



# **THE SPRINGFIELDER**

January 1976  
Volume 40, Number 1

# The Crisis in Lutheran Historiography

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A review-article on *THE LUTHERANS IN NORTH AMERICA*, edited by E. Clifford Nelson in collaboration with Theodore E. Tappert, H. George Anderson, August R. Suelflow, Eugene L. Fevold, and Fred W. Meuser (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1975, 541 pages, cloth, \$22.50; also available in paperback, \$12.95).

**T**HE WORK OF AN HISTORIAN is difficult. Unlike other muses, Cleo demands that her disciple be not one but three men—a scientist, an artist, and a theologian.

Initially, an historian must be a scientist. Investigation is his first calling. In an objective, impartial, thorough and systematic manner, the historian must uncover all evidence that may even remotely relate to his subject. Jacques Barzun, long-time dean of American historians, compared the researcher's work to that of a detective. Like the legendary Sherlock Holmes, the historian arrives on the scene after the crime has been committed. His task is to reconstruct the event by asking questions which, hopefully, will uncover clues: "What transpired?" "When did it happen?" "How did it occur?" "Where did it take place?" "Who did it?" "Why?" In this stage of his task, the historian resembles sleuth Jack Webb in the television thriller series of the 1950s, "Dragnet," with his almost rude demand: "Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts." This kind of rigorous and relentless interrogation is the historian's legacy from such German masters of the craft as Leopold von Ranke.

Evidence, however, is not argument—clues are not a case. Correct arrangement is necessary. Having, therefore, completed his laboratory assignments, the historian is hardly free to rest. His labors have just begun. A metamorphosis must occur. Off comes the lab coat of the scientist and on goes the smock of the artist. For Cleo fancies form as well as facts. Examination of the evidence continues, but now the historian is looking for cause-and-effect relationships, possible patterns which will help him organize the mass of data in some kind of understandable and meaningful fashion. Like a Michelangelo, who, looking at the uninspiring Italian stone could see the potential form and figure of Moses, the liberator of Israel, so the historian hammers away at the stubborn facts until they reveal the human face of the past. Or, like an Arthur C. Clarke, who can read dry-as-dust astronomical journals and then use that data to compose exciting science-fiction, such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, so the historian exercises his imagination to recapture that real-life drama, stranger than fiction and more awesome than science, that lurks in the debris of the centuries. The prophet Ezekiel saw the valley of dry bones spring to life. In a similar manner, the historian glimpses the skeleton of the past dressed once more in the flesh of reality. To accomplish this miracle, the historian must be a good writer. In this respect his mentor is that poet-historian-seer of nineteenth century France, Jules

Michelet, whose lectures almost always evoked applause, whose books sold with the popularity of present-day Illinois lottery tickets, whose ideas altered the history of the Third Republic and whose chapters read like the hymns of St. Francis. For Cleo, fickle lady that she is, asks for veracity, beauty, and utility in the writings of her suitors. The historian must present his findings in a narrative that is intellectually honest, emotionally satisfying, and socially significant.

If literary success is all that the historian seeks, then he has betrayed his profession and lost the affection of Cleo. Zealous muse that she is, Cleo demands that her admirers be theologians—truth-tellers as well as truth-seekers. That imperative brings in the categories of philosophy and the criteria of theology. The historian becomes a theologian when he raises questions pertaining to worth and value, significance and consequence, guilt and innocence, moral integrity and social responsibility, the role of liberty and necessity, progress and retrogression, for all imply some understanding of the nature and destiny of man. All historians are, of course, theologians. As Lord Acton, the British historian remarked, “ideas, which, in religion and in politics, are truths, in history are forces.” Some historians, whether Catholic scholars as Acton or Communist writers as Karl Marx, are candid enough to admit their ideological theological biases. Others, however, feign innocence of the theologian’s arts only in order to deceive either themselves or their readers as to their ultimate commitments. Objectivity is good for finding facts, but subjectivity is necessary to determine their worth. Observation is a way to gather information, but only participation tests its value. In the marketplace of life, it is the wise man who knows that ideas, like coins, are currency, and are invested either to profit or to loss. Like Isaiah of old, a conscientious historian must ask of a foolish generation (ch. 55:2),

Why do you spend your money for  
that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which  
does not satisfy?

