

# Introduction

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Religious sisters and nuns, known collectively as women religious,<sup>1</sup> have always operated in a liminal place in church and popular culture. Nuns for centuries maintained a spiritual capital that gave them a special role in the life of the Catholic Church. Though some individual abbesses may have wielded significant power, women religious were never canonically members of the clergy. They had, however, in popular understanding, a ‘higher calling’.<sup>2</sup> Through the institutions they managed, female religious had enormous influence in shaping generations of Catholics. They were, by the nineteenth century,

1 The term religious life refers to a form of life where men or women take three vows, of poverty, chastity and obedience, and are members of a particular religious institute which is governed by a rule and constitution. Catholic religious life has traditionally been divided into two main categories: orders of contemplative nuns whose work is prayer of the Divine Office inside the cloister and ‘active’ congregations of religious sisters whose ministry or apostolate (traditionally teaching, nursing and social welfare) is outside the cloister. The terms sisters and nuns were often used interchangeably, although with the codification of Canon Law in 1917 the term sister came to define women who took simple vows and worked outside the cloister and the term nun came to refer to contemplatives who took solemn vows and lived a life of prayer behind cloister walls. Catholic religious sisters and nuns are often referred to collectively as women religious. The *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* dated 2017 reported 659 thousand women religious worldwide. <https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=it&u=https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2018/06/13/0440/00957.html&prev=search>, accessed 30 October 2018.

2 In 1964, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) made explicit that vowed religious were categorised as laity (§43). (Papal documents originating in Latin are named after the first few words of the document so the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church is also known as *Lumen Gentium*.) Some scholars argue that this was explicitly intended to reduce the power and authority of women religious. Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 72.

integral to the development of Catholic social welfare systems that often ran in parallel with those of the state. Despite, or maybe because of their utility, nuns and sisters were often caricatured and essentialised, both from within the Catholic Church and without. At different times, they have been imagined as obedient pawns of the church, saintly virtuosos, naïve young innocents, cruel shrews, disobedient heretics and sadistic abusers – and most recently ‘radical feminists’. And today, though numbers of women religious decline in the ‘Global North’ (and increase in the ‘Global South’), they continue to attract media attention, though almost always as ‘other’.

Since the 1950s, a profusion of books has been published in Britain and Ireland and elsewhere recounting personal experiences by nuns and about nuns. The genre of ‘nuns talking’ presents a disparate range of experiences. In Britain, Karen Armstrong’s gripping and widely cited 1960s memoir explores a complex young woman’s experience of a stifling convent regime and her eventual exodus.<sup>3</sup> Sister Giles’ story of parting is gentler and less well known; she left religious life after almost twenty-five years in an enclosed monastery but continued her faith journey, still connecting with her former monastery.<sup>4</sup> Journalist Mary Loudon gathered together the stories of faith and transition of ten nuns and sisters in England in *Unveiled: Nuns Talking*.<sup>5</sup> Camillus Metcalfe framed her interviews of ten Irish women religious psychoanalytically, emphasising what she identified as the repressive nature of Irish religious life.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these British and Irish voices, there are volumes of published interviews of North American and Australian former and current women religious. The stories they tell are often polarised into ‘strong women’ who worked through repressive pre-conciliar regimes to do great things and ‘angry women’ who left, enraged and unable to countenance what they saw as the hypocrisy of religious life and the Catholic Church.<sup>7</sup>

3 Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate: A Nun's Story* (London: Flamingo, 1981) and its sequel *The Spiral Staircase* (London: William Collins, 2004).

4 Sister Giles, *The End and the Beginning* (Stanhope: The Memoir Club, 2007).

5 Mary Loudon, *Unveiled: Nuns Talking* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).

6 Camillus Metcalfe, *For God's Sake: The Hidden Life of Irish Nuns* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2014).

7 Carole G. Rogers, *Habits of Change: An Oral History of American Nuns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mary Ryllis Clark, Heather O'Connor and Valerie Krips (eds), *Perfect Charity: Women Religious Living the Spirit of Vatican II* (Australia: Morning Star Publishers, 2015); Anne Patrick Ware (ed.), *Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1985); Marie Therese Gass, *Unconventional Women: 73 Ex-Nuns Tell Their Stories* (Clackamas, OR: Sieben Hill, 2001).

Stories about women religious by those they educated are equally divergent. The feminist press Virago published *There's Something about a Convent Girl* in 1991. Its founder, Carmen Callil, a convent girl in 1940s Australia, was so scarred by her experiences she wanted the world to know what it was like to be traumatised by nuns.<sup>8</sup> But not all the twenty-four recollections authored by former convent girls educated in convent schools in England, Ireland, Australia and Rome from the 1930s to the 1960s emphasised trauma. Katie Boyle's experience was of sisters who were 'understanding, so broadminded, so worldly, and yet not at all worldly'.<sup>9</sup> These 'love them' or 'hate them' stories were perplexing. And I became even more confounded when meeting female religious in the course of my research. They were – well – quite ordinary women. I found it difficult to see them as either the 'evil nun' or the 'holy nun'. The stories both current and former religious told me of their experiences of religious life were also contradictory. Some felt damaged by their novitiate experience; others loved every moment of it. What was universal, however, was that they experienced a dramatic change in the way religious life was lived. I wanted to understand how these women had experienced the complex, sometimes metamorphic, changes of religious life. This book in exploring nuns and sisters in a secular age provides a lens with which to decipher these complex, diverse stories of female religious life.

At the heart of the transformations in religious life was the discipline of obedience and the way its practice had changed. St Augustine's often-quoted maxim, *Roma locuta est, causa finita est* (Rome has spoken; the case is finished), underscored the power of the Holy See, which expected blind obedience to conciliar and papal decision-making where no questioning, no rebuttal and no recourse to conscience was brooked.<sup>10</sup> Religious institutes had become 'little Romes' with authority centralised under a superior general or abbess.<sup>11</sup> When these leaders of congregations and orders spoke, *causa finita est!* For much of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the Holy See with its centralising remit expected universality (the church of all peoples) to be maintained through uniformity. According to its way of thinking, the spirit of

8 Jackie Bennett and Rosemary Forgan (eds), *There's Something about a Convent Girl* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 56. This book was later made into a television programme and the book was reissued in 2003 as *Convent Girls*.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

10 This Latin statement (and its English translation) from St Augustine's Sermon 131, §10 references the power and authority of the Holy See.

11 In this volume, 'religious institutes' encompasses religious orders, congregations and societies of apostolic life.

the world, modernity, led to worldliness and sorrow – and was to be dismissed or condemned.<sup>12</sup> From the 1940s, in a noticeable shift, the Holy See spoke with words that urged an engagement with the modern world: adaptation, renewal and change. Female religious in Britain, weighed down by the reification of centuries of tradition, responded hesitantly. Then the 1960s: in the Church and in the world, ideas that had been slowly simmering began to bubble and sputter. The *zeitgeist* of the times was one of action. Expectations of a better world generated a radicalisation, religious and secular, explored and lived by laity, religious and priests. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) re-enforced that *zeitgeist*. New, more urgent words were added to the religious lexicon: *aggiornamento*, *ressourcement*, collegiality and experimentation. These words were intended to encourage religious to rethink the essence of the aims and objectives of the religious institutes in which they lived. This rethinking could be radical, sweeping away much of what was familiar to insiders and outsiders of religious life. Renewal was a source of new-found energy for some, but for others, loss, of what they had known, believed, understood and loved about their vocation and about their Church. Change, in communities with hallowed traditions that had stood the test of time for hundreds of years, was difficult, confusing and painful. *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* tells the story of the excitement of the renewal of religious life. It also tells the story of the despair of that same renewal.

The post-war world is this book's starting point, as the Second World War provided an important watershed, launching a new world order where the social and cultural landscape shifted dramatically for Britons.<sup>13</sup> The war years were disruptive for Catholic nuns and sisters: privations, cohabitations and evacuations altered relationships within and without the convent.<sup>14</sup> From this, there was no turning back. This story of change

12 Bruno M. Hagspiel, 'The Religious Life in the U.S. Is on the Decline Both in Men's and Women's Orders', *Sponsa Regis*, 28:2 (1956), 29–41; Adrian Hastings, 'Catholic History from Vatican I to John Paul II', in Adrian Hastings (ed.), *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3; Patrick Pasture, 'Religion in Contemporary Europe: Contrasting Perceptions and Dynamics', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 49 (2009), 328.

