

Special Issue: Perspectives on Women's Religious Activities in Early Modern Europe and the Americas

Introduction

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Abstract:

Proposing *activity* as a useful category of analysis, this special issue considers Catholic and Protestant women in Europe and the Americas in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. We examine women in religious communities, which include both monastic communities as well as confessional communities. A close analysis of the social, economic, and cultural actions of these women religious challenges historiographical assumptions about monastic cloister and domestic space in the early modern period. In fact, we revisit monastic and domestic spaces to reveal them as stages for previously unexamined activity. This cross-denominational and trans-national special issue highlights new spheres of women's religious activity and raises new questions for the study of early modern women's lives and their capacity to act in early modern society, economy, and culture.

Keywords:

women religious; activity; nuns; Beguines; Quakers; Pietists; Europe; the Atlantic World; Spanish America

This special issue comprises five articles on the religious activities of early modern Catholic and Protestant women from a transnational perspective. We explore the spiritual work of Catholic, Quaker, and Pietist women in Italy, the Low Countries, the Holy Roman Empire, England, Spain, and the Americas across the *longue durée* from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, and consider their economic, social, and political contexts. Both Catholic and Protestant women were builders and shapers of religious communities, which in turn had far-reaching impacts on their societies.

The articles in this special issue pose *activity* as a useful category of analysis for the study of women and religion in the early modern period.¹ In the Catholic tradition, active women religious contrasted with contemplative nuns by maintaining more direct and explicit engagement in the secular world after adopting the religious habit. Characteristic of the apostolic spirituality popularized in the aftermath of the Reformation, members of active orders and congregations engaged in teaching, catechizing, nursing, and other activities of social apostolate that ran counter to the Catholic Church's contemporary drive to re-establish monastic order by reintroducing strict enclosure for nuns and subjecting the administration of convents to episcopal oversight. Members of many active orders and congregations that emerged in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries were not recognized as nuns in canon law because they neither professed solemn vows nor adopted enclosure, both of which were essential to be recognized as a nun.² In this special issue, *activity* does not refer exclusively to these active Catholic women religious. We adopt a broad definition of activity and examine social, economic, and cultural actions of women in religious communities, which include both monastic communities as well as confessional communities. Our definition of activity is broader than simply *labor*. We do not restrict our study of women's actions to income producing activities or activities that could have been substituted by purchased goods or services.³ Our approach allows us to challenge previously held assumptions and opens new avenues of inquiry across the confessional divide.

¹ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–75.

² Giancarlo Rocca, "Voto," *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione* (Rome, 2003).

³ For recent definitions of women's work or labor in early modern period, see Maria Agren, ed., *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society* (New York, 2017); Mark Hailwood and Jane Whittle, "Methodology," *Women's Work in Rural England, 1500-1700*. (Accessed August 30, 2017, [https://earlymodernwomenswork.wordpress.com/methodology/.](https://earlymodernwomenswork.wordpress.com/methodology/))

The study of early modern women's religious activities, both Catholic and Protestant, has often been framed by restrictions placed on women and their separation from the wider world. The decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the subsequent papal bulls that reinforced and extended monastic enclosure have dominated the discussion of Catholic women, while the scholarship on Protestant women has been shaped by the image of a pious wife submitting to her husband's authority, a result of the emphasis that Luther and other Protestant leaders placed on women's role as wives and mothers increasingly removed them from public life.⁴ In recent years scholars have begun looking beyond the cloister and the home to reveal the varied ways in which women on both sides of the confessional divide worked to further the cause of their Christian faith.⁵ The articles presented here continue in this vein to highlight new spheres of women's religious activity in early modern Europe and the Americas. We challenge long-held historiographical perceptions while also turning back to monastic and domestic spaces to reveal them as stages for previously unexamined activity. This cross-denominational and trans-national special issue thus offers new perspectives on women, religion, and women's religious communities in the early modern world and raises new questions for the study of early modern women's lives and possibilities for agency.

