the early 1860s Peata had mentored Aubert on Maori culture, taking her to the local *pa* (fortified settlement) 'to learn language and customs' and to listen to 'Whakapapa', journeys that stretched even the more liberal nineteenth-century rulings on enclosure. After Peata's death, Aubert worked for nine years as a 'sicknurse' at Hawke's Bay, where she developed herbal remedies that combined 'Maori medicinal ingredients, Pakeha chemistry and Pakeha wine' for communities hit by epidemics in the years after the wars. The old people called her 'Meri, a very holy lady', and talked about her 'moving around the people, getting to know the people, and understanding'. When the mission kept being diverted from the Maori by settler need, she started a campaign of letter writing, aware that 'a dodderly old maid's regrets and prayers' could not achieve much, regretting 'that I am not a man' but continuing to 'nag'.⁵³

50 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 84–8.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 110, 68–73, 111.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 116, 3, 116, 136.

The historian Katie Pickles suggests that Aubert's life points to structures of forgetfulness embedded in British settler colonial discourse. Unlike the Australian nun Mary MacKillop, whose canonization was aided by a groundswell of popular support in the 1990s deriving from her compatibility with the tropes of Australian settler identity – egalitarianism, battling injustice – Aubert, who spent much of her life among Maori, remains 'on the fringes of New Zealand national identity'.⁵⁴ Peata is hardly to be seen.

The rich historiography on nuns in later periods in Latin American countries invites more comparison with other settler colonies, ones more likely to furnish the convergences that transnational history has tended to emphasize.⁵⁵ However, it is the temporal and political differences between New Zealand and Mexico that make the similarities in these very first evangelizing efforts noteworthy. In both places women were receptive to evangelization in contexts of colonial conquest and violence. In particular, those of high status were welcomed to religious institutions, race being no barrier to inclusion; indeed, in the case of New Zealand, 'noble savage' ideology was an impetus to evangelization. But within a short time colonizers' priorities reversed the missionary order and race became the marker of exclusion. The reasons were different in each case – fear in Mexico, fiscal need in New Zealand – but in both their exclusion reflected and reinforced a broader swelling of race ideology. The state played important but different roles in effecting these shifts. In Mexico, where the church was part of the armoury of the colonizing state, the government's decision to close the schools directly stymied the evangelization of Indigenous women. In New Zealand, commitment to the separation of church and state made the mission dependent on settler support, and settlers' prime concern was the education of their own daughters.

Despite the curtailment of Indigenous women's religiosity, these early efforts were not entirely extinguished. In Mexico they lived on in the work of Indigenous *beatas*, and in New Zealand through Hoke's mentoring of Suzanne Aubert. The extent to which they were remembered, however, was shaped in each case by how the final actions of the main players reflected on the church.

The USA, Canada, and Australia: devotional revival and high imperialism

Auckland's Sisters of the Holy Family was one of hundreds of new orders inspired by the post-revolutionary Catholic revival. As one ideological movement among many vying for support in what Charles Taylor has dubbed 'the age of mobilization', Catholicism's success was due in significant part to the women whose work in 'the world' as teachers and nurses was now encouraged and supported by the Vatican: in France 400 new congregations were founded between 1800 and 1880; in Ireland the number of houses grew from 11 in 1800 to 368

54 Katie Pickles, 'Colonial sainthood in Australasia', *National Identities*, 7, 4, 2005, pp. 389–408.

55 Wiesner-Hanks, 'Crossing borders'. On nuns in Latin America, see Chowning, 'Convents and nuns'; Leavitt-Alcantara, 'Holy women'; Pamela Voekel, Bethany Moreton, and Michael Jo, 'Vaya con Dios: religion and the transnational history of the Americas', *History Compass*, 5, 5, 2007, pp. 1604–39; Monica Diaz, *Indigenous writings from the convent: negotiating ethnic autonomy in colonial Mexico*, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2010; Nancy van Deusen, *Between the sacred and the worldly: the cultural and institutional practice of recogimiento among women in colonial Peru*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001; Kathryn Burns, *Colonial habits: convents and the spiritual economy of Cuzco, Peru*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

at the end of the century.⁵⁶ A considerable historiography explains this enormous growth in terms of the opportunities that the church offered women for social mobility as well as spiritual fulfilment. Ralph Gibson argues that, as France urbanized and industrialized in the nineteenth century, work opportunities for rural working-class women contracted but there was 'an almost insatiable demand' for the sort of work done by nuns in nursing and teaching.⁵⁷ Catriona Clear has argued that in Ireland, where poverty was endemic, the convent was so popular a destination for women that the supply of sisters exceeded local demand.⁵⁸ In her study of Irish immigrant nuns to the United States, Suellen Hoy contends that many convents dispensed with dowries, giving working-class women opportunities for a professional life impossible at home, a pattern also found in Australia.⁵⁹ Ireland provided the majority of immigrant sisters to the Anglophone settler societies where Catholicism flourished. By the end of the century, in all these predominantly Protestant societies, most nuns were employed to staff the parochial school systems set in place by local bishops to keep the faith alive.