13 Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958–c. 1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 5, 806.

14 As Monique Lurard and others suggest, the Second World War in particular interrupted the stability of convent life and introduced what appears as an unprecedented interaction with the larger world. Monique Lurard, *The Society of the Sacred Heart in the World of Its Times 1865–2000* (St Louis, MO: iUniverse, 2016),

begins as the Second World War ends, when British women were no longer conscripted and were free to enter religious life. Young women were changed by their experiences of the war years, and the modifications in religious life that began in these pre-conciliar years reflected a new modernity. The Second Vatican Council collated many shifts in Church thinking in the sixteen documents that it published. What followed their publication was an unprecedented rethinking and restructuring of religious life as women religious obediently (some with great enthusiasm, others with a heavy heart) reimagined religious life into the 1970s and 1980s. This book ends in 1990: for many religious institutes this was another turning point. By the 1990s, the years of experimenting had coalesced into more stable processes of decision-making, consultation and leadership. Many communities now thought more strategically and realistically about their future and their ministries and were able to look back on the previous thirty years and assess this history with greater detachment.

This study examines the changes in religious life for women religious in Britain from 1945 to 1990, identifying how community and individual lives were altered. Though the project considers both secular and Catholic events that occurred in the post-war world, it pivots on the Second Vatican Council, and considers pre- and post-Vatican II social, cultural and religious events and social movements as influencers in these changes. It frames the new ways of living religious life in two important ways. First, it interrogates 'lived experience' by examining the day-to-day lives of women religious, responding to historian Joseph Komonchak's reflection that 'to give a sense of what Vatican II was as experienced and what it means as an event, the documents are inadequate'.<sup>15</sup> In doing this, it also addresses historical theologian Massimo Faggioli's critique that it is time to move past the event of the Second Vatican Council and focus on its afterlife.<sup>16</sup> Second, Catholic religious institutes were national and global Catholic institutions and this project is influenced by their transnational interactions. Though rooted in the experiences of women religious in Britain, the project probes the relationships and interconnectivities between women religious within and across national

p. 370. Outside of individual convent histories, there is little published of religious life in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century.

15 Joseph A. Komonchak, 'Vatican II as Ecumenical Council: Yves Congar's Vision Realized', *Commonweal*, 22 November 2002, p. 14.

16 Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), p. 139.

divides as they move from institutions embedded in uniformity to the acceptance of cultural plurality.

*Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* also engages with the histories of the social movements of the long 1960s. For too long, religion has been relegated to its own silo, unlinked to the 'radical sixties' and depicted as ultimately obstructionist to 'new thinking and freer lifestyles'. The doyen of 1960s scholarship Arthur Marwick insisted the Catholic Church acted as a centre of opposition to 'all the great movements aiming towards greater freedom for ordinary human beings'.<sup>17</sup> To contest this, female religious life is examined as a microcosm of change in the Catholic Church, pointing to the 'new thinking and freer lifestyles' that allowed for the questioning of institutional cultures and the introduction of personal autonomy that had its parallels in the larger British society.

Why is this research important? First, it promotes a better understanding of the changing role of religion in modern society in the post-war twentieth century by expanding our understanding of how religious bodies interacted with society. Despite the decline of religious belief in the Global North, religion remains inescapably relevant, as any review of recent newspaper headlines demonstrates. Religion, in many of the social and cultural histories of Britain in the 1960s, if addressed at all, has often been portrayed as a stagnant, obstructionist force. This research displays Catholicism as a living, dynamic faith tradition interacting with and being influenced by the changing nature of British society and culture. Balancing religious principles with modernity had its perils; it has resulted in a difficult and often contentious journey. This is not a story of 'progress', but a complex history of the individual and institutional efforts towards readjusting Catholicism to the 'modern world'. It does not deny the uncomfortable stories of kyriarchy or the 're-positioning and self-historicising' that occurred in some communities.<sup>18</sup>

Second, this is a women-centred, lived history. It uses material from the archives as well as oral testimony to tell a gendered story. Women's voices in many of the major religions have been relegated as subsidiary (if not invisible) in published histories. The women who have participated

17 Marwick, *The Sixties*, p. 34.

18 Margaret Susan Thompson, 'Circles of Sisterhood: Formal and Informal Collaboration among American Nuns in Response to Conflict with Vatican Kyriarchy', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 32 (2016), 63–82. See also Marit Monteiro, Marjet Derks and Annelies Van Heijst, 'The Stories the Religious Have Lived by since the 1960s', in R. Ruud Ganzevoort, Maaïke de Haardt and Michael Scherer-Rath (eds), *Religious Stories We Live by: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 223.

in this study often engaged with the world as religious catechists and evangelists and as educators, social workers or nurses. In these roles, they influenced the lives of Catholics and non-Catholics. This project reminds us of the significance of women in the larger history of religion and analyses their subjectivities as well as their interactions with society and the church. Third, this project raises the standard of knowledge about Catholicism by telling the story of social change in a different way, through lived history. It complements the event-based histories of the Second Vatican Council and the scores of theological or sociological studies of the Council and its aftermath, by utilising social and cultural history methodologies to evaluate the changes in religious life as part of the social movements of the 1960s, but like other social movements with a noteworthy prehistory and afterlife.

This research explores female religious life through lived experience in order to understand the changing nature of women's communities from the mid-1940s to the 1980s. It does not scrutinise the theology undergirding Vatican decrees but links their usage and understanding to the experiences of women religious. It acknowledges the meanings these women have ascribed to the changing dimensions of religious life. It asks questions about the changes that took place in terms of structural (e.g. community, decision-making), relational (e.g. family and friends), professional (e.g. training and ministry) and visible (e.g. religious habits, the grille) shifts. How were these changes communicated and implemented? Examining this time period through the debates of 'continuity versus rupture' (as the pre-conciliar and post-conciliar terminology suggests) denies earlier developments in thinking and praxis and suggests that Catholics resided in an impermeable Catholic silo. *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* in moving outside the Catholic world acknowledges that women religious were influenced by the broader social movements of the long 1960s.

Despite this broad remit, there is much this book does not do. As already mentioned, it does not delve into the theology or the event of the Second Vatican Council. There are numerous publications that do this.<sup>19</sup> This is not a history of the spirituality of women religious, though

19 Giuseppe Alberigo (ed.), *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols, English version edited by Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995–2006); Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (eds), *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); M. Lamberigts and L. Kenis (eds), *Vatican II and Its Legacy* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002); Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

it recognises the centrality of their relationship to the Divine and the spiritual journey that was also part of the changes in religious life. God-centredness was integral to the stories sisters and nuns told of why they entered religious life and why they remained. This work does not explore explicitly why women left religious life in great numbers as they did in the 1970s and 1980s. There are publications that address this more fully.<sup>20</sup> Nor is this a history that takes up a position alongside ‘liberal’ or ‘traditional’ histories that either exalt or denounce the changes that came out of the Second Vatican Council. Many pundits have weighed in on the consequences of the Second Vatican Council in print and social media, arguing either that the Second Vatican Council has destroyed Catholicism or that ‘progressive’ changes have not gone far enough. As with any story of change, this one is complicated. Lastly, this is not the last word on women religious and Vatican II. Each woman and each archive told unique stories of institutional and personal change. Even within the same congregation or order, change was experienced and lived differently. There are more themes to be addressed, more deep analysis to be completed and other facets of this story to be written.<sup>21</sup> This monograph offers one interpretation of what is a complicated set of events and experiences. Like the Council of Trent, this was a game-changing council.

