10-1-1998


H. Loring White

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

**Recommended Citation**

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol39/iss39/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
with other cultural groups ("You shall have no other gods before Me": monotheism preferred to polytheism) or a preference against something in the past. ("They said unto you..., but I say unto you": new occasions teaching new duties). Without a socio-cultural developmental approach, meanings have no context. Revolutions and creative innovators are surely revered, in political and technological frameworks. Shore seems to fall into the genetic fallacy, with Totemism, the original, yielding Techno-Totemism, which brings him into the post-modernist Heideggerian Wasteland.

Given the variety of epistemologies, and the functional segmentation of methodologies, I am distrustful of "cognitive science," to begin with.

Let me go further: to speak of "meaning-construction" is to suggest something de novo, starting from Ground Zero, as it were. Surely not. The case is more nearly like that of the person asking a New England grande dame: "Where do you get your hats?" and who was crushingly answered "We have our hats." Meanings that we already have through social interactions (and Hillary was right about talking to infants), are extended by contrast and metaphor. Such hats are re-made over and over; their original raw material was James' "booming, buzzing confusion," a limiting notion.

The dialectical, socially interactive context for meaning developments (not constructions, the beginnings of which can be dated) is primary. All of Shore's inventories and dualities are laid out on the hangar floor, like parts from flight 800. That is autopsial; the darn thing is not in motion.

Palmer Talbutt


Perhaps there are two reasons as to why Women Religious did not appear much earlier. The manuscript collections of the Public Record Office, the British Library, the university libraries, and the various Church of England and private antiquarian archives have
been available for a long time. However the Tudor confiscation of monastic properties in 1539 destroyed many and scattered the remaining sources. Certainly the arduous pursuit of fragments of evidence and the tortuous job of analysis had little appeal for scholars preferring to invest their time in less obscure — or more fashionable — topics. Another reason for the late appearance of this work is that it concerns women. Until recently there was small interest in portraying their lives.

The prospect that emerges from Sally Thompson's carefully focused monograph reveals 139 institutions, all but six of them founded between 1100 and 1250. Sixty years earlier Eileen Power published Medieval English Nunneries (Cambridge, 1922), but her effort covered the period 1275-1535. Thus Thompson's study of the foundational era does not revise, rather it fills a long-empty gap. She has structured the study serially according to types of founders: Inspired individuals such as hermits and anchoresses; links with hospitals; monastic orders; lay founders; and episcopal founders. Along the way she charts the courses of various houses and develops a cumulative picture of their problems. These problems include the uneducated condition of women, problems of affiliation with monastic orders, dependence on men, and inadequate endowments.

With 25 reformed monastic houses founded or refounded from Duke William's accession, the Norman barons of 1066 had no concern to carry religious reform to England. William the Conqueror's Battle Abbey appears to be an exception, but it was intended as a war memorial to fulfill a vow, the high altar sited where King Harold fell, rather than a religious mission. Only three nunneries were founded before 1100, but then, somewhat tardily, the reform wave crossed the Channel. Communities of women undertaking the religious life first had to adopt a "rule," i.e., profess a code of monastic governance and seek affiliation with the masculine order of origin. Instead of welcome, rebuff was the usual response, for monastic reformers tended to look negatively at their sisters in religion. The new orders of the Twelfth Century were either reluctant or unwilling to admit women. Those which took them in, albeit with ambivalent attitudes, Benedictines, Augustinians, and a few newer orders, primarily the Premonstratensians and Arrouaisians (which were
canonical, priestly, rather than brotherly), gave little moral aid or
guidance. This resulted in changes of affiliation, very loose affili-
ation, or no affiliation (pp 3, 56-64, 68, 83). The strict
Cistercians rejected women for most of a century until 1213,
when 30 feminine communities were admitted in a few years,
causing the order to regret this act of generosity and to attempt to
limit their numbers. They were so uncaring as to omit nunneries
from official lists of abbeys (pp 94-99).²

The exceptions to this rejection were the "double orders," like
Fontevrault and the Gilbertines, where the sexes inhabited neigh-
boring buildings. Fontevrault was a French monastery in Poitou
controlled by women in which men were actually subordinate.
Because this exceptional house had royal Plantagenet patronage
— Henry II, Richard I, and Eleanor of Aquitaine are entombed
there — it spawned three daughter houses in England (pp 113-
123). More numerous were the Gilbertines, an English order
founded by St. Gilbert of Sempringham. Gilbert was one of the
few reformers with compassion for women. Unfortunately prox-
imity bred a few scandals, and the later Gilbertine houses admit-
ted only men (pp 73-75). Which throws light on the next prob-
lem: dependence on men. Nuns required chaplains for the care of
their souls, men of learning for communication to the outside
(medieval women were unschooled), and men of affairs to man-
age the properties and finances of endowments. Because the mas-
culine orders neglected them, the nuns increasingly ended their
regular affiliations and came under the rule of bishops who
proved more willing to supply chaplains and look after their
estates (pp 54, 205-209).

