An Overview of the Historiography of Women Religious: A Twenty-Five-Year Retrospective

Carol K. Coburn

Those of us doing research and writing about the history of American women religious have lived through a period of seismic shifts in the master narrative, which has slowly been deconstructed by American social historians over the past three decades. The inclusion of gender, race, ethnicity, and class analysis has created multiple perspectives and new ways to broaden our knowledge of who we are as a people and as a nation. Women’s history was not even acknowledged as a separate field of scholarship prior to the 1970s; few if any historians thought about women at all, and if they did, they saw women only as subordinate players to men in the larger American story. A notable exception was Mary Ritter Beard, who in 1946 wrote *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities*. Better known as the wife of the famous historian Charles Austin Beard, seventy-year-old Mary Beard published her book after spending her entire life as a political activist, social reformer, historian, and archivist of the social, intellectual, and economic achievements of women. Her contention, considered radical at the time, was that “women’s contributions were central to society.” Although harshly reviewed by male academics, her work served as an important catalyst for feminist scholars in the 1970s.

I mention Mary Ritter Beard not only because she is considered a foremother of women’s history, but also because she serves as an early role model for historians and archivists of women religious who are currently engaged in conserving, describing,
and analyzing data about women religious and demonstrating that nuns were and are "central" not only to Catholic history but to religious history, women's history, and social history in the United States as well. With the exception of early congregational in-house histories often written for novices, American women religious have been virtually "invisible" in American Catholic history until recently. In many ways the methodological approaches in the historiography of women religious have paralleled the sequence of change and "discovery" that secular women's history has experienced over the last thirty years.2 The labels may vary, but the sequence of methodological change is as follows: Although a wife, daughter, sister, female confidant, or paramour may have received honorable mention as a background player in writing "history," the exception was usually the "Great Woman Approach" to history, which often consisted of a biographical life story of an "exceptional woman" (such as a queen, saint, or mystic) who made her mark in a male world against all odds. Often labeled eccentric, homely, dangerous, or masculine by contemporaries and sometimes by their biographers, these women had moved outside of gender roles in society and therefore received a mixture of admiration, pity, and/or scorn for their achievements. Eventually, women were included in what became known as the "Single-Subject" or "Ghetto Approach" to history, in which a 400-page book-length treatment of major historical developments or events (such as suffrage or sister-teachers), contained only a single paragraph or, in a magnanimous gesture, an entire 20-page chapter devoted to the contributions of women, thereby implying that all women's influence or contribution could be isolated, contained, and summarized generically because all women thought and acted alike. Likewise, the "Add Women and Stir Approach" placed women in the narrative throughout the text but still on the margins (toiling behind the scenes, often nameless and faceless), supporting (or hindering) the exploits and achievements of American men.

Fortunately, in recent decades scholars of American women have begun creating scholarship that not only uncovers and integrates information about women and their activities and influence but, more importantly, places women beyond the role of "objects" of the narrative into the role of subjects or actors in history—creators and shapers of American history and culture. The content and perspective have shifted dramatically. The development and metamorphosis of feminist scholarship have provided models of how to interpret history through the filter of gender by viewing the world through the eyes, documents, and perspectives of the American women who lived it. However, what secular feminist scholarship has rarely done is include the lives and ac-

tivities of Catholic women religious within the larger narrative of American women's history. With few exceptions, women religious have been rendered invisible there as well. My goal, and the goal of many others, is to build bridges, make connections, and integrate the history of women religious into the larger contexts of Catholic history, religious history, women's history, and American social history.

As I reflect on the historiography of women religious over the last quarter century, my first thought is that we have come a long way in a relatively short period of time. In the early 1980s, through the efforts of Evangeline Thomas and others, convent archives and religious repositories were identified and cataloged in her seminal work, *Women Religious History Sources: A Guide to Repositories in the United States*. This Herculean task produced a gold mine of information on the location and accessibility of primary documents contained in convent archives across the United States. In 1984 Elizabeth Kolmier published *Religious Women in the United States: A Survey of the Influential Literature from 1950 to 1983*. This book provided an historical overview of the development and changes in religious life as defined and interpreted by the documents and literature created over a thirty-three-year period.

During the last decade the Triennial Conference on the History of Women Religious and the efforts of both archivists and historians have been extremely fruitful in the amount and quality of scholarship produced. Further efforts were spurred in 1993 by Leslie Woodcock Tentler's often-quoted article, "On the Margins: The State of American Catholic History," published in the *American Quarterly*. This article chided historians for the continued marginalization of Catholic history and specifically for ignoring the monumental contributions of women religious in the United States. As a result of this flurry of research activity by archivists and historians begun in the early 1980s and continuing to the present, convent archives have been documented, reorganized, and generally opened to a variety of scholars—both women religious and secular historians—who have begun exploring the rich bounty of primary documents and integrating the convent sources into the larger context of American women's history and scholarship.

Consequently, forgive me ahead of time for not having time or opportunity to include all of the noteworthy publications from the last twenty-five years, but space

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4. The Conference on the History of Women Religious began through the efforts of Karen M. Kennedy, C.S.J., in 1989. The first conference was held at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota. Since that time, there have been five conferences in various locations throughout the country, and a variety of scholars have presented on a wide range of subjects over this thirteen-year period. The conference has provided a venue for scholars to present research and discuss ways to integrate the history of women religious into the larger context of American women's history and the national conference network. Currently, copies of most papers from the conference are located at the Women Religious Special Collection at Avila University, Kansas City, Missouri.

limitations and a need to focus force me to make difficult choices about topics, authors, and publications to discuss. The purpose of this article is to describe some thematic frameworks utilized by historians whose work is representative of the recent body of scholarship published about American women religious. Although I will focus on scholarship produced during the last two decades, I will also mention earlier works, particularly if they provided a strong foundation or impetus for more current scholarship. Finally, when possible, I will suggest "secular" sources that provide context for the integration of women religious into the larger historical narrative of religious history and women's history. These themes are not meant to be "equal" in coverage since some have been developed much more extensively than others, but all have an ongoing, growing body of scholarship that reflect the recent emphases and trends in the historiography of women religious. The thematic categories and subsequent scholarship I have chosen to discuss are Americanization and multiple Catholic identities; apostolic activities; professionalization and women's leadership; social justice issues and post-Vatican II activism; and religious life and spirituality. Since some of my implications for research overlap thematic categories, I will wait and propose suggestions and ideas for further research at the end of the article. My objective is to provide some perspective on the past and stimulate ideas and approaches for further research and analysis on this very important topic.