### Historical approaches and sources

*Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* draws on a variety of original material using both documentary sources and oral testimonies. Material from the archives of religious institutes were heavily weighted to explaining the structures of religious life, and offered a more institutional and less experiential history. The bureaucratising of religious life

- 20 Christine Gervais, *Beyond the Altar: Women Religious, Patriarchal Power, and the Church* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018); Helen Rose Ebaugh, Jon Lorence and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, ‘The Growth and Decline of the Population of Catholic Nuns Cross-Nationally, 1960–1990: A Case of Secularization as Social Structural Change’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35 (1996), 171–83; Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh and Paul Ritterband, ‘Education and the Exodus from Convents’, *Sociology of Religion*, 39 (1978), 257–64.
- 21 It is with some regret that I did not tackle the subject of lay sisters in this book. I was unable, within the wordcount of this book, to do justice to the complex and vexed issues developing out of the phasing out of the lay category of religious life in the 1940s and 1950s. It is the subject of a forthcoming journal article entitled ‘“The Lay Sister Problem”: Social Class and Power in Post-War British Catholic Convents’.



resulted in a rapid expansion of committees (local, provincial, national and international) and reporting necessary to communicate decision-making. Here I encountered Eric Hobsbawm's 'unmanageable excess of primary sources' and a degree of sifting and targeted reading was necessary.<sup>22</sup> Much of the extant documentary evidence, correspondence, instructions, questionnaires and reports were generated from the central motherhouse. These institutional materials were offset by sources from individual convent archives that included house diaries, newsletters or correspondence that reflected local responses and the interaction between the centre and the periphery. Autonomous communities contained similar material, though on a smaller scale. They also often liaised with those outside their monastery via correspondence with ecclesiastical officials and local, national and international leaders of their religious family. Diocesan archives across Britain also provided rich material. Bishops and clergy responded and advised on both personal and canonical issues. I was also privileged to have access to personal archives, which offered candid insights, through family letters and spiritual notebooks. Also consulted were the various papal encyclicals and most importantly the sixteen documents that came out of the Second Vatican Council that were the impetus to these changes to religious life. The emergent industry of religious life studies became an important source too. The growing numbers of memoirs by religious and former religious from the 1940s exploded into the 1970s and 1980s with more theologically, spiritually or sociologically infused works focused on the disruption of and new opportunities for religious life. Print and television media played an increasingly important role in disseminating news of religious life. Reporting in Catholic newspapers such as *The Tablet*, *The Universe*, the *Catholic Herald* and the *Catholic Pictorial* revealed both excitement and discomfort at unfolding developments. Editorials and correspondence columns offered a public space to air emotive reactions from laity and religious. Other Catholic monthly publications such as *Blackfriars*, *Doctrine and Life* and *Review for Religious* offered more theological reflections on a changing Catholic world. This was not simply an insular Catholic development. The Second Vatican Council was enacted on a world stage – its aftershocks were of interest to a mass public. Religious life and its reframing proved to be a magnet for the local and national press too, with visual displays of vocations exhibitions and nuns in 'short skirts' providing newsworthy copy from the 1950s. Despite

22 E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Present as History: Writing the History of One's Own Times', Creighton Lecture, University of London, 1993, pp. 17–18.

the competing social movements of the long 1960s, religious life was also an extraordinary feature of the 'radical sixties'.

Documents do not tell us everything we need to know about the past, though they often identify events, official decision-making and institutional ideologies. The 'turn to self' which legitimated (in some circles) the engagement with life stories (particular autobiography and oral history) in academic studies has been influential to scholars working on cohorts marginalised or missing from documentary sources. Oral histories can transfer focus from the institution and the 'exceptional' (founders or leaders) to the 'ordinary' individual. The vast majority of the sisters and nuns in Britain today entered religious life in the 1950s and 1960s and went through a period of profound personal and institutional change.<sup>23</sup> Many interviewees initially claimed an ordinariness that suggested I was mistaken in interviewing them. These were precisely the women who often leave very little trace in archival documents and whose oral testimonies reflect lived and subjective experiences that complicate an institutional top-down narrative which identified a sense of progress seemingly implicit in the renewal of religious life.<sup>24</sup>

Oral testimonies have multiple layers. To focus on subjectivities, the meanings, emotions and attitudes so central to the construction of self, requires being alert to more than just the 'facts'.<sup>25</sup> Interview narratives reflect a re-envisioned life history. These stories are embedded in each individual's personal background, developed first from the formative experiences as children, then of their religious life, especially their novitiate, and also their experiences as professed religious in the pre- and post-conciliar world. Some self-reflections appeared spontaneous and unexpected even to the narrator. Others sounded well rehearsed; perhaps they had been planned out or told to other audiences. The narrator's relationship with the wider social and cultural discourses is present in the selection and omission of stories within their narrative and can reflect the need for composure. Being alert to coherent and comfortable stories is important to considering meanings and discursive origins.<sup>26</sup>

23 Compass Project, 'Religious Life in England and Wales' published by the National Office for Vocation of the Roman Catholic Church in England (2010).

24 Some interviewees have agreed to make their oral audiorecordings available to a wider public as part of the British Library Life History collection.

25 Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, 12 (1981), 96–107.

26 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 41–2, 67; Lynn Abrams, 'Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Post-War British Women', *Social History*, 39 (2014), 14–35.

Individual memory is influenced by its relationship to a transient cultural world. Cultural historian Alessandro Portelli reminds us: 'Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.'<sup>27</sup> The world of sisters and nuns was one where self-examination was an integral feature of a disciplined, spiritual religious life and introspection became even more commonplace for women religious by the 1970s as psychoanalysis developed into an important means of making sense of the disruption many faced. Teasing apart these layers allowed me a glimpse into women-centred communities and the 'social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture'.<sup>28</sup> Religious life is a relational life and oral history provides a relational means for exploring how women religious explained, rationalised and made sense of their past. As one of the catalysts of oral history, Alistair Thomson, has recognised, oral history is not simply 'the voice of the past' but it is 'a living record of the complex interaction between past and present within each individual and in society'.<sup>29</sup> The stories women religious told had been influenced not only by their lived experience but by the intervening years of workshops and seminars, reading and discussions of religious life. Representations of women religious in popular culture such as film, television and media influenced memories also. Rebecca Sullivan has argued that American filmmakers drew on contemporary issues which suggested both elements of radicalism and traditionalism.<sup>30</sup> Films such as *The Nun's Story* (1959), *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *In This House of Brede* (1975) were featured on the big screen. Television series such as *The Flying Nun* (1967–1970) invited substantial interest. These sources not only added women's voices

27 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 50.

28 Joan Sangster, 'Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History', *Women's History Review*, 3 (1994), 6.

29 Alistair Thomson, 'Unreliable Memories? The Use and Abuse of Oral History', in William Lamont (ed.), *Historical Controversies and Historians* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p. 28.

30 Rebecca Sullivan, 'Celluloid Sisters: Femininity, Religiosity, and the Postwar American Nun Film', *Velvet Light Trap*, 46 (2000), 56; see also, Penny Summerfield, 'Public Memory or Public Amnesia? British Women of the Second World War in Popular Films of the 1950s and 1960s', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), 935–57. For more on representations of women religious in films see Maureen Sabine, *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

to social and cultural histories but also influenced the project's research agenda. The chapter themes of *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* come out of many hours of conversations and the narrators' emphasis on the relational nature of religious life.

My own subjectivity was relevant too; as was my insider/outsider status. The intersubjectivity that results from my interaction with each narrator created a unique oral testimony. My outsider status was evident on numerous levels: as an academic, as a married woman and as a foreigner easily identified by an American accent. But in some respects I was an insider also. I was known to many archivists and religious. I began doing research on nineteenth-century religious life in 2000 and throughout my PhD and subsequent research I had on numerous occasions interacted with women religious in their convent archives and refectories, kitchens and sitting rooms where they offered me tea and biscuits and generously answered my many queries. Some of the sisters I had met on previous archive visits agreed to be interviewed. My positionality was linked to my professional relationships with archivists and sisters through my past research on nineteenth-century religious life. The stories I was told were dependent on intersubjectivities, positionalities and interpersonal dynamics and as such, can only be a partial history.<sup>31</sup>

It is subjectivity that gives oral sources value, but also leaves them open to questions of the reliability, authenticity and representativeness of memory, which suggests infallibility, inaccuracy and bias (as do other source types).<sup>32</sup> Methodological challenges include memories of a 'golden age', the meanings of discrepancies, uncertainties about dates and forgetfulness of events. To address these issues, scholars have urged a rethinking of oral testimony. Rather than testimony being simply a source of factual statements, it can be considered as an 'expression and representation of culture' which includes 'dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires'.<sup>33</sup> Taking into account the implications of silences is important too. These elements of 'subjective reality' are useful to thinking through the diverse ways in which social change was recognised and received, and to consider their contemporary resonance.

31 For more discussions on intersubjectivities see Penny Summerfield, 'Dis/Composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History', in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 91–106.

