

Encounters in Theory and History of Education
Rencontres en Théorie et Histoire de l'Éducation
Encuentros en Teoría e Historia de la Educación



**The "Cult of True Womanhood" and American Catholic Sisters:
An Example of Creative Subversion**

**Le « culte de la vraie féminité » et les Soeurs américaines
catholiques : un exemple de subversion créative**

**El "Culto a la Verdadera Feminidad" y las monjas católicas de
Estados Unidos: un ejemplo de subversión creativa**

Margaret Susan Thompson

Volume 22, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085294ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.24908/encounters.v22i0.14981>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Education, Queen's University

ISSN

2560-8371 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Thompson, M. (2021). The "Cult of True Womanhood" and American Catholic Sisters: An Example of Creative Subversion. *Encounters in Theory and History of Education / Rencontres en Théorie et Histoire de l'Éducation / Encuentros en Teoría e Historia de la Educación*, 22, 268–285.
<https://doi.org/10.24908/encounters.v22i0.14981>

Résumé de l'article

Barbara Welter conclut son article révolutionnaire, « Le culte de la vraie féminité, 1820-1860, » en déclarant que « [Diverses forces dans leur vie] ... a appelé des réponses de femme qui différaient de celles qu'elle avait été formée à croire être les siennes par nature et par décret divin. La perfection même de la Vraie Féminité, en outre, portait en elle les graines de sa propre destruction. Car si la femme était si peu moins que les anges, elle devrait sûrement prendre une part plus active dans la gestion du monde, d'autant plus que les hommes faisaient un tel hachage des choses. [174] Traditionnellement, tant dans l'œuvre originale de Welter que dans les nombreux efforts qui ont suivi par la suite, la vie de la « vraie féminité » et la subversion créatrice qu'elle a involontairement inspirée ont été comprises dans des contextes laïques ou protestants. Cet article explore le rôle de l'éducation catholique par les sœurs dans le renforcement et la sape des rôles de genre victoriens, et analyse spécifiquement les contributions des femmes religieuses catholiques au processus complexe et subversif que Welter a suggéré. Il analyse les tensions culturelles et religieuses qui ont caractérisé l'éducation des femmes catholiques du XIXe siècle, ainsi que l'agence des femmes qui, même par inadvertance, est venue à autonomiser.

© Margaret Susan Thompson, 2021



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

The “Cult of True Womanhood” and American Catholic Sisters: An Example of Creative Subversion

Margaret Susan Thompson
Syracuse University

Abstract

Barbara Welter concludes her pathbreaking article, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” by declaring that “[Various forces in their lives] ... called forth responses from woman, which differed from those she was trained to believe were hers by nature and divine decree. The very perfection of True Womanhood, moreover, carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. For if woman was so very little less than the angels, she should surely take a more active part in running the world, especially since men were making such a hash of things” [174]. Traditionally, in both Welter’s original work and the many efforts that have subsequently followed, the living out of “True Womanhood” and the creative subversion it unintentionally inspired have been understood almost exclusively in either secular or Protestant contexts. This article explores the role of Catholic education by sisters in both reinforcing and undermining Victorian gender roles, and specifically analyzes the contributions of Catholic women religious to the complex and subversive process that Welter suggested. It analyzes the cultural and religious tensions that characterized nineteenth-century Catholic women’s education, as well as the women’s agency that, however inadvertently, it came to empower.

Keywords: "true femininity," Catholic education, Victorian gender roles, Catholic women

El “Culto a la Verdadera Femenidad” y las monjas católicas de Estados Unidos: un ejemplo de subversión creativa

Resumen

Barbara Welter concluye su innovativo artículo, “El Culto a la Verdadera Femenidad, 1820-1960” diciendo que “[Fuerzas diversas en sus vidas]... exigieron de parte de mujer respuestas diferentes de aquéllas en las que ellas habían sido entrenadas a creer que eran sus respuestas por decreto y naturaleza divina. La misma perfección de la Verdadera Femenidad, además, llevaba en si misma las semillas de su propia destrucción. Si la mujer era poco menos que los ángeles, ella debía seguramente tomar una parte mas activa en el gobierno del mundo, especialmente dado que los hombres estaban haciendo las cosas mal” [174] Tradicionalmente, tanto en el trabajo original de Welter como en los muchos esfuerzos que le siguieron, la vivencia de la “Verdadera Femenidad” y la subversión creativa que inspiró de manera no intencional, fue entendida en contextos seculares y Protestantes. Este artículo explora el papel de la educación Católica provista por monjas que reinfuerza y a la vez socavaban los papeles Victorianos basados en género. El artículo analiza específicamente las contribuciones de las religiosas Católicas al complejo proceso subversivo que sugirió Welter. Examina las tensiones religiosas y culturales que caracterizaron a la educación de mujeres Católicas en el siglo diecinueve, así como la agencia de las mujeres que eran inadvertidamente empoderadas.

Palabras clave: "verdadera feminidad," educación Católica, roles de género Victorianos, mujeres católicas

Le « culte de la vraie féminité » et les Sœurs américaines catholiques : un exemple de subversion créative

Résumé

Barbara Welter conclut son article révolutionnaire, « Le culte de la vraie féminité, 1820-1860, » en déclarant que « [Diverses forces dans leur vie] ... a appelé des réponses de femme qui différaient de celles qu'elle avait été formée à croire être les siennes par nature et par décret divin. La perfection même de la Vraie Féminité, en outre, portait en elle les graines de sa propre destruction. Car si la femme était si peu moins que les anges, elle devrait sûrement prendre une part plus active dans la gestion du monde, d'autant plus que les hommes faisaient un tel hachage des choses. [174]

Traditionnellement, tant dans l'œuvre originale de Welter que dans les nombreux efforts qui ont suivi par la suite, la vie de la « vraie féminité » et la subversion créatrice

qu'elle a involontairement inspirée ont été comprises dans des contextes laïques ou protestants. Cet article explore le rôle de l'éducation catholique par les sœurs dans le renforcement et la sape des rôles de genre victoriens, et analyse spécifiquement les contributions des femmes religieuses catholiques au processus complexe et subversif que Welter a suggéré. Il analyse les tensions culturelles et religieuses qui ont caractérisé l'éducation des femmes catholiques du XIXe siècle, ainsi que l'agence des femmes qui, même par inadvertance, est venue à autonomiser.

