Resurrecting the Religious Experiences of Catholic Girls' Schooling in South Australia in the 1920s

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This article highlights the re-emergence and significance of religion in the history of education. It focuses on the pervasive nature of religion in the 1920s in two select South Australian Catholic girls' schools. The lives of the students are studied in the classroom and broader school community. Student response or voice is included by use of oral history interviews, and extensive archival material has been available. As religious practices and environments were studied, paradoxes emerged. In addition, the duality of these schools as being both limiting and liberating became apparent. Religious belief and practice played a critical role in the gender formation of these students.

There have been several indications in the last decade that the social significance of religion is being reconsidered. In the broader community there is significant interest in, and a *detente* between, religion and science.[1] In the sub-discipline of religious history, there has been a significant increase in research.[2] In women's history there has been a steady stream of articles and chapters in books, which relate particularly to religion in women's lives.[3] In 1998, two special editions of journals written by academic feminist historians focussed on women, religion and citizenship, and on the place of religion in historical analysis.[4] In the specific area of the history of women religious, meticulously documented texts have been written by McGrath[5] and McLay[6]. In 1997 the first text on the history of all the Institutes of Women Religious in Australia was published[7], canvassing the origins of those groups, their foundation and development within the context of emerging Australian society. Thus a beginning appears to have been made to incorporate research in this area in Australia into the

academic mainstream, and women religious and their various apostolates are beginning to be perceived as a significant group in Australian history.

In the history of education, Catholic schooling has remained relatively untouched apart from a voluminous study of Catholic education in 1959.[8] Since then there has been little focus on Catholic schooling. In the 1960s and 1970s historians of Catholic Education were more concerned with the issue of state aid and the direction of Catholic education.[9] Throughout the period there have been institutional histories, often hagiographic in nature. In the 1980s, Noeline Kyle[10] in a study of the history of schooling in New South Wales incorporated a chapter on Catholic girls secondary schooling. In this she included, as in a previous article[11], a discussion of the role of religious females in teaching. Theobald did likewise.[12] Thus it is only relatively recently that acknowledgment of these women as teachers has been recognised. Even less attention has been paid to their schools. However. the latter appears to be changing, with new work on the subject emerging in the 1990s.[13]

In 1992 Harold Silver[14] highlighted silences in the history of education in the United States and Great Britain, particularly the lack of research in educational policy relating to disability, to the poor, and to the education of Catholics. Concerning the latter, Silver argues that in the United States, despite some work in the field, it does not add up 'to a serious, widespread historical commitment to bringing the parochial school, the Catholic, the Christian, the religious experience into the canon of educational history'.[15]

He argues further that in Britain this has been due to the preoccupation with the state and with the social class basis of educational differences:

> The experience of Catholic schooling in the twentieth century has been seen as largely irrelevant to such a focus. In neither country has the experience of religion and schooling been brought into any central position in the history of education.[16]

This is true of Australia also, at least until very recently. Furthermore, Silver argues that whilst educational history canvasses the educational system as such with its institutions and schools, it does not extend to a history of those engaged in the process, namely the student in the classroom. In both countries the dominant emphasis 'has obscured any historical picture of what it has meant ... to be a student'.[17]

I intend to respond to two of the challenges posed by Silver, by focussing my research in two of the areas he deems neglected–namely the Catholic female student and her religious experience in not only the classroom but also in the broader Catholic school community.

Barbara Finkelstein[18] is concerned with the nature of such community. She argues that schools

> not only reflect and define economic opportunity and political power, but ... nurture a sense of community identity ... and forge social bonds, evoke loyalty, compel allegiance, exact commitment and organise meaning.[19]

Catholic girls' schools have evoked a particular form of religious community which can be described and analysed. It has been suggested that 'historians will have to ... include the study of ordinary people, face-to-face contexts and the evolution of human consciousness.'[20] To do this the historian will need a range of methodological tools, some of which she mentions including 'thick description, ethnography, psychohistory, ... rhetorical theory ... material culture, iconography, and collective biography'.[21] To this I would add traditional archival material in the form of written sources. It is this material, in combination with several oral sources that I employ in my discussion of Catholic girls' schooling, and their religious experience within this particular form of community. This will add to the process of 'retrieving history as lived and constructed in small social circles ... and an array of the previously invisible'.[22]

