

**THE BEST KEPT SECRET IN THE
CHURCH : THE RELIGIOUS LIFE
FOR WOMEN IN AUSTRALIAN
ANGLICANISM, 1892-1995**

BY

GAIL ANNE BALL

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy**

Department of Studies in Religion

University of Sydney

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AARC	Australasian Advisory Council of Religious Communities
ABM	Australian(asian) Board of Missions
ACRC	Advisory Council of Religious Communities
BCA	Bush Church Aid Society
BGS	Brotherhood of the Good Shepherd
CEA	Church Extension Association
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CC*	The Clare Community
CA	Community of the Ascension
CCK	Community of Christ the King
CDL	Community of Divine Love,UK
CHN	Community of the Holy Name
CR	Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield
CSN	Community of the Sacred Name, NZ
CSJB	Community of St John the Baptist,Clewer
CSMV	Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage
CSHC*	Community of the Servants of the Holy Cross
CSC	Community of the Sisters of the Church
COV	Community of the Visitation, PNG
DSC	Daughters of St Clare
MSL	Mission to the Streets and Lanes
MOW	Movement for the Ordination of Women
OGS	Order of the Good Shepherd, NZ
OSEH	Order of St Elizabeth of Hungary
PNG	Papua New Guinea
SCK *	Servants of Christ the King
SI	Sisters of the Incarnation
SLG	Sisters of the Love of God, Fairacres
SSF	Society of St Francis
SSJE	Society of St John the Evangelist, Cowley
SPCK	Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
SSA	Society of the Sacred Advent
SSM	Society of the Sacred Mission

* not in common use

One shilling = 10 cents

20 shillings = one pound (two dollars)

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to examine the 'religious life' for women in Australian Anglicanism. In this context, the life is one of consecration to God following a vocational call to live a particular life-style with like-minded people. Consequently this special mode of life, which comes in different forms, constitutes a covenantal relationship not just with God but with the community as well. It is a disciplined life of prescribed, communal, daily prayer with the aim of searching for God and extending charity to others. This concept of service to humanity comes from the aim of loving God above all else, a love that must be translated into actions. A missionary role is fulfilled through the work undertaken in the hope that God will be revealed to those who benefit from those endeavours. On formal entry promises are made which always include the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. These vows are an extension of the baptismal covenant and are seen to be the means which enable the vocational call to be followed. Therefore, this life led under vows has always been seen in principle as a prophetic one because it shows the possibility of leading the Christian life.

The motivation for this thesis was the realisation that there exists a general lack of knowledge of the achievements and contribution of women leading this life in Australian Anglicanism. This is evident not only in Australian society but in the Anglican Church itself. On the one hand, this is not surprising given the deficiencies in the recognition of the input of women to the development of this country; on the other, the reasons why there has been so little coverage by the Church of the existence, let alone the accomplishments of Anglican sisterhoods, need clarification.

At the end of the 20th century, the Archbishop of Canterbury described the position of the religious life in the Anglican Communion as a secret¹. On the surface this appears to be correct given the lack of knowledge of the life, its work, the influence or very often even the existence of such a phenomenon in Anglicanism. While this outcome can be

¹ CSC Newsletter, Vol 29 No 2 1996, p.3

related to the accent on hiddenness and humility engendered for much of the existence of the religious community, it can have nothing to do with the missionary endeavours inherent in all Anglican communities involved in both a rigorous prayer life and intensive outreach. Therefore the reasons for this situation will be an underlying theme in this work. Accordingly the forces operating in this issue will be examined in combination with the introduction, the development and the present position of the life and its future. The theological climate and clerical influences surrounding these stages will be particularly relevant. Within this framework it is proposed to firstly, elucidate the accomplishments of these women as well as their influence on the Australian versions of Anglicanism; secondly, to ascertain whether the transplantation was successful in terms of the missionary role which was undertaken; and thirdly to examine the changes which have occurred in the life over a century.

It became apparent that although there were accounts of a good deal of the individual histories of the communities in Australia, there has not been a comprehensive, comparative overview of their establishment, growth and contribution either religiously or socially. This was a situation which needed to be rectified if the contribution of the communities was to be properly appreciated. To attempt this reconstruction, two different approaches were possible - one thematic, the other chronological. To clarify and compare the achievements of the various communities the latter was felt to be more appropriate. However as the aim was to look at both aspects of the life, external and internal, the second section dealing with the inner life necessarily needed a more thematic approach.