32 The same can be said, of course, of documentary sources.

33 Luisa Passerini, 'Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1979), 84, 86.

The communities in which women religious lived were institutional as well as social cultures, with a strong, explicit corporate identity often related to an institute's charism and the story of the institution's founding and founder.<sup>34</sup> A religious institute's functional objectives, such as teaching or nursing, or praying the Divine Office also influenced corporate identity. Women's religious institutes were very conscious mnemonic communities, communities that influenced individual socialisation. The formal socialisation process, that training period of religious life (the postulancy and novitiate) was rigorous.<sup>35</sup> Religious communities as commemorative communities were linked to historical traditions, customs and myths.<sup>36</sup> As such, communities created a shared collective memory transmitted from sister to sister, highlighting selectively features of their past.<sup>37</sup> Maurice Halbwachs argued that 'The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory'.<sup>38</sup> These frameworks provided a means of identifying with a version of the religious institute's collective and corporate past. For example, the foundation story was often linked to the identity of a religious institute, used to build community and influence its self-perception. Collective memory was experiential but is also linked to the historicising of the past. It provided a means of uniting individuals and creating cohesive communities with a very specific corporate identity.

34 Charism is often understood as a gift given by God through the Holy Spirit to a founder of a religious institute that orients its activities of building up the church to a particular spiritual emphasis. Margaret Susan Thompson, "'Charism' or 'Deep Story'? Toward a Clearer Understanding of the Growth of Women's Religious Life in Nineteenth-Century America", *Review for Religious*, 28 (1999), 230–50.

35 Until the 1960s, most women went through a two-part formation process, first as a postulant then as a novice, with each stage punctuated by milestones celebrated by ceremonies. After six months to a year as a postulant, women were clothed with a religious habit. They then entered the novitiate, undergoing a second phase of formation which lasted one to two years; then took their first vows. After this, they operated as 'young professed' for two to three years until they took their final vows. The stages of this process varied over time and according to the religious institute.

36 Monteiro, Derks and Van Heijst have argued that within some Dutch religious communities, foundation stories were reinterpreted and remade in the 1960s becoming ahistorical in the process. Monteiro *et al.*, 'The Stories the Religious Have Lived by', pp. 235–6.

37 Jan Assman, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 125–33; Michael G. Kenny, 'A Place for Memory: The Interface between Individual and Collective History', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 41 (1999), 421.

38 Lewis A. Coser (ed.), *Maurice Halbwachs on Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1952]), p. 182.

Despite the prominence of collective memory, individual memory remained influential, particularly to the cohort being interviewed. Interviews often pointed to different and conflicting meanings rather than generalisable experiences.

### Interview cohort

In popular understanding, two forms of religious life stand out: enclosed contemplative (sometimes monastic) religious orders and active (now more often called apostolic) religious congregations. Enclosed religious orders such as Benedictines, Bridgettines and Poor Clares through their recitation of the Divine Office offered prayers for the Church and the world. The nuns residing in these typically autonomous communities were enclosed, and women resided and typically remained attached to one monastic home. Religious congregations evolved from the seventeenth century to work in the mission field at home or abroad. Their form of prayer was active: their aim was to catechise and this often required movement outside the enclosure. Sisters from congregations such as the Sisters of Mercy or the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary<sup>39</sup> taught, nursed or provided forms of social welfare outside the cloister. They had more freedom of movement than contemplative nuns but they also embraced some rules of enclosure. Some groups like the Augustinian Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre and the Society of the Sacred Heart self-identified more with the 'mixed life', where they followed rules of enclosure, prayed the Divine Office and taught in schools. Many congregations, such as the Religious of La Retraite or the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy, became very large, centralised and international congregations. Then as now, the differences between these categories of religious life were in many ways constructed. Some enclosed nuns have 'active' apostolates such as retreat-giving or hospitality and they now have more leeway to leave the cloister to attend meetings, retreats and seminars. Active sisters often have a significant contemplative life. In many ways

39 This congregation has operated under a number of names. In 1609, Englishwoman Mary Ward founded the congregation that became known as the Institute of English Ladies on the continent. In the nineteenth century, the congregation was based in York and called itself the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which was the name under which it received its final approbation by Rome in 1877. In 2004, in honour of Mary Ward's founding vision, the Roman branch of the congregation was renamed the Congregation of Jesus.

women religious all live a 'mixed life' if we think of religious life on a spectrum with 'contemplation' on one end and 'action' on the other.

The nine international women's religious institutes named above agreed to participate in this project.<sup>40</sup> Table 0.1 suggests some of the diversity of these religious institutes, in terms of enclosure, apostolate, place of foundation and governance. There is no representative form of religious life, and the value of this selection of case studies is reflected in its diversity.

The selection process of interviewees was not completely under my direct control. Once approval was given by the leadership team of the religious institute, I offered to interview any of its members. The offer was often communicated via the archivist or the leadership committee through correspondence or internal publications. Any sisters and nuns who contacted me had self-selected, and I interviewed every volunteer.<sup>41</sup> Though some of the women religious had been community leaders, most were 'ordinary' nuns and sisters. Interviews took place throughout England, typically in the sister's residence. Table 0.2 identifies the date of entry of the cohort of participants. It is important to note, given the majority of interviewees entered in the 1950s and 1960s, that the narrators were (in the main) not leaders and decision-makers during the tumultuous time of renewal. I also interviewed some former religious. I had initially planned to interview a larger group of women who had left religious life, but due to time constraints this proved logistically difficult. Four former religious were interviewed; their interview questions were identical to those asked of current sisters and nuns and thus were focused on the changing dimensions of religious life rather than why they left. The women religious interviewed were born in England, Ireland and Scotland. The nature of religious life is such that women religious were often transferred or relocated from one convent to another irrespective of national boundaries. Many of the Irish-born sisters entered religious life in England or Scotland and worked in England exclusively. This research does not examine the significance of national identities in religious life. It is a specifically British history as the religious institutes studied were

40 I approached three other religious institutes for this project, they were unable to participate.

41 The interviews with the sisters who entered in the 1990s and 2000s provided me with important context for writing the conclusion. However, these interviews have not been included in the demographic profiles discussed in this section as they were technically outside the temporal remit of this work.

**Table 0.1** Religious institutes used as case studies

Religious institute	Foundation date	Founded in	Type	Date of first foundation in Britain	Primary ministry in 1960s	Community structure	Motherhouse
Poor Clares (OSC) <sup>a</sup>	1212	Assisi	enclosed	1795	Divine Office	autonomous	n/a
Bridgettines of Syon Abbey (OssS)	1415	Middlesex	enclosed	1415	Divine Office	autonomous	n/a
Benedictines of Stanbrook (OSB)	1623	Cambrai, Flanders	enclosed	1838	Divine Office	autonomous	n/a
Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre (CRSS)	1642	Liège	mixed	1794	Divine Office; education	autonomous	n/a
Congregation of La Retraite (RLR)	1678	Brittany	active	1880	education; retreat work	centralised	Belgium
Sisters of Mercy (RSM) <sup>b</sup>	1831	Ireland	active	1839	education; nursing; social welfare	autonomous	n/a



Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) <sup>c</sup>	1609	St Omer, Flanders	active	1669	education	centralised from 1953	Rome
Society of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ)	1800	France	mixed	1842	education	centralised	France
Sisters of Charity of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy (SCMM)	1832	Netherlands	active	1861	nursing; social welfare	centralised	Netherlands

#### Notes

<sup>a</sup> The Poor Clares operate as autonomous communities. Nuns from five communities were interviewed (Much Birch, York, Arundel, Lynton, Hollington).

<sup>b</sup> The Sisters of Mercy in Britain were originally autonomous convents. They are now organised into amalgamations. Sisters interviewed belonged to the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy and Sisters of Mercy of the Union of Great Britain.

<sup>c</sup> Renamed the Congregation of Jesus in 2002.

**Table 0.2** Participants interviewed, decade of entry

Religious institute	Total interviewed	Decade of entry as postulant					
		1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s
Poor Clares	14		2	4	4	1	3
Bridgettines of Syon Abbey	1			1			
Benedictines of Stanbrook	4			1	1	1	1
Augustinian Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre	17		3	4	4	3	3
Religious of La Retraite	3			3			
Sisters of Mercy	13		2	7	4		
Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary	12		3	3	5	1	
Society of the Sacred Heart	17	1	4	4	7	1	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>

located in England, Wales and Scotland; however, not all participants would have identified as British.<sup>42</sup>

The stories I heard were intensely personal and sometimes emotive, and some participants wished to remain anonymous so all the oral narratives have been anonymised for consistency, though in some cases (and with permission) I have identified the religious institute to which a narrator belonged.