Among the 'founding nuns' inspired by the revivalist atmosphere of the early nineteenth century were African Americans.⁶⁰ The Oblate Sisters of Providence were established in 1828 in Baltimore through the collaboration of the French Sulpician James Joubert and Elizabeth Lange, a refugee from the Caribbean. The Sisters of the Holy Family, founded by Henriette Delille in New Orleans in 1842, also reflected French revivalism, though its longer history is traceable to the influence of Ursuline nuns in the 1730s and 1740s, whose 'mother-centred approach' was compatible with the religious practices of the captive women brought to Louisiana from the west coast of Africa.⁶¹ Dianne Batts Morrow has argued that the Oblates challenged the social and racial order of the antebellum South: their institutions gave them power; their celibacy contested the sexualization of women of colour; their charity work shamed the racially limited efforts of antebellum white philanthropy.⁶² Both orders were sustained by a religious life that enabled their members to identify with the suffering Jesus through serving the poor of their own race.

African American sisters endured greater poverty and fewer freedoms than white nuns and they suffered discrimination within and outside the church. As Batts Morrow argues, the Oblates enjoyed the support of several unusual priests, but never on terms equal with those accorded to white nuns. They were never recipients of significant financial donations; their chapel was segregated; they served as nurses in the cholera epidemic but gained no public recognition for doing so. The church believed in the *spiritual* equality of all people and condemned the inhumane treatment of slaves, but it did not believe in *social* equality.⁶³ The journal of Sister Mary Bernard Deggs, one of the Sisters of the Holy Family, shows how deeply slavery's cultural penetration ran. Henriette Delille owned a slave; in 1876, controversy within the order over admitting a former slave as a member led to the sisters living in separate

56 Anne O'Brien, *God's willing workers: women and religion in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005, p. 165;

Charles Taylor, *A secular age*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, ch. 12.

57 Ralph Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism, 1789–1914*, London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 116–19.

58 Catriona Clear, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987, p. 135.

59 Suellen Hoy, 'The journey out: the recruitment and emigration of Irish religious women to the US, 1812–1914', *Journal of Women's History*, 6, 4, 1995, pp. 64–98; O'Brien, *God's willing workers*, part 3.

60 Evangelisti, *Nuns*, p. 175.

61 Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould, 'The feminine face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727–1852', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 54, 2, 2002, pp. 410–48.

62 Dianne Batts Morrow, 'Outsiders within: the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1830s church and society', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 15, 2, 1997, pp. 35–54.

63 *Ibid.*

convents for several years. The African American sisters were subjected to racism from other orders, one of which tried ‘to make us take off our habits’, and from priests who wanted them to send teachers but did not provide sufficient food or shelter.⁶⁴

The late nineteenth century saw a significant shift in the dynamics of mission. Following the loss of the Vatican states, the first Vatican Council erected institutional fortifications that drew the cult of the Virgin to the centre of ultramontane piety and targeted women. Having lost power in the public sphere, the Vatican exerted its authority within the private sphere. Over the next century, as liberals and feminists increasingly fought for the rights of women to be protected by the state, the papacy sought to withhold ‘the family’ from legal scrutiny and issued encyclicals that proscribed mixed marriage, contraception, and divorce.⁶⁵ The ‘rule’ governing women’s religious orders became more extensive and inflexible, distancing the sisters from each other and from their charges.⁶⁶

Global politics also altered the nature of mission. Heightened imperial rivalry stimulated the world missionary movement, particularly in Africa. In a context of growing racism and geopolitical anxiety, most settler polities introduced policies to eradicate Indigenous culture by removing children from their families to effect their assimilation.⁶⁷ In Australia and Canada, one of the ways that this was done was by enlisting the church in the care and education of Indigenous children. Paradoxically, that small stream of nuns who had been diverted by settlers from working with Indigenous people now found opportunities to do so, but under newly restrictive conditions. There was nothing new in missionaries seeking to change Indigenous norms, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, but they did so now in a context of government coercion, extremely inadequate funding, stricter regulation of convent life, and sectarian rivalry that put a premium on the competition for souls. Survivor testimony shows that the schools and missions were strictly regimented, native language and religion were prohibited, punishments could be brutal, and physical care ranged from fair to ‘genocidally poor’.⁶⁸