Mots-clés: « vraie féminité, » éducation catholique, rôles de genre victoriens, femmes catholiques

Introduction

Historian Barbara Welter's 1966 *American Quarterly* article, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," unquestionably is one of the most widely read and influential essays in the field of women's studies.¹ Even students whose exposure to the subject is limited to survey courses typically can rattle off "piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness"—although they aren't entirely certain if it's meant to be a descriptive or prescriptive litany. As Nancy Hewitt put it in 2002, "[This article was] quoted, cited paraphrased, summarized, and critiqued with such regularity that [the title] became a stock phrase in feminist scholarship. Gradually, [it] began to be used without quotation marks, then without citation and increasingly without any reference to the original article."² Yet three aspects of the piece too often are overlooked. First, its prescriptiveness was not meant to apply universally but, instead, was aimed primarily at bourgeois and upper-class gentility—at *ladies*, as opposed to all *women*. Second, given its antebellum American context, both the sources Welter cited and the audience to whom those sources originally were addressed were almost entirely secular or Protestant in nature.³

Most crucially for the present analysis, however, too many readers ignore the suggestive passage that occurs near the very end of the article, where Welter argues, provocatively:

¹ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174. For analysis of its influence, see for example: "Women's History in the New Millennium: A Retrospective Analysis of Barbara Welter's 'The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,'" *Journal of Women's History*, 14, no. 1 (2002): 149-173.

² Nancy J. Hewitt, "Taking the True Woman Hostage," *Journal of Women's History*, 14, no. 1 (2002): 156-162, 156.

³ Tellingly, there is no mention of Catholicism in the 2002 *JWH* retrospective symposium piece that focuses on religion: Tracy Fessenden, "Gendering Religion," *Journal of Women's History*, 14, no. 1 (2002): 163-169.

But even while the women's magazines and related literature encouraged this ideal of the perfect woman, forces were at work in the nineteenth century which impelled woman herself to change, to play a more creative role in society. [Various] movements . . . called forth responses from women which differed from those she was trained to believe were hers by nature and divine decree. *The very perfection of True Womanhood, moreover, carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. For if woman was so very little less than the angels, she should surely take a more active part in running the world, especially since men were making such a hash of things.* [173-74; emphasis added]

This essay begins to explore the complex and subversive process that Welter introduces here—specifically, through the contributions of Catholic women religious educators. It is my contention that no group did more both to reinforce and to undermine the rich and complicated understandings of gender contained in the Cult of True Womanhood than did women religious—and most especially those who taught those privileged enough to pursue secondary and collegiate education. Although my analysis will focus on the United States, I hope it will open up a topic that is germane as well to the experiences of bourgeois women in Canada, Europe, and the United Kingdom.⁴

Before proceeding, a few caveats must be offered. As Mary J. Oates and Susan Williamson argued as early as 1973, research that notes the disproportionate career achievement of single-sex secondary school and college alumnae may simply identify those who attend a small cohort of highly selective institutions and may overstate the advantage to those attending less prestigious places.⁵ These would include most Catholic women's schools, and especially colleges. But while that might be correct for the twentieth century (and probably more so for the era prior to the admission of women to virtually all previously male-only schools and colleges in the US), it is less of a concern for the period under investigation here—when no doubt *any* attendance at academies or colleges was indicative of privilege. Also, even in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Catholic women of accomplishment attended public or non-Catholic institutions of higher learning.

⁴ For examples from the growing body of relevant scholarship on the subject of teaching sisters, particularly relating to the Canadian experience, see *Education, Identity and Women Religious, 1800-1950*, ed. Deirdre Raftery and Elizabeth M. Smyth (New York: Routledge, 2016), especially the essays by Smyth and Rosa Bruno-Jofré; Elizabeth M. Smyth, *Changing Habits: Women's Religious Orders in Canada* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2007); and articles by Rosa Bruno-Jofré, Elizabeth M. Smyth, Jacqueline Gresko in *Paedagogica Historica*, 49: 4 (2013)—Special Issue on Catholic Teaching Congregations.

⁵ Mary J. Oates and Susan Williamson, "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers," *Signs*, 3, no. 4 (1978): 795-806. See also M. Elizabeth Tidball, "Some Undergraduate Institutional Factors Associated with the Probability of Career Success," paper delivered before the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Dec. 1972; Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, *Priorities for Action: Final Report of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973); Tidball, "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers Revisited," *Signs*, 5, no. 3 (1980): 504-17; Oates and Williamson, "Comment on Tidball's 'Women's Colleges and Women Achievers Revisited,'" *Signs*, 6, no. 2 (1980): 341-45.

Three notable examples are illustrative: Marian (Mother Marianne of Jesus) Lane Gurney, Wellesley College Class of 1888, convert from the Episcopal church who founded the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine; Mary Josephine (Mother Mary Joseph) Rogers, Smith College Class of 1905, who would go on to found the Maryknoll Sisters; and Mary Evaline Wolff, CSC (Sister Madeleva), 1887-1964, who attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison and received her PhD from the University of California-Berkeley, a poet and long-time president of St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, where she established the first doctoral program in Catholic theology open to women.⁶ The point here, then, is not that Catholic women's education was the *only* route to accomplishment for Catholic women, or that higher education was equally accessible to all. Rather, it is to suggest that Catholic single-sex education provided entrees to women's achievement that have been overlooked by secular scholars and only partially appreciated by Catholic ones. As such, the institutions traditionally conducted by nuns⁷ have been important instruments for precisely the kind of creative subversion indicated by Welter at the end of her path-breaking article.