On the Catholic side of the scholarship, the Council of Trent has long been considered a watershed moment in the history of early modern women, where research has primarily focused on nuns. In its last session in 1563, the Council reinforced Benedict VII's bull

⁴ For example: Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1989); Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago, 1999); Gabriella Zarri, *Recinti: Donne, clausura e matrimonio nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, 2000).

⁵ For example: Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England: 1500-1720* (London, 2005); Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York, 2004); Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life: French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century Catholicism* (Aldershot, 2005); and Melinda Zook, *Protestantism, Politics, and Women in Britain, 1660-1714* (London, 2013).

Periculoso (1298) that demanded monastic enclosure of nuns. Together with papal bulls that followed, Pius V's *Circa pastoralis* (1566) in particular, the Tridentine decree prescribed perpetual enclosure to all monastic women, regardless of the order and constitutions to which they had professed.⁶ Even though scholars have highlighted the flexibility of enclosure as it was experienced in monastic communities across early modern Europe and beyond, most scholarship on early modern Catholic women religious is still framed by enclosure and the tensions around its enforcement.⁷ The three articles on Catholic women in this special issue decisively shift the focus to previously unstudied activities of monastic and semi-monastic women from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. We thus contribute to the recent scholarly interest in the experiences and activities of women religious outside the enclosed convent; however, we also push against this scholarship's insistence on examining such activities, as well as non-cloistered Catholic women, from the perspective of the Church and the clergy.⁸ We focus instead on the activities themselves and how they tied early modern women religious to local communities as well as to the wider social, economic, and political fabric of the early modern period.

Our three Catholic articles study women religious who lived in organized religious communities and had professed one or more of the monastic vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty. Sarah Moran studies the financial and administrative labor of Beguines in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Southern Low Countries. Beguinage superiors and their

⁶ Raimondo Creytens, "La Riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i Decreti Tridentini," in *Il Concilio di Trento e la Riforma Tridentina: Atti del convegno storico internazionale, Trento 2-6 settembre 1963*, vol. 1 (Rome, 1965).

⁷ For example: Kathryn Burns, *Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, NC, 1999); Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life 1450-1700* (Oxford, 2007); Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (New York, 2003); Elizabeth A. Leffeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister* (Burlington, VT, 2005).

⁸ Alison Weber, ed., *Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World* (London/New York, 2016).

assistants handled huge sums of money and engaged in complicated accounting practices; by examining these, Moran broadens our view of early modern women's education, their professional possibilities, and what the Beguines in particular understood as "doing God's work." Liise Lehtsalu examines how women religious of third orders integrated into the urban communities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy. She examines the social activities of third order women religious, arguing that these women responded to specific needs in local communities and gained the support of both the local populace and civic and clerical authorities despite contemporary proscriptions against unenclosed communities. In the third article, Silvia Evangelisti examines the symbolic association of mostly cloistered religious women with discourses about conversions by means of imagined and spiritual travels. Studying the written narratives of these episodes, Evangelisti highlights the extent to which Spanish hagiographical literature contributed to highlight ideas about female religious activism. By examining the real or imagined everyday activities in which Catholic monastic and semi-monastic women engaged, these three articles demonstrate the complex ways in which women religious participated in early modern society, economy, and politics both from within and without the cloister. Together these texts also reveal the continuities in Catholic women's roles in early modern society between c.1550 and c. 1800, thus expanding our field of vision beyond the c. 1700 cutoff that continues to characterize scholarship on early modern Catholic women and the Counter Reformation more generally.

