

INTRODUCTION

This is a book that has had a long gestational period. I have been working in the religious-history field for over twenty-five years, and the standard history of American Lutheranism, *The Lutherans in North America*, edited by E. Clifford Nelson, was already fifteen years old when I began my own study on the topic. In the past few years, as I have been teaching this history to students at Luther Seminary, it has become clear that although the older histories were (and still are) invaluable, the story of American Lutheranism has shifted in significant ways during the past forty years. Besides updating the narrative to include the most recent past, new questions and new research have shifted how we look at the subject at hand, and these new elements need to be incorporated into the historical narrative. Beyond this, the context for Lutherans, as well as for the whole of religion in the United States (which will be the geographic limit of this book), has shifted dramatically during the last few decades of the twentieth century. As is proper, we now view this almost four hundred-year historical record with new eyes and from new positions, so it is time for a new attempt to tell the story.

The “new” can never obliterate past attempts to tell this history, however; all the “new” history can do is to modify and add to the historical record. This history would have been absolutely impossible without the work of generations of American Lutheran historians who recorded the history that they saw and discovered, from Israel Acrelius’s *History of New Sweden* (1759) to the flood of historical writings that have been produced in the years immediately preceding this volume. I am aware that I stand on the shoulders of giants, women and men whose painstaking

efforts have made this work possible. My current teachers, colleagues, friends, and fellow historians continue to help all of us see our common tradition in new and deeper ways, while those who have preceded us continue still to enlighten and inspire our work. The writing of such a history is, in the final measure, a collaboration of immense proportions, and I am keenly aware of the assistance that I have received, even from those whom I have never met.

So what makes this present work new? Obviously, the last two chapters of this book cover new territory that have not been seen in previous histories, and in this sense it is new. But beyond these obvious additions, this work attempts to look at the history of Lutherans in America with new questions and through new lenses. It also attempts to think about this history, especially the history of the twentieth century, through a new interpretative framework, which is only natural, given the time that has elapsed since the last great wave of American Lutheran histories in the 1960s and 1970s. First, I will talk about the new questions and perspectives, then the shift in interpretation.

Much of what is lasting and continuous about the history of Lutherans in America are the institutions that they have built: the denominational structures, schools, hospitals, social service agencies, and the like. Because of their prominence in this history, it is natural that these institutions might take a leading role in any historical narrative. Yet this would be to miss some very important elements of the story. This is a history of Lutheran *people* in America; certainly, the institutions that they formed are an important part of their story, but they are not the main focus. This history tries to strike a balance at this point, giving enough of the history of institutional formation, mergers, and continuation to provide an understanding of this element, without making it the primary aspect of the story. This history also attempts to tell the individual and social history of Lutherans in America, their own struggles to live lives of faith and to adapt to a new and different religious culture. This is a much more difficult undertaking, for two reasons. First, given the millions of individual Lutherans who comprise this history, it is difficult to determine which stories are truly representative. And, second, the materials we have to tell these stories are also often skewed toward those who were both literate and in positions of power. This history tries to balance these narratives wherever possible, with special effort to highlight not just the stories of Lutheran leaders and clergy, but to attempt a narrative that includes the experiences of laypeople, women, and non-European Americans as well. This is difficult, because the sources we have on these people, who comprise the majority of American Lutherans, are not nearly as complete as might be wished. Yet, to keep this expanded vision of Lutherans in America in mind is perhaps at least one step toward a fuller and more complete history.

Now, the question of interpretation. If there was a “golden age” of writing the history of Lutherans in America, it was the 1960s and 1970s. This was the period of time when many of the standard histories of the various American Lutheran denominations were written, as well as the last complete major American Lutheran history, *The Lutherans in North America*, produced by a team of writers headed by E. Clifford Nelson. This burst of historical research and writing is still extremely valuable, and, in all honesty, this present history is deeply indebted to the labors of these fine historians. Yet, it is important to understand the circumstances behind this wave of historical writing, which gives some clue as to the motivations behind it. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of profound institutional merger and rearrangement in American Lutheranism, and many wished for the formation of an institutionally united American Lutheranism. This was also a time of great growth and optimism, and some historians saw a single American Lutheran denomination as almost inevitable, a perspective that is reflected in a number of these histories. But there was another motivation at work here, especially in the histories written about the individual Lutheran denominational traditions that were being subsumed into these new, united Lutheran denominations. Though there was a sense of tremendous hope about the future, there was also a palpable sense of great loss as the familiar Lutheran traditions merged into single entities. Many of these denominational histories were written both to celebrate these individual Lutheran denominational traditions, and to assuage the deep sense of loss that their partisans were feeling at their ending. Much of this history said to these partisans, in effect, “Yes, we had a great tradition, but it was the destiny of this tradition to come together with other American Lutherans and form a new, united American Lutheranism.” These histories celebrated the Lutheran arrival as a united force on the American religious scene; this was their destiny, and their future. Mergers were good—and inevitable.