The published sources of available information were mainly produced or commissioned by the sisterhoods at various significant anniversaries of each community, or of particular institutions they established². The only independent overview of religious

²For example: - CHN, Esther, Mother Foundress of the Community of the Holy Name, Melbourne, [1948]; Moores E., One Hundred Years of Ministry, A History of the Society of the Sacred Advent, 1892-1992, Brisbane, [1993]; CSC, A Valiant Victorian, the Life and Times of Emily Ayckbown, London, 1964

communities in Australia is a small, almost hagiographical, publication seventy years old³. Several authors had included sections on religious orders in larger works on women in the Anglican Church, particularly in relation to the priesting of women and the growth of feminism in the Church⁴. In addition to these recent works, unpublished theses were produced in the last three decades, which helped clarify particular aspects of the outreach of individual communities, even though the studies had other subject or agendas⁵.

From the archival sources of the communities, new insights were gained into the published works, but as in all such material gaps remain. This can be attributed in part to a failure of the communities to record or collect information and in some cases to its destruction. The primary sources that this study uses were in the main produced by the communities for their own use. These included the formal Rules, Constitutions and Customaries as well as informal writings, such as memoirs, biographies, meditations and other simple epistles and correspondence of an historical, religious and spiritual nature. The communities had published some of this material but much is handwritten or typewritten. Relevant diocesan papers and publications were consulted but usually provided little information. This was the case as well with the episcopal sources that were investigated. Unfortunately much of the early episcopal material that may have provided valuable insights into the institution and development of the communities was unavailable.

Apart from a consideration of the history of the communities, other considerations were examined such as the secular, physical, religious and geographical environments while wider trends in spirituality and theological thought were pursued. The methodology

³ Stacy F., The Religious Communities in the Church of England in Australia and New Zealand, Sydney, 1929

⁴ For example: - Porter M., Women in the Church: The Great Ordination Debate in Australia, Melbourne, 1989; Rose M., Freedom From Sanctified Sexism: Women Transforming the Church, MacGregor, 1996

⁵ For example: - Frappell R., The Anglican Ministry to the Unsettled Rural Districts of Australia, Unpub. PhD Thesis, Uni. Of Sydney, 1992; Sturrock M., The Anglican Deaconess Movement in Melbourne, An Office coveted by Few, Unpub. BTh Thesis, MCOT, 1989

extended to interviews and a questionnaire aimed at clarifying a range of these and other influences on each of the communities since inception.

In a study of the religious life, one obvious approach is a comparison of the experience of the religious communal life in Anglicanism and its counterpart in the Roman Catholic Church. Despite the extensive use by the Tractarian founders of the model of the 19th century Roman congregation for Anglican sisterhoods, this will not be undertaken in any depth because of the intrinsic differences between the two. First the two groups are separated by the wide gulf between authority and government in the two denominations; secondly the fundamental position and role of the religious order in Roman Catholicism is in great contrast to Anglicanism where the life is on the periphery of the Church. Hence the religious life in the Roman Church in Australia will only be considered as it bears upon its Anglican counterpart. Similarly the Deaconess Movement that tends to be bonded with the religious order in Anglicanism, as another expression of a dedicated life style, has no affinity with the religious life at all. In contrast to the Anglican nun, the deaconess has been a part of the Church and under clerical control since inception. Further the spiritual nature of the religious life has nothing to do with that of the deaconess whose vocation is to an active outreach in the Church. Therefore any such comparisons will be limited.

Female members of Anglican religious orders have adopted the title, *Sister*. As many deaconesses, even in Protestant denominations have used this form of address, confusion has eventuated at times pertaining to the nature of the lifestyle led by a *sister*. On the one hand, this seems to be one good reason to describe those women leading the vowed religious life in Anglicanism as *religious* or *nuns*, as they are popularly known in Roman Catholicism; on the other hand, however, this is not strictly correct because *religious* are those who have been fully professed and *nuns* are enclosed and cloistered.⁶ Moreover, most Anglican sisters in Australia leading the mixed religious life of prayer and action, pointedly do not refer to themselves as nuns Therefore the use of this term

⁶ Advisory Council of the Religious Life, A Directory of the Religious Life, London, 1957, pp. 9-10

for these women will be restricted to occasions when such nomenclature leads to ease of identification.

Women leading the religious life in Anglicanism, certainly before Vatican II, seem not to have equated themselves with their counterparts leading a similar lifestyle in Roman Catholicism. The explanation for this must point to a perception Anglican sisterhoods hold of themselves and their lifestyle. The Anglo-Catholic Movement in the Church of England had developed an affinity with the theology of the Eastern Church. Moreover, like the English Church, Orthodoxy was seen as a purer form of the Apostolic Church than Rome. In a similar vein, members of Anglican orders held this outlook. This can be extended to their form of the religious life that was always popularly described in the early days as a *sisterhood*. It seems likely that a further reason for the rejection of *nun*, with its alien religious connotations, concerned the struggle for the acceptance of the religious life in the Protestant Church of England.