I have used a life-cycle approach in order to acknowledge the significance of the larger context of these women's lives, not simply their lives in religion, but also their lives before entering and, in some cases, after leaving religious life. I introduced religion early on, asking about their experience of faith within their family. I had in front of me a menu

42 For more on the challenges of four nations histories see Naomi Lloyd-Jones and Margaret M. Scull, 'A New Plea for an Old Subject? Four Nations History for the Modern Period', in Naomi Lloyd-Jones and Margaret M. Scull (eds), *Four Nations Approaches to Modern 'British' History: A (Dis)United Kingdom?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 3–31.

of questions, but allowed the interview to flow as the narrator wished. If prompts were needed to move things along, I gave them. I often let the narrator speak, interjecting only to further explore what had been said, or at an appropriate pause, taking the sister back to obtain more clarification on a particular episode in her life.

The interplay between the archival material and the oral histories allowed a deeper understanding of the lived experience of religious life to emerge. In combining documentary sources with personal narratives I was able to delve more deeply to explore the social changes negotiated by women religious in the period after the Second World War.<sup>43</sup> In keeping with Robert Orsi's work on 'lived religion', this methodology engages with the phenomenologically empiricist world of *doing* religious life.<sup>44</sup> The lived experience under examination is the quotidian of their daily lives: this includes the everyday practices of governance and hierarchy, relationships within and without the community, experiences of religious ministry; interactions with the modern world (where the interior meets the exterior) and becoming a woman. This approach tells us much about personal agency whilst acknowledging the messiness and subjectivity of identities. It also allows an interrogation of the nature of social movements, and the changing collective identity of women religious as they redefined their common interests and aims. These sources and methodologies allow this work to benefit from both the empirical and the experiential.

## Themes

This work is grounded and linked by three core premises: women religious were influenced by and participated in the wider social movements of the long 1960s; women's religious institutes were transnational entities and part of a larger global happening; and the struggles of renewal were linked to competing and contradictory ideas of collective, institutional identities.

## *Social movements*

Most of the women religious that contributed to this project lived through the transforming post-war British world of the 1940s and

43 Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 773–97.

44 Robert Orsi, 'Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion', in David D. Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 7.

1950s and the social movements that have become emblematic of the long 1960s. They travelled from the ideological mentality of the 'fortress church' of the 1940s and 1950s to a more visible global church, particularly after the Second Vatican Council. They were a part of the social movements of their time, but also participated in their own social movement. Scholars of women's social movements argue that female-led movements exist when women organise 'as women' to make social change.<sup>45</sup> Social movements come out of the frustrations of current conditions and a shared belief that change is necessary.<sup>46</sup> Vowed religious life has a place in the larger social movements of the 1960s that fought for personal emancipation and participatory democracy and wrestled with social repression and the limitations of authoritative, hierarchical structures. Women religious experimented with alternative modes of living religious life when traditional ways did not seem to fit into a changing world. Though renewal was initiated from the top down at the request of the Holy See, women religious at all levels engaged with social change; some encouraged it, others obstructed it and countless were acquiescent. Like most social movements, there were periods of social and cultural disjuncture and sometimes schism. Many voiced their grievances and collectively (though not unanimously) charted forms of action that included, for some, leaving religious life. Collaborations occurred at all levels: in individual communities, at the provincial level and in the international motherhouse. Women's religious institutes began the process of renewing corporate structures and via them, religious identities. This work examines the changes in women's religious life as a women's social movement and questions how it developed within a specific social, cultural and religious milieu.<sup>47</sup>

45 Myra Marx Ferree and Carol McClurg Mueller, 'Feminism and the Women's Movement: A Global Perspective', in David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), p. 577.

46 Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 4.

47 'New monastic movements' (for example the Community of St John or Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal) founded from 1960s are not within the remit of this book. Angela A. Aidala, 'Social Change, Gender Roles, and New Religious Movements', *Sociological Analysis*, 46 (1985), 287–314; Joanna Gilbert, 'Young People in Search of Religious Vocation', in Gemma Simmonds, CJ (ed), *A Future Full of Hope?* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2012), pp. 92–105.

### *Transnationalism*

Religious institutes operated within a globalising world. Examining the changes in religious life with an exclusively national lens is artificial and ignores the international ties that linked women religious. This social movement needs to be analysed in a transnational perspective, highlighting connections, transfers and reception of ideas between women of different cultural and national backgrounds within the same religious institutes. Understanding the 'movements and forces that cut across national boundaries', to use theorist Akira Iriye's definition of transnationalism,<sup>48</sup> is important for understanding the changes in religious life. The empirical and experiential details coming out of the documents and the oral testimonies lent themselves to a transnational approach. From the beginning of this project, the links between motherhouse, sisterhouses and daughterhouses at home and abroad were relevant. Even enclosed orders, often holding tight to their autonomy, made links with communities within their religious families in other national contexts. These links grew stronger over time. This work pays close attention to the places where transnational communities intersected at a time of great social change. Transnational history reflects cross-national influences, and the questions I ask are intended to illuminate just how the relationship between ideals and praxis (how religious life was enacted, practised, embodied and/or realised) functioned across national borders and the ways that praxis might be mediated by particular cultural contexts.

### *Identities*

Women's religious institutes rethought sometimes centuries of shared beliefs and practices, redefining and renewing religious identities. The traditional role of religious sister and nun into which many women had been socialised failed to make sense within an emerging socio-cultural modernity that reflected a secular age. Not all felt this way, some clung to the socialisation that had formed them and had given them a life-giving corporate identity that extolled a uniformity, lived internally and externally, with the religious institute to which they belonged. It was a uniformity that was intended to suppress others identities of social class, ethnicity, family, gender and sexuality. A shared identity remained

48 Akira Iriye, 'Transnational History', *Contemporary European History*, 13 (2004), 213.

essential to religious life,<sup>49</sup> but uniformity became out of place within the processes of renewal and adaptation to a modern world.

### Interlinking worlds: post-war Britain, Catholics, Vatican II

Much of the material in the upcoming chapters, because of the international and transnational nature of religious life, will resonate with historians of women religious from other national contexts. However, this research is grounded in a particular British context and contextualises the changing dimensions of women's religious life in Britain within the historiographies of post-war Britain, Catholicism in Britain and the Second Vatican Council, exploring how religious bodies engaged in modernisation and reinvigorated (or not) their global presence. The aftermath of the Second World War led to a slow and cautious reconstruction, an austerity Britain with rationing and queues and the introduction of the welfare state. Full employment, growing affluence, youth culture, educational opportunities and increased mobility became emblematic of 'progress' after the more ascetic war years. This new world order was celebrated by Harold Macmillan's 'most of our people have never had it so good' in 1957.<sup>50</sup> Women's lives changed. Young and old were integral to the work force and war efforts. Waged work was plentiful for most young women in the 1950s, and though typically interrupted by motherhood, work was often returned to in later life.<sup>51</sup> Women religious were a part of this world. Many of the women who entered religious life after the war had experience of waged employment; as religious, they acknowledged women's waged work was important while still promoting the 'greatest work' of motherhood.<sup>52</sup> Though women's suffrage was achieved in 1928, rectifying social, economic and political inequalities remained on the agenda of both feminist and non-feminist organisations. Women's groups were actively involved in efforts to improve

49 Verta Taylor and Nancy E. Whittier, 'Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization', in Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 104–29.

50 Peter Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 1. The 'most' in this phrasing is telling. Macmillan goes on to say in this speech that not everyone was sharing in this prosperity.

51 Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 52; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 52.

