
HISTORY OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS

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NEWS AND NOTES

NETWORKING

Requests have come in from several *NEWS AND NOTES* subscribers to enhance the networking capacity of this newsletter in two directions. The first would widen our scope through use of "e-mail." The second would improve members' capacity to get papers accepted at professional meetings through sharing of experience with submitting proposals.

Ritamarly Bradley, SFCC, professor emerita at St. Ambrose University, Davenport, Iowa, would be happy to provide HWR members with information on various electronic bulletin boards related to religious, medieval, and women's studies. Her e-mail address is rbradley@saunix.sau.edu. If you have e-mail, you are invited to take advantage of this offer. Please forward to the newsletter editor any other e-mail comments, resources, and suggestions you may have. Electronic networking of this sort would seem to have great potential for broadening our network to include secular historians both here and abroad.

Regarding proposal submission, newsletter focus for the next several issues will be on the Berkshire conference, next scheduled for 1995. Concerns have been expressed by several members that the program committee for the last Berkshire failed to accept proposals which would have given the program better balance in the direction of women in religion. The current Berkshire program committee goes out of office in November, but we urge HWR members who have had difficulty getting proposals accepted, or who simply want to register objection that the subject of their interest was not featured on the program, to write Marilyn Williams, program committee secretary, at the Department of History, Pace University, Pace Plaza, New York, NY, 10038.

A stack of letters of that nature is often persuasive to future program committees.

In addition, you may wish to forward to me as newsletter editor a copy of papers or panels which were rejected (or accepted) for the 1989 and 1992 conferences. I can then invite a few of our members to review these to see if a pattern exists. Next steps to enhance proposal success will be based on what we learn through this review and any further ideas you may wish to share.

PUBLICATIONS & TALKS

Margaret Susan (Peg) Thompson's article, "Cultural Conundrum: Sisters, Ethnicity, and the Adaptation of American Catholicism," appears in *MID-AMERICA: AN HISTORICAL REVIEW* (74:3, October, 1992, pp. 205-230). The article represents part of a larger project Peg has underway with Oxford Press entitled *THE YOKE OF GRACE: AMERICAN NUNS AND SOCIAL CHANGE, 1808-1917*.

Francis Bernard O'Connor, CSC, includes women religious in her study of Catholic women in the United States, Brazil, Bangladesh, and Uganda: *LIKE BREAD, THEIR VOICES RISE! Global Women Challenge the Church*, Ave Maria Press (1993). The book and an accompanying video dispell the assumption that Catholic feminism is an exclusively North American phenomenon. Research included a questionnaire administered to over 1200 women and numerous on-site interviews. Copies can be ordered from the author at 919 St. Vincent St., South Bend, IN 46617; or from Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, IN 46556.

may have on U.S. archives containing documentation pertaining to French congregations, her broader topic being women in French orders from 1598 to 1660. She can be reached at 149 North Butler St., Madison, WI 53703.

Bernadette McCauley, assistant professor of history at Hunter College, has begun a project on the history of the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary. This community of African-American women was founded by Elizabeth Williams (Mother Theodore) in Savannah, Georgia in 1916 and moved to New York City in the 1920s. They worked in a variety of educational and social service areas, particularly child care. Bernadette has started an oral history project with members of the community including Mother Agnes Eugenia, who was one of the first members in Savannah. Anyone wanting to talk with Bernadette on this project can reach her at Hunter College, 695 Park Ave., New York, NY 10021.

Alice O'Rourke, OP, is working on a biography of Mother Mary Samuel Coughlin, mother general of the Sinsinawa Dominicans 1909-1949. Alice will be residing at the motherhouse in Sinsinawa while conducting this research.

BOOK REVIEWS

THE CREATION OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS: (FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO EIGHTEEN-SEVENTY), by Gerda Lerner (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 395 pp.

Why did it take women so long to think their way free of patriarchy?

Gerda Lerner, eminent historian and author of eight books of women's history, asks this question in her latest and most significant piece of scholarship. It is a must-read book for women interested in education, history, women's religious orders, or the roots of the women's movement--in fact, for any educated woman.

The second in her series entitled *Women in History*, this book took Gerda Lerner 15 years to

write, including the "grand detour" of volume 1, *THE CREATION OF PATRIARCHY*. But collectively it took women in Western civilization 1300 years to write this book, an exploration of our coming to awareness of our own history--and our relationship to recorded history.

