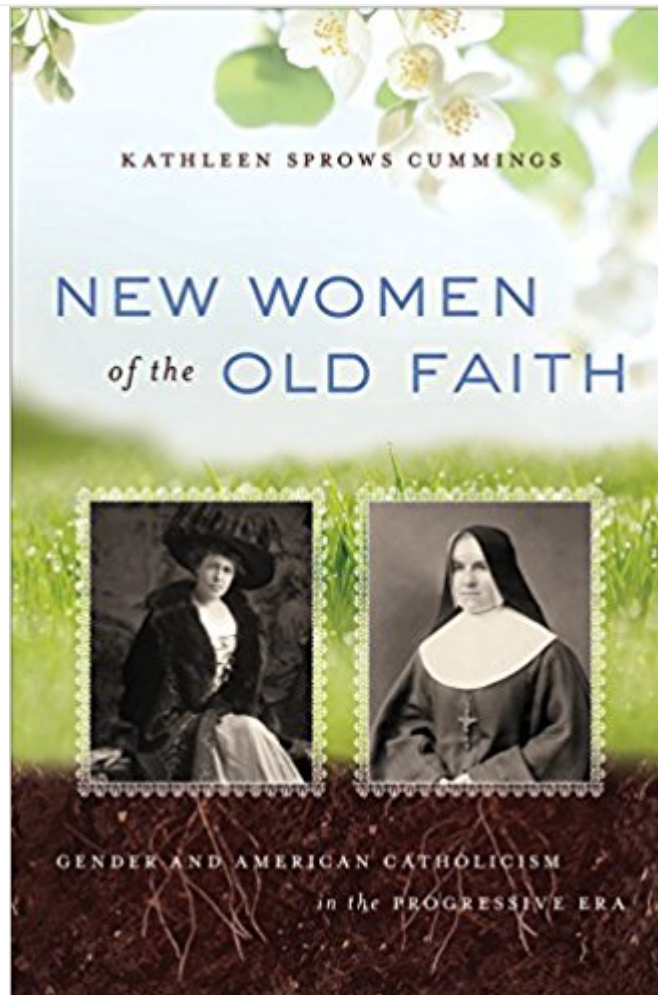


# {essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

## New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era



Volume 44 (2011)

### Reviewed Work(s)

*New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era.* By Kathleen Sprows Cummings (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Pp. 278. Paper, \$22.95.

Adding to the literature about the Progressive Era, Kathleen Sprows Cummings examines the curious juxtaposition between Catholic women's rejection of the "New Woman," seen as an independent woman asserting herself in the public arena, and their own increasing involvement in politics and social reform. Because Catholic women typically disavowed causes such as suffrage and temperance, which were embraced by Protestant reformers, they have been largely ignored by scholars of the Progressive Era and Women's History. Cummings explains, "I suspect that historians of U.S. women are reluctant to search for sources of female power in the male-dominated church because they seriously doubt that they exist" (3). Cummings's work explains why Catholic women did not join their Protestant sisters in reform and elucidates the ways in which they crafted their response to the New Woman.

Cummings frames her argument around the work and lives of four women: Margaret Buchanan Sullivan, Sister Julia McGroarty, Sister Assisium McEvoy, and Katherine Eleanor Conway. Each of these women, Cummings points out, felt more discriminated as Catholics than as women, which explains their failure to embrace feminism. Their religious identity, during a time of virulent anti-Catholicism and anti-immigration sentiments, needed more protection than their gender. This did not mean, however, that these women simply accepted their societal limitations; rather, they used distinctly Catholic methods of enacting change. Catholic women typically acted through Church-sanctioned organizations, and they were careful to justify their actions using Church dogma.

The first section covers the life of Chicago journalist Margaret Buchanan Sullivan who used her position in the press to challenge assumptions about women in the Church. The Anti-Catholic press active during the

Progressive Era wrote articles portraying the Catholic Church as repressive towards women, not allowing them active roles in the Church. Sullivan argued, instead, that women were responsible for the healthy state of the Church and pointed to accomplished and educated women, such as Jeanne de Chantal and Elizabeth Ann Seton. Sullivan and other Catholic women rejected the “rootless” lives of the New Woman in favor of the rich tradition of the Church. Her contributions to the Catholic Press provided readers with alternatives to the New Woman by crafting a positive, Catholic version of American history.

To explore the issue of higher education for women, Cummings highlights the career of Sister Julia McGroarty, the superior of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, who was instrumental in the founding of Trinity College for Catholic Women in 1900. McGroarty established the school as an alternative to the schools producing the feared New Women, but she also did it with the conscious intention of enriching the lives of her students. Trinity College, as well as the other Catholic women’s colleges which flourished in the early part of the century, provided a challenge to traditional religious sisters: they had to embrace modern professionalization while maintaining old spiritual practices.

The twentieth century’s increasing calls for educational standards also revolutionized the practices at Catholic elementary and secondary schools, creating challenges and opportunities for teaching sisters. Cummings explores the “school question” through the life of Sister Assisium McEvoy. McEvoy helped create the modern Catholic school system as a viable alternative to public schools. McEvoy followed the Progressive Era’s mandates of “efficiency, uniformity, and centralization” (113). These modern and efficient schools demanded a new kind of teaching sister, one with normal school training and certification. Despite operating in habits and crucifixes, Cummings insists that religious sisters heeded the same calls for efficiency, uniformity, and centralization as other women in the Progressive Era; indeed, the work of the settlement house and the convent had much in common.

The final section of the book tackles the thorniest issue between Catholics and their Protestant sisters: suffrage. The anti-suffrage position of most Catholic women during the Progressive Era, highlighted by the career of Boston journalist Katherine E. Conway, makes modern feminist scholars uncomfortable and explains the lack of research in the area.

Cummings reminds readers that these Catholic reformers were “marked by an overwhelming sense that being part of a Roman Catholic tradition distinguished them from other American women” (158). As such, they were unwilling to link themselves to the causes of Protestants, something Cummings defines as the “limits of sisterhood” (158). Despite the fact that Catholic women worked diligently to adapt to the changing world in progressive ways, ties to a strong Catholic identity prevented women like Conway from embracing feminism.

Well-researched and beautifully written, Cummings’s work clearly shows the need to address the absence of Catholic women in the historiography of the Progressive Era. Her attention to Catholic media, in particular, captures voices missing from other Progressive Era literature. She makes a fine start with the lives of the four women she chronicles, but much remains unexplored. In particular, Cummings does not discuss the role of Catholic women in the labor movement, pacifism, or civil rights. Still, the book calls for historians to move beyond taking Catholic rejection of feminism for granted; instead, Cummings asks scholars to explore how Catholic women created alternative structures of reform.

**Amanda Bresie**

*Texas Christian University*



Published by

[View all posts by](#)

**Book Reviews**

**20th century, Religion, Women Gender Sexuality**

**COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.**

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

---

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

**PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