What's in a veil?

Discourses informing a study of lay sisters

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A number of Catholic religious congregations in the pre-Vatican Two period consisted of a tiered system of membership. Choir nuns undertook teaching and administrative duties while lay sisters undertook domestic work. This article contains an exploration of the ways in which historians are currently writing histories of women religious. This is achieved by analysing three pieces of historical research that incorporate the metaphor of the veil (part of the traditional habit of religious). Identified discourses are then applied to a study of lay sisters who were members of the Australian Ursuline congregation. Discourses include: incorporation of marginalised women’s voices into historical discourses; affirmation of the lives of women; deconstructing myths and restoring historical accuracy; contributing to the social bond; religious life as reflecting both economic and religious aspirations, reworking childhood understandings; and resistance to patriarchy.

In December 1999 I interviewed Sister Matthias (Matty) Zahner, who is currently a member of the Ursuline religious congregation. My interest in Matty was that she is one of the few surviving members of the category of lay sisters, those who undertook domestic work in religious congregations. During the interview Matty reached over to a pile of histories of the Australian Ursulines that lay beside me, extracted one book and, with great animation, showed me what she believes to be the only reference to the lay sisters in any of the histories. It is an unnamed picture of herself with some school students in one of the congregations’ boarding schools. Matty’s observation resonated with similar discoveries I had made in reading histories of religious congregations — the absence of lay sisters.

A lay sister or lay brother (a similar system existed in men’s religious orders) is defined as ‘a member of a religious order who is not bound to the recitation of the Divine Office and is occupied in manual work’ (Cross & Livingstone 1997, p.960). The separation arose in western monasticism in the Middle Ages when a distinction was made between the oblati, those who had been placed in the monastery by their parents, and the conversi, those who entered later in life. Originally both groups were considered equally as monks but, as the abbeys became centres of learning, those who lacked the training of the oblati, who were illiterate or uneducated, came to be referred to as conversi. A similar development took place in women’s religious orders ‘where lay sisters were employed to leave the “choir nuns” free for the Office, mental prayer, and intellectual pursuits’ (Cross & Livingstone 1997, p.960). The sisters lived a life separate from the rest of the religious community, wearing a different habit and being called ‘sister’ rather than ‘mother’. The New Catholic Encyclopedia makes reference to the social position of the conversi by describing them as ‘in a class inferior to that of the choir religious’ (Ryan 1967, p.575). The Second Vatican Council brought an end to the system, with the lay sisters being given full status in the congregation, the same religious habit and title, offered educational opportunities (denied to them in previous times) and integrated into the community.

The survival of the system has been accounted for by the ‘inertia of long establishment’, papal approval and the view that the tradition of religious lifestyle was sacrosanct (McGinley 1996, p.319). However, in the twentieth century a complex system of meanings that glorified and justified the system had developed in the various congregations (Trimingham Jack, 2000). The ending of the tiered system affords development of different ways of constructing it. For example, the increased democratisation, both of society in general and of religious communities in particular, suggests conceptualising it as an archaic anomaly. Yet, as other stories associated with church institutions evidence, cessation of certain practices does not necessarily result in easy eradication from memory, nor is it appropriate that it should.

The lack of inclusion of the sisters in the histories renders them invisible. It has been argued that there is a need ‘to hear the voices of women religious’ (MacCurtain 1995, p.58) and to rescue them not only from obscurity but also from ‘pious sentimental (and often historically inaccurate) accounts of their lives written for the edification’ of their communities (Weaver 1985, p.1). One aim of this article is to explore the way in which historians are currently writing histories of women religious. The practices identified are then applied to the narratives of three members of the Ursuline congregation who were lay sisters. The study is informed by Foucault’s notion of the ‘history of the present’, which seeks to identify cultural practices that have ‘been instrumental in forming the modern individual both as object and subject’ (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983, p.120). The aims of the article are related to the construction of women religious as ‘object’ (as the historian creates the subject of the study) and as subject (as the person constructs herself in narrative).