For the bishops these acquisitions brought more quandaries
than enhancements of powers. Poverty was universal, with too
many nuns sitting down to meagre tables. Chaucer in the late 14C
Canterbury Tales exhibits contrasting monastics. There is the
Monk, a prosperous Benedictine, the manager of his great abbey's
distant properties who stops off to hunt on his business trips and
whose well filled robes reveal a rich diet. Much less well off is
"Madame Eglentyne," Prioress of the ancient house of Stratford-
at-Bow (Middlesex, now part of London). She also boasts a little
fur trimming on her gown, a nice brooch, and a few little dogs for
company, but her venal sins are petty alongside the Monk's pack
of dogs and fine horses. Stratford-at-Bow was a poor Benedictine nunneries without the extensive properties that required a traveling manager. Only three nunneries received rich endowments from royalty. King Stephen (1135-1154) established Lillechurch in Kent to provide a community for his daughter Mary. King Henry II (1154-1189) refounded Amesbury (Wiltshire) to bring his favorite order (Fontevrault) to England, and he added a major endowment to Godstow (Oxfordshire) because he buried his mistress Rosamund Clifford there in 1176 (pp 167, 182).

Like Godstow (founded 1138), several houses possessed large endowments because wealthy aristocrats founded them, but they number less than a dozen. Only nine nunneries had the higher status of abbeys — the other 130 were priories — of which five of those were among the aforementioned wealthy (pp 167, 172-174, 181-184). Over 70 were established by local lords of modest wealth whose provision was inadequate for the institutions they set up to provide for female relatives. There were always too many applicants, which required brides of Christ to furnish dowries (simony under Canon Law) in the form of grants. Note the contrast between Nuneaton (Warwickshire), founded by a rich Earl of Leicester, and nearby Pinley founded by a tenant of a great lord. In 1291 the income of Nuneaton was valued at 105 Pounds while Pinley earned only 4 Pounds (pp. 163, 166, 186-187).

Women Religious covers the subject with brevity and incisiveness, presenting the details of particular foundations in appendices. Its principal shortcoming is the result of its monographic focus, a lack of historical background to provide needed perspective. It was necessary to go elsewhere to learn that in 1066 England contained 60 houses of monks and nuns with a population in excess of 1000, and that by 1216 (end of reign of K. John), there were close to 700 houses, with a population of 13,000.

This source also offers a fine capsule summary of the nuns' troubles:

... The poverty and the purely local interests of the post-Conquest nunneries, unlike the situation of the great Anglo-Saxon communities of nuns, left them exposed in an unusual degree to the disruptive interference of patrons. Few nunneries could stand aside, as the monks of the reformed orders had been accustomed to do, from the many obligations of the feudal economy or from the insensitive demands of the
A final observation: Without asserting the point ideologically, Sally Thompson has not only closed a gap in church and social history, but she has also significantly contributed to the history of women. To the question of woman's role in the Middle Ages, the answer is that religion was the sole alternative to domesticity. The large number of communities of nuns founded after the Conquest, 139 of them, attests to the ubiquity of this vocation. She conclusively demonstrates its significance. She also reveals that women were poorly served by the Church that took them in. It neglected them and it feared them.

H. Loring White

NOTES


Crime like all other aspects of life takes place within an institutional setting. Adultery and divorce in Calvin's Geneva were no exception. Once the Catholic Prince-Bishop was expelled from the city new, civil machinery had to be instituted. At first, it continued Roman law and the precedents of the Prince-Bishop. Once Calvin's influence was established a Consistory of 12 elders and a number of pastors was created in 1538, just two years after his return to the city. The body met weekly on Thursday and deliberated for three to four hours. The Consistory, however, was part of a General Council, or larger body of citizens and bourgeois who were elected by men over 20 years of age, with substantial property and members of honored professional trades. A small Council of Sixty governed the city led by four Syndics who were reelected for numerous terms just like American Congressmen.