STOLEN DAUGHTERS, VIRGIN MOTHERS

Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain

SUSAN MUMM

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ANGLICAN SISTERHOODS IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

Susan Mumm

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The names of religious communities mentioned in the footnotes are abbreviated as follows:

All Hallows	Community of All Hallows
All Saints	Community of All Saints Sisters of the Poor
Charity	Community of the Sisters of Charity
CRJBS	Community of Reparation to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament
CSC	Community of the Sisters of the Church
CSCR	Community of the Servants of the Cross
CSJB	Community of St John the Baptist
CSKE	Community of St Katharine of Egypt
CSMC	Community of St Mary at the Cross
CSM&SJ	Community of St Mary & St John
CSM&SS	Community of St Mary & St Scholastica
CSMVB	Community of St Mary the Virgin, Brighton
CSMVW	Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage
CSP	Community of St Peter
CSTM	Community of St Thomas the Martyr
CSW	Community of St Wilfred
Epiphany	Community of the Epiphany
Holy Comforter	Community of the Holy Comforter
Holy Cross	Community of the Holy Cross
Holy Family	Community of the Holy Family
Holy Rood	Community of the Holy Rood
MCSD	Missionary Community of St Denys
NSSJD	Nursing Sisters of St John the Divine
Park Village	Society of the Holy Cross; usually known as the Park Village Sisterhood
SHUT	Society of the Holy and Undivided Trinity
SMHT	Society of the Most Holy Trinity
SSB	Society of the Sisters of Bethany
SSM	Society of St Margaret
SSM Scotland	Society of St Margaret, Scotland
SSP	St Saviour's Priory, Haggerston

Other abbreviations

LPL	Lambeth Palace Library and Archives
PH	Pusey House Library and Archives

When quoting from community archives, spelling has been regularized throughout. Abbreviations, which are very common in the convent MSS, have been written out for ease of reading.

INTRODUCTION

This book is a contribution to bridging the distance between historians of religion and of women's history by examining women's religious communities in the Victorian Church of England. Church history tends to neglect the role and importance of women in religion; women's history has not shown much interest in those women who it is assumed conformed to convention by being religious.

Women's religious communities are the one area of women's experience which would seem to fall naturally within the remit of church historians. While a certain amount has been written on the subject, virtually all has focused on the men who were associated with sisterhoods. These few priests have received a disproportionate amount of attention from historians of the Oxford Movement; the thousands of women involved in one important practical consequence of that movement, the sisterhoods, remain shadowy, even peripheral, figures. The emphasis of this material allows us to forget its paradoxical nature, as noted by a former Anglican sister, who later founded a Roman Catholic community, more than a century ago: 'Men wrote the Tracts for the Times ... but it was women who first carried all this theory into practice.'[1] Some readers may object that this book merely reverses this imbalance: my response to this is that there are plenty of histories of the Victorian church that describe the lives and careers of Newman, Pusey and John Mason Neale: one of the central purposes of this book is to re-introduce to history the nameless women of the sisterhood movement.

When one turns from church to women's history, it must then be asked why the sisterhoods, and indeed religion in general, have been of so little interest to historians of women's roles and experience.[2] These scholars tend to be suspicious of the intellectual and feminist credentials of devout women: sisters would be doubly implicated within that subset. When they are mentioned, nuns, and indeed all women whose religion has been central to the way in which they choose to live, are too often portrayed as meek, subservient, otherworldly; lacking the character and drive which makes historical personages memorable and important. This portrayal of the religious woman as inevitably ineffectual and subordinate means that sisters

have been seen as mediaeval throw-backs, anachronisms whose historical significance is nil. This ahistorical and unhelpful portrayal ignores the evidence that these sisters, and many other women, saw religion as an empowering and enabling force, not as a restrictive or crippling limitation on their human potential. Religion could be, and sometimes was, an avenue for successful revolt against male authority and conventional morality. Revolutionary potential aside, those who ignore religion cut themselves off from the mental universe of the many women in the past whose religious beliefs, conflicts and activity were central to their self-image.[3]

Thus, for a variety of reasons, the centrality of religion to women's experience in Victorian Britain has been overlooked.[4] Anglican communities generated an enormous amount of controversy in their first decades of existence, with almost all published comment being partially or wholly negative. Viewed by their contemporaries as a threat and a menace, in this century they have been dismissed by a shallow and complacent orthodoxy which pigeonholes them, almost unexamined, as groups of pious women who turned their backs on the world in order to serve God more perfectly. By divorcing them from their social context, this patronizing view has stripped their actions of all importance and has ignored the social significance and social consequences of the rebirth of religious communities within the English church. This misconstruction of the importance and impact of the sisterhoods provides the broad context for their neglect.