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Two events of the 1960s impacted significantly on Catholic education in Australia: the granting of state aid and Vatican Two. The events may be considered as paradoxical to each other. The granting of state aid was the culmination of a political struggle that had occupied those in positions of authority in the Church across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It assured, both financially and politically, the binary between Catholic and state education. In contrast, a second Church-led event, Vatican Two, resulted in a crumbling of the divide between the Catholic laity, clergy and religious orders and between Catholicism and other religious denominations.
The historiography of Catholic education generally illustrates the two shifts. The charting of the establishment of a separate educational system and the battle for state aid has been a hallmark of histories of Catholic education in the twentieth century (Corrigan 1930; Fogarty 1975; Haines 1976; Hogan 1978; Luttrell 1996). These histories were generally written by men who, although members of religious congregations, were not subject to the same enclosure rules of most women’s congregations, affording them the freedom to undertake historical research outside their places of residence and work. The orientation of the studies is (in keeping with Finkelstein’s (1992, p.288) critique of educational history) on structure, macro-politics and economics and the lives of the elite, particularly on those attributed with founding the separate system. Notions of ‘overcoming the odds’, ‘fighting for the faith’ and ‘celebrating achievements’ are embedded in the histories.

Religious who wrote histories in the pre-Vatican Two period were severely hampered both by the rules of enclosure and by the rules of superiors regarding exposure of any details that might show the congregation in a bad light. Histories written since Vatican Two by women who remain members of religious congregations are more likely to contain critique of the system of religious life (McGrath 1981).

**METAPHORS AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

Three pieces of writing indicate different ways in which religious are being constructed in contemporary historical research. Each work, written by a woman, includes a common metaphor of the ‘veil’, exemplifying the current project of ‘making visible’ the lives of the women; however, the works contrast in their constructions of the women.

The veil, a piece of long material forming part of the headress of the traditional habit of religious, was a material embodiment of convent life. Beneath it, the hair was shaved or cut very short, marking physical and emotional separation from secular life. The veil was also a signifier of the difference between choir nuns and lay sisters, with the latter wearing shorter veils, and sometimes white instead of black ones. In the pre-Vatican Two period, the majority of religious lived their lives both enclosed within the convent or their place of work (usually a school or a hospital) and enclosed within the flowing religious habit. When Vatican Two brought an end to the marked separation of convent life and the outdated religious dress, the veil was often the last piece of the traditional habit the women put aside. So central was the material symbol that it formed a metaphor for religious life — ‘taking the veil’. Hence it is not surprising that a number of historians of religious have adopted the word within the metaphorical title of their work. However, the positions of different writers and the orientation of their work are reflected in the way in which the ‘veil’ is incorporated into the metaphor.

Metaphors have long been part of the research process, and Lather (1994, pp.41-62) summarises their function:

- an image that works across multiple layers of meaning
- a vehicle for locating the researcher in the problems presented by a research project
- a means of approaching what cannot be yet understood — ‘some widened space to speak beyond our means’
- a strategy for alerting readers to the position and presence of the researcher as we offer our interpretation
- a way of integrating method, that is, a vehicle for holding together the ‘politics of interpretation, data, analysis’
- a vehicle for signalling the tentativeness and partiality of research findings.

The title of this article, ‘What’s in a veil?’, has been adopted as an image to hold together a deconstructive reading of the metaphor of ‘veil’ both in current histories of religious and constructions of the category of lay sister, partially signalled by a difference in veil.

**BEHIND THE VEIL**

A stated outcome of Mary MacKillop’s Sisters: A Life Unveiled locates the researcher, Anne Henderson (1997), as providing a corrective history by incorporating the lives of religious women into historical accounts of Catholicism in Australia. The method involves a series of case studies that alternate between the author’s narrative and those of the women. Close inspection of the author’s story reveals an embedded project — a struggle to unveil to herself the mysterious ‘nuns’ of her childhood:

Nuns were a special kind of species, somehow. They smelled of wool and leather and their heavy chains of rosary beads hanging from their large belts always let you know that they were coming. Though at times I noticed Sister Catherine could break out in rashes and run her finger down inside the tight white band that framed her face. At the age of six I looked at her red hands and felt sorry for her. She was human after all. (Henderson 1997, p.32)

Childhood constructions of the world are persistent and much of the work of adulthood is to rework them. Henderson’s struggle to demystify the women to herself is not surprising, especially given the physical and emotional separation of religious in the pre-Vatican Two period even from the children they taught. However, what is also at work here, although not acknowledged, is the contribution of narrative to the social bond of a community.