In Australia, historians of school histories have been alerted to incorporate the 'lived experience' of the student and not just the hagiographic aspirations of the elite.[23] This requirement is necessary in order to 'view those participating in the education as being as active in shaping what happened as those who sought to determine the public structure'.[24] In addition they have been given directions for such research, indicating the need to explore symbols and metaphors, and the complex web of discourses in which the identity of students is located. It was also suggested that cultural and postcultural theorists help us to understand the complexity of the 'lived experience' and the construction of consciousness. In a further article, Trimingham Jack[25] illustrates these points with a particular case study, emphasising her belief that the focus of school history should be on experience and the formation of subjectivity[26] setting an example for others to emulate. In this paper I propose to focus on the religious practices and environment in the 1920s, in two South Australian Catholic girls' secondary schools: Cabra Convent, established by the Irish Dominicans in 1884 and St. Aloysius College founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1880.

Setting the Scene

In Australia in this period most educational institutions of the Catholic Church were staffed by a female labour force from religious communities, whose numbers increased dramatically in the latter decades of the 19th century. Yet, according to Sally Kennedy:

> The impact of this flood of religious and their participation in the rapidly expanding Catholic education system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has yet to be adequately assessed in terms of women's history in Australia.[27]

In addition to Ronald Fogarty's figures[28], Corrigan[29] gives us a breakdown of religious teaching sisters compared to teaching brothers in the period 1885 to 1935. Whilst both increased eight fold, the real comparison lies in terms of numbers involved: 8500 sisters as compared with 950 brothers. This is clarified by Sister Pauline Fitz-Walter[30] who lists in chronological order the groups of religious sisters who served in educational institutions in Australia from 1846 to 1910. In the 1880s alone thirty orders of sisters began work in Australian dioceses, compared with only four of teaching brothers and three of priests. These women were given little option in the second half of the 19th century but to teach. The crisis of education in the history of the Australian Catholic Church demanded that commitment. According to the Australasian Catholic Directory in 1880, the total number of teaching sisters was 815; in 1910 it was 5081.[31] Fitz-Walter argues that these women not only 'focused ... energies in the building up of Catholic schools'[32] but their schools became the beginning of a 'natural centre of vital evangelical operations purporting to build up the body of the particular local church'.[33] If this is true, the sisters were of crucial importance not only because of their numbers but also because of their influence.

The emergence of the Catholic system of schooling in South Australia can be understood only by situating it in its unique social and educational context. In idealistic terms, education was perceived by the colonial founders as essential to their vision of a liberal democratic society. Education was planned in many forms (infant schools, schools 'on the British system', higher branches of education, agriculture and trade) and for both labourers and landholders. From the beginning, given the degree of religious pluralism in the colony as described by Hilliard and Hunt,[34] and the religious base of education, schooling was to be developed by voluntary contributions. Although government funding became available to the churches for a short period, between 1846 and 1851, it was withdrawn finally in 1851, and by 1863 a Catholic Central School Fund was helping at least

fifteen Catholic schools, but there was little unity of purpose. This was to achieved by 1867 through the system initiated in the 1860s, described as a 'product of Dr. Shiel's episcopate':

> the plan upon which it was based and the credit for its introduction belong *almost exclusively* (my emphasis) to his secretary and director of educational affairs in the diocese; the energetic, controversial and gifted Father Tenison Woods.[35]

In this explanation of Catholic education in South Australia, mention is made only of two of the three prime protagonists in this venture–namely the two males. Sister Mary MacKillop is not mentioned, nor is it stated that the implementation and survival of the system lay in the hands of hundreds of female religious teachers although this is made apparent later in the article. This subject has been explored more fully by Marie Foale in her study of the Sisters of St. Joseph.[36] She highlights the Sisters' conflicts with bishops, immense physical hardships, and severe monetary problems. This indigenous institute of sisters developed and managed elementary schools for the children of the lower-middle class and working-class families country towns and working-class suburbs.

