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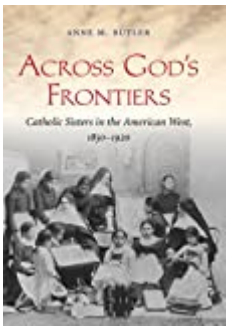


**Anne M. Butler.** *Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850-1920.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xxi + 424 pp. $38.67 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3565-4.

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## Religion, Region, and Gender

After reading Anne M. Butlerâs *Across Godâs Frontiers*, I will not think of Roman Catholic nuns and sisters and the West in the same way. Butler, who is Trustee Professor Emerita at Utah State University and a former editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly*, has extensively chronicled the experiences and contributions of an often overlooked group. In so doing, she convincingly demonstrates their remarkable resolve, adaptability, and ingenuity, while also arguing that these unmarried religious women constitute significant parts of the history of American religion, American women, and the American West.

Across eight chapters, Butler describes and interprets the nunsâ encounters with the various peoples, terrains, and climates of the West, paying particular attention to their collective and individual experiences in coming to and traveling about the region (both as European immigrants and Americans from different regions), the sometimes innovative ways they carried out their work, and the many challenges presented by race, gender, and class. Her engagement with secondary sources and current scholarship is admirable, but her use of primary documents is even more so. She has conducted extensive research in numerous archives related to these western nunsâ congregations, which, in turn, reveals insights into their thinking, attitudes, and activities, ranging from the mundane to the exceptional. A glossary proves particularly helpful in navigating the specialized vocabulary related to Catholic religious life (including the technical distinction between nuns and sisters).

With regard to American religious history, Butler has called attention to the work and impact of specific congregations and individuals (including an entire chapter devoted to Mother Katharine Drexel). Whatâs more, she highlights the advantages and opportunities nuns had by virtue of their religious life that others did not. For instance, whereas many priests often worked alone in remote and isolated places in the West and single women generally âlacked a comfortable or profitable placeâ in the secular West, religious congregations provided nuns a community support system and, even at times, a family-like environment, with many travel op-

tions and work possibilities (p. 74). In St. Louis, the Sisters of St. Mary were able to engage in nursing activities that most secular women could not. According to Butler, âWhile middle-class laywomen might have endangered their âreputationsâ by circulating day and night through the riverfront, the sisters called on their status as nuns, the charity of their work, and the response to the religious habit to silence criticismsâ (p. 100). Nonetheless, nuns still faced obstacles as Roman Catholics working in a predominantly Protestant country. Yet, for Butler, this was not their major impediment. Rather, their greatest challenge came from âthe strictly defined gender boundaries of the Catholic Church.â Their struggles with the Churchâs male hierarchy created ânearly insurmountable difficultyâ (p. 309).

In spite of these obstacles, nuns challenged and redefined secular and religious gender norms. They constructed a womanhood that, in Butlerâs words, was âintensely maternal but without childbirth,â centered on labor, and both self-supporting and multifaceted (p. 80). Contrary to the notion that western labor was the domain of men, nuns found a variety of ways to support themselves through wage labor. They also pushed gender boundaries when it came to domestic chores by engaging in typically male tasks such as plowing fields, harvesting crops, and caring for livestock. Nuns became astute managers of money and, in some cases, even incorporated their organizations. This, in turn, created divisions between nuns and the priests who tried to control their finances. Even though they still had to operate within the confines of church patriarchy, they learned effective ways to deal with their male superiors.

Butler also argues that Catholic nuns engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the West, both shaping and being shaped by it. For instance, they helped build western communities through the many services they provided the regionâs population, while western societies and circumstances sparked changes in their religious life that transformed âthe European cloister into the American conventâ (p. 11). When a group of nuns stranded unexpectedly in Kansas City by a railroad strike chose to remain in the depot overnight with their street veils lowered rather than, in obedience to their traveling instructions, seek shelter in a local convent, they demonstrated the kind of self-reliance and innovation that nuns throughout the West needed to survive. According to Butler, âTrained in a life that idealized obedience in the smallest matters, nuns quickly learned that the West had little patience for such a constraintâ (p. 75). The unusual circumstances encountered in the West caused congregational rules and constitutions to be reexamined.

All in all, Anne M. Butler has made a convincing argument that these Roman Catholic nuns and sisters made important contributions in terms of American religious history, American womenâs studies, and American western history. It is not altogether clear, however, how exceptional nuns and their experiences in the West were. One of the great challenges of regional histories is distinguishing that which is truly unique to a region from that which is held in common with other regions. So, for instance, the nunsâ self-reliance and innovation that arose from difficult traveling circumstances cannot be denied, but without comparison to other regions, it is difficult to assess if western nuns responded differently than those in other regions. Did nuns traveling in remote regions of the South, for example, encounter similar circumstances and evince similar reactions? It would also be interesting to know how these single religious womenâs experiences compared with those of other single women serving as religious workers in the West. Did the nunsâ experiences differ significantly from those of the many unmarried Protestant women who worked in remote places (such as reservations)? It is probably asking too much of Butler to address these issues in a work that is focused on bringing to light a previously neglected group, but she has laid the groundwork for future treatment of these comparative questions.

Finally, despite what at times almost seems like a paean to the nuns and sisters who came to the West, Butler readily acknowledges that they often held the same racial, gender, and class attitudes of the dominant society. She makes clear, for instance, that when interacting with Native Americans, nuns regularly used racist language and aided forced acculturation that led to âdisastrous changesâ (pp. 242-243). Despite admissions like these throughout the book, a more specific and detailed probing of the negative impact created by the nunsâ work would balance the portrayal and deepen the assessment. For example, how specifically did they contribute to the dismantling of traditional cultures and help create psychological and material trauma for indigenous peoples? This too is a part of the western nunsâ legacy that must be treated in equal detail along with their many positive contributions.

Butler has called attention to yet another strand of the Westâs complex mix of peoples and cultures. Her multidimensional approach, combining religion, region, and gender, challenges stereotypes associated with nuns and sisters and raises questions for further research. Her book has broadened my thinking in all three areas.

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