Mary MacKillop, foundress of the congregation, is an Australian candidate for canonisation. A museum dedicated to her and the work of her sisters has been established in Sydney and attracts a steady stream of pilgrims. Henderson’s book is one of the artefacts incorporated into the space. Lyotard (1984) argues that what is transmitted through narrative is the set of pragmatic rules through which ‘the community’s relationship to itself and its environment is played out’. A ‘collectivity’ finds:

the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them. The narratives’ reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation. (p.22)
Henderson's book reinforces rather than deconstructs the central organising construction of religious life. The narratives are arranged around the three central vows, poverty, celibacy (chastity) and obedience, that provided a boundary to action and subjectivity in religious life. There is no attempt to position the history of the women within the broader context of society. She writes to insiders — those who form part of the collective of worshippers of this beatified woman. Yet while Henderson contributes to the social collectivity surrounding Mary MacKillop there is also another position at work here.

Henderson argues that while popes and archbishops 'handed down the strictures' by which Catholics lived, the people who were 'important' to the 'ordinary' children growing into 'ordinary adults' were the religious they met in daily school life. It was these women who were 'leaders' in the community of convent life. Her acknowledgment of the past leadership of the women is in keeping with her current alignment with the lobby for female ordination, and this places in question defining herself as a 'practising Catholic' (Henderson 1997, p.31).

**TAKING THE VEIL**

Marta Danylewycz's (1987) *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920* sets religious life in the broad context of Canadian society with gender and class as central themes. Against a backdrop of the marginalisation of women from the professions, the metaphor of 'taking the veil' positions religious life as a choice that combined women's desire for social mobility, self-fulfilment and 'heavenly' pursuits with their propensity for hard work (p.70).

Danylewycz argues that the teaching profession in nineteenth-century Quebec had long been under the control of the Church. While the state rivalled the Church for control of education, those women who did become lay schoolmistresses were still expected to emulate 'the style of demeanour of religious women' and their employment was dependent upon a letter of recommendation from a priest. A subsequent life of low status, poverty and self-denial brought about by government negligence reinforced the notion of teaching as 'vocation' in the traditional religious sense, leading some women to see taking the veil as a more attractive choice than the lay alternative (p.70):

> Not only did the idea of teaching as a calling to a work of sacrifice and postponed gratification square well with the religious ethos, it also, one suspects, encouraged prospective teachers who wanted to make teaching their life's career to take the veil, for by becoming nuns they could combine the image with the actual experience of teaching. (p.29)

An added advantage was that the large collectivity of the teaching religious gave them greater bargaining strength than afforded to the individual lay teacher when it came to negotiating salaries and contracts. Their work then fed back to women as they formed a 'united front' between themselves and lay women over charitable work, much of which was focused on the betterment of women. While Henderson's religious ultimately remain separate to lay women, Danylewycz's religious are united with lay women as part of a feminist praxis.

Danylewycz also provides an explanation for the decisions of one congregation to create a class of domestic servants. The Congregation of Notre Dame, a Canadian order, rapidly expanded in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1888 they incorporated a tiered system of membership into their congregation making a distinction between *les sœurs converses* (those who did domestic work) and *les sœurs de chœurs* (those who taught and sang in the Office). Hence, concludes Danylewycz, the Congregation assured that 'middle class lay women who took the veil after this period would live as middle class nuns' (Danylewycz 1987, p.93).

**LIFTING THE VEIL**

Heroes are constructed in order to remind people of their 'ideals rather than actual conduct or feelings' (Schwartz 1990, p.98); 'The traits most celebrated in great leaders reflect the main premises of their culture' (p.94). The work of Rosa Bruno-Jofre (1997) in her article, 'Lifting the veil: the founding of the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate in Manitoba', is concerned with demythologising a religious heroine, exposing patriarchy at work and restoring historical accuracy.

The Missionary Oblate Sisters were founded by Adélaïde Langevin, o.m.i., Archbishop of Saint-Boniface in Canada, in 1904. As in the Australian setting, a separate Catholic education system was considered in the period as being synonymous with the development of faith (Campion 1987, p.34). The province of Manitoba was in need of Catholic schools, and Langevin's ultimate solution to this problem, as well as the solution to his fear of anglicisation of his community at the hands of non-French teachers, was the establishment of a new French-Canadian congregation. His search for an experienced, mature religious woman to head the congregation ended when he came across Ida Lafraicain. While community stories of the foundation have construed a myth of collaboration based on cooperation and mutual support between Lafraicain and Langevin, Bruno-Jofre's research indicates that the opposite was true (Bruno-Jofre 1997, p.20).