In order to provide opportunities to their students in the first place, sisters themselves had to become educated. Most scholars of women religious are aware of the pressures that American congregations faced by the middle of the twentieth century, to staff the rapidly expanding parochial school systems throughout the country. Too many sisters were sent to the classroom before receiving more than rudimentary training—if that—and by the end of World War II there is no question that their preparation and credentialing was notably inferior to their secular counterparts. It was awareness of this, emanating both from the hierarchy and, increasingly, from sisters themselves, that led to the Sister Formation Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, which justified and enabled the completion of college-level teacher training for thousands of US women religious in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸ But what is less familiar to

⁶ Margaret M. McGuinness, *Neighbors and Missionaries: A History of the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Camilla Kennedy, *To the Uttermost Parts of the earth: The Spirit and Charism of Mary Josephine Rogers* (Maryknoll Sisters, privately published, 1987); Claudette LaVerdiere, *On The Threshold of the Future: The Life and Spirituality of Mother Mary Joseph Rogers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); Madeleva Wolff, *My First Seventy Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1959); Gail Porter Mandell, *Madeleva: A Biography* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

⁷ While there are canonical distinctions between “nuns” and “sisters,” the terms are used interchangeably in both popular and even some scholarly parlance, and will be understood as synonymous for purposes of this essay. Also, it should be noted that the initials which appear after the names of sisters/nuns discussed in this essay reference the particular congregations they belonged to. Thus, “OP” stands for the Order of Preachers (or Dominicans), “IHM” designates the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters, “CSC” indicates the Congregation of the Holy Cross (in Latin), etc.

⁸ Bertrande Meyers, *The Education of Sisters: A Plan for Integrating the Religious, Cultural, Social and Professional Training of Sisters* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1941); Madeleva Wolff, *The Education of Sister Lucy: A Symposium on Teacher Education and Teacher Training* (Notre Dame: St. Mary's College, 1949); Marjorie Noterman Beane, *From Framework to Freedom: A History of the Sister Formation Conference* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993); Judith Ann Eby, “*A Little Squabble Among Nuns?: The Sister Formation Crisis and the Patterns of Authority and Obedience among American Women Religious, 1954-1971*” (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 2000).

historians is the fact that, until at least the third decade of the twentieth century, sisters as a group were probably better educated than both the women and men who taught in public schools. While some of the superiority may be attributed to the longer careers of sister-teachers—traditionally, few women in public schools remained on the job after marriage—the fact is that during the first century or so of their service in the US, congregations over time provided demonstrably superior training to their members, particularly if one acknowledges formal and informal mentoring as a form of instruction.⁹

This article is not the place to provide a detailed discussion of teacher training¹⁰—except to acknowledge that it also entailed a certain amount of creative subversion. For example, more than a few congregations retained talented subjects in the postulancy for several years, not because they were unsuited for advancement to the novitiate, but precisely because they were particularly qualified for professional training. Many bishops prohibited sisters in their jurisdictions from attending secular colleges or normal schools, but postulants were not canonically “sisters” and, thus, fell outside these kinds of strictures.¹¹

In other cases, sisters had to work around prelates who were fearful that attendance at a non-Catholic college, even a prestigious one, would threaten or endanger their vocations. Thus, Mother Mary Joseph Rogers of Maryknoll reported in 1925 to Sister Mary Michael, OP, a Sinsinawa Dominican friend, that

I have never asked His Eminence [Patrick Cardinal Hayes] about courses at Columbia, but I am sure he objects to Sisters taking courses at the University

⁹ Sylvester Schmitz, OSB, *The Adjustment of Teacher Training to Modern Educational Needs: A Comparative Study of the Professional Preparation of Teachers in the Public and Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the United States* (Atchison, KS: The Abbey Student Press, 1927); Mary J. Oates, *Learning to Teach: The Professional Preparation of Massachusetts Parochial School Faculty, 1870-1940*, Working Paper Series 10 (1981), Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, University of Notre Dame; Kevina Keating and Mary Peter Traviss, *Pioneer Mentoring in Teacher Preparation: From the Voices of Women Religious* (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 2001).

¹⁰ For additional analysis, see Margaret Susan Thompson, “Sisters and the Creation of America Catholic Identities,” in *Education, Identity and Women Religious, 1800-1950: Convents, Classrooms and Colleges* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 99-116; and the special issue of *Paedagogica Historica*, 49, no. 4 (2013): *Catholic Teaching Congregations and Synthetic Configurations: Building Identity through Pedagogy and Spirituality across National Boundaries and Cultures*, ed. Rosa Bruno-Jofré, especially Thompson, “Adaptation and Professionalisation: Challenges for Teaching Sisters in a Pluralistic Nineteenth-Century America”: 454-70.

¹¹ See, for example, the lengthy postulancies recorded in the records of admission and profession of congregations such as the School Sisters of Notre Dame (archives of the Milwaukee and Baltimore Provincialates); see also Josephine Marie Peplinski, *A Fitting Response: The History of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis, Part I—The Founding* (South Bend, IN: privately published, 1982), 114-15, 223; Josephine M. Sferrella, “Preparing IHMs for the Educational Mission,” in *Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 281-97.

itself. However, there is evidently no objection to their attending the Teachers' College, where we have had Sisters for the last two or three years.

At our last Corporation Meeting Bishop Dunn was present, and I read as usual a report for the year, and speaking of our educational work, I happened to say that our Sisters were at Columbia, and he immediately took up the point with considerable vehemence. When, however, I assured him it was the Teachers' College and not the University, he said that was all right. He questioned me more than once to make sure it was the Teachers' College and not the University.