52 Sister Mary Laurence, OP, *Nuns are Real People* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1955), p. 8; 'The Successful Woman', *Poor Soul's Friend*, 9:5 (1961), p. 137.

equitable access to state pensions, health care, family allowances, improved housing and maternity services. Conservative organisations, both religious and secular, also played a role in enhancing women's lives even without an explicit link to feminism.<sup>53</sup> Religion was relevant to and influenced by the post-war world. Hugh McLeod points to a national Christian identity that both the Second World War and the Cold War encouraged in Western nations. He highlights continued church-building, Christian socialisation in schools and confessional identities into the 1960s.<sup>54</sup> Church attendance, though, was declining; this religious world appeared in competition with an affluent 1950s and 1960s culture and its materialistic world of leisure and consumerism.<sup>55</sup>

The narratives of the 1950s as a time of prosperity and social cohesion stand in marked contrast to the popular tales of social change and generational dissonance of the 1960s. Arthur Marwick's influential tome *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958–c.1974* (1998) argues that:

[M]inor and rather insignificant movements in the fifties became major and highly significant ones in the sixties; that intangible ideas in the fifties became powerful practicalities in the sixties; that the sixties were characterised by the vast number of innovative activities taking place simultaneously, by unprecedented interaction and acceleration.<sup>56</sup>

He cites numerous examples of major movements, including youth culture, consumerism, civil rights, women's liberation and gay rights. However, more recent scholarship about the 1950s has challenged this vision of a 'radical sixties', emphasising more continuities than ruptures with the 1950s and the 1970s.<sup>57</sup> Religion is often ignored in this historiography; Marwick

53 Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997).

54 Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 59.

55 Callum G. Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), p. 220.

56 Marwick, *The Sixties*, p. 7.

57 Heiko Feldner, Clare Gorrara and Kevin Passmore (eds), *The Lost Decade? The 1950s in European History, Politics, Society and Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), p. 2. See also N. Thomas, 'Will the Real 1950s Please Stand Up? Views of a Contradictory Decade', *Cultural and Social History*, 5:2 (2008), 227–8; Selina Todd and Hilary Young, 'Baby-Boomers to "Beanstalkers" Making the

along with many feminist historiographies had little sympathy for religion in their rendition of the radical 1960s.<sup>58</sup> Marwick claims that religion, though an 'important force' behind some movements, was ultimately obstructionist to 'new thinking and freer lifestyles'.<sup>59</sup> Yet Catholicism had its own sphere of progressive activism. Scholars Gerd-Rainer Horn and Emmanuel Gerard have demonstrated in *Left Catholicism* how a 'brief flowering' of the Catholic left in the 1940s and 1950s became a 'powerful challenge' that influenced European society and politics.<sup>60</sup> Such political involvement grounded by theology and ministry is also entrenched in Horn's *The Spirit of Vatican II*, which situates Europe's liberal Catholicism within the long 1960s.<sup>61</sup> These works address the politicisation and radicalisation of Catholics, particular Catholic laity and clergy, but hardly acknowledge the efforts of male and female religious.<sup>62</sup> In addition, this 'Europe' often does not include Britain.

A 'secular age' is often discussed as a by-product of the radical 1960s, and secularisation dominates the histories of religion of post-war Britain.<sup>63</sup> In his interpretation of Rowntree and Lavers's study, historian Alan D. Gilbert finds a continuity of belief but a 'negligible commitment coupled with a nominal acceptance of prevailing belief and social

Modern Teenager in Post-War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 9 (2012), 451–67; Gillian A. M. Mitchell, 'Reassessing "the Generation Gap": Bill Haley's 1957 Tour of Britain, Inter-Generational Relations and Attitudes to Rock "n" Roll in the Late 1950s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (2013), 573–605.

58 Weaver, *New Catholic Women*, p. x.

59 Marwick, *The Sixties*, p. 34.

60 Gerd-Rainer Horn and Emmanuel Gerard (eds), *Left Catholicism 1943–1955: Catholics and Society in Western Europe at the Point of Liberation* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), p. 14; See also Martin Conway's chapter in this volume, 'Left Catholicism in Europe in the 1940s: Elements of an Interpretation', p. 278.

61 Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Jay P. Corrin's work *Catholic Progressives in England after Vatican II* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013) discusses the less influential politics of the English Catholic left movements. Belinda Davis also briefly mentions the influence of Catholicism on women's movements in 'What's Left? Popular Political Participation in Postwar Europe', *American Historical Review*, 113 (2008), 377.

62 McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, pp. 141–60; see also Horn and Gerard, *Left Catholicism*, p. 43; Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 74–92; Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II*; and Corrin, *Catholic Progressives*.

63 Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernisation: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).



habits.<sup>64</sup> One of the dominant voices in the debate, Callum Brown, made the connection between gender and secularisation central to his study, *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001), contentiously arguing that women 'broke their relationship to Christian piety in the 1960s and thereby caused secularisation'.<sup>65</sup> Hugh McLeod's investigation of the 'religious crisis' of the 1960s contends that church association remained strong into the 1970s, though church attendance and membership of church youth groups declined.<sup>66</sup> Scholars have questioned the dominance of the secularisation thesis. Religious issues were 'hotly and enthusiastically debated' and rebels and nonconformists had influence out of proportion with their numbers.<sup>67</sup> Grace Davie in her work questions the methods of measuring religiosity.<sup>68</sup> More recently, the contributors to *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* argue that scholars need different lenses from which to measure modern Christian dynamism, moving away from statistics of decline to examining Christianity's transformation and its continued cultural influence.<sup>69</sup> Timothy Jones's intervention suggests the 'teleology of decline' may be a Eurocentric norm rather than a global standard and considers a post-secular view that returns to considering religion as a category of analysis and asking, as this research does, new questions of religious change.<sup>70</sup> Secularisation

64 Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 122. B. Seeböhm Rowntree and G. R. Lavers, *English Life and Leisure* (London: Longman, Greens and Co, 1951).

65 Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 10–13. Those who argue against his premise include Jeremy Morris, 'The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another Look at the Secularization Debate', *Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), 963–76.

66 McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, p. 59. Perhaps too, as Brewitt-Taylor argues, a discursively constructed secularisation was more influential. Sam Brewitt-Taylor, 'The Invention of a "Secular Society"? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961–4', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24:3 (2013), 327–50.

67 Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Little, Brown, 2006), p. 432; Hugh McLeod, 'The 1960s', in Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds), *Religion and the Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 254.

68 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

69 Jane Garnett, Matthew Grimley, Alana Harris, William Whyte and Sarah Williams, *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 289, 291.

70 Timothy W. Jones, 'Postsecular Sex? Secularisation and Religious Change in the History of Sexuality in Britain', *History Compass*, 11 (2013), 919.

debates became a major discourse, in the Church, in the press and in universities. Women religious were operating in this secular age.

The twentieth-century Catholic world in Britain was deeply wedded to a tradition that espoused separateness and what has been called a 'fortress church' mentality.<sup>71</sup> This was a church that created an alternate infrastructure running in parallel with Protestant institutions (schools, social clubs, newspapers, etc.) in order to maintain its own moral authority and mandate conformity in belief and behaviour. Women religious were very complicit in this project of separation. However, what to outsiders may have appeared as a unified body was a complicated mix of ethnicities and social classes that did not always gel in matters of politics or practices of faith. Catholics in Britain characterised themselves with a range of identities: as 'recusant' Catholics; English, Irish, Scottish or Welsh Catholics; convert Catholics; and from the 1950s European and colonial immigrant Catholics. Social class divides were a part of this mix. The extent of this 'fortress church' can be debated, but there is little disagreement that the disintegration of a separate Catholic subculture was hastened after the Second World War.<sup>72</sup>

Catholicism remains almost invisible in post-war British histories. Social and cultural histories of the 1960s often ignore the developments of the local, national and global Catholic Church.<sup>73</sup> McLeod only briefly addresses the impact of the Second Vatican Council in *The Religious Crisis*, simply noting it was a vital catalyst to religious change more broadly.<sup>74</sup> Even explicitly Catholic histories skirt around the influence of the Second Vatican Council. Kester Aspden's *Fortress Church* is an ecclesial history that takes us only to 1963.<sup>75</sup> Editors V. Alan McClelland and Michael Hodgetts introduce a useful overview of 150 years of Catholicism in England but not one chapter focuses on the reception

71 Kester Aspden, *Fortress Church: The English Roman Catholic Bishops and Politics 1903–1963* (London: Gracewing, 2002); Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholics in England: Studies in Social Structure since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 21.

72 Corrin, *Catholic Progressives*, pp. 56–7; Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholics in England*, pp. 6–7.