Bruno-Jofre explores Langevin's use of his position as a mediator of God's will to coerce Lafraicain to his project. His coercion was not readily accepted by her and she struggled with conflicting understandings of the focus of her religious calling, her own emotional needs and the Catholic discourses of 'submission, humility, mortification, sinfulness' (p.11). Lafraicain's suffering, both at being separated from her closest companion in the move to Manitoba and at the neglect of her desires regarding the living out of her religious calling as a missionary, have been glorified in traditional accounts of foundation. Such glorification is similar to accounts of the lives of the foundresses of other congregations where it has been used to support a dominating discourse of suffering and repentation in the post-foundation period of congregations (Trimingham Jack 1998). Bruno-Jofre's research deconstructs (unveils) the cohesive element of the myth of foundation and restores the tensive aspect of the period to reveal the use of an authoritarian spirituality of the religious, for the purposes of ecclesiastical power (p.20).
DISCOURSE AS PRACTICE

A review of the three historical writings discussed in the previous sections reveals the following discourses at work. All are encompassed by the political project of resistance to patriarchy:

- incorporation of marginalised women's voices into historical discourse
- affirmation of the lives of the women
- deconstructing myths and restoring historical accuracy
- contributing to the social bond
- religious life as choice reflecting economic context as well as religious aspirations
- reworking childhood understandings.

The discourses represent a rich web for understanding current feminist practice in relation to histories of religious congregations. In the following sections they provide a guide for analysis of the narratives of three lay sisters in the Australian Ursuline community.

Incorporation of marginalised voices into historical discourse

Lay sisters were part of the social order of many Australian Catholic religious congregations (Ursulines, Dominicans, Mercy, Brigidines and the Society of the Sacred Heart) that originated in Europe. They were often part of the founding community of various congregations and made a significant contribution to the viability of boarding schools, yet they receive no attention in general histories of the foundation of Catholic education in Australia. Although many histories have been written of religious congregations in which the tiered system existed, the lay sisters receive little more than a few paragraphs in the studies (McGrath 1981; Emilson 1994). One American study has been dedicated to the system (Brockhaus 1946).

There is virtually no discussion of lay sisters in the various histories of the Ursuline congregation in Australia beyond discussion of those who were part of the foundational group who came from Germany. The choir nuns were, in the period of the tiered system, referred to as 'mother' and lay sisters as 'sister'. The contemporary use of the term 'sister' in recent histories for both categories (occurring after disbanding of the tiered system) adds to the invisibility of the lay sisters in historical discussion (Griffin & McDermott 1982; Kneipp 1982).

Records of the Australian Ursuline community indicate that 24 of the 112 deceased members of the community were lay sisters (Ursuline Congregation 1988-1999). The absence of the sisters in the histories makes collections of oral histories of the women an imperative, especially as those still living are now in late adulthood. Four of the five living ex-lay sisters of the Ursuline community were interviewed for this research. Only three were able to sign release forms for the transcripts.

Affirmation of the lives of the women

The lay sisters made a significant economic contribution to religious teaching congregations. In particular, the domestic work they undertook in boarding schools meant that the congregations could charge fees that made them accessible to a wide range of Catholic families. This was especially important for remote rural families who may have wanted to provide a Catholic education for their children and/or felt impelled to do so due to the pressure placed on them by the Catholic clergy.

The work the sisters undertook was physically demanding. For example, Sister Anne Elliot worked as a cook, often catering for over a hundred, especially in the war years when children were evacuated out of urban areas:

A: I didn't get very much help, I did most of it myself. You know, flat out and we had to do a lot of the cooking, you know, say sausage rolls and things, and later on you could buy them but I had to make them ... We bought the bread but we couldn't get the butter. What butter we did get we had to mix it up with water or milk you know — make a big base and put about half butter and half milk to get enough. Then we had to do the children's ration books. One hundred and five, one hundred and six, you know you had to cut one coupon out of each book every night. (Elliot, interview, 18/12/99)

The other sisters interviewed gave similar accounts of the relentless and exhausting nature of the work, including laundry (often for over 100 people using old-fashioned coppers, which meant rising at 4am to get the washing out to dry), cleaning and caring for the sick. Many joined as young women and so learning to cook, especially for such large numbers, was difficult, although they were usually mentored by an older sister. Yet while they often found the work overwhelming they also found value and pleasure in 'serving' the congregation and contributing to the education work of the schools. All reported that it was their prayer life that enabled them to continue the work.