This is as much as I know of the attitude of His Eminence on the matter. I think it will be a safe guide. He had a visitation of our Sisters last December; two of the Sisters who are now at Teachers' College were absent on account of class. I told His Eminence that they were at Teachers' College and he made no comment whatever . . .¹²

As Mother Mary Joseph's letter implied, sisters' access to advanced education might depend on the support or opposition of bishops with either formal or informal jurisdiction over their communities. Yet even there, circuitous approaches could work, such as that pursued by Mother Mary Joseph (Columbia *Teachers College* was permissible, through which her sisters could take an extensive range of classes at Columbia *University*); this was exemplary of the "creative subversion" that many sisters had to employ. The hierarchy in New York was particularly restrictive, but others encouraged sisters in their (arch)dioceses to pursue the best possible educational preparation, whether or not it was offered under Catholic auspices. Among prelates most encouraging was Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota—whose sister, Seraphine Ireland, was provincial superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet—who strongly encouraged the pioneer founders of the College of St. Catherine to be educated as rigorously as possible, supporting attendance at institutions such as the

¹² Mother Mary Joseph Rogers to Sister Mary Michael, 18 May 1925, Sinsinawa (WI) Dominican Archives. Apparently, Mother Mary Joseph was even less circumspect when the sisters studied away from their New York headquarters. Thus, although sisters were canonically forbidden to study obstetrics prior to 1936—it was considered a challenge to the vow of chastity(!)—at least two Maryknoll sisters did so at Providence Hospital, Seattle (interestingly, a Catholic hospital sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of Providence), as early as 1921; see early membership records ("Teresian Records") for Sisters Marie De Lourdes Bourguignon (#41) and M. Mercedes Cusack (#43), Maryknoll Archives. [The Vatican document finally lifting the prohibition on obstetrical study, *An Instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide to Religious Institutes of Women Regarding the Assistance to Mothers and Infants in Missionary Lands* (1936) is quoted extensively in Katherine Burton, *According to the Pattern: The Story of Dr. Agnes McLaren and the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1946), 213-15.]

University of Minnesota and Oxford. “St. Kate’s” founding president, Sister Antonia McHugh, was educated at the University of Chicago.¹³

In other cases, women religious attracted well-trained secular faculty members, some of whom provided long-term support for their institutions and others of whom eventually entered the communities themselves, bringing their expertise with him. Thus, the renowned non-Catholic educator and author Mary Ellen Chase befriended the CSJs at St. Catherine’s early in her career and, even after she became a legendary member of the Smith College faculty, continued to teach occasionally at St. Kate’s and to praise the sister-scholars there as among the most distinguished and accomplished she had ever encountered.¹⁴ Mary Molloy was unusual in that she earned her B.A. at Ohio State University and received her PhD at Cornell University in 1907 before accepting the presidency of the College of St. Teresa in Rochester, Minnesota, later that same year. After 15 years’ service as a “laywoman,”¹⁵ she entered the Franciscan congregation that sponsored the college and continued her educational leadership as a sister.¹⁶

Recognizing, training, and attracting such educated leaders were by no means simply late 19th- or early 20th-century phenomena. Of course, a woman like Mary Joseph Rogers recognized the benefits that her Smith College education had provided her—but as early as 1862 the Michigan IHM sisters admitted a Belgian woman who became Sister Theresa Persyn, and who brought with her the well regarded St. André Normal School system, which became the primary basis of IHM teaching for at least the next six decades. That legacy did not operate in isolation; another early member and educator was Julia Marum, who entered shortly after Persyn, having taught already for five years. As Sister Godelieve, “Julia rendered great service in the boarding school, of which she was headmistress for over a decade,” bringing with her both the pedagogical style and substance she had absorbed as a long-time student of the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Ireland.¹⁷

Even these few examples are suggestive of a phenomenon that would play a subtle but significant role in the education of those 19th and early 20th-century American women religious who, in turn, would train generations of women (not all of them Catholic, or even American). Unlike clerics, whose schooling occurred entirely within

¹³ “Introduction,” in *Higher Education for Catholic Women*, ed. Mary J. Oates (New York: Garland, 1987), n.p.; Karen Kennelly, “The Dynamic Sister Antonia and the College of St. Catherine,” *Ramsey County History*, 14 (Fall-Winter 1978): 3-18.

¹⁴ Mary Ellen Chase, *A Goodly Fellowship* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), especially chapter 9.

¹⁵ The word is qualified, since of course all Catholic women are “lay” in the sense of not being members of the clergy. But, as with nun/sister, “lay” in popular parlance typically refers to women who are not vowed religious.

¹⁶ Karen Kennelly, “Mary Molloy,” Women’s College Founder,” in *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977).

¹⁷ M. Rosalita Kelly, *No Greater Service: The History of the Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*, Monroe, Michigan (Detroit: privately published, 1948), 249-52.

the cultural and theological confines of institutions organized by and for religious purposes, sisters whether by accident or design were exposed to a broader range of pedagogical opportunities. Even their own congregations were cosmopolitan, often containing members of diverse birth and ethnic heritage. The early Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, for instance, who ran a well-regarded boarding academy (and later college) for women that operated for many years, deliberately made sure their community would be well-rounded from the outset, describing its pioneer American teaching band as follows:

In this miniature assembly of four Sisters representing four different nationalities, there was no absence of variety; French was taught by Rev. Mother M. Gertrude, Italian by Sister M. Pelligrina whose musical accents were duly appreciated by her enthusiastic compatriots, Sister M. Constantia conducted the class in German, and Miss Mary Dobbins, the first American Postulant, who had entered on December 23, 1865, presided over the class in English.¹⁸