In both Canada and Australia, nuns’ metaphorical motherhood as consecrated women undermined the motherhood of Aboriginal women.⁶⁹ The metaphor of family at the core of Catholic religious life has been remembered in complex and contested ways. In her fieldwork among sisters and former residents of the Lejac Residential School of central British Columbia, the anthropologist Jo-Anne Fiske found that two ‘conversational communities’ have emerged from the ‘remembered school’. One, which includes former residents as well as sisters, saw the school as the site of sacrifice; the other relived the school as a site of terror.⁷⁰ Both sides of the conversation use the trope of ‘motherless daughters’ – the nuns because they left their families

64 Stephen J. Ochs, ‘Review: *No cross, no crown: black nuns in nineteenth-century New Orleans*, by Sister Mary Bernard Deggs’, *Journal of Southern History*, 69, 2, 2003, pp. 432–4.

65 Lene Sjørup, ‘The Vatican and women’s reproductive health and rights: a clash of civilisations?’ *Feminist Theology*, 7, 21, 1999, pp. 79–97.

66 Mangion and Lux-Sterritt, ‘Introduction’, p. 10.

67 Margaret Jacobs, ‘The habit of elimination: Indigenous child removal in settler colonial nations in the twentieth century’, in Andrew Woolford, Jeff Benvenuto, and Alexander Laban Hinton, eds., *Colonial genocide and Indigenous North America*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 189–207.

68 J. R. Miller, *Sbingwauk’s vision: a history of native residential schools*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, part 2; Scott Riney, ‘Review essay’, *Oral History Review*, 24, 2, 1997, pp. 117–23.

69 For metaphorical motherhood among single Anglican women missionaries, see Laura Rademaker, ‘“I had more children than most people”: single women’s missionary maternalism in Arnhem Land, 1908–1945’, *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, 17, 2012, pp. 7–21; Regina Ganter, ‘Helpers-sisters-wives: white women on Australian missions’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 39, 1, pp. 7–19.

70 Fiske, ‘Spirited subjects’, p. 94

and the former students because they had been removed. Fiske sees the residential school as the site of 'a clash of moral strangers' on an 'im/moral frontier' where, since the nuns had given up their families to live in poverty, chastity, and obedience, they felt that it was appropriate that the children should also do so.⁷¹

Historians of Catholic missions in Western Australia found that the memories of former residents vary. In her research on Beagle Bay mission, Christine Choo discovered that some were grateful for their education and training, some others were resigned but mourned their lost language and culture, some were resentful and angry, and some had happy memories.⁷² Katharine Massam's attempts to recover the lives of the nuns at the Benedictine mission at New Norcia shows the near impossibility of discerning motive in cases where fragments of sources are all that remain – though she finds enough to suggest that patterns were far from monochrome.⁷³ Nor is much known of the one Indigenous order, the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, founded in the Kimberleys in 1938 in response to the 1926 encyclical *Rerum ecclesiae* exhorting religious orders to train a native clergy. Choo found 'an atmosphere of secrecy' surrounding its brief history: the Aboriginal women did not want to talk about it, and most of the archives were closed to her. From the documents made available, she suggests that the six young women who were asked to join the order were sent to a station where conditions were considered too harsh and isolated for the white sisters. They bore a heavy burden of expectation but 'reclaimed their own spiritual lives' as leaders of the Christian community in the Kimberleys.⁷⁴

Much of the historiography of nuns in settler societies analyses their work as teachers, nurses, and providers of charity to settlers, and their relationships with the clerical hierarchy and with each other.⁷⁵ Their numbers grew from the mid nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century, but not at a rate commensurate with the development of their works. From the 1920s the rates of women entering convents in many Western countries slowed and those leaving increased. In two of the largest Australian congregations, the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of the Good Samaritan for example, about 15 per cent left between 1920 and 1939, but in the next twenty years this more than doubled. Nor was the rate of entry retained: by the late 1930s religious leaders worried that some rural localities were 'fished out' in terms of vocations, and pressures from the hierarchy increased. The mechanics of this process were similar across national borders. Kathleen Sprows Cummings' close analysis of Catholics in Progressive Era Philadelphia, for example, shows that the political economy governing the convent in Philadelphia had much in common with New South Wales. In both places there was a rapid growth of orders in the nineteenth century, a consequent increase in the demand for

71 *Ibid.*

72 Christine Choo, *Mission girls: Aboriginal women on Catholic missions in the Kimberley, Western Australia, 1900–1950*, Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2001, p. 142. See also Katharine Massam, 'That there was love in this home': the Benedictine missionary sisters at New Norcia', in Amanda Barry, Joanna Cruickshank, Andrew Brown-May, and Patricia Grimshaw, eds., *Evangelists of empire? Missionaries in colonial history*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne eScholarship Research Centre, 2008, pp. 210–14.