Deconstructing myths

Understanding that supported continuance of the tiered system centred on linking it with God's will. A term often used to describe the sisters is 'humble', associating it with the life of Christ in Nazareth in the period before his public life. The process at work here is one of glorification — an attempt to make something common seem more splendid than it is (Trimingham Jack 2000). Yet the reality of the demeaned position of the lay sister was exemplified in various practices, such as those recounted by Anne:

A: When we went to communion, the lay sisters had to go last. We used to have a chapter of faults [a rite in which the religious publicly confessed their faults]... it was just a narrow room and there was seats on both sides. The choir sisters used to sit on those seats and the lay sisters had to sit on the floor. Even the old sisters you know, and one was 84 and still sitting on the floor. (Elliot, interview, 18/12/99)

Anne also reported that the sisters had no voting rights in congregational matters. Their domestic duties also precluded full participation in community activities such as religious retreats and they were given second-hand habits previously used by the choir nuns.
Within the narratives, the women turned to religious understandings to explain the religious value of their work. For example, in recounting how she came to be a lay sister Matty moved quickly from discussing leaving school early to viewing her decision as God’s will. The role of another religious congregation in the decision is given scant attention:

M: I lived in Glen Innes and I went up to the St Joseph nuns and asked about entering. They did not have lay sisters but told me about the Ursulines in Armidale ... I'd left school and I didn't want go back to school. I am where God wanted me. I didn't choose God. God chose me. Really and truly I can't say it any other way because I was just pointed to Armidale through that really. (Zahn, interview, 18/12/99)

Anne also drew on a religious understanding to explain acceptance of her position and work:

A: I suppose I thought, well you know, you’re working for God ... and it didn’t matter what you did ... at least that’s how I looked at it. Serving the Order. I loved the Ursulines and was happy to do anything for them. (Elliot, interview, 18/12/99)

Agency is made possible by ‘the human ability to reflect and evaluate, and resides in choice’ (Weedon 1987, p.90). While the category of lay sister could be glorified in the women's consciousness in terms of working for God, they all shared resistance to the category. Sister Lucy Anderson refused to read stories about ‘humble lay sisters’, stating that her understanding of such constructions were that the sisters were ‘a little stupid’. Eventually she decided that if she was going to be a lay sister then ‘she was going to be a good one’. However, her resistance continued, especially when she believed people were treated unfairly. Her explanation for her action on their behalf was: ‘I didn’t want them to be down-trodden’ (Anderson, interview, 18/12/99). Her reference to the sisters as ‘working people’, rather than ‘humble sisters’, refers to a class rather than religious understanding of their position. Anne spoke of the intellectual ability of many of the sisters and lack of educational opportunities due to family circumstance. She coped with the demeaned position by making a resolution when she was younger that she ‘would never be bitter no matter what’ because she had seen the bitterness in some of the other lay sisters (Elliot, interview, 18/12/99). Matty’s narrative illustrated the fear she lived in much of the time as she made mistakes, was abused by some of the senior choir nuns and felt unable to defend her actions. It was left to others to act on her behalf and she recalled that one priest complained about the sisters having to work during their retreat and that Lucy managed to get the sisters a recreation period the same as the choir nuns. Eventually Matty suffered a breakdown. She stated that she ‘never grew up’ and concluded that this was due to being ‘spoiled’ by her mother as a child and the constant surveillance she received from the choir nuns (Zahn, interview, 18/12/99).

An event that changed the way in which the women thought about themselves was a seminar held in Melbourne in the 1950s, conducted by an American ex-lay brother. The seminar, according to Anne and Matty who attended it, was the first educational event organised for lay sisters. It brought together women from various religious congregations across Australia. Anne and Matty both reported that during and after the seminar they thought differently about the value of their work and its relationship to religious life:

A: Oh well when you were doing the thing, he’d [the lay brother] kind of talk about it in a religious way. It was very good because he said he had been a lay brother and he said you know the Superior told him to go into the kitchen and cook and he said, I can’t cook. The Superior said to him ... ‘any bloody fool can cook’ but ... he said he soon found out that any bloody fool couldn’t cook ... they gave us a lot of demonstrations and that, a lot of spiritual talks, which I found really helpful [lighter voice]. (Elliott, interview, 18/12/99)

Matty also reported that she came back ‘a different person’ who was able to be more confident in her cooking and not so frightened of people. She also recalled that at the end of the seminar, when some of the leaders of the congregations arrived, the lay sisters gave a concert during which they joined together to sing ‘We shall not be moved. We shall not be moved’ (Zahn, interview, 18/12/99). The song illustrates the sense of agency they felt as a result of the experience. The seminar provided the sisters with a new meaning about the value of their work. The new meaning was now held in common with other lay sisters allowing them to ‘invest’ (Hollway 1984, p.238) in a position of power located in shared resistance to the demeaned position of the lay sisters.