More generally, why write a book on Anglican nuns and their work in Victorian England? After all, the very idea of nuns seems to contradict the image of Anglicanism as part of the Protestant tradition. Furthermore, why another book on women's religious work when most British women no longer participate in any form of organized religion? But, as in so many areas of the historical investigation, it is dangerous to limit our pursuit of the past to the preoccupations of the present. An understanding of the phenomenon of the 'sisterhood movement' within Anglicanism illuminates for us one small corner of the Victorian world: one where ideas about the proper role for women, the influence of religion and the power of philanthropic endeavour coincided and, sometimes, collided.

It is occasionally claimed that discussion of Victorian women in feminist terms is so anachronistic as to be meaningless: in other words, if a group or individual would have rejected the 'feminist' label (assuming it had existed), they cannot be termed feminist: this is an example of the 'no name, no thing' fallacy. As well as being one aspect of the nineteenth-century epidemic of philanthropic activity, sisterhoods can legitimately be placed within the story

of the advancement of women, as an example of *feminist practice*. Since until very recently the history of feminism has concentrated on the lives of individuals, 'feminist practice', as Rendell terms it, has been comparatively neglected. By feminist practice is meant 'the association of women together for a feminist purpose ... the organisation of a range of activities ... around the claims of women to determine different areas of their lives'.[5] Under this definition, sisterhoods can be seen as firmly rooted in the feminist tradition, both by their fierce commitment to their women-created organizations and by their dedication to improving, or at least ameliorating, the lives of working-class women and their children.

While academic neglect has been widespread, paradoxically there has been, and continues to be, enormous popular interest in nuns. This ranges from romanticized depictions of the 'good sisters', through the idea that all women of religion are psychologically abnormal, to the depths of 'convent' pornography. All popular views suffer from a great deal of superficial stereotyping and from a complete failure to understand the reasons why women joined communities and the reality of how communities were formed. The cultural and social significance of sisterhoods is obscured by these various popularizations as much as by the lack of serious study devoted to the subject; cultural icons as potent as that of the nun resist re-evaluation.

Three explanations are offered for the popularity of Anglican religious communities for women in the nineteenth century. One view, born in the Victorian period and long accepted almost without question, sees sisterhoods as yet another aspect of Victorian England's solution to the problem of 'superfluous' women. Sisterhoods were believed to provide such unfortunates with a church-based replacement for marriage and family life: in other words, those who entered communities merely sought to replace the patriarchal structure of the Victorian family with the equally patriarchal structure of the Victorian Church. The last decade's resurgence of interest in these communities has been accompanied by a rethinking of the social meanings of sisterhoods. This has led to a refutation of the traditional understanding of sisterhoods, instead arguing that the communities were proto-feminist organizations which subverted the limitations placed on the activities of middle-class women by providing them with divine sanction for otherwise unorthodox acts. This perspective assumes that women were attracted to sisterhoods by the opportunity they offered to translate subversive intellectual and vocational drives into the more acceptable language of religion.[6] Thus the Anglican sisters are transformed into incipient feminists, seeking freedom from male control as well as the opportunity to exert authority within the

all-female structure of the convent. Most recently a third view has proposed that these communities should more properly be viewed neither as traditional nor proto-feminist institutions, but instead as providing a valuable alternative to both in a time of transition.[7]

These three positions share a common weakness. They are based almost entirely on secondary sources, and indeed almost entirely upon a very few well-known quotations which are dragged out time and again in order to 'prove' something about the nature of Victorian society. Overall, very little is known about the Anglican religious orders for women. There has been little interest in the orders as a way of life. No one has troubled to examine the existing records of these communities to see why women joined them, to discover whether the convent satisfied their aspirations for their lives or, indeed, what life in an Anglican religious order in Victorian England was like. These are the gaps which this book begins to fill.

More specifically, the purpose of this book is threefold: first, to chart the growth of the sisterhood movement to 1900; secondly, to find out what kind of career convent life offered to women, and whether early entrants were motivated primarily by motives of religious devotion or of social service; and finally, to re-examine the public debate on the topic in order to see if anything can be learned from the attacks of contemporary observers as to whether and how sisterhoods threatened Victorian norms. The common thread running throughout the book is its exploration of the ways in which becoming a sister allowed a woman to circumvent the social and cultural restrictions placed on her more conventional counterparts. Community life gave Victorian women the freedom to choose to leave the family home without marriage, to participate in the government of a semi-democratic institution, and to undertake demanding and meaningful work at a time when women were believed to seek employment only in response to dire poverty.

