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In the wider field of the ecclesiastical and religious history of the Middle Ages, the study of female religious is among those where the master narrative has changed most profoundly over the last forty years or so. With the exception of mainly German-language studies looking at the so-called »Frauenstifte«, before the 1960s scholarship paid little or no attention to female convents. This was based (in addition to any misogynist sentiments that may have featured among these scholars) on the notion that the situation of women in the Church was such that their involvement in determining the development of ecclesiastical structures, intellectual and spiritual life, and even their own form of religious life was minimal. In this respect, the continuous pursuit by male religious of reform and transmitting some of their ideals to secular society was thought of as contrasting starkly with female religious’ passivity and enclosed status.

While the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970s brought female religious more sharply into focus, for the most part these studies corroborated earlier views of a female religious landscape mired in a state of institutional, spiritual and intellectual inertia. The overall narrative these scholars relied upon was one where, beginning in the early 800s, successive reforms marginalised women religious by removing them from the public sphere, barring them from advanced education, and placing all the key sacramental and governmental duties in the hands of male clerics involved in the cura monialium. In addition to looking at the implications of such interventions, scholars also investigated the concurrent discourse in contemporary legislation and polemical commentaries, expressing suspicion of women’s commitment to the religious life, their sexuality, and in general their behaviour as members of the monastic ordo; and in hagiography by male authors attempting to impose specific views of female sanctity.

The present volume seeks once again to modify the master narrative of the situation of women religious post-800 by »restoring a focus«, as the editors write in their introduction, »on ordinary women and men«. The objective is to investigate the notion that the involvement and presence of men in female convents, and of religious women in male convents, should not be defined in terms of a strict hierarchical relationship whereby men regarded the cura monialium as a burden or, at the very least, a dangerous distraction from their main purpose in life. In addition to exploring the phenomenon of double monasteries, contributions to this volume seek to shift the attention of scholars away from the
problem of enclosure and the relatively few indications we have of sexual misconduct to reconstructing how men and women co-existed and collaborated in a religious context. From this, a relationship emerges of intellectual and spiritual exchange, and of institutional management, that was far more horizontal and collaborative than has often been previously suggested.

Chronologically, the meticulously researched case studies cover the period from the end of the eleventh century – when the range of new options for men and women seeking a religious life led to experiments with the nature and implications of boundaries between the sexes – to the end of the Middle Ages. Geographically, the focus is on the German-speaking regions of Europe. Three chapters, by Elsanne Gilomen-Schenkel, Susan Marti and Eva Schlotheuber, respectively, explore the complex realities of double monasteries; the significance of male-female collaboration in book production and illumination; and the role of provosts in female monasteries. In a second group of contributors, Fiona Griffiths, Shelley Amiste Wolbrink and Anthony Ray explore case studies of male-female collaboration in specific intellectual and spiritual contexts, looking, respectively, at Guibert of Gembloux’s involvement with Hildegard of Bingen, the pastoral and other roles of men in the Premonstratensian houses in Füssenich and Meer, and the role of the Cistercian monks of Villers as confessors in female houses in the Low Countries. A third group – Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, Wybren Scheepsma and Sigrid Hirbodian – looks at the cura monialium in late medieval urban contexts. Somewhat orphaned are contributions from Sara S. Poor, on female teachers in the medieval imagination, and Sabine Klapp, on canons in late medieval Frauenstifte. Finally, John W. Coakley provides an afterword, appropriately entitled »Ordinary life and the Gendered Imagination«.

This volume’s basic premise of looking at the realities of male-female interactions in medieval contexts rather than normative or literary discourse is not entirely new. As the editors acknowledge in the introduction, there have been quite a few case studies in recent years which have pointed to problems with the older narratives described earlier in this review. Nonetheless, it deserves to be referred to as ground-breaking for being the first work to give centre stage to the need to pursue this approach, and to draw attention to its implications of a paradigm shift. Therefore, this reviewer considers it something of a missed opportunity that the volume does not include at least one chapter on the period between c. 800 and the end of the eleventh century for, as a number of recent publications have suggested, during that period, too, male-female interactions in monastic contexts were significantly more complex than previously suspected. It is to be hoped that specialists will take up the challenge of filling this lacuna, and thus further contribute to this exciting new chapter in the study of medieval religious life.