Americanization and Multiple Catholic Identities

Issues involving Americanization, particularly the interface between religious, ethnic, class, and gender identities, have been important components in analyzing and understanding the history of women religious. Historians have documented that whether Catholic religious orders emigrated from Europe or began on American soil, the taint of "foreignness" had to be addressed both in interacting with the outside world—where a Protestant majority often equated Roman Catholicism with anti-American attitudes and beliefs—and within religious orders, where ethnic and class conflicts could destroy fledgling communities. Although schools, churches, priests, and male religious were victims of harassment and sometimes violence, many scholars suggest that communities of women religious were often targeted in ways that demonstrate that religious bigotry and gender bias were motivations for the attacks.

As women who lived and worked in all-female environments; created and maintained schools and institutions in the public domain; wore "mysterious," distinctive clothing, and took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience while rejecting marriage and motherhood, nuns elicited a variety of Protestant fantasies. Alternatively they were seen either as captive, docile minions and concubines for male clergy or as upright "abnormal" women, rejected by males as unfit for marriage and motherhood and allowed to run amuck as "independent" women with masculine tendencies. In her 1978 seminal work, The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America, Mary乙wens described
these anti-Catholic biases, including the role that nineteenth-century fiction and literature played in the creation of both positive and negative images of the realities of American sisters’ lives and activities. Importantly, in the late 1970s and 1980s Ewens’s research on Catholic sisters moved into a broader context, and her articles and book chapters analyzing women’s contributions in Catholic history and American religious history were included in a variety of anthologies and published by mainstream presses.6

Other works that described and analyzed religious bigotry as well as the inherent struggles with ethnic/immigrant and gender identity in the American milieu include four books published in the late 1980s: A Church of Many Cultures: Selected Historical Essays on Ethnic American Catholicism and Immigrants and Their Church, both edited by Dolores Liptak; American Catholic Women: A Historical Exploration, edited by Karen M. Kenneally; and The History of American Catholic Women, by James J. Kenneally. The last two explored gender issues for both lay and religious women.7 All four books explored gender, class, and/or ethnic identities and the clash of cultures typically resulting from the growing pluralism within American Catholic culture. From 1986 to 1996 three “special issues” of the U.S. Catholic Historian included many articles that deftly portrayed the struggle of women religious to integrate the sometimes contradictory aspects of gender, ethnic, racial, and religious identities in their lives, convents, and ministry activities.8

Other works that discuss and analyze Americanization and multiple Catholic identities but were published in non-Catholic journals and books include Nikola Baumgarten’s article “Education and Democracy in Frontier St. Louis: The Society of the Sacred Heart,” published in the History of Education Quarterly (1994), and David G. Hackett’s use of multiple religious traditions and a comparative approach in his article, “Gender and Religion in American Culture, 1870–1930” published in the journal Religion and American Culture (1995). In her superb chapter “Women’s History IS American Religious History” in Retelling U.S. Religious History (1997), Harvard religious

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scholar Ann Braude compares and analyzes gender bias within Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religious traditions and describes how gender identity seemed to place nuns at the flash point of anti-Catholic bigotry. Braude describes a Protestant perspective that viewed the Catholic Church as too "feminized." She wrote that Protestant scorn of the "rich sensual environment . . . the cult of saints and especially the veneration of the Virgin . . . retains the anti-Catholic as well as the anti-woman bias of the standard narrative of American religion."  

Even within their own convent walls, women religious had to address issues related to Americanization, particularly ethnicity and class. Historians of women religious tend to agree on many of the Americanizing influences that created and reshaped religious communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Women religious had to downplay, if not eliminate, ethnic and class conflicts within their own communities in order to successfully recruit young women into the community—a recruitment outreach that often extended into countries as diverse as Canada, Ireland, France, Germany, and Mexico. Suellen Hoy's article, "The Journey Out: The Recruitment and Emigration of Irish Religious Women to the United States, 1812–1914," in the Journal of Women's History traced this century-long pilgrimage and subsequent "Americanization" of Erin's daughters.  

By the 1980s historians of women religious had begun to chronicle the struggles of foreign-born communities and sisters in American society. Outdated European convent customs plagued communities in the United States; they produced ethnic conflicts and rivalries and created incidents of class resentment among the sisters. In the more egalitarian atmosphere of the United States, parents were reluctant to send daughters to join communities that might relegate them to "second-class citizenship" by utilizing them as "domestics" or lay sisters. Issues involving the ownership of slaves, the lay/choir sister division, dowry payments, and linguistic requirements for postulants divided communities and forced many to reshape their constitutions, customs books, and recruiting and formation practices, at times breaking their ties to their European motherhouses. Two in-depth studies have looked at the importance of this transition in nineteenth-century America. Patricia Byrne's "Sisters of St. Joseph: The Americanization of a French Tradition" in the U.S. Catholic Historian (1986) and Ephrem Hollermann's 1994 book, The Reshaping of a Tradition: American Benedictine Women, 1852–1881, serve as excellent examples of the issues facing American communities who came to the United States.


Utilizing data gleaned from a large number of convent archival materials, Margaret Susan Thompson's research has looked extensively at these conflicts within a variety of religious orders. Her article, "Sisterhood and Power: Class, Culture, and Ethnicity in the American Convent," in the Colby Library Journal and her chapter, "Discovering Foremothers: Sisters, Society, and the American Catholic Experience," in The American Catholic Religious Life, edited by Joseph M. White, have added greatly to the discussion. In Jo Ann Kay McNamara's tour de force, Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia, she devoted a chapter to the "culture wars" that erupted when fifteen centuries of European religious traditions were transplanted to the United States. In Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836–1920, Martha Smith and I discussed the ethnic and class struggles inside and outside the community of the Sisters of St. Joseph, who came from France but quickly Americanized by translating their constitution, customs books, and teaching manual to attract postulants and alleviate ethnic rivalries in their community. In 2002 Diane Batts Morrow's book, Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828–1860, makes clear that these conflicts and identity issues were not confined only to white Euro-American communities. In her finely nuanced study of race, religion, and gender, Morrow states that the African American Oblate Sisters of Providence struggled not only with white racism from the Church and the outside world but also with skin color, ethnic, and class differences among themselves.