In addition to the Sisters of St. Joseph, several religious orders came to South Australia and taught a wealthier group of female Catholic and non-Catholic students, and it is these orders on which I focus my research. The Australian Catholic directories,[37] available from 1880, provide us with information regarding South Australia's 'superior schools', the sisters and brothers who ran them, and their student numbers. These schools are seen as a distinct category, separate from parish primary schools run by the Sisters of St. Joseph. Their students are differentiated by sex, and by their status as boarders or day pupils. I have collated the statistics of the girls' superior schools at five-yearly intervals, and scrutiny of the figures highlights aspects of growth and expansion.[38]

From analysis of these figures it is clear that increasing numbers of Catholic girls and boys in the 19th century in South Australia were undertaking secondary schooling. What is not apparent from the tables is the fact that most of the female teaching orders were in fact running two or three schools in addition to their superior school: for example, an intermediate, 'poor' or primary school, and in one case an orphanage and House of Mercy.

Although I concentrate on two Orders, the Sisters of Mercy, the Irish Dominicans, and in particular their superior schools for girls in Adelaide, other Orders of sisters came in the late 19th century and early 20th century to do similar work. These included the English Dominicans (1883), the

Sisters of the Good Samaritan (1902), Sisters of Mercy from Broken Hill (1902) and the Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin-Loreto Sisters (1905). These orders were to expand and establish select schools in metropolitan Adelaide and rural South Australia

Who Were These Students?

Due to a lack of complete school registers, or in some cases a lack of any school registers in this period, I have no detailed demographic study of the students of the schools. However, there is plenty of evidence which points in the direction of a predominantly middle-class clientele. Such evidence is found in the fee structures, boarding requirements for students, uniform styles, and account books. The detailed and extensive nature of boarding school requirements at St.Aloysius College in 1917 indicates the high added expense in sending a daughter to board. Such requirements were as follows:

> a good supply of underclothing, two black pinafores, two school frocks, one best frock (black velvet), one best white frock, one tussore coat, one panama hat, one gem hat, one school badge, one dressing wrapper, one bedgown, one pair of bedroom slippers, one pair of tennis shoes, two pairs of walking shoes, two pairs of sheets, two pairs of blankets, three pillow cases, one counterpane, three towels, three serviettes and ring and toiletries[39]

To supply the necessary clothing and bedding and to pay the fees parents had to have a considerable income. Comparison of fee structures and the average wage of the period, substantiates this.[40]

Strict class differentiation was apparent in the schools set up by the Sisters of Mercy and the Dominicans. On one site Cabra Dominicans had three schools: the select school, the intermediate school and the poor school, and pupils were not expected to mix with their counterparts in the other schools. Later, this Order was to reduce this to two schools only, the upstairs and the downstairs, again differentiated along socio-economic lines.[41] Similarly, the Mercy sisters established and developed St. Aloysius College as the superior school, a parish primary school, and a House of Mercy for the domestic training of working class migrant girls. By the 1920s Carmel Bourke, a student at St. Aloysius College in this decade described the family background of the boarders at this select school as follows:

> from middle class families and chiefly from Irish Australian parentage. I do not remember any really poor girls, though many had to live very economically, but neither do I recall any really wealthy girls.... A variety of backgrounds–a few from professional families; lawyers, doctors, pharmacists–but the majority of their fathers were white collar men, teachers, bank clerks, public servants, accountants, etc. Their mothers did not go out to work.... A small percentage of

> non Catholics ... several of my companions were Jews, and they used to attend the Synagogue on Saturday mornings.[42]

All in all there is sufficient evidence to argue that the secondary students in these two schools can be differentiated from other Catholic schools in terms of class, and this is what the sisters intended.