Economic and religious considerations

A lack of educational opportunity was implicated in all the women’s decisions to become lay sisters. All had left school at a young age (between 14 and 16) and all were from working-class families, and at the time there was little state support for those wanting to finish their education. Anne wanted to become a nurse but ended up joining the congregation where she was sent to do domestic work while waiting to take the nurses’ entrance examination. Matty’s mother had been employed as a domestic worker for the St Joseph nuns, who did not use the tiered system. When Matty asked to join that congregation they directed her to the Ursulines (who had lay sisters) presumably because her educational level made her unsuitable for teaching. Lucy had wanted to join the Ursulines as a teacher but, after some testing of her educational level, was directed into the lay sister category (Zahn, interview, 18/12/99). The practice of the period was not to offer any further education to lay sisters which might have made them fit for teaching.

A book written by Rita King (no date), who was an Ursuline lay sister (now deceased), exemplifies the relationship between educational level, class and lay sisters. The title of the book, Probable Usefulness, acts as a metaphor for the status of the family’s history. Her family were Irish immigrants and the title stems from a criterion for accepting or refusing immigrants into Australia. The opening paragraph of the book introduces it as an inter-generational history of a family who undertook domestic work:

‘The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world’, but even that hand needs its helpers; the mothers of the notable families had their nursemaids and governesses; their embroiderers and seamstresses; their cooks, housekeepers and laundresses; and men
too, needed their grooms and gardeners; their teamsters and shepherds, for the smooth and constant running of the homes and stations. These stories are of some of these helping families. (King, no date, p.1.)

While Dany列wycz constructs ‘taking the veil’ as a choice with economic as well as spiritual rewards there is no indication that any of the three women interviewed here actively sought the lay sister category, rather it resulted from their educational background.

**Contributing to the social bond**

Borland (1991) argues that in the performance of personal narrative, meaning construction occurs on two levels. First, meaning arises from the dynamic interaction between the person and the event. Second, it develops from the interaction between the person’s reconstruction of the event and the intended audience. The interviews with the lay sisters revealed a tension for them as they recounted the difficulty of the lives they led, at the same time not wanting to produce an account that would be destructive to the social bond between themselves and the rest of the religious community.

Anne dealt with the difficulty by emphasising the context of the historical period in which they made their choice:

A: Well actually in those days you know we were between the two world wars and depression years and there wasn’t much money around and you didn’t get you know, any help with education — so I left school and I attended St Josephs, and I intended to be a nurse. I did the nurses’ exam, but I was too young, I had about 18 months to wait. So in the meantime I was asked by one of the sisters at St Josephs could I go to Armidale as domestic help? You know, in the interin and all that, in that 18 months; then I went there, I stayed there for 18 months and I decided to enter into the sisters. (Elliot, interview, 18/12/99)

She also used her understanding of the practices of the period to explain acceptance of her position:

A: Oh I didn’t mind you know because — I never thought much about it because it was what was happening at the time. You just took it all for granted. I was happy to do it. (Elliot, interview, 18/12/99)

Matty used a similar approach: ‘You see you’ve got to look at that stage, it’s no good looking now at what was then’ (Zahner, interview, 18/12/99).

In contrast, Lucy achieved cohesiveness with the community by using a strategy of pointing out the difficulties both groups faced while at the same time indicating the advantages enjoyed by the sisters:

L: Well choir nuns would have recreation time between 11.00 and 12.30, 12 o’clock and they used to sit around doing crochet you know and fancy work. We’d learnt of course, that they were suffering as much sitting down doing that, as we were doing the work. Of course, we were free to go our own merry way. (Anderson, interview, 18/12/99)

The lay sisters were supervised by the choir nuns, but there were times when their supervisors were busy elsewhere. On such occasions, the sisters could enjoy freedoms associated with their duties that sometimes included breaking rules such as leaving the convent grounds and talking with their neighbours.