73 Katharine Massam, 'A leader without authority: Mary Consuelo de la Cruz Batiz and missionary women at New Norcia', in Rosemary Francis, Patricia Grimshaw, and Ann Standish, eds., *Seizing the initiative: Australian women leaders in politics, workplaces and communities*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne eScholarship Research Centre, pp. 72–88; Massam, 'That there was love in this home'.

74 Choo, *Mission girls*, ch. 6.

75 Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the veil: an alternative to marriage, motherhood and spinsterhood in Quebec 1840–1920*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987; Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited lives: how nuns shaped Catholic culture and American life, 1836–1920*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999; O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers*.

their services, a straining of resources, pressures to increase vocations, and a resultant shift in the way in which the idea of ‘vocation’ was articulated.⁷⁶ To some extent the declining numbers reflect increased opportunities for women’s work and education. They may also reflect the Code of Canon Law introduced in 1917. Seeking to stem the threat of modernity and secularization, it dictated the minutiae of sisters’ lives to further control and standardize religious life.⁷⁷ It is no coincidence that, in a context where nuns’ were overworked and the spirituality of sacrifice extolled, abuses occurred, not only on Indigenous missions but in orphanages and homes for women.⁷⁸

The devotional revival of the early nineteenth century offered new opportunities for a wide cross-section of women. In the United States, resistance to race oppression encouraged the formation of African American orders. Led by women of high status within their own communities who were subjected to antebellum racism, their orders challenged the entrenched racism of the slave state and defended African American identity. The Irish and European nuns who took Catholicism to the New World, and those whom they recruited there, were predominantly of working- or lower middle-class backgrounds, for whom the church offered greater opportunities than were otherwise available. In national contexts of Protestant predominance they enabled the Catholic Church to establish an alternative education system that challenged the spiritual, cultural, and class dominance of the Protestant majority. Despite their minority status, their whiteness made them eligible to run missions for Indigenous people. Provided with paltry government funding, unable to elicit significant donations from the settler faithful, but unwilling to relinquish the opportunity for evangelization in a charged sectarian environment, they became agents of crude and coercive forms of assimilation.

Activism, feminism, and backlash: Africa, the Philippines, and Australia

Nuns have a familiar place in narratives of the Second Vatican Council. Declining vocations and ageing, overworked personnel were a cause of concern to the hierarchy for some time. In 1950 Pope Pius XII addressed religious leaders in Rome on these issues.⁷⁹ Four years later, American nuns sought to strengthen vocations by improving education and spiritual formation through the Sister Formation Movement.⁸⁰ In 1962 the Belgian cardinal Leon Suenens published a short, widely selling tract, *The nun in the world*, which mourned the ‘spiritual devaluation’ of the religious vocation: convents were places of ‘disquiet’ and sisters had lost the esteem even of ‘good Catholics’ and the clergy.⁸¹ The actors missing from this narrative are the Catholic women who, from the early twentieth century, chose not to become nuns or to leave after some time. They too played a part in forging *aggiornamento*.

76 Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New women of the old faith: gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

77 Mary Anne Confoy, ‘Religious life in the Vatican II era: “state of perfection” or living charism?’, *Theological Studies*, 74, 2, pp. 321–46.

78 See Australian Government, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au> (consulted 13 June 2016).

79 Confoy, ‘Religious life’.

80 Angelyn Dries, ‘Living in ambiguity: a paradigm shift experienced by the Sister Formation Movement’, *Catholic Historical Review*, 79, 3, 1993, pp. 478–87.

81 Leon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The nun in the world*, London: Burns and Oates, 1962.

The Second Vatican Council reflected and reinforced deep social and cultural change. It redefined the 'church' as 'the pilgrim people of God' rather than a hierarchical structure.⁸² Its 'Decree on the renewal of religious life', issued in 1965, called on religious congregations to reinterpret their apostolate by returning to the inspiration of their founders, and to 'live their lives at the very heart of humanity in the light of the Gospel'. Over the next twenty years the meaning of religious life was reinterpreted. Many of the fundamental assumptions that had underpinned it were challenged: that it was superior to the lay state; that authority within congregations should be absolute and hierarchical; that renunciation and sacrifice were in themselves virtuous.⁸³ However, the Council did not address gender issues more broadly and it left unreformed assumptions about women that perpetuated what has become known as 'complementarian theology': women are equal but different, and barred from equal ministry.⁸⁴

One of the changes that came with the deep shifts of the mid twentieth century was in the location of the church. From the 1970s there was a steep decline in the number of nuns in the global North and a significant increase in the South. In some countries the increase in the number of nuns was extreme: between 1960 and 1990, for example, there were increases of up to 475% in Nigeria, 430% in Guatemala, 257% in Ghana, and 184% in Paraguay, though they were a small percentage of the Catholic population.⁸⁵ Again the theory of mobility has been employed to explain these shifts. The sociologists Helen Rose Ebaugh, Jon Lorence, and Janet Saltzman Chafetz argue that, mirroring mobility patterns apparent for women in the nineteenth-century industrializing West, these increases reflected the fact that the church provided opportunities for women that were largely unavailable elsewhere.⁸⁶