The Religious Cultural Practices and Environment

The sisters as both administrators of their schools and teachers in the classrooms were pragmatic and innovative enough to perceive the occupational and technological changes within society and also the changing nature of the family as more women entered the work force. As such they could respond to parental aspirations for their daughters. In combination, 'with the professionalisation of teaching in Catholic girls' schools, the decline of the lady, and the growing emphasis on external examination results tied to university entrance as a measure of educational worth',[43] the schools provided a multiplicity of courses from which the students could choose. An extract from Cabra's school magazine *Veritas* in 1918, describes the changes in female education and acknowledges:

> education for women now means something more than it did in the past. Then the girl was trained for home life only; now so changed are conditions that woman invades those occupations that were formally left exclusively to men.[44]

Accordingly it was possible to study for university entrance and the sisters encouraged able students to do so. Paradoxically, in the same article, the idealised womanhood which the sisters had as their aim–the building up of a perfect womanly character, was defined as:

> A woman of culture, and of refinement, of discernment and of judgment, one in whom the reasoning faculties are perfectly balanced with the emotional, and above and before all one of noble charity and blameless purity, that in all things she may be a true woman in whatever vocation she may choose.[45]

Therefore, at the same time as there may have been an apparent decline of the 'lady' in society, the evidence in Catholic girls' secondary schools indicates that, as girls increasingly undertook courses which would credential them for occupations in the public world of work, the strictures and guidelines for their femininity increased correspondingly, and religion played a large part in this emphasis. It is this constructed environment on which I wish to focus.

The informal aspects, or hidden agenda of these schools, illustrate that the nuns erected not only physical barriers, but also implemented religious

and social observances to protect their students supposedly from pollutants, such as 'the Devil', the public world of men, their morally inferior working-class counterparts, and non-Catholic Christians.

In the 1930 Constitution of the Dominican Sisters of South Australia, who ran Cabra, there were several instructions which exemplify the strategies to be enforced to protect and encourage girls' religious development. Teachers were admonished to

> shield her, as far as lies with them, from learning aught that is contrary to the Catholic religion and good morals; whether by positive teaching or by unnecessary and avoidable contact with non-Catholics.[46]

The intersection of religion, morality, and femininity is highlighted by a further instruction given about dancing, callisthenics and the like. 'The law of feminine modesty and reserve'[47] was to be emphasised, physical games were to be chosen that were suitable for girls, and, 'books and papers for their recreative reading should be carefully censored'.[48] At St. Aloysius College it was stated as an attraction for parents in the 1917 Prospectus that 'All correspondence to and from the boarders is subject to inspection'[49] It appears that the number of directives increased as time progressed, perhaps as the world outside became more threatening and more obtrusive.

Therefore, although it is quite apparent that an increasing number of students were preparing for the university public examinations, business and commercial courses, it was in an increasingly intense environment of cultivated religious femininity.

In trying to ascertain the environment in which the nuns taught and the students learnt, it is crucial to go much further than a bare description of subjects taught and directives given. This is particularly true for boarders who were more immersed in the religious atmosphere and regimented routines of convent life. These boarders were of course influenced not only by their classroom teacher or teachers, but by a mistress in charge of boarders and the pervasive presence of all others in the nearby convent, and lay sisters working in their boarding house. This signal influence by powerful women, has been documented elsewhere[50] and their pervasive presence must be kept in mind in the following description of this form of community life.

The Cabra Dominican sisters incorporated into their 1930s constitution a section relating to boarders, indicating the need to encourage attendance at mass, reception of the sacraments and additional instruction from 'chaplains or other priests'. It further stipulated that the teachers should 'stimulate their sense of corporate and social religion by the establishment of suitable associations and sodalities'. They were also encouraged to

develop within the students a 'voluntary practice of religion'.[51] This certainly seems to have been incorporated in the daily routine of boarders. By the 1920s students still

> rose at 6 o'clock but school began at 8.55, broken only for lunch and students were dismissed at 3.45. For boarders there was now one hour of study before tea and one and a half hours study after it; and they retired at 9.00.[52]

This same old scholar makes quite clear the compulsory nature of morning prayers said together at Our Lady's Altar, daily mass, rosary in the chapel after tea, night prayers together, followed by an introduction to meditation. Breakfast was taken in silence so that a recollection of mass could be maintained. Many other spiritual exercises pervaded the day.