On the Protestant side, the stress that the Protestant Reformation placed on domestic worship and personal contemplation was seen as constraining for women, especially since the male head of the household became central to religious teaching within the family.⁹ But the image of the pious, homebound wife as the archetype of women's spiritual practice and

⁹ For example: Natalie Zemon Davis, "City Women and Religious Change," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France, Eight Essays* (Stanford, 1975), 93–4; Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1989), 1–5.

religious activity has been challenged by recent scholarship on women's preaching and conversion activities, their writing, and their role in institutionalizing the Protestant creed in the sixteenth century. Wide-ranging scholarship, emerging from and influenced by the fields of Gender History, has questioned the resonance of a "public" and "private" divide in women's (and men's) everyday lives.¹⁰ The uncovering of women's role in inspiring and founding new radical groups across Europe and the Atlantic world has also done much to underscore their active roles in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious culture.¹¹ These studies have given us a more complex and accurate view of women's activities within and beyond the household, offering important reflections on how a female domestic sphere could be socially constructed *for* and *by* women. In a number of ways, the reforms that took shape across Europe and the American colonies from the sixteenth century encouraged new modes of participatory life for women. Stress was placed, for example, on individual piety, companionate marriage, and the need for literacy to interpret scripture.¹²

However, one consequence of this scholarly realignment has been a tendency among feminist scholars to focus on the more controversial, radical, and "public" activities of

¹⁰ Some studies that have problematized the "private" and "public" domains in Protestant women's lives from Britain and the Americas include: Karen Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2012); Erica Longfellow, "Public, Private, and the Household in Early Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 313-34; Carole Shammas, *A History of Household Government in America* (London, 2002); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York, 1991); Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 390-91; Alexandra Walsham, "Holy Families: The Spiritualization of the Early Modern Household Revisited," *Studies in Church History* 50 (2014): 122-60; Merry E. Wiesner, "Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987): 311-21.

¹¹ Merry Wiesner-Hanks, "Protestant Movements," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allyson M. Poska, Jane Couchman, Katherine A. McIver (Farnham, 2013), 129-148; Emily Clark and Mary Laven, eds., *Women and Religion in the Atlantic Age, 1550-1900* (Farnham, 2013).

¹² Clark and Laven, eds., *Women and Religion in the Atlantic Age, 1550-1900*, 1-4.

Protestant women who did not conform to the norms and expectations of their time. Thus, in counterpoint to the scholarship on the European Catholic Reformation, and despite the widespread acknowledgment that there was a fluidity between women's "public" and "private" roles, the domestic and less radical aspects of Protestant women's lives have tended to be eclipsed in favor of those moments when women felt authorized to speak publicly about religious and political matters. This has especially been true of studies about women within sectarian, non-conforming, and dissenting Protestant communities, where the secondary literature has continued to equate women's domestic activities with limited authority within their religious communities.¹³

The two Protestant essays in this volume draw attention to the household as a positive and reinforcing space for women's "public" religious activities. Naomi Pullin highlights the central role of Quaker hosts in supporting a highly mobile and transient religious community in Britain and colonial America. Examining the correspondence and printed spiritual journals of female missionaries and the Quaker hosts with whom they lodged, Pullin casts light on the act of hosting as an important activity to understand seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious practice. Elizabeth Bouldin looks at two women, Antoinette Bourignon and Jane Lead, who led radical pietistic communities in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. Like Pullin, she emphasizes women's transformation of domestic spaces into key sites of religious activity. Bouldin argues that as these women sought to integrate their religious practices with their responsibilities to fellow believers, their active roles forced a redefinition of female piety. Together these two articles show that Protestant women assumed positions of leadership and authority in their religious communities through their activity

¹³ This scholarly oversight is discussed in the British context in Sarah Apetrei and Hannah Smith, eds., *Religion and Women in Britain, c.1660–1760* (Farnham, 2015), 3–14.

within the home, revealing the flexibility of the boundaries between the public and the private, the communal and the domestic.

Our examination of the activities of women religious, and of women's religious activities, reveal the highly varied forms that women's spiritual work took in the early modern world, and highlight both continuities and differences across confessional, linguistic, and geographic boundaries. The women in our articles neither submitted to the institutions and structures of their Catholic or Protestant faiths, nor did they seek to subvert these institutions and structures. Instead, we see these women acted within and through their religious communities and that their work inevitably connected them to wider social and political domains that extended from the local to the global. By studying the activities of this diverse group of Catholic and Protestant women, we thus gain new insights on the intersections between gender, religion and agency in the early modern period and create new spaces for further research.