In the real world, the money is belief, and the bread is life itself.

No longer a detective, nor even an ardent advocate, the historian now sits in the judge’s chair. For he must give a verdict. To avoid a decision is, by default, to have made one. Speak he must. Err he may. Like Paul he should strive to be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). He will combine clarity and charity, humility with certainty, moral honesty with intellectual severity. In this facet of his work his mentors are such illustrious predecessors as Luke, the first church historian, and St. Augustine, the first historical theologian.

Today these virtues of the historical profession are more in evidence by their absence than their presence. Good historical writing is in short supply. It is hard to know why. Perhaps it is because of the rigors of the craft, or the lack of sufficient public patronage, or the obsession of the nation with matters other than destiny. Whatever the cause, the paradox remains—never has America had so many practicing historians, yet seldom has the country produced less outstanding historical literature than in the 1970’s. The giants are dis-

appearing from the land and one looks in vain for a biographer with the eloquence of a Roland Bainton, the penetrating political analysis of a Richard Hofstadter, the literary power of a Foster Rhea Dulles, the encyclopedic accuracy of a Harold J. Grimm, the intellectual depth and perception of a Henry Steele Commager, the mastery of economic interpretation indicated by a Charles and Mary Beard (one does not have to agree with them to know they were good historians), the recitation of church history on a global scale and with evangelical enthusiasm by a Kenneth Scott Latourette, the sophistication and philosophical subtlety of an Arnold J. Toynbee. Strangely enough, the academy of history seems deserted—but it is the solitude of the lonely crowd.

For that reason it was somewhat tragic that Fortress Press of Philadelphia decided to issue a new history of American Lutheranism at this time. Confessedly, a survey of the subject was now needed. Finally, the venerable classic, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America*, had succumbed to the pressures of age. New research had made it regrettably obsolete in places, though it still stands as a monument to the superior scholarship of Abdel Ross Wentz of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Furthermore, when the new text came hot off the presses, there would be anniversaries galore. By 1975 one could mark the three-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the landing of the first Lutherans for the purpose of permanent settlement in North America. Besides this birthday of the American Lutheran Church, there was also the rapidly approaching Bicentennial Year. Perchance Fortress Press intended this volume to be a modest tribute to the Republic as it entered its third century. One could expect nothing less from a printing house located in Philadelphia. One could easily find other motivations for such a publication. No one can deny the justification for a new history of Lutheranism in North America. Unfortunately, whatever the noble intentions, this book was simply born out of season. It just is not the right time—either in the academy or the church—for a major reappraisal of Lutheran lore in this land. The academy is depressed, the church is distressed. Write church history with fear and trembling, for in such eras the risk is great! For that reason, it is not a bit surprising to see that in almost every respect this volume conforms to the troubled spiritual and intellectual climate of the country today. It offers little to transform that condition either by power, grace, or truth. The poverty of the historical profession in the seventies is sadly reflected on every page. *The Lutherans in North America* (a strange title, which is fittingly printed half in Latin, half in Gothic script on the cover) admirably indicates the confusion among historians concerning their task of investigation, narration, and interpretation of the past. This book is history by committee, history as sociology, and history against theology.

#### HISTORY BY COMMITTEE

This book is history by committee. It was planned by a committee, written by a committee, redacted by a committee.

The 1960's were the "golden age" of the committee in America.