In the course of my research, several themes began to stand out. They seem to me to be central to an accurate understanding of the phenomenon of the Victorian Anglican sisterhoods. First, the sisterhoods actually drew a larger number of women into more communities than had previously been realized. This indicates that the movement was more numerically significant than had been thought, which in turn makes the outpouring of written comment on the subject of sisterhoods seem less grotesquely disproportionate. Second, the first generation of Anglican sisters seem to have been motivated more by a desire to undertake meaningful work which also addressed the inequities in their society than by an overwhelming personal piety and a desire to attain personal holiness. Among the next generation of

members, many reversed the two imperatives. From this follows the third finding, that the communities changed over time. In general, a sisterhood in the 1860s tended to be a more radical organization than the same sisterhood in the 1890s: there is evidence for an overall transition from innovation to conservatism. Connected to this, the motivation for joining such a community also shows signs of change over time; as the social welfare impulse weakens, a primarily religious motivation grows. Lastly, the communities show very few signs of conforming to the traditional argument that they attracted women seeking surrogate male authority through the church: on the contrary, they were formed of women often uninterested in, or even antipathetic to, the formalities of the church hierarchy. Their attention was focused instead on improving, as they saw it, the condition of the working class in general, and of working-class women and children in particular. They were important agents in the Victorian outpouring of philanthropy as well as in the first wave of British feminist practice.

A comment on primary sources

Archival materials relating to Anglican sisterhoods are found primarily in convent holdings, and vary greatly in amount and content from community to community. Furthermore, the communities differ enormously in openness to researchers. A few communities refuse or severely limit access to their records, while even the most open of the still-existing communities do not permit full or unrestricted access. (My original intention had been to carry the study through to 1914; the almost universal reluctance of communities to allow the use of twentieth-century records meant that the terminal date had to be revised to 1900.) Some communities refuse access as a result of the insensitivity of earlier researchers. The extreme reluctance of many communities to allow an outsider access to their nineteenth-century records is the single largest problem faced by the researcher in this area.

Many communities possess few records. The vow of poverty and the pressure of active work meant that when paper ceased to be immediately useful, it was discarded. An instance of the low priority given to record-keeping in communities overwhelmed by active work is the case of the Community of Reparation to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. It was not until 1897, when Reparation was twenty-eight years old, that it was decided to purchase a book in which to record the names of women who were professed.[8] The communities' disavowal of material accumulation means that

personal papers and community records were often systematically destroyed at intervals, if ever kept at all. Within these limitations the scope of the study is as comprehensive as possible; I worked in the records of every community founded before 1900 which would grant me access. I consequently gained at least limited access to the records of twenty-eight communities.

Most of the archives of expired orders have been destroyed or have disappeared, but a few have found their way to the Pusey House archival collection. As a general rule, the larger and earlier-established communities have survived; many smaller and later ones have not, and with them died their records. While this certainly marred the representativeness of the study, every attempt was made to avoid distortion when depicting the movement as a whole. In such circumstances there is always the problem of skew: it is difficult for the researcher to avoid being seduced by complete archives, and so neglect equally important organizations whose records are meagre. I have worked on the principle that records that have managed to survive should be employed, even if they lack typicality. Since large and middling communities have survived with greater frequency than very small ones, the archival materials of the first type are much more likely to still be in existence and to be at least partially available to the researcher. Thus the activities and experiences of the smaller (and often later-formed) sisterhoods are under-represented in this book. The papers of several bishops involved with sisterhoods were used at Lambeth Palace Library, and some information on deaconesses was available at the Church of England Record Centre.

Community records were supplemented by the pamphlet collections at Pusey House, Oxford, and St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden. No student of Victorian pamphlet literature can fail to notice the importance of the medium as a cheap and quick way of spreading ideas and opinions; because it was so speedy and inexpensive, it can, to a certain extent, serve as a gauge to the concerns of the time. It is important to note that one of the greatest of the pamphlet debates was devoted to the question of the legitimacy of the establishment of religious orders for women within the Anglican Church. Because the establishment of women's communities provoked 'such impassioned discussion, it provides the modern scholar with a valuable prism within which to analyse gender and class issues' in Victorian society.[9] This material has been used extensively.

Prescriptive literature, with its great emphasis on the imperative and religiously motivated necessity for women to remain within the home, is useful and important. But the successful rejection of home and family by thousands of women who experimented with community life reminds us that

we must look also at the material and social culture of the sisterhoods themselves, which often portray a world-view at odds with the prescriptive literature which purports to describe and explain them. This work attempts to do both: to examine the mass of controversial literature enveloping (almost crushing) the communities, and to study the women who joined, and the nature of the organizations they created.[10]

Terms of reference and terminology

When one sets out to write a social history of a religious movement, one crucial question is that of scope. Will the historian foreground and evaluate the religious beliefs of the group, or focus upon describing the life and activities that emerged from those beliefs? It was a question I struggled with in the writing of this book: and reluctantly I concluded that the story of the theological revolution behind the Victorian sisterhood movement is a task that would swell this book to unacceptable proportions. The book you are holding is a social history and makes no claim to be a comprehensive guide to the religious beliefs and practices (which varied considerably) of the ninety-odd Anglican sisterhoods established in nineteenth-century Britain. That story remains to be written by someone else. Of course religion cannot be separated out from the motivations and the activities of sisterhoods. It is important, and the whole history of the sisterhoods is saturated with it. But it is not the main theme of this book.