In a more direct approach to addressing the invisibility of the past and present pluralism of Catholic life in the United States, historians have recently begun examining the variety of experiences of Latino, Asian, Native American, and African American Catholics. As a capstone to this section on Americanization and multiple Catholic identities, I want to recommend the nine-volume series "American Catholic Identities: A Documentary History," edited by Christopher J. Kauffman. The goal of this series is to demonstrate "understanding of social history—the significance of gender, race, regionalism, ethnicity and spirituality, as well as Catholic thought and practice before

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and since the Second Vatican Council. The chronological and thematic inclusion of significant and interesting primary documents, many that include the writings and activities of sisters, provides a broad range of perspectives and contexts. Two recently published volumes, *The Frontiers and Catholic Identities*, edited by Anne Butler, Michael E. Engh, and Thomas W. Spalding, and *Gender Identities in American Catholicism*, edited by Paula Kane, James J. Kenneally, and Karen M. Kennelly, are particularly pertinent to scholarship on the history of women religious.

**Apostolic Activities**

Many argue that it is in the area of apostolic ministry that the absence of women religious in traditional historical narratives has been most egregious. The massive amount of institution building and support services that Catholic sisters provided in education, health care, and social service is legendary. Women religious built and/or staffed schools (elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions), hospitals, and social service institutions that served millions of Americans, rich and poor, Catholic and non-Catholic, young and old, families and the homeless, the deaf and the disabled, and the racially and ethnically marginalized. Also, beginning in the late nineteenth-century American women religious became involved in overseas mission work—a global ministry that continued to expand throughout the twentieth century and became a major part of some congregations’ ministry. To quote from Tentler’s article, "Had women under secular or Protestant auspices compiled this record of achievement, they would be today a thoroughly researched population. . . . Remedy is surely needed."

In the past twenty-five years, historians of women religious have moved decisively to provide "remedy," and nowhere has this effort been more successful than in documenting, describing, and analyzing the apostolate. Some of the strongest inroads in placing sisters within the broader context of Catholic, religious, and women’s history have been made in this area of research. I see two trends in the historiography that support this contention and help define the research. First, historians of women religious have made major attempts to document sisters and institutions, creating the raw data and facts of "who, where, when, and why" that are so necessary to establish the visible presence of women religious as institution builders and shapers within Catholic culture and American life. Clearly influenced by more recent trends in women’s history and social history, many religious orders have taken major steps to document their communities’ activities by writing updated or expanded histories that place sisters at the center.

14. Although I have not had an opportunity to read all nine volumes and some are still forthcoming, much can be gleaned about women religious from two recent volumes in particular: *Gender Identities in American Catholicism*, ed. Paula Kane, James J. Kenneally, and Karen M. Kennelly (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002); and *The Frontiers and Catholic Identities*, ed. Anne Butler, Michael E. Engh, and Thomas W. Spalding (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).

of the analysis. Community historians have become more acutely aware of nuances of gender, ethnicity, and class issues within their orders and also in the interactions of their sisters with diverse groups.

Although it is impossible to name all the fine books produced over the last two decades, almost all large communities and some smaller ones have rewritten, updated, or expanded their American stories—counting, naming, and describing their sisters’ and their communities’ contributions to American society. More recently, some communities have created anthologies to document their histories and model a feminist collaborative approach in the process of “recovering” their communities’ histories. In 1997 the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan, published *Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*. In 2000 the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota, published *With Hearts Expanded: Transformations in the Lives of Benedictine Women, St. Joseph, Minnesota, 1957–2000*, and two years later the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Paul, Minnesota, published *Eyes Open on a World: The Challenges of Change*. In 1994 one writer attempted to provide a comprehensive history as a “tribute” to sisters and with a desire to place them on center stage in American Catholic history. With the support of many historians and community archivists who provided information, documents, statistics, and photographs for his book, George C. Stewart Jr. published *Marvels of Charity: History of American Sisters and Nuns*. Using a chronological approach for his narrative and supplementing his work with extensive statistical data on sisters, institutions, and apostolic activities, Stewart has given researchers a broad foundation to further explore and interpret the experiences of American women religious.¹⁶

The second trend in the historiography of religious women’s activities has two components. As historians described and interpreted the activities of Catholic sisters, they began to put these activities into the broader narratives of religious history, women’s history, and social history in two distinctive ways: by comparing and contrasting Catholic nuns’ activities to other American women’s activities, and by placing the sisters’ work within the scholarship describing the historical development of the professions of teaching, nursing, social service, and global ministry. When I first began researching the history of women religious thirteen years ago, I was immediately struck by how closely the activities of sisters mirrored the activities and institution building of Protestant or secular American women, although nuns’ contributions were never discussed in my graduate work in women’s history. Like an early explorer who

thought she had discovered a "Lost World," I was determined to explore this "parallel universe." Of course, like Columbus, I did not discover anything because many women religious and some secular historians were already there, creating and publishing research and moving it into the mainstream of academic scholarship.

Nowhere has this move to a larger context been stronger than in the historiography of the educational apostolate. Nineteenth-century convent academies opened wherever a community of women religious settled. This activity continued the European traditions of many communities, providing needed financial resources for religious communities with European or American foundations and serving a Catholic and non-Catholic population that had few options for their children's education. Two previously mentioned works, Mary Ewens's book, The Role of the Nun, and Nikola Baumgarten's article, "Education and Democracy," placed women religious within the larger nineteenth-century educational culture as they dealt with racial, ethnic, and gender conflicts inherent to the teaching apostolate. In Highly Respectable and Accomplished Ladies: Catholic Women Religious in America, 1790–1850, Barbara Misner described the important educational apostolate and many other aspects of convent life in Catholic women's communities that had established foundations in antebellum America. Focusing specifically on convent academies, Mary Eileen Brewer's Nuns and the Education of American Catholic Women, 1860–1920 detailed curriculum and daily life at many convent academies that existed well into the twentieth century. In Spirited Lives Martha Smith and I explored the importance of Catholic schools and academies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, describing how the religious rivalries and competition between Protestant women and Catholic sisters undeniably expanded the gender parameters and leadership possibilities for both. 17

It is well documented that many nineteenth-century convent academies gave birth to Catholic women's colleges in the twentieth century. Catholic women's colleges established by women religious began predominately for three reasons: Catholic men's colleges and universities barred their doors to women (except for summer or off-campus sessions); women religious were already attending secular colleges since communities needed a place to educate their sisters (who required degrees to meet professional and accreditation standards); and lay women were also attending non-Catholic private and public colleges, which was considered a risk to the faith. This gave the larger religious orders leverage with clerics and bishops to go forward with creating institutions of higher learning for Catholic women.