Experts came together in order to commit mediocrity by common consent. The dangers of "group-think" only became obvious later. There was presidency by committee, ending in the disgrace of the Watergate scandals. There was foreign policy by committee, resulting in the Indochina debacle. But nowhere were committees more popular and powerful than on campus. This project of "history by committee" was "conceived" at the University of Chicago in June, 1965, by unknown parents, for one is told only of an anonymous "consultation of American Lutheran historians." Like many other plans made by college committees in the mid-sixties, it was confused in purpose. Everyone wanted a book—but no one was sure what kind. Some felt that all that was required was a revision of the existing text by Abdel Ross Wentz. Others disagreed. Modesty gave way to hybris. Why not a trilogy? a whole library? The "consultation" convened by Fortress Press decided to create three books—one of primary sources, one a scholarly monograph for professionals, and finally a "popular" abridgement for "the masses." For a while the committee was living in an academic Camelot, or maybe even the realm of Aquarius. They were far removed from the Kingdom of Reality. The plans were overbuilt for the stark realities of the seventies. Three books became one, a combination popular-scholarly exhaustive-abridgement tailored to the reading needs of classes and the masses. To father such a *Wunderkind* would require either Superscholar or else scizzors and paste. There is a strong smell of glue in the air. For this is not a book; it is an incongruous contraction, a sort of classic academic "combination sandwich," or, to use the terminology of Fortress Press, which likes to puzzle over the theology of "Q" and the message of "L" and "M," this is redaction-history. What else could one expect from a committee but a redaction? In the manner of the man building the tower in the Gospel narrative (was that in "Q," "L," "M," or elsewhere?), there was no counting of the cost and the assumption that the Johnson boom would last forever. The crash came and the ambitious architectural plans of the sixties now stand as the half-finished tower of the seventies. This book is drastically confined in scope and format due to economic necessities. Where is the bibliography? Where are adequate maps and illustrations? Taken as a whole this work reminds me of those fifteen cent novels published during the Great Depression, stamped NRA, that have survived as collector's items. In similar fashion this book may go down in history as sad testimony to the folly of academic committees and overambitious editors who were finally taken to task by the recession of the seventies. Surely this volume is like the proverbial giraffe, a horse put together by a committee.

Perhaps the disasters of editorial redaction could have been ameliorated if care had been taken to send the manuscript to readers representative of both the entire Lutheran spectrum and Christian community on this continent. A European or Third World reaction would have been a stroke of genius! Unfortunately, the reviewers were mainly Neo-Lutherans. The work was sent to such persons as Dr. John Tietjen—hardly a great church historian; surely a man much preoccupied with his own personal and professional difficulties; cer-

tainly not representative of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. (Since the writers were selected politically, by the editor's own admission, why was the book not sent to Dr. J. A. O. Preus? Readers could have been chosen in equally diplomatic form, and President Preus could have profited from the knowledge that he was a "parvenu"—in spite of his ancestry and his Ph.D. in Classics—and the manuscript could have benefited by his correction of the misquotation of his brother, Robert, on page 531. But such are minor matters.) The work was also sent to the pastor of the Lutheran Church in Tascony, Pennsylvania, noted for his "never-failing good humor" (a much needed asset in reading this book). Though the book claims to be Lutheran, ecumenical, and secular (amazing triad!), it is none of these. Lutheran? Write instead *Neo-Lutheran*. It was not submitted by the editors to any *conservative* Lutherans for appraisal, let alone such ardent apologists for Lutheranism as Dr. John Warwick Montgomery. Ecumenical? Write instead "our friends." Why was the manuscript not shared with representatives of America's largest Protestant family, the evangelicals? Dr. Carl Henry, founding editor of *Christianity Today*, would have been delighted to have offered counsel, not to mention any of the many competent scholars of the Conference on Faith and History. Secular? Having earned my Ph.D. at a secular university in the area of American religious history, I can personally assure the editors this is *not* a book that is indicative of the concerns of academic historians today. Where is there any indication of the utilization of computer-analysis of data? Or, granted that Neo-Orthodox theologs may have an aversion to "facts," where is there any recognition of one of the hottest trends among historians today, "psycho-history," or the employment of psychiatric insights to understand the actions of historic individuals? Totally deaf to this development the book ignores biography.

Authorship by committee is, to be sure, more understandable than the plotting and redacting by committee employed to produce this volume. Why? Because it is very difficult to research and write American Lutheran church history. The origins of Lutheranism are more cosmopolitan than those of any other American denomination with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church. Materials pertaining to the Lutheran saga are found in an almost infinite variety of forms and foreign languages, ranging from such well-known tongues as French and German to such relatively obscure vernaculars as Transylvanian Saxon and Ruthenian. The story sprawls over almost four centuries, a continent twice the size of Europe, several countries, Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean (incidentally, why is the Caribbean, culturally part of Anglo-America, neglected in this volume?), with a cast of more than nine million. For most of the time the churches were organized in a bewildering medley of synods, ministeriums, conferences. Fragmentation was the rule, not the exception. It would take a giant to master this material and to digest it. The utilization of a committee of experts to research and write the text is *comprehensible*.

