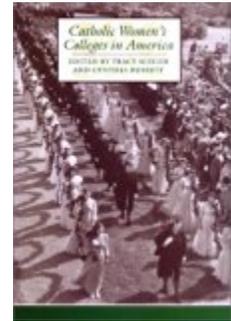


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tracy Schier, Cynthia Russett, eds. *Catholic Women's Colleges in America*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. vi + 439 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6805-4.

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While American secular and Protestant women's colleges have received a relatively significant amount of attention from scholars, the study of Catholic women's colleges has begun only recently. *Catholic Women's Colleges in America* is an edited collection that represents the diversity of scholarship in the emerging field of Catholic higher education for women. In addition to a strong introduction and conclusion, the book contains ten chapters written by ten different scholars, two useful appendices, and a good index. The collection is a very fine introduction to the topic and will be particularly interesting to scholars of American women or higher education.

The introduction, written by the editors, and the short first chapter, written by Jill Ker Conway, former president of Smith College, both set the stage for the collection by positioning Catholic women's education within the context of the more general topics of higher education for women and Catholic education. Although Catholic women's colleges have been much less visible than other women's colleges, particularly the elite colleges of the Northeast, Conway notes that "it will surprise even the best-read historians of women's education that the Catholic women's colleges educated a slightly larger cohort of American women than did Protestant or nondenominational institutions by the 1950s, that more than half of the institutions founded to educate women in the United States were Catholic colleges for women, and that, along with Catholic colleges for men, they were the agents of a rise in educational levels for immigrants second only to that of America's Jews" (p. 12). The next nine chapters flesh out particular aspects of the motivation for founding Catholic women's colleges and the distinct educational opportunity they provided, as well as issues of governance, financing, and accreditation during the en-

tire twentieth century.

In chapter 2, theologian Monika Hellwig explains five main reasons that women religious were able to provide post secondary education: celibacy, community, vow of poverty, contemplation, and charity (p. 17). In chapter 3, Kathleen Mahony presents a chronological account of how the late-nineteenth-century version of Catholic higher education for women developed, beginning with medieval convents' appreciation for education and continuing through to the belief among the late-nineteenth-century Catholic hierarchy that higher education for Catholic women was necessary if only to avoid their being exposed to "the pernicious influence of Protestantism and secularism in non-Catholic colleges and universities" (p. 49). Sociologist Thomas Landy presents a highly statistical fourth chapter based largely on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education *Report of the Commissioner of Education* and *College Blue Books*. In a particularly strong chapter entitled, "Faculties and What They Taught," Karen Kennelly explains how the sister-professors obtained their own higher educations, as well as how they adapted the curriculum and delivery of their courses and programs in response to students' changing desires and needs. Kennelly's description of the changing student body over the twentieth century, from a fairly homogeneous group of middle-class whites to a more diverse group that included a significant proportion of working-class immigrant students, is especially interesting. David Contosta's chapter focuses on three diverse Catholic women's colleges within a single city, Philadelphia. Like Kennelly, Contosta highlights differences in students' class backgrounds and their connected views and behaviors. In chapter 7, economist Mary Oates focuses on the invaluable financial con-

tribution that Catholic sisterhoods made to American women's higher education through the "living endowments" of their professional services. After noting the dismal degree to which Catholic women's colleges were endowed, relative both to other women's colleges and Catholic men's colleges, Oates writes: "Almost single-handedly, therefore, sisterhoods financed the women's colleges from their internal resources" (p. 187). Chapter 8, by Jane Redmont is based on interviews with the alumnae of Catholic colleges founded by women religious and includes responses to questions on feminism, marriage, and the effects of Vatican II. Dorothy Brown and Carol Hurd Green's chapter is about post-Vatican II success stories from Catholic colleges that built innovative programs that effectively addressed the needs of students and subsequently continued to attract students. The final chapter, by Melanie Morey, offers a fascinating analysis of the present-day relationships between religious congregations and the colleges they founded, and describes the often complicated nature of the reserve powers these congregations hold.

While the chapters stand on their own and can be read individually, reading them as a collection brings several problematic issues to the fore. The first is the repetitive nature of some of the arguments, including the essential role of women religious in Catholic women's colleges. Even though I would be the first to argue that their role was of the ultimate importance, repeatedly explaining the nature of women religious' role is not the best

way to convince readers of its importance, and may, in effect, end up not doing them justice. Dividing the book into parts with one part focused on the variety of women religious' contributions might avoid issues of repetition. In addition, the collection is reflective of the array of language used in the vernacular to describe the work of women religious. While acceptable in the popular press, it is distracting in a scholarly collection to see some authors use "nun" or "sisterhood" while others use "women religious" or "congregation."

Schier and Russett are clear in their introduction that *Catholic Women's Colleges in America* is largely an introduction to this little-explored topic. In their words, "this book is exploratory. Other scholars will, we hope, take up the work and advance our understanding of these colleges—their students, alumnae, faculties, challenges and achievements—still further" (p. 9). However, whereas Schier and Russett outline a list of fairly precise questions that need to be answered, I would suggest the more urgent need is to place the whole topic within a larger context. In particular, I think it is time to critically review how gender was constructed in both men's and women's Catholic colleges and to reflect on how this construction affected the decline of these colleges. So, while this collection is very valuable as an introduction to a topic that in the past has been dominated by alumni-style periodicals, as the authors indicate themselves, there is much more work to be done.

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