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Schneider, Carolyn M. I Am a Christian: The Nun, the Devil, and Martin Luther. Studies in Lutheran History and Theology

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Schneider, Carolyn M.

I Am a Christian: The Nun, the Devil, and Martin Luther. Studies in Lutheran History and Theology.

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. Pp. 184. ISBN 978-0-8006-9732-7 (hardcover) \$30.

I am close to a US Federal Agent and we have remarked more than once that my job as an historian is not entirely different from the job of a detective. We are both trying to solve mysteries or explain events. Carolyn Schneider's new book is a prime example of history as detective story. The sermon illustration that provokes this mystery is common. I first heard it during one of my father's sermons in the early 1980s. It records the experience of a woman who when confronted by the devil repelled him with a simple declaration of her faith, "I am Christian." Since that sermon thirty years ago, I have heard it retold a number of times, sometimes with water signifying baptism being thrown at the devil for good measure. Sometimes, it is Luther himself who is the focus of the story rather than the woman about whom he spoke. It is true that Luther seems to have used her as an exemplum for his own bouts with the devil. This book, Schneider tells us, began as a "quest to uncover the identity of Luther's faithful woman," (1). The book ends with a theological investigation into the continuing usefulness of the story for pastoral care today.

The first chapter opens the mystery by discussing the many and various ways and contexts within which Luther retold the story of a faithful woman and her encounter with the devil. The illustration can be found in his writings as early as 1520 and as late as 1544. They stretch across sermons, formal essays (like *Babylonian Captivity* — the first recorded use of the story), lectures, commentaries, and not-surprisingly the Table Talk. The story's contours change and the main character goes through some transformations — from a holy virgin, to nun, or a girl, or even sometimes she is given the name Mechthild. As Schneider guides the reader through these changes in Chapter Two, she carefully highlights how the story was changed to accommodate Luther's changing theological vision. As his theology evolved, so too did the story. In Chapter Three, we arrive at the center of the mystery. Who was the faithful woman? Discovering her identity is far more difficult than Schneider had first thought it might be. She posits a number of possibilities including Mechthild of Hackeborn (d. 1298) and Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1285). In the end, it

proves impossible to discern who the unknown faithful woman was. She seems to be a bit of a composite figure, embodying elements of stories from both Mechthilds but also from early church martyrs such as Perpetua — who was famous for her declaration under torture, “*Christiana sum* [I am a Christian].”

The final two chapters turn to contemporary theology. In these chapters, Schneider makes clear that as a theologian the exact identity of the woman is less important to her than the ways in which Luther used the declaration. From his perspective, it was a brave and noble avowal that eviscerated the devil and left him powerless. For Luther, the devil was personal and personified. For Schneider, the “devil” is less a person than the structures that one might label demonic. Nevertheless, she argues that individual people are still the victims of these demonic forces — some she examines include addiction, self-harm, and sickness — and that these people can learn from Mechthild’s witness. Though one might quibble here and there with her assessments, I do not think Luther would quibble with the pastoral intent that lies at the heart of these chapters. For him, the story of the faithful woman always served a pastoral intent — to soothe a sin-sick soul. That is Schneider’s aim as well.

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