

Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age, Britain 1945-90

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In the preface of *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age*, Carmen M. Mangion admits ‘this was not a book I wanted to write. This was a book I thought should be written’ (p.xi). In recent decades there has been a ‘religious turn’ in gender and cultural history, epitomised by the publication of the 2011 *Feminist Review* special issue dedicated to religion and spirituality.⁽¹⁾ This ‘turn’ in the historiography has sought to illuminate the ways in which piety, and its relationship to patriarchy, should be reappraised in order to explore the resources and networks within religious organisations utilised by women claiming autonomy and asserting agency. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries’ seminal 2010 edited volume, *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, expertly marked ‘the revival of interest in religion within British cultural and social history’.⁽²⁾ Whilst women’s religious lives have been adeptly interrogated in the 19th and early-20th centuries, a *lacuna* endures in the scholarship surrounding the religious lives of women in the post-war era.

Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age expertly contributes to an emerging historiography which seeks to integrate discussion of faith and spirituality into the histories of the social movements of the 'long 1960s'. Mangion notes that religion, if discussed at all, is frequently depicted 'as a stagnant, obstructionist force' in many of the social and cultural histories of Britain in the 1960s (p.6). *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* offers a response to historians, like Arthur Marwick, who have argued the 'Catholic Church tended to operate as a centre of opposition to all the great movements aiming towards greater freedom for ordinary human beings'.⁽³⁾ Mangion's impressive volume seeks to dispel the notion that religious communities were separate from, and out of touch with, the wider world. The front cover of *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* is adorned with a playful scene taken from the British television documentary series *Whicker's World*. The still, lifted from an episode entitled 'A Girl Gets Temptations - But I Wanted to Give Myself to God', depicts a group of Poor Clares playing football. In the midst of the joyful scene, journalist and television presenter Alan Whicker can be seen in the background delightedly discovering the women's lively spirits and sense of fun. The 26 minute programme, which centred on the enclosed Catholic community of nuns, was broadcast to small screens in family homes across Britain in 1972. In an attempt to encourage vocations, the Poor Clares at Baddesley Clinton agreed to be the subject of Whicker's television programme. Presenter, camera, and crew entered the monastery, and the monastery, in turn, entered the homes of British families.

As he introduced the community of Poor Clares, Whicker described the nuns as 'the most unliberated women in the world' (p.161). In contrast to Whicker's bold statement, Mangion details the various and vibrant ways in which women religious—the collective term used to describe religious sisters and nuns—claimed autonomy and asserted agency. *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* provides an important intervention into the existing scholarship by arguing that, in the post-war era, the convent—traditionally considered to be 'a conservative site of religious piety'—became a site of 'radical engagement', 'social change', and 'dissonance' (p.94). Mangion's volume charts the social changes which dominated religious life in the 'long 1960s' and maps these changes onto social movements that were taking place in wider society, through chapters which address the 'Modern Girl'; a convent version of '1968'; participatory governance; experimental approaches to community living; relationships becoming less formal and more relational; and engagement with a revived voluntary sector.

Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age seeks to understand how women religious 'experienced the complex, sometimes metamorphic, changes of religious life' in Britain between 1945 and 1990 (p.3). It begins at the close of the Second World War, with Pope Pius XII's growing awareness of women's changing roles in a modernising post-war world, and tracks various apostolic constitutions, such as *Sponsa Christi* (1950), which encouraged the adaption and modernisation of religious life. Chronologically this study pivots around the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), drawing attention to the 16 documents that emerged from Vatican II, notably *Perfectae Caritatis* and *Gaudium et Spes*, and highlighting how these documents provided the impetus for the 'unprecedented rethinking' of religious life (p.5). This 'rethinking' encouraged shifts towards participatory governance which, in turn, challenged the 'embedded feminine hierarchies and matriarchal structures' of convent life (p.94). In adopting a broad timeframe Mangion emphasises the importance of viewing these changes within a wide context of post-war modernisation which considers both pre- and post- Vatican II social, cultural, and religious events as influencers of change.

The book is comprised of six thematic chapters which are preceded by an introductory chapter which details the post-war landscape, providing ‘a snapshot of the Catholic Church engaging with the modern world in the 1940s and 1950s’ (p.31). Mangion notes that the 1950s are frequently remembered as a golden age ‘when novitiates were bursting’ (p.31). Yet her archival research suggests a different story, one dominated by the paucity of women crossing the monastic threshold. Mangion’s archival discoveries, therefore, raise interesting questions about the dichotomy between collective memory and lived reality. Within this first chapter Mangion additionally provides accessible explanations of various apostolic constitutions such as *Sponsa Christi* (1950), making her volume accessible to both students new to the topic, and academics seeking to broaden their understandings of lived religious experience in the post-war era.