I cannot leave the question of religious belief, however, without saying something about religious terminology. It may disturb those who are well-versed in church history that the terms 'sister' and 'nun' are used indiscriminately in the text. This is done deliberately, for the reason (which I believe to be a good one) that the women I am writing about made no meaningful distinction between the terms. They referred to themselves as both sister and nun without any indication of being aware of the difference in canon law or in Roman Catholic usage between the words. To these Victorian Anglicans, sisters and nuns were women who banded together in a community structure, wore a common dress, and made (usually) more or less binding promises to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience.

... never since the Reformation has conventual life been so interesting to the body of English women, and to the whole nation through them: at a time when – partly through religious enthusiasm, stimulated by self-chosen teachers and counsellors, partly from the failure of family life, hitherto the English ideal, to satisfy woman's growing aspirations – the cloister has assumed a reality as a possible sphere and refuge ...*

* [Anne Mozley], 'Convent life', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, **105** (1869), p. 607.

PART I OVERVIEW

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CHAPTER ONE

'THOSE WICKED NUNS': THE FORGOTTEN STORY OF THE SISTERHOOD MOVEMENT

Anglican sisterhoods take their place in a long tradition; Christian women were among the first to form women-only groups, with the earliest established in the second or third century AD. The importance of the nineteenth-century Church of England movement lies in their being the first successful communities for women in the post-Reformation Established Church in Britain, although several attempts had been made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When the poet laureate Robert Southey resurrected the idea in the early nineteenth century, he imagined that they would operate as both refuge and resource: places of refuge for unmarried women and as sources of charitable relief and trained nurses to ameliorate the suffering of the poor. Indeed, it was as a tribute to Southey that the first sisterhood, the committee-established Park Village community, was founded in 1845.

The sisterhood movement grew rapidly in a glare of publicity. By the century's end, Anglican sisters were the largest group of full-time, organized women church workers within the established church. Most estimates calculate that there were between 3000 and 4000 members in 1900, living in around sixty communities.[1] This is almost certainly a conservative estimate, as my own research has unearthed more than a dozen Victorian communities whose existence has been forgotten; although some of these forgotten communities were undoubtedly short-lived, there is no doubt that more than ninety sisterhoods were formed in the first fifty-five years of their revival. Archival research suggests that approximately 10,000 women in all had passed through ninety-odd communities between 1845 and 1900, staying for anywhere from a few months to a lifetime.[2]

The urge to create or join women-only groups which were dedicated to social service and devotion was not confined to Roman Catholics and Anglicans in nineteenth-century Britain. Quakers made attempts at the same ideal, and the Wesleyan Methodists established the Sisters of the Poor in 1887 in direct imitation of Anglican orders. Deaconess orders also enjoyed a

resurgence among a number of denominations, both in Britain and on the continent. The popularity of such organizations created much alarm among those dedicated to keeping women in the home. A number of contemporary observers saw in sisterhoods a viable and ever-more popular alternative to the ordinary life of a Victorian woman, and thus an implicit criticism of marriage and family life. As Penelope Holland warned in 1869, women's religious communities were increasingly perceived as an attractive escape from a lifetime of female domesticity or trivial social activity: 'in the present day there is scarcely any alternative for a girl in fashionable society, between reckless dissipation and a convent life. The latter is being chosen oftener year by year'.[3] One of the more dispassionate critics of community life agreed that the interest in the movement was growing: she saw the attractions as being a combination of religious enthusiasm and the sisterhoods' ability to offer a sphere to women aware of '*the failure of family life* ... to satisfy woman's growing aspirations'.[4] 'A sort of agitated interest in them is constantly increasing', wrote Sarah Wister in 1873, one of many testimonies to the enormous attention bestowed on these groups.[5] The 1901 census would seem to confirm the attractiveness of the religious life: of professional women over the age of 45, sisters comprised the third largest group.[6]

The first Church of England community commenced in the year of John Henry Newman's secession to Rome, and this naturally draws us to place the sisterhoods within the framework of the Oxford Movement. Newman's writings (in particular *Lives of English Saints*, published in 1844) were an important influence on the pioneering generation of sisters. A number of women who joined communities, including the first woman to be professed in the Anglican Communion, traced their decision to their reading of Newman's books. This is not the place to offer a pocket history of the Tractarian movement, nor of its successor movements: Ritualism, Puseyism and Anglo-Catholicism.[7] Suffice it to say that all these varied expressions of the Oxford Movement agreed on the primacy of the sacraments as a means to salvation, rejecting the dominant conversion model insisted upon by Victorian evangelicalism. Beyond that, they varied widely in their attitudes toward ritual and authority; but they again came close to unanimity in their insistence on active work and charity: both as a form of spiritual discipline and to obey the commands of Christ.