While mobility was a backdrop, women became nuns for reasons that were local and personal. In Africa, the choice to become a nun was highly contentious: families lost the bride wealth and grandchildren that would have strengthened their clans. Joan F. Burke's research on the Kongolese Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur shows that the sisters' use of the metaphor of maternity made their choice more acceptable over time. The first generation was accused of being 'sterilized cows' who feared childbirth, but they transformed themselves into spiritual 'Mamas for us all', emphasizing the work of nurturing rather than biological motherhood.⁸⁷ Kathleen R. Smyth's interviews with two Fipa sisters who became members of the Sisters of Our Lady Queen of Africa in Tanganyika reveal the differences in their experience, despite the fact that both girls were pressured by missionaries to become nuns, and by their fathers not to. In her conversations with Smyth, Sister Oclia highlighted the fact that, at the age of sixteen, when she was already engaged, she decided that she did not want to get married, a decision probably shaped by the fact that as a child she had witnessed her aunt being beaten unconscious by her uncle; she was also attracted by the education required of a sister. Sister Edwina's narrative emphasized that she had wanted to be a nun from an early age and that she had been

82 John Frederick Schwaller, *The history of the Catholic Church in Latin America: from conquest to revolution and beyond*, New York: New York University Press, 2011, p. 228.

83 Sophie McGrath, *These women? Women religious in the history of Australia: the Sisters of Mercy Parramatta, 1888–1988*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 1989, pp. 150–1.

84 Sarah H. Woolwine and E. M. Dadlez, 'When complementarianism becomes gender apartheid: feminist philosophers' objections to the Christian right', *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 30, 1, 2014, pp. 195–203.

85 Helen Rose Ebaugh, Jon Lorence, and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, 'The growth and decline of the population of Catholic nuns cross-nationally, 1960–1990: a case of secularization as social structural change', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1996, 35, 2, pp. 171–83.

86 *Ibid.*

87 Joan F. Burke, *'These Catholic sisters are all mamas!' Towards the inculturation of the sisterhood in Africa: an ethnographic survey*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, p. 82.

curious to know ‘who made the trees, flowers and plants’. She had dreams that confirmed her spiritual resolve despite continued and rigorous opposition from her family.⁸⁸

Despite the fact that the Second Vatican Council did not specifically address women’s equal ministry, its vision of a democratic church went some way towards making religious women receptive to feminism. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist theology worked with liberation theology to expand the work of nuns across the globe. In Latin America, liberation theology inspired priests and nuns to join the freedom fighters, their resistance being met with brutal repression. The language of liberation theology had wide influence across the Catholic world.⁸⁹ Feminist theology, the product of the US Civil Rights movement and the women’s movement, spoke to educated women in Latin America, Asia, and Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, who insisted that male liberation theologians include women’s oppression in their social critiques.⁹⁰ Following the foundation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Tanzania in 1976, the Women’s Commission of EATWOT was founded in Geneva in 1983.

Recent research on African orders elucidates their struggles in these decades, both within their convents and with government. Catherine Higgs contrasts the processes by which two communities in KwaZulu-Natal gained self-rule. The Montebello Dominicans struggled against a regime that had relegated them to domestic work since the early twentieth century, provided them with inferior food, and was headed by a German prioress who tried to ignore the Vatican Council’s recommendations regarding consultation. The Companions of Saint Angela, however, experienced the shift from white to black leadership relatively easily. A smaller order, founded in the 1940s near the townships of Soweto, its members felt united as African sisters. These contexts had a significant impact on the responses of these two communities to the resistance movement against apartheid. The Montebello Dominicans were preoccupied with their own internal struggles and tried to remain apolitical, though they were inevitably drawn into the political tensions. The Companions of Saint Angela, in contrast, under the leadership of Sister Bernard Ncube, became activists whose ‘disobedience’ brought them into direct confrontation with the state.⁹¹ Sister Bernard was radicalized by twenty-five years teaching schoolchildren in Kagiso ‘and defusing confrontations’ between local residents and the police. Jailed for sixteen months for sedition, she was the most radical of the few activist nuns in South Africa at this time.⁹²

In the Philippines, as in Africa, a minority of nuns from a range of congregations became feminist activists, politicized by the Marcos regime’s declaration of martial law in 1972, as well as by the Second Vatican Council. Mina Roces sees them as transnational feminists, moving from the local to the international, living in and out of convents, part-time with the poor and part-time with their congregations. Most were from middle- and upper-class families and they were ‘plugged into’ global theological networks. Some who protested at illegal demonstrations in the 1970s became ‘celebrities’. Conscious of their ‘moral power’, they used it to try to

88 Kathleen R. Smythe, ‘“Child of the clan” or “child of the priests”: life stories of two Fipa Catholic sisters’, *Journal of Religious History*, 23, 1, 1999, pp. 92–107.