The pervasive spirituality was complemented by the notion of the boarders as 'ladies'. They had few household tasks to perform, washed only their own dishes, never went into the kitchen, and were taught fancywork in terms of tray cloths, supper cloths, doilies and embroidered silk shawls. Many of the boarders learnt to play the piano, singing or elocution, and, as shown previously, practice times were incorporated into the daily routine. Finally, in times of recreation, these students were fortunate in having extensive grounds. Mary Sweeney[53] describes the many walks, including the wattle walk, the cemetery walk, the orchards and vines and three avenues. There were also tennis courts and swings and a farm run by the man at the lodge and the lay sisters. However, the boarders had to stick to prescribed limits, the wattle walk, and were not allowed into the orchards or farm.

Recreation days such as St. Dominic's Day, a gala day for sisters and boarders, were fondly recalled. Mary remembers special meals, parlour games, girls making up for concerts in the evening, plays and dancing. These aspects of boarding at Cabra in the period under discussion highlight the significant intersection of religion and gender. Much more must be added to understand the full complexity and numerous influences in the lives of the students.

In describing boarding life at St. Aloysius College, I rely considerably on an oral testimony and the written reminiscences of Carmel Bourke. This material is subject to the limitations of any oral history interview, written as it was in 1991 about boarding school life in the 1920s. However, these descriptions reflect an eye for considerable detail, a lovely command of the language, and a refreshing indication of warmth, understanding, humour and human foible. Carmel was a boarder at the college between 1920 and 1926 where she matriculated in the Senior Public Examination in 1922. She then won a probationary studentship, a two-year scholarship, preliminary to

going to Adelaide Teachers' College, which could only be taken in a State high school. She therefore completed her secondary studies at Adelaide High School but remained in the college boarding school as a 'parlour boarder' during the years 1923 to 1926. Discipline within this boarding school seemed to centre on an assembly of the boarders every Friday evening:

> Rather a dreaded affair, since she [the boarding school mistress] gave us a little homily on our behaviour and her expectations of us, dealt with all complaints in a very summary fashion, and distributed bad marks to any young delinquents: these were dreaded, as they carried various little penalties and deprivations.[54]

Putting this into context we must add that Carmel Bourke suggests that there was

> a feeling of camaraderie in the boarding school, it was a cheerful homely place and some deep friendships were formed, both with the sisters and with the school companions.[55]

The sisters in charge of the boarders were perceived as 'kind and caring people, genuinely concerned for our welfare'.[56] She includes in her written reminiscences a detailed daily timetable, which again highlights the religious commitment, the time set aside for study and practice, and some free time allocated to recreation.

Carmel Bourke provides us with detailed descriptions of their weekends. She recollects the Sunday walk:

> on Sunday morning after mass, we could often persuade the two sisters accompanying us to take us to the Botanical Gardens. This had the added attraction of taking a route down Rundle Street, and window shopping as we dawdled along. There was a further attraction in the kiosk at the gardens, if one was lucky enough to have a little pocket money. These walks were done in crocodile fashion, two by two with the senior girls at the top and the sisters at the rear. And of course the full regalia was worn–gloves and black shoes and stockings and those dreaded hats.[57]

Prior to the walk the boarders had attended mass in the Cathedral where

> Saint Aloysius girls and Christian Brothers' College boys sang appropriate hymns, with a Christian Brother walking up and down the aisle to conduct and to ensure our reverent decorum.[58]

This description of Sunday morning is a fine example of the religious gendering of the students. Sunday afternoons were for letter writing to parents and for receiving visitors.