Anglo-Catholicism offered, even for those women who did not enter communities, a busy and demanding life: daily services, the duty of regular self-examination, an obligation to work among the poor, and an almost Methodist attention to regularity of life. It was 'virtually a full-time

occupation, with a variety of activities useful and (in their own terms) important'.[8] Women who were active in Anglo-Catholicism were almost certain to be exposed to sisterhoods through circles of like-minded women, which often included associates or members of communities. Communities must be seen as part of a larger Anglo-Catholic system; what was sometimes known as the 'London–Brighton–South Coast religion' is reflected in the geographic distribution of the convents established.

Most communities, with the general exception of those founded in the province of York, tended to cluster at the extreme ritualistic end of the Anglican spectrum, although not all of the women who joined them were attracted to this element. This is consistent with the influence of the Oxford Movement on the sisterhoods, except for those directed by E. B. Pusey, who assumed public leadership of the Movement after Newman's secession, as being that of the second generation of Tractarians. One durable contribution of the Oxford Movement is the sisterhoods which flourished long after the original leaders of the Movement were all dead; in their two-fold emphasis on doctrine and practice, they were central to perpetuating its spirit, if not its name. Certainly the delayed social effect of the Oxford Movement shone forth most brightly in the communities, aligned as they often were with the socialist slum clergy. Some contemporary observers went so far as to claim that the High Church movement would never have become a force in British society if it had not been for 'the active and personal contribution of women', particularly sisters.[9]

Much to its dismay, the Victorian Church of England discovered that even a remarkably conservative institution can harbour radicalism. By the 1830s the late eighteenth-century evangelical impulse had lost much of its original spiritual vitality to become a stultifying and rigid social captivity, often seeming to be more concerned with Sunday travelling than with serving God in this world. However, this same impulse took on a new shape in the Oxford Movement, which was as radical in its desire for holiness as the Clapham sect had been. Women found that a shared religious faith could transform their lives, as religion provided the motivating force behind their attempts to organize themselves and create philanthropic institutions aimed especially at their own sex. Of all the women-generated groups in Victorian society, it is sisterhoods which brought this tendency to its furthest and most developed form. After the first phase of the Oxford Movement ended, the sisterhoods showed the Church that the combination of High Church theology and women-oriented institutions could be an extremely troublesome thorn in the flesh. Allchin reminds us of the paradox implicit in 'the fact

that a theological movement so traditional and conservative [as the Oxford Movement] should have found itself coming into alliance with the most radical political and social points of view'.[10] One contemporary witness says that in her circle, evangelicals were derided for their 'lax and easy-going religion', and 'again and again' she heard the 'High Church party held up as the only one which understood a really active, working life'.[11]

In the spring of 1845 the first Anglican religious community for women, the Park Village sisterhood (officially styled the Sisterhood of the Holy Cross), commenced work in the slums of Somers Town and Camden. The backgrounds of the first three women to join were to be typical of later members of many sisterhoods; one was the daughter of a country clergyman, another the daughter of a Scottish Episcopalian bishop. It is also typical that nothing can be discovered of the background of the third. Indeed, most of what is known of this small and short-lived community comes from only one source: the unabashedly hostile autobiographies of two former members.[12]

However, Park Village was to be anomalous in many ways. Uniquely among all Victorian sisterhoods, it was not founded by a woman, but was established and financed by a committee of prominent men (including Gladstone, Lord John Manners, and Lords Clive, Lyttleton and Camden) as a memorial to Robert Southey. Park Village's mandate, first described by Gladstone in a privately issued circular, was fourfold: '1. Visiting the poor in their own homes. 2. Visiting hospitals, workhouses, or prisons. 3. Feeding, clothing, and instructing destitute children. 4. Assisting in burying the dead.' The community contained the seeds of failure from the outset. It was fatally weakened by its lack of a natural leader, created as it was by a committee rather than, as all the other sisterhoods were, by a woman of strong character who could draw others to join her. It seemed directionless. Extreme experiments in asceticism were another factor in its failure, and the early members could not agree whether their goal was the performance of good works among the poor or a less active life of devotion and contemplation. Most of its members joined the second community to be formed, the Society of the Most Holy Trinity (Ascot Priory), when it absorbed Park Village in 1856.

Within five years of the foundation of Park Village six sisterhoods had been established. The best known of these was Ascot Priory, located in Plymouth. It was this community, founded by Priscilla Lydia Sellon, which largely attracted the great swells of public hostility in the 1850s, and the sisterhood suffered permanent damage as a result.[13] Public inquiries and pulpit denunciations of Ascot Priory centred around the ritualistic practices

