Alison Weber, ed.

Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. Pp. xiii + 373. Hb, \$150.

The term “devout laywomen” denotes women who held an identity distinct from marriage or monasticism and were called to a vocation of “sacralized service” (2). Various known as *beatas*, *seroras*, *ancille*, *pizzochere*, beguines, tertiaries, or spiritual virgins, devout laywomen led diverse lifestyles yet were united in their “secular vocation to serve God in the world” (2) living as individuals in their own homes or in communities. More than their “third status” (neither wives nor nuns), devout laywomen were distinguished by their propensity to extreme asceticism, charismatic spirituality, and prophetic power. Such “extra-official” status not only rendered the spirituality of devout laywomen suspicious in the eyes of ecclesiastical authorities, but it also further subjected them to the intensified moral code of both the post-Tridentine Catholic Church and the post-Reformation states. Transnational and cross-confessional in scope, this collection calls for a more nuanced view on the historiographical paradigm of treating women as “the prototypical subject of church-state discipline” (16). The sixteen contributors demonstrate that both in Europe and its colonial and missionary encounters, particular local circumstances, combined with the apostolic and missionary drives of the Counter-Reformation church, created an opening for devout laywomen to both challenge and bridge the binary oppositions of lay and religious, regulated and unregulated, open and enclosed, Catholic and Protestant, and defiant and submissive.

Essays are divided into four thematic sections. “Service” illustrates the crucial services that devout laywomen provided to their local communities as educators (the Company of St. Ursula in Italy), as nurses, caregivers, and managers of hospitals (the Daughters of Charity in France), and as administrators of parish shrines (*seroras* in the Basque country). Although the post-Tridentine church aimed to enforce enclosure of all female religious communities, the material and spiritual demands of local communities enabled the Daughters of Charity, for instance, to pursue their charitable vocation in public as highly trained nurses and hospital staff members. “Perceptions of Holiness” examines devout laywomen as the locus in which models of sanctity were constructed and spiritual authority was negotiated. In Spain, Peru, and the Philippines, *beatas* faced Inquisitorial charges of heresy or pretense of sanctity as frequently as they were venerated as living saints. The mix of support and suspicion from priests and spiritual directors indicates that the Counter-Reformation church was not uniformly oppressive regarding lay female spiritual expressions. For instance, Maria Laura Giordano’s examination of the church’s attitude toward

the Spanish *beatas seorsum* (*beatas* who lived alone or with their families) over the *longue durée* reveals *beatas* to be “one of the few channels between general society and the religious orders” (103). For that, the church was much more accommodating and flexible in its regulation of lay female spirituality than it has been portrayed to be.

“Confessional Crossings” showcases multiple ways in which Catholicism and Protestantism intersected in the lived experiences of devout laywomen. Contrary to conventional wisdom, medieval semi-religious communities of unmarried women known as *béguinages* continued to exist in the German lands after the Protestant Reformation. Single women became *beguines* to fulfill both their own material needs and the desire for “active spiritual expression” (187). A significant number of convents in Lower Saxony adopted Lutheranism and yet, for the most part, maintained the administrative structure and spiritual routines of a Catholic convent. Now as educational institutions, “Lutheran convents” observed varying degrees of enclosure and offered women a spiritual refuge without monasticism. Recusant women in England created “holy households” to cultivate a Catholic identity among their children, servants, and neighbors through close contact with English Jesuits. “Alliances” demonstrates the collaborations into which devout laywomen entered with both ecclesiastical and lay people in the cases of two semi-enclosed conservatories (schools) for women of different socioeconomic status in Florence, an English recusant woman running a safe house in collaboration with a Jesuit priest, and Japanese female missionaries operating alongside their Jesuit directors, among others. These collaborations shine a spotlight on the unintended consequences of church-state discipline. The drive to regulate lay spirituality and impose moral and social discipline did not put devout laywomen into a position of absolute submission. Rather, the intensified evangelization of the laity in both Catholic and Protestant areas accentuated devout laywomen’s crucial roles as charitable workers, educators, administrators, models for lay piety, and spiritual leaders.

A few essays stand out for their recommendations for analytical frameworks and calls for further comparative research. Anne Jacobson Schutte’s examination of five printed vernacular biographies of pious laywomen in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy lays the foundation for comparative studies on the defining features of lay female sanctity. Titled “Elastic Institutions,” Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane’s essay proposes to view beguine communities as institutions that not only perpetuated the model of the chaste and devout single woman but also adapted to communal needs with their members’ active, charitable, and spiritual impulses. Adopting “elasticity” as a paradigm, historians may bridge the medieval–early modern divide and restore *beguines*

from the margins of historiography to their status as contributing members in early modern German society. Several contributors examine the “third path” through the lenses of durability and adaptability. Jennifer Haraguchi (on semi-enclosed schools in Florence), Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer (on Lutheran convents), Querciolo Mazzonis (on the Ursulines in Italy), and Deane demonstrate that, while being increasingly subjected to the regulatory power of local prelates and civil authorities, the sometimes mixed-confessional communities for women who took simple vows and adopted modified enclosure were in fact desirable institutions.

Finally, as Alison Weber states in her introduction to the volume, the Jesuit connection is a useful framework for transnational analysis. Weber (on Jesuit apologies for laywomen’s spirituality), Stacey Schlau (on female mysticism in Peru), and Jessica Fowler (on accusations of heresy in the Philippines) indicate that Jesuit support or suspicion affected laywomen’s standing on the sinner–saint spectrum. Specifically, the Jesuits’ ambivalence toward women’s spiritual authority and influence over the laity is further accentuated when it is contrasted to their enthusiasm about female ministry in the face of official hostility toward Catholicism. For instance, the Jesuits were more willing to support Japanese Catholic laywomen as missionaries in a country where Christians were persecuted (see Haruko Nawata Ward’s essay) or collaborate with recusant English women or English convents in exile to help perpetuate the English Catholic identity (see chapters by Robert Scully and Ellen Macek).

Weber acknowledges that this collection leans on the “Hispano-Italian axis” (17). Nevertheless, this volume delivers on another one of its stated objectives, namely, to suggest approaches for further investigation across geographical and linguistic divides. Japan and the Philippines have proven to be promising sites for such inquiry. Boundary-crossing, elasticity, and the Jesuit connection are useful analytical frameworks for comparative and transnational studies. The comparative scope of this collection could benefit from the inclusion of another mix-confessional state, the Dutch Republic, in which the medieval tradition of *mulieres religiosae* continued in the early modern period in the lives of Catholic spiritual virgins as well as married women. Dutch examples may enrich the north–south comparison while highlighting the complexity of devout laywomen as subjects of historical inquiry.

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