Although Catholic women's colleges developed later than other women's colleges, coeducational institutions, and Catholic men's colleges, the gender aspects of the debates on the needs and concerns about women's education easily crossed theological lines. Three anthologies have examined the history, documents, and intellectual and

curricular trends in the history of Catholic women's colleges and the intellectual tradition of women religious. In 1987 Mary J. Oates edited *Higher Education for Catholic Women: An Historical Anthology*, which used the plethora of primary documents generated by women religious, lay women, and male clerics to trace the evolution of Catholic women's colleges throughout the twentieth century. In 1996 *Women Religious and the Intellectual Life: The North American Achievement*, edited by Bridget Puzon, was published. Eight women from different religious congregations explored the "present and future of women religious engaged in works of intellectual life." In 2002 Tracy Schier and Cynthia Russett brought together a seasoned group of scholars to write historical essays that traced the issues of institutional origins, structure and governance, curricular changes, faculty expertise, alumni, and intellectual and spiritual heritages, among many other topics. Their book, *Catholic Women's Colleges in America*, provides an excellent overview of the multiple transitions and transformations of an institution that so many sisters attended, taught in, supported, and administered throughout the twentieth century.¹⁸

Although private academies and women's colleges dominate the education historiography, teaching in elementary or secondary schools was the more typical experience for large numbers of women religious in the United States. As the Catholic immigrant population grew, and even after many Catholics moved into the middle-class mainstream, the sisters' central role in parish teaching continued until the 1970s. Clerics and bishops, having access to a cheap labor source, demanded more sisters, and religious communities struggled to meet the needs of parish teaching, sometimes at the expense of sisters' health and well-being, professional credentials, and community finances.

Although no historian has yet attempted a national study of parish education that places sisters in the center of the research, some historians of women have made strong contributions in surveying communities within cities or regions of the country. Florence Deacon's dissertation, "Handmaids or Autonomous Women: The Charitable Activities, Institution Building and Communal Relationships of Catholic Sisters in Nineteenth-Century Wisconsin" (1989), discusses the role of nuns in parish education and deftly compares the nuns’ experiences with those of public school teachers. Deacon's research goes well beyond education and describes other charitable activities, legal realities, communal relationships, and the ongoing "gender politics" as sisters negotiated with bishops, priests, and spiritual directors. In 1994 Annabelle Raiche and Ann Marie Biermaier published *They Came to Teach: The Story of Sisters Who Taught in Parochial Schools and Their Contribution to Elementary Education in Minnesota*. Patricia Byrne, a coeditor (with Jay P. Dolan, R. Scott Appleby, and Debra Campbell) and contributor to *Transforming Parish Ministry: The Changing Roles of Catholic

Clergy, Laity and Women Religious, wrote convincingly about the nuns’ influence, struggles, and changing status in parish education.  

Beginning with “Organized Volunteerism: The Catholic Sisters in Massachusetts, 1870–1940” in Women in American Religion, and more recently in her book, The Catholic Philanthropic Tradition in America, Mary J. Oates has consistently tied the educational apostolate, particularly parish school teaching, to the social service apostolate in the historiography of American nuns. Because the work was always underpaid and even at times forced on diocesan communities by their bishop, she argues that sisters’ parish and orphan schools should be considered volunteerism and treated as part of the American Catholic philanthropic history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Additional works that examine the history of Catholic social service and nuns’ contributions are “Irish Catholic Nuns and the Development of New York City’s Welfare System, 1840–1900,” a 1992 dissertation by Maureen Fitzgerald; Margaret McGuinness’s “Body and Soul: Catholic Social Settlements and Immigration,” in U.S. Catholic Historian; and a book by Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown entitled The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare (1997). Two recent scholarly articles that have appeared in non-Catholic journals include Suellen Hoy’s “Caring for Chicago’s Women and Girls: The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, 1859–1911,” in the Journal of Urban History, and M. Christine Anderson’s “Catholic Nuns and the Invention of Social Work: The Sisters of the Santa Maria Institute of Cincinnati, Ohio, 1897 through the 1920s,” published in the Journal of Women’s History. 

Similar to the link between teaching and philanthropy, the work of women religious in nursing and health care was educational and philanthropic, and it formed the third component of the apostolate. Nursing sisters served children, orphans, and the same Catholic immigrants and middle-class clientele who filled their orphanages, schools,

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and social service institutions. Some excellent books provide a solid foundation, describing and analyzing the nursing and health care apostolate, placing sister nurses and their hospitals in the center of American Catholic history, women's history, and social history.

Mary Denis Maher's *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War* provides an excellent example of how the activities of sisters interfaced with one of the most well-known events in American history. Since sister nurses made up approximately 20 percent of all Civil War nurses and were some of the best-trained caregivers at the time, their activities not only provided a vital service to American society but also greatly reduced anti-Catholic bigotry, which was prevalent in antebellum America. Published the same year (1989), *Pioneer Healers: The History of Women Religious in American Health Care*, edited by Ursula Stepisi and Dolores Liptak, expanded the important narrative by placing nursing sisters at the flash points of wars, epidemics, massive immigration, and economic recessions and tracing the central role that women religious played in developing and expanding health care in the United States. Individual profiles, statistics, and chronological milestones in the appendices add facts and hard data to the interesting and well-researched essays. In 1995 Christopher Kauffman placed the sisters' activities within the context of the history of Catholic health care in the United States. In *Ministry and Meaning: A Religious History of Catholic Health Care in the United States*, Kauffman traced the important role of women religious not only as service providers but also as makers and shapers of policy and meaning in health care. Most recently, Sioban Nelson's book, *Say Little, Do Much: Nurses, Nuns and Hospitals in the Nineteenth Century*, exemplifies scholarship that documents the sister nurses' contributions to health care and compares their work with that of Protestant deaconesses involved in nineteenth-century health care.22