Carmel Bourke's reminiscences also highlight the ladylike behaviour expected of these girls on all occasions. Saturdays were no different. The sisters took the students out as often as they could:

> Occasionally we would attend a matinee music recital at the Adelaide Town Hall, or the Elder Conservatorium. In summer the sisters would take us down to the beach ... and go for a swim, modestly undressing in the sisters' bathing box, a little shed on the foreshore, up against the sandhills. Then would follow the delights of tea on the beach, and a journey back to school by train in the cool evening.[59]

It is apparent that

> the sisters placed in charge of the boarders were a significant influence in our school lives ... They cared for us when we were sick, took a great interest in our activities in school, comforted the lonely, scolded the troublesome, minded our pocket money for us, and made very sure that we did not spend it extravagantly: in fact, they stood in loco parentis to us while we were away from home.[60]

The boarders were influenced by several more teaching sisters than their counterparts, the day scholars, and were immersed in convent life almost totally.

As well as an emphasis on distinctly feminine behaviour, there was also distinctive feminine components of their religious education, both formal and informal. In most cases these components seemed clearly and significantly to strengthen the traditional Victorian notions of acceptable femininity and separate spheres. Certain dominant spiritual doctrines and exercises were emphasised by nuns in their schools. According to O'Farrell, femininity was expressed in two major roles, the ideal Mary and the opposite Eve.[61] Mary's femininity, especially her domestic virtues, chastity and modesty in particular, were applauded. Eve was denigrated. Seen as daughters of Eve, women were habitually portrayed as both weak and dangerous. An excellent example of this was published for Cabra students in their 1918 school magazine in an article entitled *'Aperuisti Credentibus Regna Coelorum'*:

> Eve hearkened to the deceiver, Mary to her Maker: man's whole lot was changed by the free choice of two women. Eve's choice led to the world's descent, but Mary's to the throne of God. Thus is Eve the type and cause of woman's condition before Christ, Mary the type and cause of Christian woman's place, honour and dignity.[62]

Initials only are available at the end but this approach is resonant of male clerical sophistry. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain to what degree it was used by the sisters and how it influenced female adolescents, it is, nevertheless, the public face of the Church's religious teaching for girls. In addition, other models of femininity proffered by the sisters to their students were the long-suffering, often oppressed female saints: for example St. Monica, the anguished mother of St. Augustine, and the elderly pregnant St. Elizabeth. They were revered, as were statues of Our Lady and devotion to the rosary. Adolescent girls were encouraged to pray to succeed in being models of Mary in purity and grace.

One anonymous recollection of a retreat in 1918 describes such annual occurrences in their regimented form:

> Each morning we had Holy Mass at 7.30; the lectures were at 11 o'clock, 3 and 7 pm., and after evening instruction we had Benediction of the Most Holy Sacrament. Our free time was spent in reading the lives of the saints, in meditation and visits to the Blessed Sacrament; we said the rosary in common, and had our hour for sewing and lighter duties.[63]

In May special prayers were said daily in honour of Our Lady:

> her altar on a bracket on the wall, was elaborately decorated with lace and blue satin drapings, and surrounded with flowers and candles. The sisters used a special set of devotions, consisting of hymns and readings and prayers.[64]

Similarly in June the school again assembled at the altar, in front of a large picture of the Sacred Heart with scarlet satin drapes and lace, with red flowers and candles.[65] Holy days of obligation, other important feast days, and the sisters' patronal feast days were all fully explained, and many times celebrated with a long play in the lunch time, an early afternoon dismissal, and in the case of a Mistress of Schools and Mistress of Boarders, an evening concert ending with 'a little party to the joy of the always hungry boarders'.[66] One particular feast day which appears to stand out in the memories of all students interviewed was St. Patrick's Day, with its procession and tableaux. These were prepared by most of the schools and they 'consisted of lorries or trolleys drawn by draught horses, ... even the horses wore festoons and bunting on their harness'.[67] These tableaux dramatised Irish history and legends in a spectacular way. In addition, there were sports and a grand concert at night, all reflecting Irish-Australian fervour.