of the group, as well as the autocratic figure of the founder. The founder of Ascot Priory, however, was certainly one of the most influential figures of the sisterhood movement, and her character and achievements had a profound impact upon Victorian beliefs about women's communities.[14] Lydia (she did not use her first name) Sellon, the daughter of an affluent naval commander, was probably born in 1821, and was reared by a Scottish Presbyterian governess after the early death of her mother. She came under the influence of the Oxford Movement around 1830, but although she visited Park Village, she was repelled by the group's extreme asceticism, and eventually decided to form her own community. Ascot Priory was founded in response to the Bishop of Exeter's public appeal for workers willing to come to the appalling slums of the Devon seaports. By 1851 Sellon's community, as well as having supplied a number of nurses for Florence Nightingale's hospital in the Crimea, was running an orphanage, a training school for sailor boys, a refuge for girls, a home for elderly seamen, a large industrial school, six model lodging-houses, a soup kitchen, five ragged schools, a convalescent home and a hospital, with sisters working in Devonport, Bristol and Alverstoke in Hampshire. Soon the community was working in Bethnal Green and Bradford-on-Avon as well. (Ascot Priory established a London presence by absorbing a small sisterhood in Pimlico in 1854.) However, because the sisterhood suffered from so much negative publicity in its early years, it found it more difficult to attract members or financial contributions than did other sisterhoods.[15] It is said that when women declared their intention of entering a sisterhood, they were commonly advised 'anywhere but Devonport' (Devonport is yet another name for the community, which was officially styled, but seldom called, the Society of the Most Holy Trinity). The sisters of this community gradually retreated to Plymouth, developing a tendency toward the contemplative life (Florence Nightingale noted with some contempt that Sellon 'retreated from the world') and the group became increasingly divorced from the philanthropic impulse which had given it birth.

It is an odd twist of history that the first two communities for Anglican women were both untypical of the movement as a whole. A contemporary description claims to be representative of the way communities were generated, and indeed it does closely follow the experience of many foundations in the 1850s:

> in a neglected corner of a slumbering diocese, where ... people were most solidly established in their satisfaction with things as they were, and in contempt of every

> new idea, two ladies were brought together by a common desire to rescue the sinful. They took a house in the country and began to receive penitent women. Other ladies joined them, fired with the same spirit . . . Their plan of a common life gradually developed in a rule accepted by all. They left pleasant homes, useful and easy lives, for repulsive work, poverty, and the ridicule of their neighbours.[16]

One sisterhood whose development followed this general pattern was the Community of Saint John Baptist (usually known as 'the Clewer Sisters'). This community was formed in 1851 at Clewer, near the Windsor military camp, as a refuge for prostitutes who wanted to leave the streets. The Clewer sisters ran a penitentiary for such women, which provided a two-year course of 'penitence'. Its founder, Harriet Monsell, was the daughter of an Irish MP and baronet. The childless widow of a clergyman, she dedicated herself to God beside her husband's deathbed.

Long considered one of the most fashionable of the sisterhoods, Clewer attracted many members from the aristocracy and upper gentry. Monsell skilfully cultivated her family ties with persons of influence, such as Archbishop Tait and the Royal Chaplain, in order to maximize the desirability of the community to potential members. Her success in this was evidenced by the private visit of Queen Victoria and one of her daughters to the community in 1864. By 1900 Clewer had enrolled more than 300 sisters stationed in over fifty sites scattered around the United Kingdom, and worked largely in the USA and India as well. One contemporaneous group with a similar development was the Community of All Saints — in early days often called the Sisters of the Poor. It was founded in the slums of Marylebone by the 'immensely rich' Harriet Brownlow Byron, daughter of a former MP and Deputy Lieutenant of Hertfordshire.[17] Specializing in nursing, this community also counted over 300 members by 1900, and was spread even more widely than Clewer.

Two more communities deserve brief mention. The Community of Saint Mary the Virgin, Wantage, was one of the very few communities which did not discriminate between sisters on the basis of their social status. Instead it placed all members in a single order. This was exceptional at the time, as almost all other sisterhoods divided their members into choir and lay sisters, based on social status and financial contribution. Its leader from 1850 to 1887 was the daughter of a Sussex farmer; Harriet Day's humble background, in addition to the lack of social barriers within the community, attracted many intelligent, ambitious women who had been financially self-supporting before entering the community. This community also concentrated on working

with prostitutes, although it gradually expanded into schools and teacher training.

The Community of the Sisters of the Church is the only sisterhood founded relatively late in the century (1870) to grow at the rapid pace of the communities of the 1840s and 1850s.[18] The Sisters of the Church's founder, Emily Ayckbowm, was a woman with an acutely sensitive social conscience and extraordinary charisma. Her remarkable vision gave rise to a fast-growing community which ran orphanages and schools, as well as a myriad of other projects. After only twenty-five years of existence, the community, despite a barrage of negative publicity in the 1890s, had established twenty-eight schools, five large orphanages, three convalescent homes, nursed children in a 500-bed seaside convalescent hospital, and was feeding hundreds of unemployed East Londoners every winter.[19] Charles Booth encountered Ayckbowm's sisters, whose methods did not meet with his approval, repeatedly in his explorations of late-Victorian poverty. Even Booth, who disliked their refusal to submit themselves to the authority of the bishops, had to admit that their 'enthusiasm and zeal' had allowed them to 'spread all over the world, showing astonishing force and vigour'.[20]