In Chapter 2, Lerner presents the first answer to the question of why patriarchy lasted so long: it systematically excluded women from education or disadvantaged them educationally compared to their brothers. As a result, women have been deprived of authority. In Chapters 3-10, Lerner shows how various women gained authority in alternative ways--through direct mystic contact with God, through motherhood, and through sheer genius and creativity.

The second critical factor undermining women's development was that men defined women as persons outside history, thus denying them any knowledge of the work of their predecessors. This exclusion, along with restriction from education, formed "truly the most oppressive aspect of women's condition under patriarchy" (280), argues Lerner.

Beginning with Hilda of Whitby, continuing with Hrosvitha of Gandersheim, Hildegard of Bingen, Christine de Pisan, Sor Juana de la Cruz, Mary Wollstonecraft, Emma Goldman, Simone de Beauvoir, and many others, Lerner demonstrates how "women, ignorant of their history, had to reinvent the wheel over and over again" (268).

For over 900 years--from Hrosvitha to Harriet Beecher Stowe--the rights simply to think and to write remained controversial. Lerner painfully documents how "woman after thinking woman argued her way out of patriarchal confinement and constraints"--unaware that similar arguments had been worked out hundreds of years earlier by other women, unable to "test and improve their ideas by being in dialogue with the women thinkers before them" (281).

In her preface, Lerner gives us a glimpse of the personal toll this book took: "It was the most difficult work I have ever done because the scope of women's difficulties, losses and disap-

pointments, the horrifying tragedy of wasted talents and energy extending over the centuries and millennia, became more visible to me than it had ever before" (x).

The good news in the book is the central role of women religious in claiming authority to think and write, in establishing the right to education, in becoming participants in public discourse, and in documenting individual lives and then group histories. In Chapter 7, entitled "One Thousand Years of Feminist Biblical Criticism," Lerner shows how women beginning with Hildegard of Bingen and Christine de Pisan engaged in theological reinterpretation of the passages in Genesis and St. Paul that had been used to justify the subordination of women.

Lerner says that the most important thing she learned in writing her earlier work on patriarchy was "the significance to women of their relationship to the Divine and the profound impact the severing of that relationship had on the history of women" (vii).

This book is worth reading simply as an introduction to a large number of significant, courageous women who were not included in the history classes of the past. But Lerner's main contribution in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* is the clarity with which she perceives the sweep of Western history--both the 4000 years since patriarchy took hold and the 1300-year period during which women became aware of the wrongs they had suffered, realized that these were socially determined, and began to join with other women to remedy them.

In her conclusion, Lerner asserts that "now, the period of patriarchal hegemony over culture has come to an end. ...Women do not as yet have power over institutions, over the state, over law. But the theoretical insights modern feminist scholarship has already achieved have the power to shatter the patriarchal paradigm." Efforts to halt the transformation can retard the process "but they cannot stop it" (283).

A subject covering so many years and such a large geographical area is certainly daunting, and

specialists may have disagreements with Lerner's handling of certain women or topics, but the breadth of her earlier work in women's history certainly qualified her and led her to a project of this scope. In addition to 283 pages of text, Lerner offers 47 pages of notes, a 46-page bibliography, and a detailed index.

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ARCHIVAL NEWS

Denis Sennet, SA, has compiled a workbook-style source compendium, *A DIVINE LEGACY: Records Keeping for Religious Congregations/Orders*, to assist archivists or records managers in the administration and appraisal of material for their collections. For copies, contact the author at Friars of the Atonement Archives, Graymoor - P.O. Box 300, Garrison, NY 10524-0300.

The Monroe IHMs continue to work with the help of a substantial gift for capital improvements to their archives. Further information on this effort may be obtained from Rose Matthew Mangini, IHM, who is the new archivist.

SPECIAL REPORT

by

**Mary Hayes, SND
Book Review Editor**

In an interview for *NEWS AND NOTES*, Sister Mada-Anne Gell, VHM, archivist for the Georgetown Visitation Monastery and second Federation of the Visitandines in the United States, shares the lessons she learned from the fire that destroyed the central building of Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School on July 8, 1993.

This central section of the school was in many ways the repository of the history of Visitation. Built in 1873, it contained the school archives, parlors with valuable antique furniture and religious art, the Archbishop Leonard Neale Room, filled with precious artifacts from the first decades of the school and a small museum-like room on the fourth floor, also containing material artifacts.