Carmel Bourke describes well the daily 'living out of one's Catholicity in a convent school'.[68] She admits to being very impressionable due to her previous primary education in a small one-teacher country public school.

The tone was 'essentially Christian and high moral standards were maintained; but it was necessarily "free public and secular" as government statutes insisted.'[69] She relates her experience on the first day of school at St. Aloysius College when

> The signal was given for morning prayer, and everyone knelt on the floor beside her desk. I whispered to my neighbour 'My stockings will get dirty!' to her great amusement, but I had just 'gone into stockings' and was proud of them.... That first day was full of surprises for me–a prayer before each lesson began–a Hail Mary when the clock struck–the Angelus recited together at noon–and a hymn sung at the close of the day. A whole new way of life![70]

In this period when there were no Students' Representative Councils, prefects or even house captains in the schools, the role of leadership and responsibility was seen in being a Child of Mary. It was coveted by most and seen as a great honour except for those who rated it as too holy. An invitation to join was usually issued about the senior public examination level, and after a period of probation, in which behaviour and piety were monitored, the student would be consecrated as a Child of Mary at a ceremony. Mary, of course, was to be emulated at all times, and devotional prayers and hymns were to be said and sung regularly. Accompanying accoutrements were a blue cloak, a ribbon, a badge and sometimes a veil. The dominant virtues that a Child of Mary aimed for were purity, modesty and devotion to the Blessed Virgin.

As well as the informal religious rituals permeating the daily lives of pupils, there were formal Christian doctrine lessons. Every day each class had one lesson of this nature, described by Mary Sweeney at the senior level as being

> apologetics in religion, we were taught like little seminarians ... with much emphasis on the Dominican influence on study and learning and Dominican feast days and saints.[71]

The esteem with which the sisters regarded this subject is seen in the number of prizes that they gave for Christian doctrine. The primary religious training in Catholic schools in catechism, Bible stories, prayers and hymns, was continued into the junior secondary classes. Although not part of their secondary education, students remembered vividly their first confession, communion and confirmation with its attendant rituals indicating religious rites of passage. These formal and informal religious practices permeated the lives of these students, inculcating strong notions of acceptable religious and cultural femininity.

Finally, discussion of the education of such young women is incomplete without reference to their sensory perceptions. No formal documents like

constitutions, prospecti, annals or prize giving reports touch on such matters. Yet students' reminiscences are riddled with references to aural, visual and olfactory recollections. Mention has been made of aural aspects of school life: for example, bells for the Angelus, lesson times, nuns' personal bells, hymns generally, and music, both choral and instrumental. Visual perceptions may have been implied in some discussions, but the influence of such theatrical rituals with their incumbent architectural setting, icons, costumes–for example, priests' vestments, nuns' flowing habits, students' white communion dresses and veils–all left impressions on young students. One such dramatic and formal occasion and its impact on students is described by Cabra pupils in their publication *Veritas* in 1918:

> St. Joseph's Month brought us the great privilege of being present at the clothing of two postulants and the profession of four novices. Our hearts were impressed with the solemnity of the ceremony, the beauty of which was enhanced by the exquisite singing of the choir, ... After it was over ... each sought to be the first to greet the newly professed, upon whose faces there was a look of holy joy. It was a day we shall long remember.[72]

In addition the architectural beauty of chapels, cloisters, and the many paintings and statues, indicate the extent to which students were immersed in much more than a simple set of subjects. Finally, smells such as beeswax, incense, cabbage, roses all left a lasting impression to complete the picture.

Finkelstein does not define what she means by 'thick description', but by combining traditional written sources and oral and written reminiscences, I believe the result is a multifaceted description of Catholic girls schooling in their intense religious environment, perhaps getting close to what Finkelstein might have meant by 'thick description'.

