

Book Review – “I Am a Christian: the Nun, the Devil and Martin Luther.” Carolyn M. Schneider.

Colleagues,

Today’s ThTh post is Robin Morgan’s review of a book by Carolyn Schneider. After 12 years as theology professor at Texas Lutheran University, Seguin, Texas, Prof. Schneider recently sent me this note: “I have left TLU and will be spending the fall semester at the Collegeville Institute [in Minnesota], working on translating a sermon credited to Athanasius from Coptic into English. In the spring I will be going to Egypt to teach one course at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo. After that, I don’t know. But I am excited about this next year.” Both author Schneider and reviewer Morgan have served on the Board of Directors of the Crossings Community, Inc.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. We’re moving to smaller quarters. Anyone interested in 25 years’ worth of Currents in Theology and Mission? Now available for shipping costs.

“I Am a Christian: the Nun, the Devil and Martin

Luther.” Carolyn M. Schneider.

**Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. 184 pp.
Hardcover. [Amazon price \$22.80]**

Carolyn Schneider’s book, “I Am a Christian: the Nun, the Devil and Martin Luther” is a historical and theological exploration of a story Luther told numerous times over a 24-year period. The story is of a faithful woman who when confronted with the demonic responds with the short confession, “I am a Christian.” This story with its simple, but powerful message, was obviously significant for Luther and Schneider does an admirable job of researching and expounding that significance.

She begins by enumerating and locating all the written occurrences of the story in Luther’s works. From a sermon on St. Anthony’s Day to the lectures on Genesis to Table Talks over a number of years, this story in various forms was a staple of Luther’s exemplar repertoire. Sometimes a nun, sometimes a young girl, sometimes an older woman, sometimes a word of advice from Luther himself, the protagonist of the story is always a faithful person standing in the face of evil proclaiming “I am a Christian.”

Schneider’s second chapter is probably the one of most interest to the readers of Thursday Theology. She provides an in-depth explanation of the theological importance Luther puts on the story’s confession, “I am a Christian.” For students of Bob Bertram (to whose memory she dedicates this book), echoes of his phrase, “the Sweet Swap,” ring in the ear as one reads these pages. For those with an academic background, but little knowledge of Lutheran theology, this chapter could be an understandable introduction to the core of Luther’s thought. Schneider walks step-by-step through Luther’s theology encompassed in the woman’s confession. Schneider highlights Luther’s emphasis on baptism as he says in the Large Catechism

that baptism is "victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ and the Holy Spirit with his gifts." (p. 35)

Schneider also shows how Luther's theology usually leads to pastoral care: "The devil's intent is to destroy us. For, while God wants people to live, and to do so with joy, 'Satan wants our death by any means.' Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, was an example for Luther of one who lost his life to the devil. As Luther understood it, Judas was attacked by the 'bright devil,' the devil's most dangerous form. This devil demands human sacrifice, either of endless self-effort or of endless repentance. Those who believe and obey the bright devil think they are fearing and honoring God. By mistaking the devil's law for God's law, they reach the point of exhaustion and cannot go on. This throws them into the struggle of faith that Luther calls ANFECHTUNG, an attack by the devil with the goal of making one despair of one's life and salvation...When he told the story of the faithful woman in the Sermon on St. Anthony (1522), Luther admired the way the virgin resisted the devil's attack by turning attention away from either her achievements or her feelings of despair, and turning it instead toward the invincible promise of salvation she received in her baptism. Thus she replaced her 'spiritual sadness' with 'spiritual happiness.'" (p. 27)

Chapter three explores the identity of the woman in the story. Though Luther sometimes left the woman nameless, often her name was some form of Mechthild. Schneider explores possible identities through the stories of the martyr Blandina, the legend of Margaret and two Mechthilds, one of Hackeborn and the other of Magdeburg. The stories of these women illuminate the way some Christian women throughout the ages have dealt with spiritual temptation, but does not bring her to a clear identity of the woman in the story. However, Schneider's search, she

believes, mirrors Luther's search for words, phrases and stories to help him "express God's gracious action toward people in Christ." (p. 76)

Chapter four compares Luther's theology with that of the Mechthilds, both Hackeborn and Magdeburg. Schneider is drawing comparisons to set Luther within, or at least at the edge of, medieval affective and mystical theology. Particularly, she sees Mechthild of Magdeburg's legacy of affective theology and Christocentric mysticism along with the Friends of God movement as directly affecting Luther, largely through Tauler. Schneider uses this opportunity to draw attention to the impact these earlier women theologians had on Luther's development. She is highlighting the reality that, though Christian theology has largely been the domain of men, even those men have learned from the women who came before them. I hope to see future work by Schneider on this topic.

The most extraordinary part of this book is chapter five. Schneider takes her academic research, which is important in itself, and makes the connection to today's world. I have much respect for academics who have the courage to take this risky, but necessary next step. Many people need the examples academics can provide from their work. By making connections themselves, academics help their readers do the same in their own contexts.

Schneider begins this chapter by acknowledging the differences in the way the medieval world dealt with problems of despair and anxiety compared with the way we do in this post-Enlightenment age. We use the language of medical and psychological sciences rather than spiritual temptations. She says that "even in training for pastoral care there are no classes called How to help People Deal with the Devil." (p. 102) To bridge this semantic divide, Schneider uses Walter Wink's work in his "Engaging the Powers" series. "He associates this spiritual

dimension of reality with the biblical 'powers,' such as those listed in Romans 8:38-39, 1 Corinthians 15:24-27, Colossians 2:13-15 and Ephesians 2:1-2 and 6:12." She also cites Heinrik Berkhof, a Dutch theologian who "stressed the fact that in Paul's theology, God created the powers good. Their purpose was to give social structure to the world and thus preserve the creation from destructive chaos. But when the powers become gods and demand worship 'as though they were the ultimate ground of being,' they become perverse and separate people from God. With reference to Ephesians 2:1-2, Berkhof gives the example of the warped powers of 'Volk, race, and state' he felt 'in the air' when he was studying in Berlin in 1937." (p. 103)

Schneider goes on to explore temptations to despair within the context of familiar modern problems: depression, addictions, and self-harm, especially in the lives of women. She uses her own experiences as a volunteer helping homeless people with recovery issues, the experiences of clergy in the parish as well as psychologists to make connections between Luther's theology and specific situations today. I found Schneider's use of Valerie Saiving Goldstein's groundbreaking article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," particularly useful. Goldstein emphasized that temptation to passivity, not pride, is more prevalent among women. She states that theology's emphasis on rooting out pride, though helpful for men, has "only stifled the movements women made to develop strong selves capable of differentiated love and left them more deeply embedded in the sin of non-selfhood with its easy access to despair." (p. 105).

Schneider concludes with an afterword in which she highlights Luther's urging of people in his day to use the story of the faithful woman as their own. This confession, "I am a Christian," isn't only a confession of faith, but a powerful tool for fighting despair. Through her research and contextualizing of this story, Schneider has helped Christians

today benefit from the faithful woman's courageous claim in the face of evil.

Robin J. Morgan

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