Finally, even 19th-century women religious offered support and collaborative opportunities to members of other communities—long before the intentional cooperation fostered by Sister Formation was articulated and encouraged.¹⁹ Offering temporary hospitality to women new to the area (or to the country) was well-known and widely exercised. More pertinent to the focus of this essay, however, was support for educational improvement and formation in patterns of religious life particularly suitable to the United States. Few were so generous as Mother Caroline Friess of Milwaukee's School Sisters of Notre Dame, who entered her novitiate asking for volunteers to “give” to a newly organizing Dominican group in nearby Racine!²⁰ But it was not uncommon, for instance, for sisters well trained in a particular discipline, such as music, to take in members from other communities for a year or more, so that they could then return to share their new knowledge with their own sisters and students. Thus, the Sisters of Divine Providence in Kentucky, who came from Alsace, postponed the arrival of one Sister Rosana until she could achieve music certification from the Salzburg Conservatory; meanwhile, they sent four members to the IHMs in Monroe, Michigan—who graciously taught and housed them—to receive higher education that would

¹⁸ M. Cherubim Duffy, *Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart in the United States, 1865-1926* (Peekskill, NY: privately printed, 1927), 18.

¹⁹ For information on Sister Formation, see sources cited in Note 8, above.

²⁰ “On May 12, 1862, Mother Benedicta Bauer, O.P., arrived in Racine, Wisconsin, with eleven companions. This marked the beginning of the motherhouse of the Racine Dominicans in that city. See Mary Hortense Kohler, O.P. *Life and Work of Mother Benedicta Bauer* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company), 201. It was to this Congregation (c. April 1861) that Mother Caroline invited SSND candidates. Two candidates responded, Mary Oberbrunner and Cunigunda Loesch. Mary became Mother Hyacinth, the Major Superior of the Racine Dominicans, 1866-1901.” *MOTHER MARY CAROLINE FRIESS: Correspondence and Other Documents*, ed. Barbara Brumleve and Marjorie Myers. (Resource Publication No. 35; SSND Heritage Research, 1985), 120.

prepare them to meet their American teaching responsibilities.²¹ More remarkably, New Orleans' Sisters of the Holy Family, descended from "Free Women of Color" of the antebellum era, were indebted early in their history to the Religious of the Sacred Heart, who agreed to teach some of the Holy Family members although this practice directly challenged the racial segregation practiced almost universally in the American South.²²

The point in giving even these cursory examples is to show that sisters found ways around restrictive circumstances and even imposed policies as ways of enhancing their own qualifications as well as the education they were able to offer their students. And they supported those in other congregations when they could do so, even though this was often discouraged or even officially prohibited by overbearing prelates. Thus, sisters who voluntarily or involuntarily left their own motherhouses demonstrated remarkable fidelity to them, sometimes stretching over decades. Consider the vocational and spiritual journey of Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin, originally an Oblate Sister of Providence, and later a founding IHM in both Michigan and Pennsylvania, who spent eighteen years in exile with the Grey Nuns of Ottawa before returning to die among IHMs in Philadelphia.²³

Mother St. Andrew Feltin followed a similarly convoluted path, professing vows as a Sister of Divine Providence in Alsace, leading a pioneer band to San Antonio, Texas, being deposed and exiled from the community (also for 18 years)—this time in California—before being permitted to return to San Antonio after the prelate who had disciplined her finally died. Meanwhile, one of her Alsatian companions, who left Texas when Feltin did, returned to the European Motherhouse, re-entered the community, was given a new religious name (she had been Sister Arsine and became Sister Camille), and then returned to America as one of the first three (and only English-speaking) pioneers to Kentucky in the 1880s. Two things are remarkable here. First, the story as late as the 1980s in both Divine Providence communities was that there was no contact or communication between the groups from the time of the Kentuckians' arrival until Vatican II. But, in searching through the "House Diary" in Kentucky, this author found evidence of three visits by Mother Florence of San Antonio (Mother St. Andrew's successor)—all during the lifetime of Sister Arsine/Camille. Clearly, contact,

²¹ Mary of the Incarnation Byrne, "A Retrospect of Fifty Years" (bound typescript), 59, 76; archives of the Sisters of Divine Providence, Melbourne, KY.

²² Mary Francis Borgia Hart, *Violets in the King's Garden: A History of the Sisters of the Holy Family* (New Orleans: privately published, 1976), n.p. It took many years more for the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Baltimore to extend similar services to the African-American Oblate Sisters of Providence. They sent professors to the Oblate Motherhouse as early as the 1920s to instruct them, but did not admit them to their own college until a decade later; Mary Emma Hadrick, "Contributions of the Oblate Sisters of Providence to Catholic Education in the United States and Cuba, 1829-1962" (MA thesis, Catholic University of America, 1964), 147-48.

²³ Marita-Constance Supan, "Dangerous Memory: Mother M. Theresa Maxis Duchemin and the Michigan Congregation of the Sisters, IHM, in *Building Sisterhood*, 31-67; *Paths of Daring, Deeds of Hope: Letters by and about Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin*, ed. Margaret Gannon (Scranton, PA: privately published, 1992).

however surreptitious, had been maintained. Finally, when Arsine/Camille eventually died, the official necrology acknowledged both the fullness and the continuity of her religious experience. Here is how it was recorded:

SR. ARSENE SCHAFF--SR. M. CAMILLE SCHAFF.

Name: Barbara Schaff

Born: Oct. 17, 1850 at Lorraine, France

Invested Sept. 10, 1871

Professed, Sept. 10, 1875

Entered St. Jean-de-Bassel: Nov. 3, 1867

Volunteered for Texas: August 13, 1878

Returned to St. Jean De Bassel: August 8, 1887 where after a year's novitiate she again took up her life of teaching, later coming to the house in Kentucky.

