

Vorburger-Bossart, Esther: *Was Bedürfnis der Zeit ist. Identitäten in der katholischen Frauenbildung, Die Innerschweizer Lehrschwwesterninstitute Baldegg, Cham, Ingenbohl und Menzingen 1900–1980*. Fribourg: Academic Press 2008. ISBN: 978-3-7278-1641-3; 484 S.

Rezensiert von: Marjet Derks

Saying that the history of women religious is booming is only a slight exaggeration. During the last two decades, in nearly every country in western and southern Europe, lay-historians (most of them women) have been doing research on 19th and 20th century sisters and their institutes. Influenced by gender and social history, and the cultural turn in church history, the latter have become serious objects and subjects of history. Research questions nowadays focus on their actor ship, formal and informal power, attractiveness and impact (both positive and negative). Overall questions relate to the impact of women's convents on large-scale socio-religious developments, such as ultramontanism, modernity and secularisation. Concepts like gender, class and identity help to enlighten these questions. Thus, the numerous memoirs and chronicles, mostly written by clergymen or sister-archivists who focussed mainly on institutional features and alternating mother superiors, have gradually been surpassed. Instead of being the only sources, they have become part of a historiographical phase, that is in the past.

German-speaking countries have not been among the forerunners of the new history on women religious, but since the last decade this has been changing. Whereas in Germany, Relinde Meiwes is one of the principal trend-setters, Esther Vorburger-Bossart has set a distinct tone for Switzerland. Like her previous work on women's convents in St. Gallen, her impressive dissertation on four Swiss congregations is an important contribution to current historiography. Her main aim is to analyse the way in which Catholic female ideals were formed and expressed by the sisters in their schools and how these were transmitted onto girls and young women of several generations. Basically, this book is about «the making of» Catholic women and the crucial role

that women religious have played in this process, thus also influencing Church identity.

The central agents of this massive and rich dissertation are the so-called «Lehrschwwestern». These sisters not only held private and public schools, but also four training schools for female teachers. Numerous Catholic women, who played an influential role in the education of Swiss girls, received their training at the institutes in Baldegg, Cham, Ingenbohl and Menzingen, and passed their religious and cultural worldview onto their pupils. Consequently, the influence of the «Lehrschwwestern» reached much further than just in their direct environment.

Dealing with modernity is the central concept that lies at the background of this research, reflecting one of the focuses of analysis of the Fribourg-research group of prof. Urs Altermatt, where this dissertation was written. It is presented as the key factor of, successively, homogeneity and transformation from 1830 onward. Until way into the 20th century, just similar to the Church, the sisters struggled to deal with the changing demands of time. Loyal servants of the male clergy, the sisters educated their pupils like they were educated themselves, focussing on discipline, modesty, sacrificiality and a strong awareness of woman's place within the Church. All this converged into an elaborated cult of the Holy Mary, the eternal ideal woman within Catholicism. According to Vorburger-Bossart, the clergy stimulated this cult, both to enhance discipline and to subject not only the sisters, but all Catholic women. The sisters perfected it, as perfection played an important role in convent life. This cult served as the primarily identity marker that could counterweight most, if not all, threats of modernity within the Catholic realm. This also influenced the feminisation of Catholicism, a theme that refers to an on-going historiographical debate. Vorburger-Bossart convincingly argues that sisters were primal agents in this feminisation process. After World War II, the relation between the Church and modernity took on different shapes. From Vatican II onward, the same Church that they had served so faithfully forced the sisters to both work on their authenticity and adapt to the times that were «a-changing». By and by, this resulted in a more

pluralist lifestyle. Identification with the Holy Mother no longer fulfilled as the answer to all questions, although it leaves to be seen if ideal and reality ever really coincided.

One of the most interesting findings of this project is the underlying contradictory tendency in the histories of the institutions. On the one hand, the sisters eagerly emphasized a submissive ideal of femininity (as was demanded by the Church), while on the other hand they themselves were distinct examples of female actor ship. Fairly well educated, running their institutes as independent entrepreneurs, and balancing finances, they embodied modern women of the world. This imbued an ambiguous relation with the women's movement.