89 Schwaller, *History of the Catholic Church*, p. 254.

90 Rosemary Radford Ruether, ‘The development of feminist theology: becoming increasingly global and interfaith’, *Feminist Theology*, 20, 3, 2012, p. 187.

91 Catherine Higgs, ‘Silence, disobedience, and African Catholic sisters in apartheid South Africa’, *African Studies Review*, 54, 2, 2011, pp. 1–22.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

empower Filipino women. In their radio shows, classes, and personal counselling they raised issues considered taboo, such as rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment, giving victims the courage to share their stories and seek help.⁹³

Heather Claussen's ethnographic study of the Benedictine Sisters in Manila provides insights into how they managed controversial issues such as contraception and same-sex relationships. Differentiating between 'Catholic practice' and 'church dogma', Sister Micha did not disapprove of condoms but, because people expected her to agree with the Pope and Cardinal Sin, she could not always 'express her true opinions outright' but gave 'lengthy explanations' to clarify her views. She saw her positive responses to women who were not conforming to Catholic dogma as effecting cultural change. Claussen argues that, since much of the sexual guilt in the Philippines stems from Catholic teaching, the counselling of women such as Sister Micha, 'at the symbolic source of their pain', 'rendered the church a site of radicalization as well as oppression through the revision of relevant cultural scripts'.⁹⁴

In Australia a few nuns became high-profile justice advocates in the 1990s as governments increasingly embraced neoliberal policies. Sister Veronica Brady, a Loreto sister and English academic at the University of Western Australia, was outspoken on Aboriginal and gay rights.⁹⁵ Sister Patricia Pak-Poy was at the forefront of the international campaign to ban landmines.⁹⁶ More recently nuns have joined protests against the Australian government's policy on asylum seekers.⁹⁷ The advocacy of some has been less visible. For thirty-eight years, the Josephite Michele Madigan has been the 'paper worker' for Anangu women in the South Australian desert. She has facilitated publication of their remarkable life stories and, working from a caravan at the back of an op shop in Coober Pedy, despatched faxes and letters supporting the struggles of a senior Aboriginal women's council in their campaign against the government's plans to dump radioactive nuclear waste near Woomera in the 1990s. She continues to be a rare source of critical insight into a renewed dumping offensive of global ambition.⁹⁸

But if the work of activists is relatively well documented, the shifting work and internal dynamics of whole communities is more elusive. In some contexts nuns experienced the radical call to serve the poor as reinforcing anachronistic forms of women's religious life.⁹⁹ The research of the psychologist Megan Brock suggests the complex ways in which sisters have renegotiated their identity in relation to the church's construction of them as self-sacrificing.¹⁰⁰ In terms of corporate identity, the big shift has been towards justice movements, advocacy, and

93 Mina Roces, 'The Filipino Catholic nun as transnational feminist', *Women's History Review*, 17, 1, 2008, pp. 57–78.

94 Heather Claussen, *Unconventional sisterhood: feminist Catholic nuns in the Philippines*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001, pp. 203–4.

95 Australian Biography, Screen Australia Digital Learning, 'Veronica Brady', <http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/brady/> (consulted 15 October 2015).

96 Patricia Pak-Poy, *A path is made by walking it: reflections on the Australian network to ban landmines, 1991–2006*, Melbourne: David Lovell Publishing, 2006.

97 *Saturday Paper*, 13–19 December 2014, p. 10.

98 Eve Vincent, 'Nuclear colonialism in the South Australian desert', *Local–Global: Identity, Security, Community*, 3, 2007, pp. 103–12; Michelle Madigan, 'Dumped-on elders down but not despairing', *Eureka Street*, 2 May 2016. See, for example, Jessie Lennon, *I'm the one that know this country!*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2011.

99 Collette Livermore, *Hope endures: an Australian sister's story of leaving Mother Teresa, losing faith and her on-going search for meaning*, Sydney: William Heinemann, 2008.