Missioned at: St. Boniface, Ludlow, KY--1890

St. Ann, West Covington, KY--1891

Catholic University--1893

St. Anne Convent, Melbourne--1911

Sister was 18 years professed when coming to Kentucky. [NB: Time before & in Texas is counted here.]

Sister died at the age of 75, December 27, 1925.

This necrology is a powerful example of creative subversion. Although others—primarily men—had dismissed her from Texas, required her to re-enter religious formation, renamed her, and so on, she and her sisters obviously acknowledged her unbroken fidelity and her continuous religious experience. She was considered trustworthy enough to be a pioneer member of the first band sent to Kentucky, and to be commemorated as a provincial foundress.²⁴

So how do the examples provided so far provide a foundation for the claim that education under the auspices of sisters simultaneously reinforced and subverted the presumptively diminutive values of the Cult of True Womanhood? Well, to begin with,

²⁴ "Placement Book," Volume I (pages unnumbered), archives of the Sisters of Divine Providence Providence, Melbourne, KY.] The "Placement Book" was a combination vow registry, assignment list, and necrology, kept in handwriting.] See also Angelina Murphy, *Mother Florence: A Biographical History* (Smithtown, NY: Exposition Press, 1980); Mary Generosa Callahan, *The Sisters of Divine Providence, San Antonio, Texas* (Milwaukee: Bruce Press, 1955); Mary Diane Langford, *The Tattered Heart: A Historical Fiction Biography of Mother St. Andrew Feltin, CDP, Foundress of the Sisters of Divine Providence of San Antonio, Texas* (New York: iUniverse, 2007).

the sisters themselves provided examples of women who had been both empowered by True Womanhood and—intentionally or not—inspired to transcend the limitations that it implied. Consider, for example, the impression left upon Mary Ellen Chase in the wake of her first sustained encounter with Minnesota’s Sisters of St. Joseph:

Before my association with St. Catherine’s [College], I had known nothing whatever of convent life . . . The few nuns I had ever seen had received from me curiosity, possible admiration if their habits became them, and a kind of incredulous pity for the deprivations which they must undergo. St. Catherine’s, from the first time I entered its gates, swept aside all such baseless conceptions as so much outworn baggage. The life there, as in other convents which I have fortunately since known, was far more sane and wholesome than is usual in assemblages of women elsewhere.

In particular, Chase admired a graduate school classmate and friend named Sister Lioba, who

became at once the center and the nucleus of our seminar . . . because she at once got more from our reading and contributed more to it than anyone else. Her vow of poverty did not deny her the wealth of Henry Fielding or her vow of chastity shut her from his distinctly unchaste situations. In fact, the best paper written in our seminar that year was written by Sister Lioba on the humor in *Tom Jones*.

Although Chase became a legend at Smith, she enjoyed repeatedly returning to St. Kate’s where she found personal sanctuary, companionship and intellectual stimulation. In both her memoirs and her fiction she played wittily with the contrast between the presumed subjection of women under vows and the liberation of mind and spirit she found flourishing among so many of them.²⁵

As one who had herself attended single-sex schools for much of her education, Chase appreciated both the constraints and the opportunities that such institutions afforded. In this, she offered a healthy counterpoint to those who strongly criticized sisters’ schools for the rigor of their rules, the limitations on their students’ freedoms, and the often-repeated charge that students were forced to “live like little nuns” themselves, although they had taken no vows and, in most cases, never intended to. Perhaps the most well-known pejorative account of such an experience was that by novelist Mary McCarthy, in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*—in which, among other things, she attributes her loss of faith at least partially to her exposure to convent school. Kate Chopin, author of the controversial *Awakening*, among other works, also

²⁵ Chase, *Goodly Fellowship*, chapter 9, especially 229-30, 239. Regarding Chase’s “legendary” status at Smith, it should be noted that a residential House was named for her in 1968, even before her death in 1973; see <http://sophia.smith.edu/blog/smithipedia/faculty-staff/chase-mary-ellen/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

left the church after many years of education by sisters, and other ex-Catholics could also be cited, including more than a few prominent today.²⁶

But this is not entirely the point, or not the entire point. Despite the alienation from their faith tradition that women such as Chopin and McCarthy came to embody, the talents they displayed—like those of their less disaffected contemporaries such as Agnes Repplier and Margaret Mitchell—undoubtedly owed much to the instruction they received from their Catholic schooling.²⁷

Now it is true that these schools inculcated into their students a social, spiritual, and sexual code that was didactic, restrictive, and rigid. Many expressed complaints, not only the disaffected like Mary McCarthy. Consider, for instance, this grievance published in *America* magazine from an anonymous Catholic college woman in 1941: “Why must the Catholic colleges be so disapproving of things that are dear, almost necessary to the modern girl?” And yet virtually all the restrictions she went on to cite—curfews, dress codes (including skirts and stockings) for both dormitories and classes, restrictions on dating, requirements for permission to leave campus overnight, etc.—were still in effect a quarter of a century later at secular colleges such as Smith College.²⁸ Thus, in assessing criticisms of rules at Catholic academies and colleges, particularly those for women, we should remember that these were by and large characteristic of genteel *women’s* educational institutions, and not merely *Catholic* ones.

It is equally important to remember that education occurs both explicitly and subliminally. Students learn not just from what they study formally—or what they are formally taught—but also by what they observe, absorb, and experience, sometimes without being aware that they are doing so. Moreover, these implicit lessons are sometimes the more memorable ones. Consider, for instance, that three of the most prominent women in early 21st-century American public life are all alumnae of Catholic women’s schools, two of them of single-sex institutions. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was taught by sisters both at Blessed Sacrament Elementary School and at Cardinal Spellman High School, from which she was graduated as Valedictorian.²⁹ Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) is an alumna of the Institute of Notre Dame (School Sisters of Notre Dame) and Trinity College (now University), Washington (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur), to whom she has always given tremendous credit

²⁶ Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1957); Frances Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (many editions); Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1999).

