Amy Leonard’s *Nails in the Wall*, part of the extensive series, Women in Culture and Society, is a welcome addition to recent literature exploring the ways in which early modern nuns maintained strong ties to the communities outside their walls, and actively participated in shaping the Reformations of the sixteenth century.

Leonard’s book examines three Dominican convents in the city of Strasbourg that survived and perpetuated the Catholic faith despite the city’s official conversion to Protestantism. The process by which these convents avoided dissolution and maintained their Catholicism depended upon numerous and diffuse factors, including the nuns’ personal tenacity, their gender, ties to the people of Strasbourg, the uniqueness of German politics, and, ultimately, compromise between Protestants and Catholics.

Protestants gained a majority in Strasbourg’s governing city council in 1524, and by 1529 the magistrates abolished the Latin Mass and secularized the city’s religious institutions. The council sought to dissolve the monasteries, and offered Strasbourg’s professed religious annual pensions to draw them out of the cloister. While nearly all the men’s houses within the city’s walls succumbed, three of the seven women’s houses extant in 1525 resisted the council’s offer. Although many of the nuns of SS. Margaret and Agnes, St. Mary Magdalene, and St. Nicholas-in-Undis accepted the pensions and left, others insisted upon remaining in their communities. These three convents were the only ones of their order in Strasbourg to fully implement the Dominican reforms of the late fifteenth century, a fact that Leonard argues contributed to their survival. These reforms perhaps bolstered the nuns’ confidence in the righteousness of their cause and the uprightness of their houses, and the women set a crucial precedent of council involvement in their affairs when they petitioned the magistrates for help in implementing the reforms. Overlapping jurisdictions and the peculiar nature of politics in the Holy Roman Empire meant that the nuns could appeal to Strasbourg’s governing body rather than the bishop, who might not have been as sympathetic to their desire for reform. Leonard
suggests that this association between the reformed nuns and city council bred a familiarity and affinity that perhaps contributed to the magistrates’ reluctance to close these particular convents.

Protestant leaders’ initial uncertainty as to what should become of nuns also aided the Strasbourg convents. Leonard’s second chapter admirably mines the famously prolific sixteenth-century German pamphlet literature for Protestant theories on the utility of the cloister, and she determines that while most Protestants advocated the dissolution of monastic institutions, some could indeed envision a role for convents in Protestant society. Luther advised that a woman should be like “a nail driven into the wall,” firmly attached to the home, holding it and her family together, but even he recommended allowing “each nun’s own conscience to guide her” decision to leave or remain in her community, as long as no perpetual vows were involved (54).

The nuns’ gender, as well as their ties to the community, was also essential to their houses’ survival. Men’s houses closed more frequently throughout Germany than women’s, owing in part to a perception of male religious as more of a threat to reform, but also because Protestant leaders knew women had fewer options outside the cloister. Many nuns were too old to marry, some too sick to leave their convents. Also, Strasbourg families still wanted a place for their daughters. Many nuns were too old to marry, some too sick to leave their convents. Also, Strasbourg families still wanted a place for their daughters. Leonard emphasizes a link between the nuns and some of the city’s leading families, and argues that the council did not wish to alienate influential people by ostracizing their female relatives (87).

Unable to convince the nuns to leave and unwilling to force them out, the council sought to make the convents useful to the newly Protestant city by redefining their purpose and character. Recalling a mythical past in which monastic institutions functioned solely as centers of learning, the magistrates determined to serve the “common good” by converting the convents into schools for girls, thus meeting the needs of the nuns and the community at large. The council and the nuns thus reached a compromise. The nuns had to hear Protestant sermons, wear lay clothing, forgo the Latin Mass, sing in German, and do without vows or novices. In exchange, they could open schools, teach girls to be good wives and mothers, and continue to live communally with the council’s blessing and protection.
The nuns ostensibly agreed, accepting the council as their authority. However, throughout the century they smuggled in priests to perform Catholic rites, and accepted new novices without the council’s permission. Although little evidence remains to indicate what occurred in the schools, that most students chose to remain as nuns suggests that the sisters were not teaching Protestant doctrine. The council was aware of the nuns’ infractions, yet while the magistrates frequently issued warnings, they did little to enforce their regulations. The Protestant clergy complained bitterly that the Catholic Mass still took place in the convents’ chapels, with many citizens of Strasbourg in attendance, effectively making the convents little bastions of Catholicism in the city. Despite the clergy’s outrage, however, the magistrates seemed unwilling to intervene. Only when St. Nicolas-in-Undis became involved in a financial and sexual scandal in the 1590s did the council step in, closing it down and moving some of the sisters to another house. Despite the serious (and rather propagandistic) charges against the nuns of St. Nicolas-in-Undis, the council did not seize the opportunity to dissolve the two remaining convents.

One of Leonard’s most significant arguments is that the case of Strasbourg demonstrates how Protestants and Catholics could compromise with one another to achieve a common good, and that their willingness to do so highlights some of the limitations of the confessionalization model for understanding the local dynamics of reform. Individuals often played a greater role in dictating the terms of reform in their communities than the confessionalization model, with its emphasis on elite-imposed religious identity, implies. One wonders by the end of her book, however, whether Strasbourg might have seen compromise between Protestants and Catholics on an even larger scale than her focus on the nuns as the agents of the Catholic compromise presents. Leonard consistently cites pressure from important Strasbourg families as motivating the councils’ decisions regarding the convents, and while she emphasizes the connections between reformed families and several nuns, she also notes briefly in Chapter Four that most of the “influential” families with daughters in the convents retained ties to Catholicism. The Catholic ties of the nuns’ relatives are implied in places throughout the book, but seldom made explicit, although these were the same families who pressured the council to maintain the
convents, and whose daughters continued to join the convents. Some discussion of the extent of Catholic influence in Protestant Strasbourg, especially as it may have pertained to the council’s stance towards the convents, might have added an important dimension to the compromise between Protestants and Catholics that Leonard highlights. Overall, however, *Nails in the Wall* sheds important light on social dynamics during the early days of the Protestant Reformation, and provides welcome insight into women’s influence over the shape reform took at the local level.

Rebecca Clark Nykwest


Maria Bogucka’s book surveys the situation of women in Poland from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, providing a window into this world for those of us who cannot read the primary and secondary source materials in Polish. Bogucka, an historian and member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, focuses particularly on economic, religious, cultural, and political systems and how women interacted with them. Throughout most of the eight chapters, she reviews developments in these systems in Western Europe and then describes how the situations in Poland either paralleled or diverged from Western ones.

In her chapter on women and economic life, for example, Bogucka explains that the market economy and other features of capitalism that developed in Western Europe did not emerge on a large scale in Poland until much later. While serving as “a granary of Europe” in the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth century, Poland did so with a traditional manorial system based on serf labor. This “backwardness of the Polish economy,” she claims, provided “wider opportunities for women’s economic activity” (31) than in the Western countries, since the value of women’s