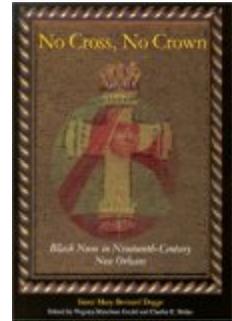


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sister Mary Bernard Deggs. *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*. Edited by Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E Nolan. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. 264 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33630-9.

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In a recent essay, Tracy Fessenden argues that religious differences should be considered along side issues of class and race in explorations of differences among women in nineteenth-century America. Specifically, Fessenden contends that “the widespread critical unwillingness to engage religion as a category of identity alongside or encoded within race or class also elides the ways that female power...has frequently been organized as power over (and at the expense of) women whose racial, class, and religious identities set them in ambiguous relations to dominant and implicitly white, middle-class Protestant ideologies of womanhood.” While historians have explored the relationship between the identities and political ideologies of African American women to Protestantism, few have examined Catholic women. The publication of Sister Mary Bernard Deggs’ history of the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans provides scholars and teachers with an excellent source for examining how one group of Catholic African-American women defined themselves, their mission and their relationship to community during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Edited by Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* is divided into five sections that chronicle the Sisters of the Holy Family through the tenure of five Mother Superiors. Gould and Nolan’s preface and introduction provide a solid context for Deggs’ history. The editors’ preface details their difficulties in editing a fragmented document written by a person unfamiliar with the conventions of writing and possibly suffering from dyslexia. Deggs’ lack of concern with details and various illnesses further complicated Gould and Nolan’s task as they describe their efforts to retain the document’s authenticity while making it an accessible

and intelligible history. To accomplish the latter goals, Gould and Nolan did significant editing. Their discussion of how they made their editorial decisions adequately explains the reasons for those choices, and their preservation of each edited version of their manuscripts makes those choices transparent. For teachers, this discussion provides a nice opportunity to explore with students the editorial process.

The editors’ introduction provides a brief history of Catholic women’s religious activity in New Orleans and briefly discusses how Catholic African-American women constructed an ideology of womanhood in the shadows of racism. Most of the women who entered the Sisters of the Holy Family were from elite families and held a strong commitment to minister to their communities. Like the Protestant women described by previous historians, piety offered to African American women a respectability that the ideology of the slave system had denied to them. Joining a convent, Gould and Nolan argue, provided African-American women an opportunity to “recast their identities and thus their influence and power within their community” (xxxiii). The editors compliment their general introduction with brief chapter introductions that offer the reader a history of race relations and the development of Catholic communities in New Orleans. The editors’ introductions generally do a fine job providing context for Deggs’ history, although a brief discussion of historiography might have further underscored the significance of Deggs’ journal and helped readers contextualize Deggs’ work with African American and women’s history.

The majority of *No Cross, No Crown* consists of Gould and Nolan’s edited version of Deggs’ history. That his-

tory provides the reader with an insider's understanding of convent life, the challenges of forming a Catholic community of African-American women, the meaning of Catholic womanhood, divisions within the Catholic community and the relationship between the Sisters of the Holy Family and the larger African-American community. Perhaps the greatest and most consistent problem facing the Sisters of the Holy Family and its various Mother Superiors was financial. Throughout her text, Deggs describes the financial hardships of the order and the various maneuvers used by the Mother Superiors to offer financial security to the order. But, as Deggs also emphasizes, the willingness of the nuns to live poverty and sacrifice the necessities of life was a basic tenant of Catholic womanhood: "To get our crown we must, we must give ourselves a little pain to save our own souls and the souls of our friends. If not, we will have no share in His glory. All who wish to be happy must deny themselves for the love of others. When we do not try to save others, we do not do our duty as religious" (64). For the most part, Deggs defines the former Mother Superiors as good Catholic women who embodied the values of self-sacrifice and community service. Deggs provides important glimpses into how Catholic women understood and attempted to apply the dictates of Catholic womanhood to their everyday lives.

While Deggs consistently praises the community spirit of the Sisters of the Holy Family, she also provides evidence of dissent and fractures. Such dissent, Deggs notes, often takes place over the appointment of a new Mother Superior. Dissidents, Deggs suggested, were a constant source of mischief and could undermine the authority and work of the new Mother Superior. Historian Daniel Cohen has noted a fundamental contradiction in convent life: the unmatched opportunities provided by convents often attracted talented and ambitious women who were then expected to embrace lives of self-abrogation and submission to authority. Such individuals often found it difficult to sacrifice individual needs to the community and sometimes found themselves in conflict with church officials. Deggs' history not only offers some support for Cohen's argument but also provides a window into how that contradiction could manifest itself in the day-to-day operations of convent life.

Gould and Nolan work diligently to place Deggs' history within the context of changing race relations in New Orleans before and after the Civil War. Some of the most interesting material in Deggs' history, however, focuses on relationships within African-American communities,

a point that receives less attention in Gould and Nolan's introductions. In particular, Deggs' history sheds light on class relationships and how class influenced the Sister's interactions within those communities. Throughout her text, Deggs notes with great frustration the presence of vice that often tempted the young women the nuns sought to educate. As educators, the nuns felt obligated to reach out to the community and provide for young women the Catholic education that they believed would save their souls. Yet, the reaction by the nuns to the sometimes obstinate behavior of these young women underscores how closely tied the nun's construction of Catholic womanhood was to their status as elite women. This point is clear in Deggs' discussion of the decisions by the nuns to refuse service to young women who had crossed the line of respectable behavior. Here Deggs' journal offers key insights into the problems outlined by Evelyn Higginbotham in her discussion of African-American women's adoption of respectability as a political strategy for resisting racial oppression. For this reasons and others detailed above, *No Cross, No Crown* is an invaluable source not only for historians of American Catholicism but also for historians of women and African Americans.

First and foremost, the editors noted that they wanted to provide the Sisters of the Holy Family "with the opportunity to more fully explore and understand the complexity of their past" (xxxvi). This understanding, Gould and Nolan argue, demonstrates the continuity between the current mission of the Sisters and a complex historical past defined in part by a dialectical relationship between community need and the Sisters' sense of their mission. As such, the editors defined their role as providing the most accurate and understandable version of Deggs' journal; they took great care not to impose their interpretations onto the text. This strategy is understandable and legitimate; it demonstrates an unusual commitment on the editors part to a non-academic community. However, teachers interested in using Deggs' journal as a classroom text may encounter difficulties with this strategy. The lack of historiographical context and explanatory foot/end notes throughout the Deggs' text will make her history difficult for undergraduates to follow. Still, the text's informative discussions of the social history of the Sisters of the Holy Family, its clear discussions of Catholic womanhood and its fascinating glimpses into the Sister's relationship with the broader community will provide scholars and teachers interested in exploring the diversity of women's religious history and African American women's history with an excellent primary source.

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