²⁷ George S. Stokes, *Agnes Repplier* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949); Dardon A. Pyron, *Southern Daughter: The Life of Margaret Mitchell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁸ “College Rules,” in Oates, ed., *Higher Education*, 435; Smith College claim based upon memoirs such as Susan Allen Toth, *Ivy Days: Making My Way Out East* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1984).

²⁹ Sonia Sotomayor, *My Beloved World* (New York, Knopf, 2012).

both for her social conscience and for her intellectual training.³⁰ And, upon her retirement from the U.S. Senate, where she had become the longest-serving woman member six years earlier, Maryland's Barbara Mikulski included the following in her Farewell Address in the Upper Chamber:

The other place where I learned about service was from the nuns who taught me. I had the great fortune to go to Catholic schools. I was taught by the Notre Dame Sisters and the Sisters of Mercy. These wonderful women who led the consecrated life taught us not only about reading, writing and arithmetic, but when they taught us religion, they emphasized the beatitudes. If anybody reads the scripture, if you go to Matthew 5, you know what has shaped us. One of the lines is "blessed are those who are meek of heart." I had to really work at that one—really, really work at that one. But, at the same time, there were those that said, those who hunger and thirst after justice. And that's what motivated me. It was focusing on the value of faith like love your neighbor, care for the sick, worry about the poor.³¹

These are hardly isolated examples, as the memoirs in a recent compilation of appreciations suggest.³² But how and why does this influence occur?

I would like to suggest that such influence occurs along parallel if somewhat contradictory paths. At the same time that the students under nuns' tutelage were being taught apparently restrictive behaviors, dreams of the future centered on either piety (the cloister) or domesticity (marriage and home)—both of them almost obsessively, if submissively, dependent upon purity—[There; I've gotten in the four components of the Cult of True Womanhood!], students were observing and experiencing something very different. They were attending complex educational institutions that had been founded by, and now were administered by, women who, though apparently conforming to True Womanhood's precepts, were in fact competent, empowered, and surrounded by like-minded individuals who shared their values and their objectives. Their teachers were not simply equipped to transmit knowledge of traditionally "feminine" graces, but also philosophy, physics, history, and mathematics. Implicitly, what students were being taught by example was that women could be not only holy but holistic. They could be administrators, scientists, and executives, scholars and superiors. Let us not forget that, in the US, long before

³⁰ See Nancy Pelosi's official biography: <https://pelosi.house.gov/biography-0> (accessed 30 June 2021). Further, in commenting on Pope Francis's statements on social justice, Pelosi declared that he was "beginning to sound like the nuns; for example: <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/michael-w-chapman/pelosi-pope-francis-starting-sound-nun> (accessed 30 June 2021).

³¹ Barbara Mikulski, Senate Farewell Address, delivered 7 December 2016, published in *Tributes to Hon. Barbara A. Mikulski*, Senate Document 114-22, Government Printing Office, 2017; <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CDOC-114sdoc22/html/CDOC-114sdoc22.htm> (accessed 30 June 2021).

³² *Thank you, Sisters: Stories of Women Religious and How They Enrich our Lives*, ed. John Bookser Feister (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2013).

Married Women's Property Rights were protected in any states, women's religious congregations—and many of the institutions they operated—were legally incorporated with sisters (*women!*) as their corporate officers and board members.

Thus, consciously or unconsciously, the messages by example that the sisters conveyed were that women were anything but helpless creatures. To put it in 21st-century terms, sisters exercised *agency* over their circumstances, their institutions, and their lives. They had made choices that could be empowering—sometimes terrifyingly so, but empowering.

Although technically under the canonical jurisdiction of male “Ecclesiastical Superiors,” in practical terms nineteenth and early twentieth-century teaching sisters enjoyed autonomy as much as or more than any cohort of their female contemporaries. They were not feminists—which required both a self-awareness and a consciousness that few women religious, or any women, of the time could have had—but they can perhaps be appreciated as proto-feminists who assumed responsibility for their own individual and corporate integrity in ways that it was impossible for their students to ignore. Thus, Mother M. Augusta Anderson, Superior General of Indiana's Sisters of the Holy Cross, who finally secured pontifical approbation for her community in 1889 after decades of struggling with her male counterpart, Father Edward Sorin, declared wearily before her death: “I have asked God for only one thing. What I have had to suffer does not count . . . I have asked Him to fix my Sisters so that no man can ever lay his hand upon them. I asked nothing more. He has done all I asked.”³³ This long-time teacher had modeled such determination for her sisters and her students long before she was asked to assume leadership of her congregation.

Is it any wonder that some of the brightest graduates of sisters' schools and colleges found themselves “called” to join the ranks of the vowed? Consider the alternative, as recounted by historian Eileen Brewer, conveying the advice of a late nineteenth-century Sinsinawa Dominican to those soon to graduate from St. Clara Academy:

Sister Charles Borromeo Stevens . . . insisted that the home was woman's natural sphere yet admitted that domestic life was commonplace and filled with drudgery . . . “To be ‘bounded by a nutshell’ is, in fact, woman's destiny, her

³³ Quoted in M. Madeleva Wolff, “Mother M. Augusta,” in *Superior Generals, Vol. II, Centenary Chronicles of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1841-1941* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1941), 104. For more on this, see Margaret Susan Thompson, “The Validation of Sisterhood: Canonical Status and Liberation in the History of American Nuns,” in *A Leaf of the Great Tree of God: Essays in Honour of Ritamary Bradley, sfcc*, ed. Margot H. King (Toronto, Canada: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1994), 38-78; Thompson, “Women, Feminism, and the New Religious History: Catholic Sisters as a Case Study.” In *Belief and Behavior: Essays in the New Religious History*, ed. Philip VanderMeer and Robert Swierenga, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991, 136-63.