Although far less developed in the historiography of women religious than the "big three" of the U.S. apostolate, missionary work (or global ministry) includes all of the sisters' apostolic activities and exports them outside the United States. Although contributions to *Review for Religious* in the past decade have begun to address sisters' missionary work, three books published in the late 1990s provide a larger context for the important role of nuns in global ministry. Mary McGlone's *Sharing Faith Across the Hemisphere* focuses on the sisters' contributions in the Latin American apostolate. Dana L. Robert's *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* and Angelyn Dries's *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* use an even wider lens to place and interpret nuns' missionary activities within the global context of American Catholic history, religious history, and women's history.

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Creating a broad perspective and sensitive to religious, ethnic, racial, and gender differences among the missionaries and the people they served, both books provide a model for others who research this interesting ministry, which will only grow more complicated and politicized in the future. The recent publication of Gender Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century, edited by Dana L. Robert, provides new content and analysis concerning women’s vast contribution to global ministry.23

Professionalization and Women’s Leadership

Although much information about the professionalization and leadership of women religious is documented, both implicitly and explicitly, in most of the sources I have mentioned above, in this section I discuss recent work that addresses these issues in a more direct or comprehensive way. Within the past decade, historians of women religious have begun to explore the importance and influence of the Sister Formation Conference (SFC), the influence and role of the women auditors at the Second Vatican Council, and the changing role and influence of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). The SFC and LCWR both began in the 1950s and had tremendous influence and impact on women religious prior to and after the Second Vatican Council. Although they began separately and had somewhat different constituencies and, at times, different goals prior to Vatican II, these organizations actively promoted higher education, professionalization, and intercommunity (and later ecumenical) dialogue and cooperation. They expanded the autonomy and national leadership role of nuns at a critical time in Catholic and American women’s history.

Marjorie Niseman Beane’s book, From Framework to Freedom: A History of the Sister Formation Conference (1993), provided a descriptive analysis of the SFC and its contribution in preparing nuns for the forthcoming changes of the Second Vatican Council. Drawing from her earlier research and publications, Mary Schneider explored the contributions of the SFC in “Educating an Elite: Sister Formation, Higher Education and Images of Women,” in A Leaf from the Great Tree of God: Essays in Honour of Ritamary Bradley, S.F.C.C., edited by Margot King. In 2000 Judith Ann Eby’s dissertation, “A Little Squabble Among Nuns? The Sister Formation Crisis and the Patterns of Authority and Obedience Among American Women Religious, 1954–1971,” went even further to describe, analyze, and interpret the impact of the SFC, specifically the power struggles between the Conference of Major Superiors of Women (CMSW; later the LCWR) and the SFC leadership as centuries-old, pre–Vatican II interpretations of authority and obedience gave way to the newer, more collegial model encour-

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aged by Vatican II.\textsuperscript{24}

In \textit{Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II}, Carmel McEnroy provided an interesting and contextual account of the women auditors at Vatican II. Mary Luke Tobin's highly visible and interactive role at the council, as a symbol and vocal representative for American women religious in Rome, is placed within the larger context of one of the most significant religious events of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{25}

Using two earlier studies describing changes in leadership and authority in women's communities, Lora Ann Quinonez and Mary Daniel Turner coauthored \textit{The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters} in 1992. This excellent book looked at the SPC and beyond Vatican II by tracing the leadership role and autonomy of American sisters through the history and documents of the LCWR and its metamorphosis from its early, timid beginnings as the CMSW in 1956 to its independent stance as a national forum and leader of women religious in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{26}

In summary, I would like to suggest some books published over the last two decades that have discussed and analyzed the theoretical and pragmatic arguments, struggles, and successes of women's religious leadership in the United States. I mention three anthologies as representative sources: \textit{Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions} (1979), edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin; the three-volume \textit{Women and Religion in America} (1981, 1983, 1986), edited by Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller; and \textit{Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles Inside the Mainstream} (1996), edited by Catherine Wesinger. These anthologies include chapters discussing the leadership of Catholic lay and religious women written by Mary Ehren, Mary J. Oates, Elizabeth Kolmer, Marie Augusta Neal, and theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schissler Fiorenza, and Mary Farrell Bednarowski, among others. All of these books provide a larger context to analyze the nexus of gender and leadership within Judeo-Christian traditions in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.\textsuperscript{27}


Social Justice Issues and Post–Vatican II Activism

Although social activism within sisters’ ministry and institutions can be found in most historical narratives of Catholic religious communities, I will focus here on the work of historians of women religious and others who are beginning to research and analyze more contemporary nuns’ responses to social justice issues, particularly their post–Vatican II activism. For many religious communities the call to renewal meant re-examining equity issues within their institutions. For other communities it meant letting go of these institutions, refocusing on justice issues, and engaging in activism as individuals, in small groups with other sisters, and with laity.

Historians have only recently begun to analyze this activism, but some trends are evident. Issues involving race, class, and gender discrimination have figured prominently in the published research. Suellen Hoy has looked extensively at sisters in Chicago—a hotbed of racial strife and also the location of the national headquarters for the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice (NCCIJ) and the equally hard-hitting Catholic Interracial Council of Chicago. Her excellent article, “No Color Line at Loretto Academy: Catholic Sisters and African Americans on Chicago’s South Side,” in Journal of Women’s History, documented the sisters’ struggles to maintain their academies in the inner city after federally mandated desegregation in 1954 caused white parishioners to flee these schools as African American girls quickly became the majority of students and eventually the entire student body. Caught between their desire to serve their black students and indifference of the archdiocese, which provided little monetary support even though it provided significant financial support for the neighborhood Catholic boys’ academy, the sisters finally were forced to close the academy in 1968. Long before the 1950s and 1960s Catholic sisters broke racial boundaries by living and working in black neighborhoods, as Hoy has shown in “Ministering Hope to Chicago” in Chicago History and “Illinois Technical School for Colored Girls: A Catholic Institution on Chicago’s South Side, 1911–1953” in the Journal of Illinois History.28