By 1900 more than ninety sisterhoods had been formed for women wishing to live the monastic life within the Church of England. Aside from the two early amalgamations, only a handful failed, and none 'went over to Rome' during Victoria's reign.[21] Most of these nineteenth-century foundations were still functioning in the 1960s, in great contrast to Anglican communities for men. Of the eighteen men's communities formed in the nineteenth century, eleven had become extinct before 1900, usually after only a year or two of life. Typical were the Brotherhood of St James, which survived for six months in 1855, and the Order of St Joseph, in existence for the greater part of 1866. Two of the remaining seven had already become Roman Catholic before 1900, and a third was to join them shortly after the end of the century. Others were wracked by scandal.[22] None were to attain anything approaching the size, importance, or public face which many of the women's communities enjoyed.

As later chapters will make clear, Anglican sisterhoods as they evolved bore little resemblance to Southey's description. They were not to be, as Southey had imagined, a home for superfluous women or an employment agency for reliable nurses, although to a certain extent they fulfilled these functions. The following chapters will demonstrate that Anglican sisterhoods became much more than their initial projector had ever envisioned. Their inventive and evolving community structures gave women independence, autonomy and

control over their own lives; they provided a nurturing woman-affirming environment while also providing creative, fulfilling work. The work they did became a significant element in the history of Victorian philanthrophy, as well as giving the lives of the sisters profound meaning. Both in their convents and in their work, religious communities empowered women. They validated the worth of women, their abilities and their labour, 'in a world that seemed materialistic, godless, and male'.[23]

The following chapters will examine how and why women entered sisterhoods and the lives they lived there, the government and administration of communities, and sisterhood projects among the poor. The final section of the book discusses popular responses to the sisterhood movement, from the clerical establishment, Victorian feminists and the general public.

PART II THE REALITY OF SISTERHOODS

CHAPTER TWO

'THE EAGER LIFE HERE JUST SUITS ME': THE ATTRACTIONS OF CONVENT LIFE FOR VICTORIAN WOMEN

Why did women join these new institutions? The motivation of those who joined Anglican communities in the nineteenth century is crucial to our understanding of how and why the communities fared as they did. Almost always motivations for such a momentous decision were mixed. Religious impulses, a desire to help the poor, a wish for a 'career', disinclination for marriage, an interest in living with other women, and many other factors merged in these decisions. Much of the rest of this book tries, in different ways, to answer that all-important question, why – why women joined and stayed in communities.

However, our cultural presuppositions about religious communities as they exist today may lead us to make unwarranted assumptions about these Victorian sisterhoods. Women today who join such groups are invariably seen as being deeply devout: after all, the caring professions and communal living arrangements mean that women who wish to live with other women and work among the disadvantaged do not need to join sisterhoods to carry out these desires. But for much of the nineteenth century, this was not the case in Britain. This meant that women joined sisterhoods who today would not dream of making such a choice, and we would be wrong in assuming that all Victorian sisters were profoundly religious. While in one sense it is probably impossible for a historian to study the nature and depth of the religious commitment of Anglican sisters, it is possible to chart some general trends in an area which was normally treated with strict reticence by the sisters themselves.

It is difficult to gauge the religiosity of sisters; the life of prayer is usually a silent one. The conventional rhetoric of spiritual testimony must always be taken into account, with its tendency to darken the pre-conversion picture in order to heighten the contrast with the sanctity of the present. However, I have made the decision to take the record more or less as it stands, although some may consider this naive: if a sister or an ex-sister records that she was uninterested in religion when she entered a sisterhood, I pay her the compliment of taking her at her word.

First, it is clear that a religious motivation of some sort was almost always present in the decision to join a community, although the extent of the part it played varied a great deal. The picture is complex: first, sisters believed that they were called directly by God, and that their vocation set them apart from the ordinary life of women, making marriage or independent spinsterhood impossible. Unlike the clergy, whose sense of vocation may often have been mixed with social, economic or professional reasons for the taking of orders, sisters cut themselves off from all recognized roles for Victorian women. This made the concept of vocation a central issue. Second, a great number of women joined communities, especially in the early years, because they were widely perceived to be the only outlet for women who felt called to a life of social service. For some of these women, the religious impulse was secondary, or even absent. Perhaps, for most who joined, the two motivations were inextricably interwoven. It is clear that in general Victorian sisters saw life as a vocation of service, not to a husband or to a priest, but to Christ in His poor. Their work, central as it often was, was imbued with religious belief and feeling, even if it was seldom expressed. As one opponent of the movement admitted,

> The reasonable attractions of sisterhoods seem to consist in their offer of training, protection, and authoritative direction in work which provides food for the affections while promoting the salvation of souls and the glory of God.[1]

The great majority of women who entered Anglican communities were conventionally religious; many were extremely devout. However, it would be a mistake to assume that all Anglican sisters shared a homogeneous and utterly conventional religious background. In this area there seems to be strong evidence of change over time, a change which is most clearly expressed in the different attitudes toward religion among first- and second-generation sisters. First-generation sisters 'came for the work, not the life', according to contemporary observers. One second-generation sister, herself a historian, depicted the attitude of one of her colleagues as typical of first-generation members. When visited by the chaplain, Sister Mary Pascal reported,

> he asked me if I was progressing in my spiritual life. I said, I really don't know. I am interested in my work; I am always at Office; I have my time of devotion. What more does he want me to do?