Conclusion

Historians generally use theory to inform their research. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the work done by several theorists[73] could have been applied to an analysis of these schools. There appears little doubt, for example, that there was a strong tendency to reproduce particular ideological formations, in this case religious and gender ones. Such social theorists argued that students are likely to bring to their schooling particular class and gender attitudes and, I would add, religious values, regarding their individuality, role in society and attitudes to work, marriage and motherhood. Some social structures were seen to reinforce these forms of differentiation and 'work to legitimate this ideology at the collective level'.[74] Barton and Walker agree that

> such gender differentiation was produced and reproduced through the operation of patriarchal ideologies in places of work, ... in family life and in cultural forms and practices.[75]

Catholic girls' schools certainly prescribed religious practices and attitudes which reinforced the dominant femininity of the period.

However, I would argue that the work of Jean Anyon indicates that there was a more complex process of accommodation *and* resistance evident in responses of women to appropriate sex role attitudes and behaviours.[76] The contradictory messages sent by powerful religious women, ambitious for the academic success of their students, yet encouraging the religious and gender roles of marriage and motherhood, can be easily accounted for by Anyon's notion that

> most women neither totally accept or reject femininity, but make concessions to it, and the contradictory demands of femininity and self esteem. They adopt femininity to their own ends, resist it in subtle ways, and use it to ward off its consequences.[77]

The existence of activists such as Bella Guerin, Susan Ryan, Germaine Greer, Ann Summers and many other Catholic women who had extensive schooling in Catholic convents, yet nevertheless entered the public world of work and frequently challenged accepted notions of womanly behaviour, reflects the usefulness of such a theory.

In the 1980s, historians could have argued that such convent schools provided a fine illustration of 'double conformity'.[78] Delamont defines this concept as the strategy used by educational institutions for girls in the 19th century, to ensure that females could study male subjects and even undertake university study, whilst at the same time safeguarding their femininity by enforcing rights and rituals to protect their students. The result was that many female students undertook a double load in order to study male knowledge and skills, whilst at the same time prove to their parents and society that they could also excel in the traditional female accomplishments. In South Australian Catholic superior schools there is evidence to substantiate such a concept. Yet this too is a limited analysis, as Theobald has highlighted.[79] Scott in fact alludes to the 'opportunity rather than the conformity' in her study of girls in private schools.[80]

However useful theorists have been, some would consider application of their ideas today as outmoded. Historians of Education appear to be more influenced by post-structuralists, who pose yet another analytical device whereby one could describe the same double approach to girls' education as contradictory discourses which girls had to negotiate, thus giving them a greater sense of agency. These two discourses could be defined as the use of

male knowledge and skills, (encouragement of university entrance and intellectual growth) within a female framework, (the exaggerated cultivation of femininity). Nor, I would argue, were there only two forces at work. The further component of religious conformism intersected with these gender practices, along with possible career structures and varied personality characteristics. The post-structuralists might express this as the 'non unitary nature of self'.[81] Valverde articulates it more eloquently when stating that the unity of an individual is constructed 'in the ebb and flow of conflicting meanings generated by various discourses'.[82]

From this analysis, it is apparent that Catholic girls in secondary convent schools had to contend with contradictory gender and religious discourses, which interacted in a complex manner. Scott articulates clearly these paradoxes in schoolgirl femininity as it simultaneously represented 'tradition and modernity, subservience and autonomy, liberation and institutionalisation'.[83] She argues further that within these girls schools, one of which was St. Aloyius College:

> femininity could extend, modify or redefine itself, although even those changes which appeared to stretch the boundaries of femininity were justified in terms of conservative ideals and were not intended to subvert the gender order.[84]

Religion in the form of denominational influences, she suggests, 'produced their own variants of masculinity and femininity'.[85] This paper has shown the many ways that Roman Catholicism in girls' schools influenced significantly the students' gender formation. In so doing, my research has addressed Scott's challenge to recognise the

> awareness of contextual variation and subtleties in gender construction which may be linked with people's profoundest beliefs about the meaning of human life.[86]

Religion, in this case Catholicism, whilst at times both liberating and yet limiting, was a crucial factor in such development.

NOTES

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