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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Elizabeth M. Smyth, ed.  
*Changing Habits:  
Women's Religious Orders in Canada.*

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For more than two decades, Canadian historians have touted the vast potential for research on women religious. As far back as 1987, Marta Danylewycz, in her now-classic monograph *Taking the Veil* (McClelland & Stewart), urged women's historians to explore the rich resources of convent archives. In 1992, Ruth Compton Brouwer's wide-ranging historiographic essay, "Transcending the 'unacknowledged quarantine': Putting Religion into English-Canadian Women's History," drew attention to the paucity of research on women religious, particularly in English Canada. Perhaps more than any other Canadian historian, Elizabeth Smyth's impressive body of research has demonstrated that the study of women religious offers substantial contributions to the histories of education, gender, religion and region. *Changing Habits: Women's Religious Orders in Canada*, a long-overdue collection of essays on the history of women religious, expertly edited and introduced by Smyth, is certainly a feather in her cap. Bringing together historians and scholars from across the disciplines, *Changing Habits* undoubtedly marks a shift in the perception of research on women religious within the larger context of Canadian history.

The strength of this collection is in the breadth and diversity of its Canadian and international contributors: "historians, sociologists, theologians, architectural historians and material culturalists who examine historical sources on women religious with diverse methodologies" (10). Adding to the range of perspectives are the contributions of three sister-scholars: Mary Olga McKenna, SC; Veronica O'Reilly, CSJ; and Ellen Leonard, CSJ; who offer insider views on the histories of their respective communities. Leonard's article, "The Process of Transformation: Women Religious and the Study of Theology, 1955–1980," lends an especially insightful feminist interpretation to a topic seldom examined from an historical perspective: the challenges

faced by sisters as they entered into theological study, a pursuit which was, until recent decades, the exclusive prerogative of male clergy.

Despite (or perhaps to the credit of) the authors' diverse perspectives and approaches, this collection offers a unique purview on the various roles of women religious in the educational, medical and social service institutions of the nation. The place of women religious in education is a salient theme in the collection, with about half of the articles examining aspects of teaching sisters' histories. While some, like McKenna's "An Educational Odyssey: The Sisters of Charity of Halifax," offer detailed, linear histories of teaching congregations, other articles yield more nuanced interpretations of the role of convent culture. Heidi MacDonald's "Entering the Convent as Coming of Age in the 1930s" is a finely crafted historical exploration of the intersections of youth, education, convent culture, and the larger socio-economic sphere.

Perhaps the most engaging and complex of the articles in this collection is Rebecca Sullivan's "Blasphemes of Modernity: Scandals of the Nineteenth-Century Quebec Convent." Sullivan examines the representations of women religious in the mass media, applying techniques of discourse analysis to the popular narrative of the runaway nun. Those readers captivated by Sullivan's 2005 publication, *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism and American Postwar Popular Culture* (University of Toronto Press), will delight in the application of her deep analysis to this intriguing aspect of Canadian history. Also worthy of special note for its unique, interdisciplinary approach is an article by Tania Martin, a professor of architecture, titled, "Sites of Prayer and Pilgrimage Within a Convent: The Architectural Manifestations of a Religious Vocation." Martin probes the architecture of convents to reveal the ways in which space, both sacred and mundane, is purposefully engaged to shape the spirituality and identity of communities.

*Changing Habits* not only makes a significant contribution to the history of women religious, but it also serves as a valuable example of the range of methodological approaches to Canadian history. Professors of Canadian history would do well to consider *Changing Habits* for its utility in the context of courses on historiography and/or historical method as it is certain to raise awareness of varied approaches to the research and writing of history, and to stimulate critical discussion among social and cultural historians-in-training regarding the use of diverse print, oral, and material sources.

Smyth's introductory essay draws meaningful connections among the articles and, most importantly, indicates the research that remains to be done in the field. Among other suggestions, Smyth mentions the need for further research on the place of women's religious communities in the residential schools debacle, specifically the "gender, power and race dynamics" at play therein (16), and this would certainly aid in illuminating this dark chapter in Canadian history. Also, as Smyth indicates, there is much to be examined regarding the decline of religious communities in recent decades. Though contemplative religious communities of cloistered nuns have not been near so common in the nation's history when compared to the numerous active religious communities of teaching, nursing and missionary sisters, they are

noticeably absent from this collection; perhaps a second volume would offer an opportunity to include the histories of contemplative women's religious communities in Canada. Given the scholarly prowess of its contributors and the richness of the thirteen articles in *Changing Habits*, a second edition would certainly be warranted and welcomed.