For this book, an enormous amount of sources and literature has been studied: the bibliography stakes up 56 pages. The list of secondary literature is impressive and quite up to date, albeit with a strong emphasis on the German field of language. Among the sources are archives of the four institutes and the convents. In addition, 55 sisters have been interviewed. A comment on all this material may seem improper (was it still not enough?), but nevertheless I argue that the amount of sources conceals some imbalances, which have consequences for the content of the book. The focus is first and foremost on the institutes and the congregations. Representation is about the sisters, their spirituality, aims and interpretations, or rather: on the dominant viewpoint within each congregation. This is especially the case for Baldegg, but also applies to the other schools. In this respect, the fact that the book is dedicated to «the honourable sisters» is rather telling. Everyone who has had the experience of interviewing dozens of sisters gets somewhat encapsulated. Quite often, their hospitality is overwhelming (if only for its incomparability to the academic environment!), their stories are captivating and their eagerness to help is moving. They tend to pull you in, which is hard to counterbalance

The author could have been more critical in her representation of the sisters. For although one of the leading questions of the book is about the «collective-religious female sub community», the dynamics of the congregations remain rather indistinguishable.

Despite all the interviews, we hardly get to know the sisters in person (although the photographs do reveal some interesting features). How did they experience their lives as groups of co-working and cohabitating women who had left their blood relatives to become each other's symbolic families? Recent studies have shown the tiresome effects of communal life, or the intense and disruptive impact a strict mother superior could have. Many sensitive and creative souls were smothered in the convent. Questions like these remain untouched.

The same goes for the experience of the changes that were brought about by the renewal of Vatican II. Vorburger-Bossart states that the sisters could adapt quite easily, eagerly even, to the new conditions, suggesting that in their pre-Vatican attitude they were already open-minded and related to the world. This seems to be too much of an echo of what the interviewed sisters told the author. I call this reflex the «renewal trap». Nowadays, it has become a popular topos of many sisters to firmly declare that they have always been in favour of the renewal. Thus, they adapt to a collective memory that creates a distance towards the pre-Vatican era, downsizing the meaning of pre-Vatican work and spirituality. That the renewal very often was a source of deep clashes, both on an organizational and a personal level, has been erased from memory, so to speak. The same goes for the profound personal crises caused by it, strengthened by the fact that numerous sisters left the convent in these years. How did their departure affect the stay-behinds? This calls for a method in which ex-nuns are included in the oral history.

Furthermore, the viewpoint from the girls who were in the sisters' care remains obscure, since no more than seven former pupils have been interviewed. How did they experience all this imprinting of «Catholic femininity 101»? Were there no negative sides to all this religious enthusiasm? One cannot help to wonder if and how all the girls and young women that were educated by the sisters really appropriated the Marian cult. In addition: what about the recent debate on abuse in Catholic institutes? And what about layteach-

ers who worked at the institutes? All this is not a plea for a sensational or negative history of women religious, but an argument for a more multiform and multi-layered one. Despite the size of this thorough and empowering book, there might still be a story about these sisters and their institutes that has yet not been told.

Zitierweise:

Marjet Derks: Rezension zu: Esther Vorburger-Bossart, «Was Bedürfnis der Zeit ist...» Identitäten in der katholischen Frauenbildung. Die Innerschweizer Lehrschwesterninstitute Baldegg, Cham, Ingenbohl und Menzingen 1900–1980, Fribourg, Academic Press Fribourg, 2008. Zuerst erschienen in: , Vol. 105, 2011, S. 556-558.

Marjet Derks über Vorburger-Bossart, Esther: *Was Bedürfnis der Zeit ist. Identitäten in der katholischen Frauenbildung, Die Innerschweizer Lehrschwesterninstitute Baldegg, Cham, Ingenbohl und Menzingen 1900–1980*. Fribourg 2008, in: H-Soz-u-Kult .