normal condition, and she must submit, as gracefully and wisely, as her peculiarities of disposition and varied traits of character will permit.”³⁴

Unless, that is, she followed in the footsteps of her teachers, and became a sister herself—entering into what was widely considered to be a “higher state of grace.” [Or, as Milwaukee School Sister of St. Francis M. Theopista Bolschak put it several years after her entrance in 1892: “We as religious should strive to be higher in heaven than our relatives.”] This, at least, was socially acceptable and even meritorious, according to traditional Catholic understanding.³⁵

But what of those who simply remained unmarried: determining that they had neither a call to religious life nor a desire for marriage? By the early 20th century, apparently too many sister-educated Catholic women were choosing to do just this, pursuing careers for which their schooling had prepared them, perhaps too effectively. Jesuit Daniel M. O’Connell expressed his concern for “a too large aggregation of Catholic maidens” in *America* magazine, and proposed closer relationships between women’s colleges and comparable institutions for men, so as to encourage more marriages between “appropriate” partners. A quarter century later, the “problem” had improved only slightly, according to another dismayed Jesuit, reporting on a study of 40,000 alumnae of Catholic women’s colleges.³⁶ Economist Mary Oates documented the phenomenon of “unprecedented achievements of [unmarried lay] women in diverse occupations and professions,” noting that they “challenged conventional attitudes and social standards by their work choices and accomplishments.” There is no need to repeat what she has already analyzed elsewhere, but Oates persuasively demonstrates that such women persevered in their chosen careers despite the many roadblocks they encountered—not least among them repeated charges that they violated social, cultural and (especially) religious expectations as to appropriate female behavior. She notes that these Catholic laywomen

collectively changed the thinking of both men and women about women’s place in society and in the church . . . [They] proceeded, often in the face of sex discrimination and ridicule, to enter all of the professions, progressing in each to positions of authority and influence, bringing the Catholic presence to every

³⁴ Eileen Mary Brewer, *Nuns and the Education of American Catholic Women, 1860-1920* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), 104.

³⁵ “1930 Sisters’ Survey,” Archives of the School Sisters of St. Francis, Milwaukee, WI; see also Felix M. Kirsch, OMCap, *The Spiritual Direction of Sisters: A Manual for Priests and Superiors*, adapted from the 2nd German ed. of Rev. A. Ehl (New York: Benziger Bros, 1931); Rev. Bernard O’Reilly, *The Mirror of True Womanhood* (New York: Peter F. Collier, 1881).

³⁶ Daniel M. O’Connell, “Catholic College Maidens,” *America*, 35 (15 May 1926): 111-12; John L. Thomas, “Catholic College Spinsters? Half Never Marry, Says TIME—New Data Given Here,” *Social Order*, 2 (1952): 357-62; both reprinted in Oates, ed., *Higher Education*, 274-84.

sector of American life and thereby enhancing the visibility and dignity of their church.”³⁷

While not all these women were educated in same-sex institutions, or by sisters, the vast majority were, evidently benefitting both explicitly and implicitly from teacher-exemplars who modeled achievement, agency, and expertise—even as they outwardly seemed to inculcate the more passive virtues of the Cult of True Womanhood.

This, then, may have been the most subversive message that sister-educators conveyed to their charges: that marriage was not inevitable, that the convent albeit a joyful and fulfilling place for some was not the sole alternative for all and, most importantly, that women could contribute substantially to church and world. And at least some sisters knew precisely how subversive and empowering the message was that they hoped to convey. An Australian Sister of Mercy put it this way in 1934:

It is the aim of the nuns to train the girls under their care in individual initiative, to develop in them independent judgement and self-control so that they may take their place in political affairs, in professional ranks or in any other sphere for which they are fitted by their energy and intelligence, in such a way as to wield a telling influence for good.³⁸

“What then shall we call a well-educated girl,” asked noted Religious of the Sacred heart and educator Janet Erskine Stuart toward the end of her landmark *Education of Catholic Girls*, “whom we consider ready for the opportunities and responsibilities of her new life?”³⁹ Mother Stuart declared:

Through every vicissitude of woman’s education there have always been the few who were exceptional in mental and moral strength, and they have held on their way, and achieved a great deal, and left behind them names deserving of honor . . . Whether they devote themselves to the well-being of their own families, or give themselves to volunteer work in any department, social or particular, or advance in the direction of higher studies, or receive any special call from God to dedicate their gifts to His particular service, they will at least have something to give . . .⁴⁰

³⁷ Mary J. Oates, “Catholic Laywomen in the Labor Force, 1850-1950,” in *American Catholic Women: A Historical Exploration*, ed. Karen Kennelly (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 81-124; quotes are from 81-2 and 124, while information on the disproportionately unmarried state of these laywomen is throughout and explicitly on page 87.

³⁸ Mary Ignatius Kelly, RSM, Adelaide, Australia, quoted in Josephine Laffin, “‘You’ll Never Guess What Those Mercies Are Up to Now!’ The Sisters of Mercy in the Archdiocese of Adelaide, South Australia,” paper presented at the Cushwa Center Conference on the Lived Experience of Vatican II, University of Notre Dame, April 2014.

³⁹ Janet Erskine Stuart, *The Education of Catholic Girls* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1914), 230.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 222, 227.

In purporting to prepare young women for their “station,” then, they expanded that station’s size and scope beyond what their foremothers, or even they, might have envisioned. In providing opportunities neither vocational nor purely intellectual in character, they helped their students to dream not only of what they might *do* but of who they might *be*. And here, perhaps, we see the most creatively subversive consequence of the sort of education to which Stuart and so many others dedicated their lives; it was nothing less than a means through which “True Women” could transform themselves, their world and their place within it.