The basis of selection for the six authors was, however, as is openly admitted in it, as much "political" as "scholarly." Care was

to be taken to provide adequate representation for each of the major Lutheran bodies. The final result was three ALC historians, two LCA, and one LC-MS. Since the editor is ALC and the publisher LCA, the representation is "political" in more ways than one.

The six historians selected are all men of proven ability, and include Theodore G. Tappert, late Professor of Church History, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, authority on the seventeenth century, who prepared the unit on the Colonial Era; H. George Anderson, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina, a specialist in Southern and early national history, who reported the development of Lutheranism from 1790-1841; August R. Suelflow, the one Missouri Synod scholar on the team, of the Concordia Historical Institute, who co-authored the section "Following the Frontier, 1840-1875"; Eugene L. Fevold, Luther Theological Seminary, Minneapolis, who penned the chapters on the late nineteenth century; and Fred W. Meuser, President of an institution in Columbus, Ohio, variously named as Capital Theological Seminary (incorrect; it once was the Theological Department of Capital University, but that was in 1900), Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary (the "Evangelical" disappeared from the title and curriculum in the mid-1960's), and Lutheran Theological Seminary at Columbus. Meuser, though absent from the classroom in administration for many years, demonstrates once more his mastery of Lutheran history from 1900-1930. Finally, there is the editor (who was author of the section on the contemporary period and collaborator with Suelflow for the Gilded Age), the ever pugnacious E. Clifford Nelson, St. Olaf College, who brought a certain breezy, journalistic touch to both his own chapters and those of his colleagues. Measured by standards of strict scholarship, Suelflow, Meuser, and Tappert are head and shoulders above Anderson, Fevold, and Nelson. It is their conscientious work that carries the book.

#### HISTORY AS SOCIOLOGY

The organization and narration of the material uncovered by these scholars requires a thesis. In the selection of a theme the editor, Nelson, reveals himself to be a church historian, not an historical theologian. It quickly becomes evident that this book is essentially a treatise on Lutheran immigration and acculturation. Doctrine, confessional identity—such items are incidental.

This is a non-doctrinal history of American Lutheranism. I know that is hard to imagine, but here it is! Surely this text will go down in the annals as a remarkable illustration of the secularization of the Lutheran churches in the seventies and of the almost total capitulation of Neo-Lutheranism to American culture. To Nelson, in the final analysis, Lutheranism is but part of the ongoing immigrant saga.

To me that view is totally missing the point. Lutheranism, in sharp distinction from all other kinds of Christianity, is a confessional church. Roman Catholicism has the papacy; Eastern Orthodoxy has tradition; Anglicanism has the episcopacy; Calvinism has the notion of the elect community; Enthusiasm has the trust in individual experi-

ence; but Lutheranism has only theology. Subtract theology, as Nelson has done, and all one has left is a collection of strange immigrants.

Why was sociology, rather than theology, chosen as the unifying theme for this text? How could the idea of Americanization replace confessionalism as the plot of the Lutheran story? Who would substitute immigration narratives (out of vogue among secular historians since the 1930's) for the account of doctrinal discovery as the key to the Lutheran epic? Only someone who ultimately has a strong dislike for Lutheran Orthodoxy.

This is why the volume does *not* begin with an historiographical essay, for nearly all previous histories of *Lutheranism* (a faith, as opposed to the Lutherans, a community) saw theology as the basis of church-identity. This is why the volume does *not* include an opening chapter on conditions in Europe on the eve of the migration to America. This is why the volume does *not* develop in depth those topics closely connected with theology (polity, liturgy, piety, biography).