100 Megan P. Brock, 'Resisting the Catholic Church's notion of the nun as self-sacrificing woman', *Feminism and Psychology*, 20, 4, 2010, pp. 473–90.

social work, reflecting the long history of Catholic amelioration as well as the late twentieth-century focus on structural change.¹⁰¹

American nuns bore the brunt of the Vatican's backlash. By the 1990s the outpouring of feminist theology and history that began in the 1980s under the intellectual leadership of American scholars, including Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether, was taking root in universities and Christian women's organizations across the world. A form of 'speaking truth to power', it historicized Vatican teaching on gender equality and women's reproductive rights, and called not only for women's equality in the church, but also for new forms of ecclesiastical governance.¹⁰² The Vatican's response was to proscribe public discussion of women's ordination and wage 'a global crusade' against abortion, birth control, and homosexual couples, with particularly negative consequences for the poor and for Aids sufferers in the Philippines, Africa, and some countries in Latin America.¹⁰³ Silence was maintained on sexual abuse. Nuns were targeted. In 2008 Pope Benedict launched an investigation into 341 women's religious institutes in the US, accusing them of 'a certain secular mentality' and perhaps 'a certain feminist spirit'; a report in 2012 criticized the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) for 'pushing radical feminist themes'.¹⁰⁴ Under the rule of Pope Francis a final report has vindicated the LCWR and commended the nuns' 'selfless' work, but Francis still refuses to discuss women's ordination – 'that door is closed' – and he finds the 'female machismo' of the women's movement unpalatable.¹⁰⁵

Though directed towards women in the West, the backlash was shaped by the politics of the global South, where the growth of the church gave rise to new tensions in the politics of sex and gender. In his analysis of *The next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins argues that 'by and large' the countries of the global South 'tend to be much more patriarchal' and some are virulently anti-homosexual. In his view, the Vatican's intransigence reflects its participation in 'the political game of the new century' and he argues that it would be 'suicidal' for the long-term prospects of the church to adapt 'to the needs of Western elites'.¹⁰⁶ Jenkins' interpretation is an unusually candid assessment of the role of political choice in shaping 'traditional moral teaching'; but, in addition to condoning the pursuit of power as the driver of Catholic teaching, it reinforces and perpetuates the binary between the apparent interests of individualistic Western elites and those of 'Third World' nations that suffuses much discussion of the global church.¹⁰⁷ Pitching 'Western liberal elites' against the poverty of the global South ignores the inextricable connections between gender and economic justice, and it obscures the rights of women and gays in the poorest countries in the world. Further, while differences in politico-economic contexts are incontrovertibly stark, such polarization runs the risk of essentializing 'Third World' leaders as incapable of change. The African American historian Shannen Dee

101 Anne O'Brien, *Philanthropy and settler colonialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

102 Landmark works include Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*, New York: Crossroad, 1983; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and god talk: towards a feminist theology*, London: SCM Press, 1983.

103 Ruether, 'Women'.

104 Catholics for Renewal, 'News 2014', <http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/news2014.htm> (consulted 13 October 2015); Julia Baird, 'Catholic Church must accept feminism', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20–21 December 2014.

105 Robert McClory, 'Pope Francis and women's ordination', *National Catholic Reporter* 16 September 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-francis-and-womens-ordination> (consulted 13 October 2015).

106 Philip Jenkins, *The next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 197.

107 See Hilary Carey and John Gascoigne, *Church and state in old and new worlds*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, p. 27.

Williams has argued that Archbishop Kaigama of Nigeria has been a rare international voice denouncing the terrorist group Boko Haram's sexual abuse of women and girls. In her view, even though Kaigama has opposed women's ordination, birth control, and gay marriage, his calls for international attention to the abuse of women, coupled with his vocal criticism of European imperialism in the church, suggests 'room for negotiation and growth'.¹⁰⁸ She sees African nuns as 'a largely untapped source of power and leadership in the fight against racism and sexism in the church'.¹⁰⁹ Like those in the Philippines and Australia's Fourth World, their work has been premised on the fact that it is non-elite women who are at risk when old ideologies go unchallenged.

From the early twentieth century the church's attraction as an avenue of mobility for women in the West was eclipsed by the development of secular opportunities, and by the 1970s vocations in the Western world had fallen away. Conversely, the decades after decolonization saw the convent become an avenue of social mobility for women in the 'Third World'. In Africa and the Philippines a small but significant minority of nuns became activists using their own high status and that of the church to defend the rights of the oppressed. The Second Vatican Council reinstated the importance of conscience and some nuns interpreted church teachings in its light, contravening Vatican policy. They joined transnational ecumenical organizations of 'Third World' theologians drawn together by centuries of colonization and racial oppression. In Australia, as in the US, some nuns took on the role of justice advocates, subverting their traditional association with self-abnegation and thereby gaining attention for causes that challenged government and Vatican policy. Despite the polar-opposite trajectories in vocations between global North and South, women across the globe met on the common ground generated through work for social justice. In reaction against their engagement with feminism and the world, the Vatican tried to rein them in.