The system ended at the end of the 1960s when an American member of the congregation, Sister Marie Therese Walsh, became Provincial of the Australian community. She immediately brought about changes, such as the sisters having free time to make a retreat, new clothes, integrating them with the rest of the community and sending them for holidays. Opportunities for further study were offered to the sisters, although none of the three women took these up. All three women were pleased to see the ending of the system, although Anne and Lucy continued doing similar work until they retired. Matty found the ending of the system less satisfying. She had taken pride in cooking but when the choir nuns took on some of that work they produced what she described as ‘gourmet’ meals with which she felt unable to compete (Zahner, interview, 18/12/99).

**REWORKING CHILDHOOD UNDERSTANDINGS**

Both religious congregations that taught me as a child and adolescent, the religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart and the Dominican congregations, used the tiered system of membership. My memory of the sisters is scant as I had virtually no contact with them, except for one sister who was in charge of the infirmary. To me, they were a silent almost invisible presence who sometimes smiled but never spoke. Words I would have used to describe them would have been ‘simple’ and ‘sweet’. My understandings, as well as glorification of the sisters’ position, are reflected in the narrative of another ex-student of the Society of the Sacred Heart:

MF: They were very sweet, the little sisters. I remember the dairy there. One milked the cows. Often they would be sweeping the paths and one would say hello. We thought they were very holy because they had given up the luxuries of life. Work was like a prayer and to us we thought they were wonderful. Some of them may have been Italian or another nationality. They didn’t speak very much. They may have moved from different Sacre Coeur convents, as nuns moved to different states and countries and some were missionaries. (Michelle F, interview, 5/6/96)

None of the sisters of the Society were from a non-English-speaking background and the quote illustrates the social distance between the students and the sisters. Yet this was not the case in all circumstances. An ex-student of the Society, who went to boarding school aged four, recalled spending a pleasurable part of the day in the kitchen and being made toys by one of the sisters (Marie M, interview, 18/4/96).

Alignment of lay sisters with students, sometimes in opposition to directions from the hierarchy, was a way in which some dealt with their lower position in the community hierarchy (Trimingham Jack 2000). A construction, arising out of such alignment, has been used in glorifying their position — for example, Emilson’s (1994, p.27) description of the
Dominican lay sisters as making the kitchen ‘the heart of the house’. Some written reflections of Thai students who attended an Ursuline boarding school contain similarities:

While I was in Armidale I was happy and not so lonely because Sr. Vianney and the other Sisters were very kind to me. Sr. Vianney taught me about cooking and I liked to help her in the kitchen. She looked after me very well. (Strumput, no date)

Food for international students was very important since we were from a different country. Sister Vianney was the one who was responsible for this important item. Our beloved Sister Vianney never forgot to give us tea/coffee in the morning, beside looking after us with a kind heart ... On Friday we were given fish curry and rice which our Sister again prepared for us (very tasty for Thai students). (Tansakul, no date)

The reminiscences of myself and other students reveal a construction that is largely located in childhood. Research into the lives of the women offers an opportunity to view them from a perspective beyond pious glorification and childhood understandings.

CONCLUSION

The three pieces of historical research reviewed within this article are all embedded in resistance to patriarchy. That is, they in some way expose or challenge a gender-based hierarchical binary in which women’s interests are subordinated to men’s. Henderson’s position is to incorporate the women’s stories into historical discourse and to affirm the social bond of the women’s community. Danylewycz’s argument supports the contention that joining a religious congregation brought with it a sense of agency not possible for women teachers outside such communities. Bruno-Jofre’s work exposes the manipulation of a religious by a male cleric. Analysis of the tiered system within religious congregations, undertaken within this article, draws upon discourses in current use within feminist historical practice. However, the story of the lay sisters exposes class-based and exploitative practices within religious congregations rather than at the hands of patriarchy. Yet Bruno-Jofre’s exposure of the clash between the desires of religious for living out their calling and the intentions of male clerics contains possibility for considering the tiered system within terms of patriarchy.

The longstanding belief within Australian Catholicism that education is synonymous with faith was fuelled by Catholic bishops and resulted in the establishment of a separate education system. The recruitment of women’s congregations to staff the Catholic school system and the physical and emotional cost of this work is in the process of being documented. Indeed the metaphor of the veil may be read both as an allusion to that which remains hidden as well as that which is exposed. Catholic boarding schools made a Catholic education available to remote rural families (Tobin 1987). The use of the tiered system of religious membership contributed significantly to reducing the cost of these schools, although, as this article documents, the lay sisters bore much of this burden at both an emotional and physical level.

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