Each chapter expertly situates the topics to be discussed within the existing historiography and the expansive footnotes highlight further avenues for exploration. Chapter two explores the discourses surrounding the post-war ‘Modern Girl’. It interrogates how the institutional Church, along with female religious congregations, sought to restructure the lived experience of religious life to accommodate the ‘Modern Girl’. Chapter three genders our knowledge of the global 1968 movement by exploring an emancipatory movement led, sustained, and spread by women. The female leaders of religious institutions ‘rethought governance and replaced deeply embedded structures’ wherein ‘the mother superior or abbess and her council made decisions for all members of the community’ (p.125). More women participated in governance and new voices were heard via questionnaires and consultative meetings. However, as Mangion demonstrates, the extent to which these changes were received and fruitfully implemented varied widely.

Chapter four explores generational discourses and the ‘turn to the self’, through examining homosocial relationships within the convent. It argues for a less stark pre-/post-conciliar dichotomy and contributes to the scholarship examining how ‘authenticity’, ‘selfhood’, and ‘identity’ were remade in the second half of the twentieth-century (p.132). It additionally considers the ways in which ‘common life became less codified and rigid’ (p.238), therefore acknowledging the importance of relationships and allowing for more personal agency.

Chapter five, ‘The world in the cloister and the nun in the world’, considers the entry of women religious into the modern world. Mangion skilfully unpicks the notion of modernity, demonstrating how nuns and sisters both rejected and embraced notions of ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’. In doing so, Mangion is attentive to generational as well as national, and international, divides. This chapter provides a fascinating analysis of the imagined spatial boundaries within convent settings. Women who entered religious life in the 1940s and 1950s valued enclosure for the opportunity it provided to live a life centred on prayer.

Yet ‘uninvited, the world entered the cloister in myriad ways’ (p.192). War disrupted the patterns of religious life and created opportunities for interactions. Likewise, the advent of mass media and increased personal mobility ‘reduced some of the strict divisions between the secular and the religious world’ (p.192). Mangion argues this was not a ‘sudden thrust into the world’ but rather a ‘gradual shift’ (p.192).

The final two chapters stand out for the interventions they make within the existing scholarship. Chapter six provides new, and important, perspectives on the ways in which the voluntary sector and welfare state worked in collaboration, through examining the changing ministries of women religious in both local and global settings. It questions how religious institutions re-examined their ministries in the 1970s and 1980s, and demonstrates how women religious were ‘influenced by discourses of social justice grounded in solidarity with those marginalised by society’ (p.33). Despite fears held by the ecclesiastical hierarchies that state-supplied health care and social welfare would ‘damage Catholic family life by removing parental (and clerical) authority’, women religious worked in ‘collaboration with local state funders’ (p.39). Female religious, and religious institutions more broadly, ‘remained active participants in the voluntary sector that met unmet needs in the social welfare state’ (p.228). Moreover, Mangion’s discussion of fears surrounding ‘career-itis’ (p.186), the belief that women religious would potentially become more interested in professionalisation than their religious ministry, provides interesting parallels to similar debates taking place

within the Anglican Church surrounding women's ordination.

Chapter seven offers an equally important intervention into the historiography by complicating our understandings of how women, and particularly religious women, experienced, engaged with, and rejected the second-wave feminist movement. Within this chapter religion is utilised as a category of analysis in order to examine how 'becoming a woman' manifested itself in women religious. Rather than posit these changes as secularisation, Mangion examines the ways in which 'religious and secular ideas shaped these women's awareness of their womanhood' (p.232). Mangion suggests that whilst women religious may not have been reading Simone de Beauvoir or Germaine Greer, they were reading and discussing the writings of feminist theologians such as Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Through examining the influence of these predominately American Catholic theologians on British women religious, Mangion demonstrates that transnational exchanges, of both ideas and people, were pivotal to the lives of women religious in the post-war era. Furthermore, by highlighting women religious' engagement with feminist theologians, Mangion echoes Caitríona Beaumont's call that definitions of the 'women's movement' should be diversified in order to be inclusive of 'all groups which promoted the social, political and economic rights of women, regardless of whether or not they identified themselves as feminist' (4).

The conclusion reunites the various strands of Mangion's arguments, exploring them through the notion of the 'pain of change'. In particular, it poignantly draws attention to 'the revelations of emotional, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of priests and male and female religious' (p.280), which Mangion acknowledges have become a part of the world-wide landscape of religious life. This issue does not feature prominently in the main body of the book. However, it is difficult to write any histories of Catholicism, or religion more broadly, without acknowledging the trauma endured by individuals and the 'complicity of silence of authorities within the religious institutions and within the ecclesiastical hierarchy' (p.283). Mangion powerfully calls for scholars of religious life 'to avoid the silence of the past' (p.283), urging that both collective institutions and individual actors must be held to account.