In 2002 two dissertations also examined racial issues and the involvement of women religious. Amy Koehliger’s “From Selma to Sisterhood: Race and Transformation in Catholic Sisterhoods in the 1960s” analyzed the work of the NCCW, Margaret Trulter, and the civil rights campaigns of Selma, Alabama, Project Cabrini in Chicago, and the sisters’ work in the rural South. Although less focused on sisters’ activities than on the larger Catholic response, Gregory Nelson Hite’s dissertation, “The Hottest Place in Hell: The Catholic Church, the Alabama Voting Rights Campaign, and Selma, Alabama, 1937–1965,” traced nuns’ involvement from their arrival in the city during the depression to the infamous Selma demonstrations of 1965. The Selma story is also being explored by independent filmmakers who hope to bring the film “Sisters of Selma” to public television in the next few years.29

Gender as a social justice issue in the Church has also begun to be mined by historians of women religious and other writers interested in documenting the social activism of Catholic sisters after Vatican II. Although many of the previously mentioned books and articles have numerous anecdotes detailing the gendered struggles of sisters in the Church and with the male hierarchy, some recent work has focused directly on issues and events that highlight sexism, the influence of feminism, and the gendered politics of the late twentieth-century American Church. In 1986 Madonna Kolbenschlag edited Authority, Community and Conflict, which included a chapter by Helen Marie Burns entitled “The Experience of Sisters of Mercy of the Union in Public Office,” a chapter by Lora Ann Quinonez and Mary E. Hunt entitled “Toward Communal Empowerment,” and many other chapters that focused on the gendered battleground of women’s role, authority, and autonomy inside and outside the Church. Also, The Inside Stories: 13 Valiant Women Challenging the Church by Annie Lally Milhaven included the struggles of both laywomen and nuns as they challenged the patriarchal Church.30

Numerous books focusing on gender in the Church were published in the 1990s; representative examples include Faithful and Fearless: Moving Feminist Protest inside the Church and Military by Mary Fainsod Katzenstein; The Feminization of the Church? by Kaye Ashe; Women’s Role in the Church by Joan Chittister; and Transforming Feminism by Maria Riley. Originally published in 1985 and reprinted in 1995, Mary Jo Weaver’s New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority examined the role and influence of both laywomen and women religious in the contemporary Church. In 1991 Sandra M. Schneider published Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church, and nine years later she pub-


lished With Oil in Their Lamps: Faith, Feminism and the Future, which looked at feminism, the role of women religious in higher education, and how both have transformed the Church. A recent work on this highly important issue is the anthology The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue, edited by Elizabeth A. Johnson. These books represent a wide range of attitudes about the Church’s ability to change its gendered theology regarding laywomen and women religious and its historic inability to view them as “full human persons” deserving of leadership roles and autonomy.31

Another group of books I have chosen to place in this thematic category, although they do not fit into the historiography in the traditional way, are collected memoirs and essays written by women religious that document the sisters’ personal experiences as they engaged in relevant contemporary social issues in the post–Vatican II world. In Hope Is an Open Door (1981), Mary Luke Tobin writes about how her experiences as an auditor at Vatican II, her relationship with Thomas Merton, and her renewal experiences in the Loretto Community all played a part in her understanding and working toward social justice inside and outside the Church. She wrote, “The future, whatever it brings, is open to the completely new experience that is encountered when persons and communities . . . accept the challenge of relating the events of the times to the gospel and to the justice mandated by it.”32

Clearly, many sisters have agreed with Tobin’s sentiments. Published in 1985, Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story, edited by Ann Patrick Ware, provided insights into the ways that Vatican II and the renewal process propelled individual nuns into a vast sea of social justice issues. Nineteen sisters from a variety of religious orders contributed essays. Written by many prominent social activists, these accounts detailed the personal and communal struggles of the post–Vatican II era that moved them into different ministries and, in some cases, high-profile leadership roles as they addressed race, class, and gender issues both inside and outside the Church. In 1996 Carole Garibaldi Rogers interviewed over fifty nuns for Poverty, Chastity, and Change: Lives of Contemporary American Nuns. In No Turning Back: Two Nuns’ Battle with the Vatican over Women’s Right to Choose, authors Barbara Ferraro and Patricia Hussey documented their battles with the Vatican after their highly publicized pro-choice stance appeared in the New York Times.33

33. Ann Patrick Ware, ed., Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story (Kansas City, Mo.: Leaven Press, 1985); Carole Garibaldi Rogers, Poverty, Chastity and Change: Lives of Contemporary Amer-
Two other women religious have been high-profile advocates of social justice causes that have placed them at the flash points of both admiration and ridicule. Helen Prejean's celebrated book and the subsequent film, *Dead Man Walking*, made her an award-winning author and national spokesperson on capital punishment. Between 1983 and 1995 Jeannine Grammick edited or coedited five books concerning her national ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics, both lay and religious. Her most recent edited volume, *Voices of Hope: A Collection of Positive Catholic Writings on Gay and Lesbian Issues*, continued to place her in a visible role on this highly controversial issue. A number of these contemporary authors have been criticized by the laity and, at times, censured by the hierarchy in the United States and Rome who believe that nuns should not challenge the magisterium or participate in active dissent against official Church teachings. Some accuse the sisters of moving too deeply and too publicly into the political arena of American life.  

The discussion of sexism, feminism, and women's role in the Church will only expand in the future as sisters continue to challenge the Church to bring its ideas on social justice, including gender justice, into the twenty-first century. Two excellent "secular" sources that provide the necessary American context for historians of women religious who are analyzing sexism in the social and political milieu of the post–World War II era are *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* by Ruth Rosen and Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Rosen's tome provides a comprehensive overview of the era and the influence of the "Second Wave" of the women's movement, crediting some of the earliest consciousness raising and activism to churchwomen who "got it" and quickly made the connection between sexism and patriarchy when analyzing their limited and prescribed roles in the Church.