Conclusion

These case studies offer new insight into the relationship between the local and the global in shaping the receptivity of women from a variety of contexts of colonization, decolonization, and slavery to living in Catholic religious community. They show some of the myriad local factors that fashioned women's understandings of the relationship between the spiritual and material advantages of the consecrated life. They also delineate aspects of the shifting relationship between race, class, social status, and the state in affecting their experience over time. In two sites of mission where there was no formal colonization, race figured relatively little in the missionary desire for souls. In sixteenth-century Vietnam, the life of a nun offered a degree of mobility in the form of freedom from subsistence agriculture, and in Japan it offered hope of life after death. And, despite the ambivalence accorded 'pagan' women, these nuns appear to have had greater freedom than those in Europe at the same time, because of their crucial role as cultural mediators.

Colonization and conquest made race matter in brutally new ways. It left in the lurch the earliest women converted in two colonies, as the priorities of settlers and the state rapidly supervened. In the antebellum USA, racism was so intense that African American women,

108 Shannen Dee Williams, 'The global Catholic Church and the radical possibilities of #BlackLivesMatter', *Journal of African Religions*, 3, 4, 2015 p. 509.

109 *Ibid.*

stirred by Catholic revival, founded new orders to challenge it. Settler colonialism offered white women class mobility but most immigrant nuns worked to strengthen the diaspora church against the influence of Protestantism. They advanced the interests of settlers ahead of Indigenous people and, from the late nineteenth century, their evangelical ambitions were leashed to government policies dedicated to Indigenous assimilation. In the wake of decolonization, women in the global South took the opportunities for education and leadership offered by the church, and anti-racism became one of the binding principles for activists across the 'Third World'.

These cases point to a range of further questions that transnational histories of nuns might address, including the economic role of convents, the impacts of migration, changing understandings and practices of sexuality, and spirituality. The contexts in which nuns acted as concealers, exposers, and perpetrators of abuse against children awaits sustained research. I have highlighted the issue of women in relationship with church teachings on gender inequality because of its ongoing ethical ramifications. Two interweaving narratives help clarify these ramifications. Both have women at their centre but one narrates them as subjects, the other as actors. In the first, the very presence (or absence) of women as subjects of fear, hope, or disapproval worked to shape the ecclesiastical teachings that developed in defensive reaction against the Vatican's loss of temporal status. Following the Reformation, the Catholic Church tightened the rules on female enclosure to safeguard chastity and reputation; following the French Revolution, it encouraged the foundation of uncloistered active congregations to rebuild the church; following the loss of the Vatican states, it issued new rulings to control and regulate, seeking strength through divergence from feminist and liberal efforts to advance women's rights. In the face of atrophy and declining vocations, the Second Vatican Council advanced the vision of a democratic church without specifically addressing its age-old 'problem with women'.¹¹⁰ In the face of a collapse of vocations in the global North and steep rises in the global South, the Vatican unleashed a worldwide campaign against abortion, birth control, and homosexual relationships, and against the nuns in the US who espoused a feminist theology.

The other narrative has women shaping shifts in Vatican policy by what they did rather than how they were perceived. They formed new congregations in Europe after the Reformation and after the French Revolution, but slowed their participation once religious life lost vigour and their options increased. They formed communities in various sites of colonialism and slavery, in some cases challenging racist norms in doing so. In the last forty years they have joined convents in significant numbers in some of the poorest countries in the world. In the context of decolonization, liberation theology, and feminism, some have become activists and advocates, utilizing their symbolic power to work in the interests of poor people and of women.

Delineating two such narratives is not to deny the fact that mutual dependency and reciprocity marked relationships between women and churchmen, nor indeed to doubt the capacity of the spiritual life to challenge the binary opposition of 'male' and 'female'.¹¹¹ However, since Vatican policies are formulated around this binary and remain an important source of essentialist understandings of sex and gender more broadly, these narratives provide

110 Ruether, 'Women', p. 184.

111 See Frances E. Dolan, 'Afterword', in Lux-Sterritt and Mangion, *Gender, Catholicism and spirituality*, pp. 180–6.

usable outlines of trends that the church continues to foster. It is not difficult to find here the value of the *longue durée*: authorities 'stuck in old patterns of practice and ideology' but also 'other options, other possibilities and alternative models'.¹¹² The women who work at the heart of the patriarchal church in order to reform it know that history is a valuable instrument. In order not to scandalize her students, Sister Micha, for example, provides them with a history of the church's attitudes to contraception. In her view it demonstrates that, far from reflecting divine sanction, 'current prohibitions' are evidence of 'human theological hang-ups'.¹¹³

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112 Guldi and Armitage, *History manifesto*, pp. 55–6, 68–9.

113 Claussen, *Unconventional sisterhood*, p. 203.