Throughout this impressive volume Mangion places the voices and 'lived experiences' of women religious at the centre of her study by adopting a methodology which utilises a combination of 24 archives and 97 oral history interviews. The deeply personal and emotional voices which emerged from the interviews conducted by Mangion humanise the story of adaption, renewal, and change within the Catholic Church in the post-war era. These voices additionally tell two contrasting stories, one centred on 'the excitement of the renewal of religious life', and another on the 'despair of the same renewal' (p.4). These contrasting perspectives demonstrate that there is no linear narrative to be told about the lives of women religious. Instead these seemingly contradictory accounts 'represent the desire for an authentically lived religious experience in a world that was changing' (p.267).

Though some of the women religious had been community leaders, many interviewees initially claimed an 'ordinariness' which led them to suggest that Mangion may be mistaken in being interested in their lives. This is a familiar assertion heard by oral historians seeking to understand the lives of women in the post-war era. As Mangion notes, it is these supposedly ordinary women who leave 'very little trace in archival documents' (p.10). Collecting their testimonies is of crucial importance; only through exploring subjective experiences can nuance be brought to the otherwise 'top-down narrative which identified a sense of progress seemingly implicit in the renewal of religious life' (p.10). Untangling the complex and often contradictory lived religious experience of 'ordinary' female religious, who defied the stereotypes of both 'evil nun' and 'holy nun' (p.3), enables Mangion to offer further insights into the 'complex web of authority and obedience' which underpinned convent life.

Within her interviews, Mangion adopts a life-cycle approach which pays attention not only to the daily routines and rhythms which dominated the lives of women religious, but 'also their lives before entering and, in some cases, leaving religious life' (p.18). This approach elicits wonderful, and sometimes heart-breaking, stories about the effect that entering religious life had on both women religious and their families. Mangion deftly integrates the kaleidoscope of emotions felt by women religious into her study. In a

particularly moving vignette, one woman religious recalled accidentally walking in on her mother crying in the bathroom on the day she was due to enter a convent. She recalled, 'I hadn't realised till that point the way she was feeling, because I'd always had encouragement' (p.46). It is evident that Mangion's interviews have been skilfully conducted with tact and sensitivity (apparent in her commitment not to push her interviewees to speak about sensitive topics, for example diminishment and the associated 'feelings of rejection in the current lack of interest in religious life or the departures of aspirants') (p.290). However, Mangion's discussion of the historiography surrounding oral history methodology, and particularly 'the reliability, authenticity and representativeness of memory' (p.11), at times feels somewhat stale. The conversation surrounding oral history methodology could have perhaps been enhanced by an exploration of how the spatial dynamics in which the interview took place (in this case typically in the sister's residence) influenced the dynamic of the interview.

As the field further evolves it would be interesting for oral historians to move away from fixating on the flaws of the methodology.

In further considering her own methodology Mangion provides a fascinating exploration of her own positionality as a researcher, highlighting her simultaneous insider/outsider status. As an historian researching the lives of women religious in the nineteenth-century Mangion built a close relationship with convent archivists who frequently acted as gatekeepers to women religious. Yet as an academic, and as a married woman, Mangion's identity was simultaneously one of an outsider. Indeed, Mangion's own insider/outsider status offers an interesting parallel to other polarised themes within her study: the sacred versus the secular, the personal and the political, the interior meeting the exterior which ultimately manifested in the world entering the cloister, and the nun entering the world. Greater explorations of why historians choose their subjects, and how their own subjectivities influence the histories they write, and the interviews they conduct, are a welcomed addition to the historiography. Further explorations of why interviewees agree to participate in projects proposed by historians would also be an interesting point of analysis. Are they themselves aware of their own legacies? Do they feel elements of history have been erased? How and why do they tell the stories they do?

Returning once more to the preface, Mangion confides that she waited and waited for someone else to write the lives of women religious in the post-war era, 'but no one did' (p.xi). The religious lives of women are still, somewhat surprisingly, missing from the historiographies of modern Britain. *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in A Secular Age* is, therefore, a most welcome addition to the existing historiography which will undoubtedly inspire and encourage further research. Mangion deftly highlights future research projects that are in need of exploration, from the departures of postulants and novices who had 'no vocations' between the 1940s and 1960s, to the 'growth and dynamism of female religious life in the Global South' (p.285). The lives of women, and their interactions with faith and spirituality, in the post-war era is a rich field, ripe for exploration. *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in A Secular Age* provides an invaluable resource for anyone embarking on this journey.

Notes

1. June Purvis, "'A Glass Half Full'?: Women's history in the UK', *Women's History Review*, 27 (2017), pp.1-21; *Feminist Review*, issue 97, 2011.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries (eds.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (London, 2010); Dr Alison Twells, review of *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, (review no. 1017).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford, 1998), p.34.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Cairtriona Beaumont, 'Citizens not Feminists: the boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women's organisations in England, 1928-39', *Women's Historical Review*, 9 (2000), p.413.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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