**Religious Life and Spirituality**

Although this is placed as my final thematic category of discussion, in many ways it is the most overwhelming. As Elizabeth Kolber indicated in her extensive book, *Red-
religious Women in the United States: A Survey of the Influential Literature from 1950 to 1983, the explosion of writings by women religious about religious life and spirituality began soon after Vatican II. What had been a trickle became a rush of words and ideas from women religious who for generations had experienced religious life and formation based mostly on the religious and spiritual writings of men. I would argue that this area of literature has expanded even more in the two decades since Kolmer's excellent analysis. Consequently, for historians to adequately analyze the late-twentieth-century experience of women religious, it is vital for the researcher to understand what nuns have said and are saying about their own experiences and understandings of religious life and spirituality. Compared to earlier books that focused on the "ideal" of religious life, more contemporary writers have and are focusing on discovering what religious life is and means in the contemporary world. As someone who comes to this from an outsider's perspective, I will provide an overview of the trends I see in this important area of the historiography, leaving others to debate the finer points presented by the authors.

For the past two decades a variety of women religious have written articles and essays for the journal Review for Religious. Issues concerning community governance, structure and leadership, communal living, the vows, associate memberships, vocation and formation, global missions, and the future of religious life have been proposed and debated. Some recent examples of the ongoing discussions include Miriam D. Ukeritis, "Religious Life's Ongoing Renewal: Will Good Intentions Suffice?"; Karen M. Kennelly, "Foreign Missions and the Renewal Movement"; Doris Gottmeoeller, "Community Living: Beginning the Conversation"; and Mary Ann Foley, "Another Window on the Crisis in Women's Communities." These articles and others in the journal have provided an ongoing forum for women religious to inform, debate, and provide points of discussion as communities continue to make decisions about their futures.

In larger, book-length treatments of these topics, sociologists, theologians, and others have taken on these multifaceted themes of religious life. The work of Marie Augusta Neal set the standard for sociological approaches to analyzing religious life. Her groundbreaking work Catholic Sisters in Transition: From the 1960s to the 1980s, first published in 1984, was later followed by From Nuns to Sisters: An Expanding Vocation in 1990. Utilizing extensive survey data first collected in 1967, Neal supplemented the discussions of religious life with hard data concerning numbers, attitudes, demographic background, and activities of American sisters. In the 1990s sociologist Patricia Wittberg produced three additional studies: Creating a Future for Religious Life: A Sociological Perspective, The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective, and Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities. Also in the


Besides the work of sociologists, theologians have provided many significant analyses of religious life—where it has been and where it is going. One of the most prolific writers to focus on the theme of religious life is theologian Sandra M. Schneiders. Besides many articles in theological journals and books on scripture, Schneiders published *New Wineskins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today* in 1986. More recently Schneiders has published *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (2000) and *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (2001). One more book is forthcoming, which will complete her trilogy on “Religious Life in a New Millennium.” Far too insightful and complex to summarize in this article, these volumes are major contributions to contemporary thinking about religious life, past and future.\(^38\)

Three anthologies have focused on the experiences and ideas of women from within the tradition of their own religious communities. In 1988 Carol Quigley edited *Turning Points in Religious Life*, an anthology written (with one exception) by Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary describing their reflections on the historical and contemporary aspects of religious life. In 1999 two other communities moved in similar directions. Adrian Dominican sisters came together to create *Journey in Faith and Fidelity: Women Shaping Religious Life for a Renewed Church*, edited by Nadine Foley, and Margaret Carney and Elise Saggau edited a volume of collected papers entitled *Franciscan Studies: The Difference Women Are Making*. These volumes not only add to the historiography on women religious but also provide the larger context of community identity within religious life.\(^39\)

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Other women religious from a variety of backgrounds have contributed significantly to discussions on religious life and spirituality as well. Utilizing the expertise of theologians, psychologists, and others, the 1989 anthology *The Crisis in Religious Vocations: An Inside View*, edited by Laurie Feltinor, brought together male and female religious to wrestle with issues surrounding the decline and future of religious vocations. Mary Jo Leddy’s *Reweaving Religious Life: Beyond the Liberal Model* and Barbara Flann’s *Wrestling with God: Religious Life in Search of Its Soul* are fine examples of this contemporary trend in writings about religious life and community. Joan Chittister’s activism on the speakers’ circuit and her extensive array of books have set a standard for thoughtful, insightful thinking and writing on religious life and spirituality. Although her publications now number over forty, I will mention two recent and representative contributions. In 1995 she published *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* and in 1998 *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*. Chittister’s books reach a large audience and have the “crossover effect” that makes them attractive to both religious and lay readers.40

Although biographies and autobiographies of sisters could reside throughout all of my thematic categories, I want to mention them here because first and foremost these women clearly saw their vocation and religious life as the best way to express their life goals and experiences. This category of religious biography is vast and could have many entries, but I will mention three recent publications because of their quality and the authors’ contemporary look at their remarkable subjects. In the late 1990s Hermenia Maldrey, Phil Kilroy, and Gail Porter Mandell produced excellent biographical studies of Mary Austin Carroll, Madeleine Sophie Barat, and Madeleva Wolff respectively. These authors utilized extensive primary sources and brought a modern, nuanced analysis to these important women, who were major influences in nineteenth- and twentieth-century religious life.41

Finally, I want to mention two books that may be useful in contextualizing the experiences of women religious as historians assess religious life and spirituality. In 1994 Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes edited *Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives*. This multicultural anthology compared Catholic, Protestant, and nontraditional or alternative approaches to women’s spirituality. The contributing writers, including Toinette M. Eugene, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Marie Augusta Neal, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, document the variety of Catholic input in this volume. One other


book that I have found to be extremely useful for comparative purposes is Mary Farrell Bednarowski's *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (1998). Bednarowski, a Catholic, has worked at a Protestant seminary for thirty years and produced a provocative book that attempted to find the "common threads" of women's approaches to and thinking about religion. She focused on the contemporary feminist writings of Native American, Protestant (liberal and conservative), Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist scholars, which give the reader a "world religions" approach to women's perspectives on religion and spirituality within their own traditions.  

**Implications for Future Research**

Over the past twenty-five years historians of women religious and other scholars have produced an abundance of strong scholarship on a variety of topics related to women religious. Scholars have gone well beyond the "who, what, where, when" descriptors of history and have begun to create, interpret, and integrate the narrative of the history of women religious into the larger context of Catholic history, religious history, women's history, and social history by placing the sisters' lives, work, experiences, and ideas at the center of the analysis. However, there are many avenues for new research and there is much to be done in exploring new historical terrain. I will suggest some of these possibilities and provide further implications for research—knowing that my list is limited and suggests only some of the possible beginnings.