73 There are some exceptions, including the Oxford-based project '1968: Activism, Networks, Trajectories'. [www.history.ox.ac.uk/research/project/around-1968-activism-networks-trajectories.html](http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/research/project/around-1968-activism-networks-trajectories.html), accessed 17 June 2014. See Robert Gildea, James Mark and Anette Warring (eds), *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 231–2, which includes work on the Catholic worker-priest movement.

74 McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, p. 10.

75 Aspden, *Fortress Church*.

of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>76</sup> Michael Hornsby-Smith's extensive sociological interpretations offer the most sustained analysis of post-war Catholic identities and of the extent of tradition and change.<sup>77</sup> It is unfortunate that a robust lived history of the after-life of the Second Vatican Council in any of the four nations in Britain has yet to be written. There is progress though. James Hagerty's recent biography of Cardinal John Carmel Heenan addresses many challenges faced by Heenan, particularly those associated with the Second Vatican Council and its reception in England.<sup>78</sup> Jay P. Corrin's *Catholic Progressives in England after Vatican II* (2013) offers a much-needed spotlight on the Catholic left.<sup>79</sup> David Geiringer's interventions on post-war Catholic religious change suggest that Church authorities and Catholic laity engaged with secular ideas and recategorisation of certain religious beliefs.<sup>80</sup> Alana Harris's work on post-war Catholicism and the family utilises 'lived experience' to explore the continuity within English Catholic cultures of beliefs, devotional practices and identities.<sup>81</sup> Like many of these works, *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* connects with the social and cultural context of the post-war British world and questions the 'rupture' of the post-conciliar Catholic world.

The term *aggiornamento*, employed to signal an opening of windows that let in fresh air, was the keyword behind the spirit of the Second Vatican Council opened by Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) on 11 October

76 V. Alan McClelland and Michael Hodgetts (eds), *From without the Flaminian Gate: 150 Years of Roman Catholicism in England and Wales, 1850–2000* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999). Vatican II is mentioned in several chapters including the last one, entitled 'Faith in Crisis: From Holocaust to Hope, 1943–2000'.

77 For example, Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholics in England*; Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Michael P. Hornsby-Smith (ed.), *Catholics in England 1950–2000: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* (London: Cassell, 1999).

78 James Hagerty, *Cardinal John Carmel Heenan: Priest of the People, Prince of the Church* (London: Gracewing, 2012).

79 Corrin, *Catholic Progressives*.

80 David Geiringer, '"At Some Point in the 1960s, Hell Disappeared": Hell, Gender and Catholicism in Post-War England', *Cultural and Social History*, 15 (2018), 1–17; David Geiringer, 'Catholic Understandings of Female Sexuality in 1960s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 209–38.

81 Alana Harris, *Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945–1982* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Alana Harris, '"A Paradise on Earth, a Foretaste of Heaven": English Catholic Understandings of Domesticity and Marriage, 1945–65', in Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin and Abigail Wills (eds), *The Politics of Domestic Authority since 1800* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 155–81.

1962.<sup>82</sup> He acceded to the pontificate in 1958, then aged 76, and was expected to be a caretaker pope who maintained the status quo. Instead, he called for a Council which began the movement to make Catholicism more relevant to the modern world. This was a pastoral council, concerned with ecclesiology and the nature and mission of the church. By the close of the Council on 8 December 1965, the primary published outputs of the council, sixteen decrees and encyclicals, had already begun to bring about changes in (amongst other things) liturgy; in the responsibilities of the laity and clergy; in relationships with other faith groups; in the role of an informed conscience in making moral decisions; in the revision of Canon Law; and, of course, in the lived experience of religious life. The interpretation of council documents changed the look and feel of Catholicism. These changes were enthusiastically welcomed by those who felt the Catholic Church had lost touch with the modern world, and disparaged by others who felt the changes went too far. The Council allowed the public discussion of issues that had previously been consigned to so-called 'progressive' Catholic circles.

Theologians have long dominated the conversation of the Second Vatican Council, with debates revolving around continuity and rupture.<sup>83</sup> Theologian and (at the time) Lutheran Richard John Neuhaus's reflection on the aftershocks of the Second Vatican Council twenty-five years after they had begun are as relevant today as they were in 1987: 'the contest over the interpretation of Vatican II constitutes a critical battlefield in our society's continuing cultural wars'.<sup>84</sup> The political and ideological conflicts over the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council remain deeply emotive and personal. Some like parish priest Dermot A. Lane saw Vatican II as 'a radical turning point in the self-understanding of the Catholic Church which included an embrace of the modern world, the initiation of a fresh dialogue between the Church and the world, a desire to bring about Christian unity among the Churches, and an appreciation of the value of other religions'.<sup>85</sup> Others found the concept of rupture

82 Pope John XXIII died within nine months of the opening of the council and newly elected Pope Paul VI took the helm on 21 June 1963.

83 The historiography of Vatican II is vast. For a summary of the historiographical debates see Faggioli, *Vatican II*. The most influential interpretations of the Second Vatican Council were published by the Bologna Group under the leadership of Giuseppe Alberigo in the magisterial five-volume *History of Vatican II* (the volumes were published from 1995 to 2006).

84 Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, p. 61.

85 Dermot A. Lane, 'Vatican II: The Irish Experience', *The Furrow*, 55 (2004), 69.

dangerously erroneous and suggested Pope Benedict XVI's discourse of 'reform in continuity'.<sup>86</sup>

Research on female religious life by Susan O'Brien, Deirdre Raftery, Karly Kehoe, Caitriona Clear, Barbara Walsh and my own contributions addressed the agency and authority of women religious, highlighting their substantial role in the growth and dynamism of the nineteenth-century Church in Britain and Ireland.<sup>87</sup> The historiography of British and Irish women religious in the twentieth century is scant compared to that of North America and Europe.<sup>88</sup> Yvonne McKenna documents the lives of twentieth-century Irish women religious in *Made Holy: Irish Women Religious at Home and Abroad* (2006), which highlights identity, migration and diaspora and addresses the changes to religious life coming out of the Second Vatican Council in an Irish context.<sup>89</sup> A number of congregation-specific histories provide rich illustrations of the specificities of the responses to the Second Vatican Council.<sup>90</sup> The work of Susan O'Brien has been particularly valuable as it goes beyond the corporate activities of one religious institute to engage with

86 Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (eds), *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8.

87 Susan O'Brien, "'Terra Incognita': The Nun in Nineteenth-Century England", *Past and Present*, 121 (1988), 110–40; S. Karly Kehoe, *Creating a Scottish Church: Catholicism, Gender and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Barbara Walsh, *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales, 1800–1937: A Social History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002); Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987); Deirdre Raftery, 'Rebels with a Cause: Obedience, Resistance and Convent Life, 1800–1940', *History of Education*, 42 (2013), 1–16.

88 Carol K. Coburn, 'An Overview of the Historiography of Women Religious: A Twenty-Five-Year Retrospective', *US Catholic Historian*, 22 (2004), 1–26. Some recent examples include Mary Beth Fraser Connolly, *Women of Faith: The Chicago Sisters of Mercy and the Evolution of a Religious Community* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Barbra Mann Wall, *Into Africa: A Transnational History of Catholic Medical Missions and Social Change* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Jazon Zuidema (ed.), *Understanding the Consecrated Life in Canada: Critical Essays on Contemporary Trends* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015); Rosa Bruno-Jofré, Heidi McDonald and Elizabeth Smyth, *Vatican II and Beyond: The Changing Mission and Identity of Canadian Women Religious* (Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

89 Yvonne McKenna, *Made Holy: Irish Women Religious at Home and Abroad* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006).

90 Mary Lyons, *Governance Structures of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy: Becoming One* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005); Louise O'Reilly, *The Impact of Vatican II on Women Religious: Case Study of the Union of Irish Presentation Sisters* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); Anselm Nye, *A Peculiar Kind of Mission: The English Dominican Sisters, 1845–2010* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2011).

both the theological and the wider transnational and social context.<sup>91</sup> Fifty years on from ‘the beginning of the beginning’ of *aggiornamento*, the experiential outcomes of the Council still need to be addressed, particularly in the British context.<sup>92</sup> Alana Harris by examining the lived religious experiences of English Catholic devotional life has begun this work.<sup>93</sup> *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* joins this experiential bandwagon with its focus on women religious.