Sister Elspeth went on to say that 'it was all that those earliest Sisters had as an

ideal, and they lived up to it faithfully. Only a few in those days wished for more time for devotion ...'[2] She claimed that her contemporaries had reversed these priorities and placed the date of the change at around 1900, when social work and teaching were becoming very widely accepted as female professions. There is evidence that for many first-generation sisters, the impetus to join was an urgent desire to cease being collaborators with social and economic injustice; they were no longer 'content smilingly to lie on a bed of roses while they know that thousands around them sleep on thorns'. The single-minded search for personal sanctity sometimes imagined by outsiders was a rarity in the early days of sisterhoods.[3] In all the successful early Anglican communities, the desire to do good weighed more heavily than any devotional impulse. When Benedicta Bostock joined the Benedictine community of St Mary's Abbey, she was asked the reason why she wished to become a nun. Her answer was simple: 'The Poor Law'.[4]

Part of this tendency towards a vocation of social service in a community's first generation may also have been inherent in the selection process. The founder of Clewer, when interviewing potential members, placed more emphasis on general mental ability than on religious faith. She believed that women possessing common sense could be instilled with religion, but that piety unaccompanied by common sense was of no value to a community. The founder of All Saints shared this attitude. One sister remembered 'we old (first) sisters were trained for *work* and not for the religious life ... [Mother Harriet] was always saying *Work* and Pray – or, that work must come first, and Meditations, Devotions, etc. must make way if the work came.'[5] Significantly, even secular philanthropists saw the sisterhood movement as the beginning of organized and trained social work.[6]

As the example of Clewer makes plain, communities did not always require a high standard of belief from incoming members: in the days of few workers and many pleas for assistance, Mothers Superior had a natural inclination toward the recruitment of practical, sensible women who were not afraid of work; increased religiosity, it was assumed, would come as the sister became more immersed in community life. One sister, according to her biographer, was not even a Christian at the time she joined what was to become the Community of the Holy Rood. Dora Pattison (sister of the sceptic Mark Pattison) was tormented by her disbelief in the authenticity of the Bible, and it is possible that she may have joined Holy Rood in the hope that sisterhood life would strengthen her faith. In fact, it seems that sisterhoods actively encouraged women with 'doubts' to enter. Community life, it was claimed, would provide scope for those 'oftimes tormented with

infidel doubts': presumably work for God would assuage doubts of His existence.[7]

Some did not doubt, but were profoundly ignorant of Christianity. A lay novice in another community is said to have 'known nothing of any kind of religion whatever'. In the All Saints novitiate the novices were reported as having a distaste for religious discussions, and the level of religious sophistication is indicated by one admitting that she found the training interesting because she 'knew next to nothing of the Bible'.[8] Others held beliefs that were not orthodox. The founder of Wantage was a convert from Socinianism, an ancient heresy which disbelieves in the divinity of Christ, seeing him as only a good man. An ex-sister described herself as 'more of a Deist than a believer in Christ' during her years in a community.[9]

Others simply seem to have had little interest in religion at all. One sister, who later became the Mother Superior of Saint Saviour's Priory, described her life at the time she decided to enter a community as being completely devoid of religious concern or sentiment. Some actively disliked devout practices. The same All Saints sister who claimed to know nothing of the Bible described her religious background as eclectic and religiously tolerant:

> I was not brought up in any definite school of thought: mine was a family of mixed religions, Quaker, Anglican, and Papist, and I was left to think as I chose. I probably would have answered, if questioned, that one religion was as good as another ...

While this individual wrote this from the perspective of her later conversion to Roman Catholicism, the fact that her latitudinarianism was not seen as problematic while she was an Anglican sister is important to our understanding of the formative years of these organizations.

At the other extreme, deaconess orders (where Evangelical ministers organized women to work as 'the handmaidens of the clergy' under close supervision) refused to allow women with suspect spiritual credentials to join them. Louisa Twining tells with approval the story of a woman who volunteered to be a deaconess. When the pastor-founder of the deaconess order queried her motivation he found that 'it was her love and pity for suffering humanity that induced her to help her fellow-creatures; but this answer did not satisfy him ...', and her application was rejected.[10] This insistence on religious uniformity, and the rejection of candidates whose motivation would certainly have been acceptable to a sisterhood, may have accounted in part for the steady haemorrhage of members experienced by