Historians have made significant contributions in analyzing the stories of women religious in nineteenth-century America. However, untapped possibilities remain that would place the sisters within additional contexts and narratives; namely, the effects of region and location need more research attention. First, more work needs to be done on sisters' interactions with multiethnic populations, particularly Native American, Asian, and Hispanic populations in the American West. What was the sisters' role as "cultural mediators" between peoples on the frontier and in the fast-growing urban centers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Second, although most of the nineteenth-century Catholic population was located in cities on the Eastern seaboard and the Midwest, historians of women religious (with some exceptions) have yet to examine the sisters' role within these urban contexts—including the social, religious, and political impact of the nuns' presence and their activities. The "secular" scholarship on American women and urban institution building is rich, and historians of women religious should design research to tap into this larger context of women's activities and influence in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century cities. Finally, to my knowledge almost no one has explored the influence and extent of nuns' work in rural or small

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communities. Did their activities and influence mirror that of women religious in urban centers, or was it distinctly different (stronger or weaker) because they were small in number or more “isolated” ethnically, religiously, and geographically?

Although historians of women religious have made major inroads in defining the sisters’ nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundations, their ministries, and struggles with Americanization, multiple Catholic identities, and the male hierarchy, the post-1920 period, particularly the post–World War II era, remains an open field. Many historians’ assumption that the decades between the world wars were indeed “The Great Repression” or a “Virtual Ice Age” in religious life resulting from the changes in 1918Canon Law needs much more analysis. Many questions need to be explored, such as: Why did the sisterhoods continue to grow rapidly in the United States? How were the women entering communities in this time period similar to or different from earlier generations? How did the large attendance of sisters at public colleges (particularly at the graduate level) affect, if not challenge, ideas about religious life and women’s role? How did the type of institution in which a sister served affect her identity and sense of mission? How did the interaction with laity change or affect the attitudes of women religious?

The post–World War II era, both pre- and post–Vatican II, also needs much more analysis, particularly within the context of the significant social upheavals concerning the role and activities of American women in the public culture. More work needs to be done to place the sisters’ national organizations (SFC, LCWR, the National Catholic AIDS Network [NCAN], and the National Black Sisters’ Union [NBSD], among others) into this broader narrative. Likewise, more research needs to be done to analyze the post–Vatican II organizations that have united and divided laywomen and women religious around social justice issues (Women Organizing for Change [WOC], Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual [WATER], Dignity, and Call to Action, among others). Just as historians have explored the nineteenth-century issues surrounding Americanization, we need to explore the multicultural Catholicism of the twentieth century and research how women religious responded in their missions to and with these diverse populations.

Although much has been written about the renewal movement from both individual and community perspectives, I believe more work needs to be done to make connections with the larger context of American women’s history in the late 1960s. How did the upheaval of Vatican II interface with major shifts in gender roles in American society? Although they were rarely called this, many of the small and large group community meetings that began after Vatican II in order to address the new mandates functioned as “consciousness-raising” activities, although this term is usually associated with the secular women’s movement. When I began reading about or was told by sisters about these community meetings and the confrontations and emotional upheavals during the renewal process, it reminded me of similar encounters that happened all over the country when groups of women came together to talk to each other about the important issues in their lives and their shared frustrations, fears, and desires
to change their roles in their families, organizations, and society. What other parallels exist between the experiences of women religious and the secular women’s movement of the late 1960s and 1970s?

One of the stunning changes in the ministry of women religious has been the move away from institutions toward more direct ministry with marginal or disaffected groups. Sisters have joined many Catholics and non-Catholics in work settings, organizations, and, in some cases, active protest on behalf of people of color, the poor, and the disabled. Sisters and their communities have become active in discussions concerning corporate investments, ecology, nuclear energy, the death penalty, and the School of the Americas, to name a few. Not only does this diversity of mission need exploration and analysis, but historians of women religious need to research the aftermath of the closing of institutions; hiring and working with more laity, including many non-Catholics; and the influence of lay boards that now direct many of the sisters’ institutions. What has been the effect on the mission of the communities? And, since many lay boards are now predominantly male, how has that impacted the sisters’ institutions and their values? Additionally, how have the global ministries been affected as sisters (consciously or unconsciously) now export Americanization through ideas and practices involving technology, individuality, capitalism, feminism, or other first-world lifestyle issues? Or conversely, how has nonwestern culture influenced religious life in global communities with American roots?

Finally, sisters are now some of the best-educated public speakers and writers on Catholic theology and spirituality, disseminating their work not only to other women religious but also to women and men, lay and religious, from a variety of religious traditions. How has the sisters’ growing theological expertise impacted the Church, interaction with the laity, interaction with male clergy, and their own religious communities?

I have two additional suggestions to enhance and facilitate further research on the history of women religious. These suggestions transcend research on time periods, conceptual themes, and/or individual community studies. First, Evangeline Thomas’s groundbreaking survey and guide to convent archival sources is now over twenty years old. An updated guidebook locating and describing archival holdings, collected works, and primary sources would definitely provide an important and useful tool for future researchers. Second, I want to suggest the establishment of an intercongregational or national research institute that would provide annually competitive grant monies for graduate students and/or senior scholars who are researching and writing manuscript-length studies. This would provide incentives for broader-based work that would promote visibility, academic credibility, and national recognition of American women religious and their historic contributions to American life. Both suggestions would provide additional impetus for expanding the historiography and encouraging future scholarly work.

In conclusion, women religious, although not in positions of “official” leadership in the Church, have been and continue to be important players in Catholic life and culture.
They have been and continue to be builders and shapers of American society as well. As historians of women religious we need to explore the intersections, the matrices—the places or points where new identities and ideas originate, take form, and develop. To do this we need to take the stories and histories of women religious and their communities and contextualize them by placing them at the center of the research, then moving them into the larger concentric circles of Catholic history, religious history, women’s history, and American social history. Only in this way can we fully develop and appreciate the historical and contemporary meaning of their lives.