Anglican religious orders for women in Australia were introduced, grew and developed in line with the country. A consideration of the transferral of the Tractarian English model of the life to the Australian colonies will be made and the subsequent establishment of different groups, their development and social outreach will be analysed. This will be done in the light of the unique way in which the Church spread across the continent adapting to a vastly different scene from England, geographically, demographically and politically.

The first section begins with a review of the surprising, almost casual, way the religious life was introduced into a Church, which despite its diversity of thought saw itself as basically Protestant. How this life, seen generally as foreign and papist, attained eventual legitimacy and episcopal recognition will be examined. The path to acceptance at the end of the 19th century is traced through the Victorian era in line with the evolution of the Tractarian Movement that led to wide-ranging changes in Church practice and outlook. Consideration will be paid to the models, used by the Tractarian innovators for the new phenomenon of sisterhoods, and the influence exerted by the

Benedictine and Augustinian Rules. The part attributed to the sisterhoods in the movement towards democratic reform and universal suffrage will be briefly perused in line with the momentum of middle class women moving into philanthropic and paid work. Moreover this will be in conjunction with the Deaconess Movement, the Evangelical competition to the High Church religious communities.

At a time of great change associated with the move to Federation and universal suffrage, the two forms of dedicated life for women were introduced to the Australian colonies. The interaction of the transplanted Tractarian paradigm with religio-cultural differences in the colonies will be considered. These include the consequences of a non-Established Church, with its government fragmented into virtually autonomous dioceses; the polarisation of support for deaconesses and sisterhoods along religious party lines and the shortage of well-educated middle class citizens. Moreover, the move to a common form of Protestant outlook, in concert with great antipathy to the dominant Irish form of Roman Catholicism, is a theme which runs through the early chapters comprising the historical review. The positive and negative outcome on the acceptance of sisterhoods, due to the intensity of lay thought in this regard, will be addressed.

The establishment and growth of the three major sisterhoods and the introduction of smaller groups is examined. This involves the theological, geographical and social problems that were encountered and these effects on the diversification of the outreach. This will be in concert with a perusal of their missionary capability. The shift that the communities underwent after the Second World War are traced, as the Western world moved into the rapid change apparently inherent in the late 20th century. In this dynamic, institutions from an earlier time could not remain unchallenged. The result was that most of the practical reasons for this type of religious community were undermined. One difficulty in the life had always been the paradox of maintaining a balance between the success of the large institutions and the basic vision of assisting the poor and dispossessed. The dramatically changing world from the sixties saw the emergence of a general exploration in the Christian Church for direction. The religious communities were not immune and the result was a reappraisal of their role and

function. At the end of the century these questions had not been resolved and the future remained unclear. The result has been a loss of members and a dearth of recruits so that the sisterhoods have undertaken a more hidden existence usually in individual ministries. A further outcome saw the introduction of purely contemplative groups.

Spirituality involves all aspects of life. Therefore the spirituality of an individual or group is defined as the whole of life, both external and internal. Accordingly the external life, its history and outreach, is as much a part of the spiritual life as the inner, hidden core. Moreover in a comprehensive examination of the religious life, it is imperative to examine as far as possible the inner life of the members of the communities. While the historical review points to external influences on this interior life, other means such as the interviews and questionnaire will be used. It is hoped that this methodology will facilitate the provision of further information needed to answer these and other concerns. These questions include the particular spiritual ethos and distinguishing characteristics of the present-day major communities and the apparent lack of interest in the Church for the religious life.

The second section mainly concentrates on aspects of spirituality of consequence for the religious life in general and in particular features of relevance to the Australian Anglican groups. These factors include vocation, the Rules, Constitutions and Customaries, integrated with the influences of individuals within the communities and that of spiritual advisors. From the questionnaire, trends in the membership of each community such as age, religious background, length of profession, community experience, spiritual thought and concerns for the future are discerned. All of this information is correlated to produce a comparison of the distinguishing characteristics and spiritual ethos of the major institutions at the end of the twentieth century.

Consideration is given to a comparative view of the stages through which the sisterhoods in Australia have progressed since their institution. The focus is on the interaction of the internal and external forces surrounding the life and the subsequent

effect on the achievements and direction of the life. One outcome in the religious life has been the redefinition of the basic aim of the quest for perfection to mean the development of the wholeness of the individual in human terms. The result has been an attitudinal shift from the traditional world-rejecting view. Further change has seen the reassessment of the original vision of the founders of the communities with a resultant search for new directions. This has been in conjunction with a general transformation in the concept of 'community' and to human needs within such organisations. Finally the expectations for the future direction and viability of the religious life in Anglicanism are considered in relationship to this shift in perspective.

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