### Structure

This brief summary of the histories and historiographies in which the research is situated suggests several points. First, that scholars are far more interested in secularisation than they are in matters of religious belief and religious responses to the social movements of the 1960s. Second, that the history of social movements of the long 1960s is rarely gendered. Third, that Church and Catholic historians focus more on institutional than experiential matters. *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* embeds the history of women religious within the social movements of the long 1960s, informing this historiography with a Catholic and women-centred study. Decentring these traditional historiographies of the 1960s disrupts the usual scripts of social and cultural transformations that are male and secular. It is time to add to the past studies of a centrist and bureaucratised church by investigating the convolutions of the living church. By examining the lives of women religious in the period 1945 to 1990, we can reflect on the continuities and discontinuities of lived religious life. This work suggests these changes in religious life in Britain were more evolutionary than revolutionary; modest experiments of the 1940s and 1950s informed the post-conciliar experiments that were ongoing through to the 1980s and suggest a longer time frame for the implementation of changes in religious life. *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age* tells the complicated story of post-war Catholic women religious in a nuanced way, acknowledging that though women religious grounded their experiments in the need for authenticity, such authenticity was always contested.

91 Susan O'Brien, *Leaving God for God: The Daughters Charity of St Vincent de Paul in Britain, 1847–2017* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2017); Anselm Nye, *A Peculiar Kind of Mission: The English Dominican Sisters, 1845–2010* (London: Gracewing, 2013).

92 Karl Rahner, *The Church after the Council* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 20.

93 Harris, *Faith in the Family*.

Chapter 1 provides a snapshot of the Catholic Church engaging with the modern world in the 1940s and 1950s. It looks at both the global and the national church and is in part the backstory to the remaining chapters, asserting a significant prehistory to the Second Vatican Council as it pertains to religious life. It surveys young women's place in the modern world of the 1940s and 1950s, considering their opportunities and their decision to enter religious life through an analysis of the 'vocation story'. It links the specificities of their life histories to the growing global, national and institutional awareness that fewer women were saying 'yes' to religious life. The 1950s was often remembered as a golden age 'when novitiates were bursting'. The archives suggest a different story that features the paucity of women crossing the monastic threshold. This phenomenon was addressed in various ways. Pope Pius XII's apostolic constitution *Sponsa Christi* (1950) and subsequent international congresses advocated a renewal of religious life. Modern approaches were employed to develop a more sophisticated means of vocation promotion that was direct, public-facing and professional. The new religious discourse on the 'modern world' acknowledged that religious life must modernise to become more relevant and attractive to Catholic women.

In Chapter 2 the discourse on the post-war Modern Girl takes centre stage and the chapter investigates how she influenced the boundaries of female religious life in British congregations and orders from the 1940s to the 1960s. It identifies the predominant themes developed by the cultural trope of the Modern Girl, which reflected certain orthodoxies regarding perceived social and moral swings and then demonstrates how these were incorporated within the Catholic discourse of youth culture in general, but more particularly the Catholic Modern Girl. It interrogates how the institutional church along with female religious congregations and orders reacted to this discourse and what steps were taken (or not taken) to restructure the lived experience of religious life to accommodate the Modern Girl.

Chapter 3 explores the ways in which religious life was reconfigured in regard to governance and obedience, leading to the elimination of, as one sister put it, 'a Victorian attitude'. It genders our knowledge of the global 1968 movements by exploring an emancipatory movement led, sustained and spread by women. The female leaders of religious institutes rethought governance and replaced deeply embedded structures where the mother superior or abbess and her council made decisions for all members of the community. The result: more women participated in governance, as delegates to General Chapters or as members of



provincial structures; more voices were heard via questionnaires and consultative meetings. At the local level, changes in governance practices were experienced by each and every member of a community. Renewal released a social movement that gave voice to grievances and concerns about religious life and unleashed collective action that changed, in many communities, the lived experience of community life. And yet, this was in no way a straightforward story of progress. These changes polarised women religious in groups that were 'for change' and 'against change' and were highly contentious.

Prescriptive and promotional convent literature portrayed community life as an unchanging oasis of serenity grounded in fictive familial bonds. Homosocial relationships within the convent were more complicated, particularly during and after the structural changes of religious life discussed in the previous chapter. Chapter 4 addresses the changing tenor of the relationships within monastic and convent female homosocial spaces as a move from the formal to the relational. Women's experiences of religious life are analysed to understand how relationships were understood and lived. The first section considers the 'common life', communal ways of inhabiting the social spaces of the convent that held religious life together. As the horarium which regulated the religious day was altered, the permission-centred model of religious life became one that allowed for personal responsibility. The formal structures of the common life provided a unity that was now questioned and relationships grounded in formerly rigid structures were renegotiated. The second section addresses the complex, relational nature of these shifts and questions the language of generations used to identify those for and against change. The convent, often imagined as a conservative site of religious piety, became a place of radical activism and generational dissonance when a discourse of personal and shared responsibility challenged matriarchal social hierarchies.

The nun in the modern world and the modern world inside the convent is the subject of Chapter 5. Some considered adaptations to a secular age as a dangerous move towards religious secularisation. Others saw this as a necessary antidote to the evils of modernity. This engagement with the world, faintly visible in archival sources from the 1940s, quickened with the publication of council documents *Perfectae Caritatis* (Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, 1965) and *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964) which emphasised (or so it seemed) a radical activism embedded in a secular world. That acceptability to engaging with the modern world on its own terms in its own language exemplifies this new relationship with



modernity. By the 1960s and 1970s, the questioning of institutional barriers to ministry and bolstering of individual autonomy was reflective of the larger 1960s mentality that emphasised individual expression, links between people and the removal of boundaries. Becoming part of the world was a response to both religious and secular social movements. For many sisters and nuns, it was not a sudden thrust into the world; but a gradual shift. It was not always a welcome shift when it disrupted patterns of living and beliefs about the sacred/secular divide.

Chapter 6 questions how religious institutions re-examined their ministries in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by a discourse of social justice grounded in solidarity with those marginalised by society and in line with a voluntary sector re-energised by the social movements of the long 1960s. In addressing the role of women religious as purveyors of religion, it suggests a rethinking of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy which realigned them with the politics of mercy. Alternate ministries were both local and global, but united by their focus on those marginalised by society. Whether working as parish sisters, in convent schools or in the *barriadas* of Peru, female religious held on to this larger objective of social justice that was not narrowed by geography. What linked these ministries was a more global thinking of their role as religious: their work revealed both a local mission done globally and a global mission done locally. Added to these shifts in ministries is the complexities of the realisation that the decline in numbers would not be reversed and institutional work running large schools and hospitals needed to be rethought.

Chapter 7 engages with the ideas coming out of the 1970s women's movement and their influence on the identities of women religious. Encouraged by the *Nun in the World* (1963) and feminist theologians, nuns and sisters experienced a more thorough grounding in theology that acknowledged their womanhood and sexuality and linked it to a deeper understanding of their faith. They questioned the 'charged symbols' of religious life. Enclosed nuns opened their non-cloistered spaces more readily, and some began to see the grille that separated them from the world as an unnecessary impediment to their ministry. The other loaded symbol of religious life, the religious habit, was being modified and in some communities was seen as a barrier to new ministries. For some, these unchanging symbols of religious life signified tradition, security and the authenticity of religious life. For others, the need for modernity, to meet the modern world in different ways, offered a 'renewed' way to be an authentic religious. Women religious, like feminists, claimed for themselves the right to define their own place in both secular society and

the Catholic world. This chapter demonstrates that both religious and secular ideas shaped these women's awareness of their womanhood.

The Conclusion encapsulates the changes enacted from 1945 to 1990, considering both the voices heard and the voices not heard in this study, and acknowledging the pain of change. It examines the three core premises: religious life as a social movement influenced by secular social movements, transnational influences and changing identities setting these in the more international frame of religious life, identifying what made British religious life distinctive. In addressing the global nature of these changes, it reminds us of the internationality of religious life and the transnational encounters that informed women's understanding of religious change. It then links this historical study with the continued complexity of contemporary religious life: a time of diminishment and innovations, revelations of abuse and new religious movements.

This history of Catholic nuns and sisters in a secular Britain begins in the following chapter with an acknowledgement of the significance of the 'modern world' of the 1940s and 1950s and an examination of the vocation stories of women who entered religious life.