But perhaps there is a need for such a novelty—a sociological survey of three centuries of Lutheran immigrants in America. Is this book good sociology? Hardly! It is jam-packed with what we used to call at Ohio State “history as trivia.” Reading this work one learns that Julius Bodensieck had “a remarkable wife” (but she then remains anonymous!—fie, fie, in this “Year of the Woman”), that American Jews in 1945 raised \$100 million dollars, that Leigh Jordahl is an expert on the theology of Franz Pieper. Twice we are told that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod disciplined one of its China missionaries for praying with Presbyterians. Thrice we are informed of the ongoing struggle for the control of Augsburg College. It is revealed that Walter A. Maier’s “radio sermons did not impede the remarkable growth of ‘The Lutheran Hour.’” The same quotation from Theodore Roosevelt is used twice for different purposes. We read of the most sudden conversion to confessionalism reported anywhere in Lutheran literature: On page 92 John C. Kunze is quoted as having said “The thirty-nine articles [of the Church of England] fully agree with the Augustan [Augsburg] Confession and every Lutheran can subscribe them.” Four paragraphs later, on page 93, Anderson remarks, and not in sarcasm or humor, that “Kunze had a strong sense of the distinctive doctrines of the Lutheran church.”

I suppose such information has value for contestants on television quiz programs—but what about the serious student of Lutheranism in America? Such a person is in trouble—because a strange set of priorities has guided the editor of this text. Take, for instance, simply one category—that of biography. For a book that claims to offer a “holistic” interpretation of Lutheranism in North America, there is a startling neglect of the role of personality in the Lutheran saga. Certainly some consideration of the interaction of men and movements would have been very helpful! But Nelson has capitulated to the cult of the anti-hero, and the reader looks in *despair* for biographical sketches of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, Charles Porterfield Krauth, Matthias Loy, C. F. W. Walther, Samuel S. Schmucker,



Franz Pieper, Franklin Clark Fry, or any of the other human dynamos of American Lutheranism. Such significant theologians as E. C. Fendt and Harold Yochum appear only in footnotes for the purpose of derogating them. In my opinion this is a shabby way to treat two of the leading educators of the old American Lutheran Church who devoted their lives to the quest for Lutheran unity on the basis of the Confessions. R. C. H. Lenski, the celebrated exegete, is mentioned only once, and that because of his opposition to the National Lutheran Council. The way in which conservative leaders disappear from the pages of this most recent Lutheran narrative is reminiscent of the "non-persons" in the "non-histories" in Soviet encyclopedias.

This recitation could be continued—but this should suffice to suggest the tragedy of this volume. Perhaps the disaster can be remedied in part if the units by Tappert, Meuser, and Suelflow could appear in paperback as specialized studies of individual eras.

#### HISTORY AGAINST THEOLOGY

In the final analysis, the problem with *The Lutherans in North America* is the set of priorities indicated by its editor. Priorities involve values, and that indicates the need for sound theology. Sound theology is what is lacking in this volume. Certain authors reveal that happy union of good historiography and solid theology that is the mark of a first-rate historical theologian. These traits are obviously present in the confessionalism of an August Suelflow and the liberal evangelicalism of a Fred Meuser. But because of the lack of that kind of a consciousness in the editorial staff, this volume has become anti-theology. The indictment of James A. Scherer, in an essay called "The Identity Crisis in Contemporary Lutheranism," is adequately illustrated in this book:

It is an unpleasant but undeniable fact that Lutheran identity today consists mostly of the cultivation of Lutheran adiaphora (hymnal, liturgical practice, centralized boards, etc). So pervasive is our sense of Lutheran . . . identity at this level that we are apt to think that it is the main thing about our churchmanship. We are, in short, most identifiably Lutheran precisely at the point where the reformers said there should be the greatest liberty.

And where we ought to be bound to the Word of the Confessions, and therefore identifiable as Lutherans, we are not.

This book is suitable to serve as Exhibit A—evidence of the anti-theological bias that is settling upon all our churches. Should this trend continue, we will all fulfill the prophecy of this text, for we will be "Culture-Protestants" of Northern and Central European origin, currently undergoing the pangs of Americanization. That tide of secularization can be reversed. There is a way—if there is also the will. It is called theological recovery—and that process has begun. Should it succeed, the next history of Lutherans in North America will be quite different, quite different indeed.