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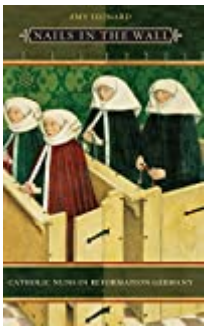

Amy Leonard. *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 218 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-47257-7.

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The Catholic Church of the Middle Ages forced women against their will, even as children, to take up an ascetic existence that was out of touch with the world and that violated their feminine nature. Discarded by their families, condemned to a joyless life behind impervious walls, indeed buried, nuns devoted themselves to useless activities and fulfilled no socially meaningful responsibilities. The representatives of the Reformation movement saw the situation in this or a similar way, and for this reason they demanded the closing of all convents. The women living in them were to marry, bear children and fulfill their responsibilities as wives, mothers and housewives. The sixteenth-century Reformers thereby challenged a model for women's lives that was highly regarded and widespread. What consequences did these new concepts have for the women concerned? What did they themselves have to say about these endeavors? And how did they conduct themselves in the face of the policy that demanded the closure of their convents?

Scholars have had a difficult time answering these questions. The example of Luther, who married a former nun, is said to be evidence of the success of the endeavor, or so it is generally argued. As early as the 1930s, the medievalist Herbert Grundmann drew attention to the high proportion of women involved in the manifold religious movements of the Middle Ages and attributed this presence to the special fascination that concepts of an extra-familial existence apparently exercised precisely upon women. When women's history was established in the context of the radical movement of 1968, the central issue, on the other hand, was the surmounting of prudish morality. Accordingly, the lived experience of sexuality was assessed positively as the dominant aspect of feminine self-awareness, even in history. In keeping with this trend, gender research in the 1980s and 1990s at first considered the high regard paid to feminine sexuality in marriage (which found expression in Reformation concepts), as a form of progress when compared with the Catholic model of the virginal life. This one-sided fixation hindered an adequate use of past forms of celibate life with their own spiritual definitions of "sexuality." Merry Wiesner was the first to point out that Protestant theology, by banishing women to the household, robbed them of the possibility of expressing their own spirituality in women's groups. In 1989, Lyndal Roper showed that women were also, at the same time, excluded from the masculine discourse taking place increasingly in the urban public sphere. Thus, the new Protestant positioning of femininity did not primarily grant women the fulfillment of their libidinous desires, but rather restricted them by means of new dependencies and restraints. In recent years, a new interest in the concepts of feminine communal life considered in its spiritual as-

pects has awakened in connection with such studies. In Germany, it was above all Peter Burschel who presented various studies that contained an anthropological understanding of the meaning of celibate traditions for a self-determined corporeal awareness and a mystically rooted self-definition, especially for women.

It is exactly this line of research discourse that Amy Leonard enters with her work, which attempts to explain why nuns in the Reformation vehemently refused to give up their monastic form of life. The subject of her work is a microanalysis of the circumstances within the Dominican order in Strasbourg, which she places within the general context of relevant secondary research. She has invested almost ten years of detailed research in archives and libraries in this book, the text of which comprises little more than 200 pages. Leonard to a great extent foregoes providing a broad presentation and assessment of the sources, and is on the whole content with only the most essential documentary references to prove her thesis. She trots out only a few, especially impressive and detailed case studies, and discusses the results of her research in a rather pointed essay-type form. Within the research landscape and academic traditions of Germany, Leonard's short treatment of the sources, her pointed arguments against leading authorities, and her thoroughly partisan clarity are unfortunately extremely rare. These virtues make this work fresh and fascinating. It certainly will attract many more readers and spark many more discussions than many a thick tome.

For Amy Leonard knows what she is talking about. And the findings that she presents based on her extensive, indeed comprehensive research are expressive enough in their own right. The whole book is, so to say, graphic proof of her thesis about the strength and positive powers of self-assertion in "asceticism." The initial question she addresses is: why were Strasbourg nuns so resistant to attacks on their form of life? Of the seven Strasbourg convents with their nearly two hundred female members, three survived the decreed closing of their houses. These were those houses, as Leonard determines, that had reintroduced traditional observance before the beginning of the Reformation and, thus had already renewed their religious life themselves. In the process, the women succeeded in finding a new interpretation of their existence, even under the conditions of secularization, and succeeded in putting this into practice. Precisely these convents later became the center of the Counter-Reformation. Leonard cites the following decisive factors for this astounding willingness and ability to reform: The nuns wove an effective network and practiced a close solidarity among themselves; many also continued to be closely associated with the local elite from which they, as a rule, came. They were financially secure and independent and felt themselves committed to the urban community. Most of them had decided independently in favor of this life and found it to be a good one; they elected their prioress jointly, by whom they felt themselves to be well represented. Leonard concludes that the fact that convent women had more control over their lives than average women in Strasbourg. Along with the spiritual duties of praying and singing, which were a part of the *memoria* or remembrance of the dead, they also engaged in a series of social and intellectual activities: they offered a home for the needy, for whom they provided and cared; they reared, instructed and protected young girls and, in the process, devoted themselves to impoverished children, too (as well as to rich ones); they provided an example of artistic and learned development and, thus, formed a center for contemporary spiritual discussion and experience. Ironically, as Leonard comments, the nuns, far from confirming the Reformers' image of the corrupt and dissolute cloisters, fulfilled precisely those ideals typical of the evangelical movement of the sixteenth century. Thus, they convinced even the city council of the meaningfulness and usefulness of their work. The latter's benevolence was shown, for example, in the willingness of the city leaders to compensate those nuns with generous pensions who complied with the call to leave the cloister, or even to allow their reentry into the convent. Leonard summarizes by noting the women's integration as daughters of the city, rather than a position as individuals who were "dead to the world." The necessities of urban solidarity, so Leonard, characterized the nuns' life together, not primarily their loyalty to religious confessions. Of course, there is also an exception: Leonard describes a scandal at one of the convents that revolved around sexuality and financial fraud. It ended with the imprisonment of four nuns, the prioress among them. Yet, even this discredit brought upon the Catholic cause could not destroy the generally positive impression that the other Dominican communities of women in the city had conveyed.

Amy Leonard clearly distances herself from any rigid theory of confessionalization such as those presented by Schilling and Reinhard, since such a theory juxtaposes the religious groups and their milieus in a much too rigid and contrary manner. On the contrary, she emphasizes her result of porosity and cooperation, even the willingness to compromise, among the disputing parties, even in view of the different positions in the confessional con-

troversy. In any case, as she recounts, it was not a political authority that decided alone in regard to confessional questions. It was the case, rather, that a mentality developed within the cloisters themselves that became the basis for a new Catholic identity formed from below. Differently than in England, the decentralized situation in the Roman Empire permitted such special regional solutions.

Leonard possibly tends to overtax her opposing position a bit too much. Detailed studies of other cities will confirm these results or perhaps even qualify them. Yet, she has succeeded in showing how suitable a consistent consideration of the question of the gender of the protagonists of historical phenomena can be in calling into question the "grand narratives" and arguments that were developed using masculine examples. Her micro-study, thus, is also a landmark in methodology, and not only for Reformation research: Such a new understanding of the prospects offered by extra-familial models of femininity also fulfills a key function in establishing the relevance of gender studies for the explanation of our present-day situation. We now face a situation that challenges the notion (dominant for centuries) that gender is realized primarily in a lifelong marriage and the family. A comparative view of the original logical arguments for this model of order which was institutionalized at the beginning of the modern age is, for this reason, very important. Amy Leonard confronts us with detailed insights into the variety of possibilities for female existence in history and, in the process, shows us the logical arguments for their preservation in the face of attacks upon their significance.