This present history has been written forty years later, and much has happened among Lutherans in America during the meantime. Although there was another merger in 1988, forming the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the vision of a single, united American Lutheran entity has receded with every passing year, as the two major denominations, the ELCA and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), seem to be moving ever further apart from each other. And American Lutheranism has undergone three very public and painful schisms since 1970, which have further clouded the optimistic vision of inevitable unity, if not killed it entirely. Further, recent developments, including a reexamination of past histories, have produced a more nuanced reading of unity movements and mergers, a reading that also takes into account the difficulties and losses that institutional realignment has meant. Mergers were, as it now seems, neither inevitable nor

completely good, and could actually be seen in another view as costly distractions and painful detours from the real work of American Lutheranism. This present history will not jump from one end of this spectrum to another, but will at least attempt to consider both sides of the major institutional realignments that have dominated American Lutheranism in the twentieth century.

A further challenge might be the often-heard assertion that the writing of denominational history itself is a rather poor substitute for “real” American religious history. This view generally sees these kinds of denominational histories as inferior substitutes for “true” historical scholarship, prone to self-absorption and self-congratulation as they are. To be sure, there are enough denominational histories (even among American Lutherans) that reinforce this critical viewpoint, but the existence of some mediocre historical writing does not negate the attempt. Instead, it suggests that the real push should be to write *better* denominational histories, rather than to abandon the field altogether. Further, I would assert that in fact *all* American religious history is actually denominational history, in some very important ways. Given American religious pluralism and institutional diffusion, one cannot truly write on any aspect of American religious history without locating one’s subject within a specific institutional and denominational context; to fail to do this is to write a monodimensional history. Lutherans definitely have been underrepresented in the writing of American religious histories, and it is my hope that this volume will begin to redress this imbalance.

One other note, hinted at above: this book is very consciously a history of Lutherans within the territorial confines of the United States of America. This limit means that the work pays little attention to Lutherans in other parts of North America, especially to Canada and to the scattered Lutheran groups in the Caribbean, particularly after the colonial period. This limit is deliberate, but not because the history of these other areas is unimportant. Rather, it is because their history is both important and distinct; in other words, these grouping of Lutherans outside the United States have formed their communities within distinctive religious and social milieus that are different from those of the United States. Good histories of Lutheranism in Canada and the Caribbean (of which there are several; see the bibliography) root their stories in the distinctive cultures of their areas, and should not attempt to be told as an adjunct or an afterthought to the history of Lutherans in the United States. Thus, unless otherwise noted, my use of the word *America* and its variants throughout this book will denote, and serve as shorthand for, the United States.

This volume is laid out in a basic chronological fashion, moving the history from beginning to end, although there are times when it will be necessary to jump

either backward or forward to help make sense of something in the text. The chapters themselves, especially after the first three, will cover roughly twenty-five to forty years of history at a time. Between the chapters are brief excursions, which lift interesting nuggets of historical materials out of its preceding chapter, to examine further. At times these excursions will duplicate materials mentioned elsewhere, but hopefully these slight duplications will not bother the reader. The first chapter—on Lutheranism in Europe, 1500–1900—is an attempt to explain the European background for the American narrative; it is separate, so as not to digress for an explanation for a European trend in the middle of a discussion of something concerning American Lutheranism. Finally, in order to improve the readability of the text, the number of endnotes have been limited, and in their place is an extended bibliographic essay at the end of the volume.



As mentioned above, this present history could not have been written without the work of numerous historians who have written their histories before me. Certainly, I have pointed out areas where my own historical vision differs from theirs, but this is not to say that my own historical inadequacies are any less than theirs; all I can hope is that readers of this narrative and future historians will understand and be patient with me. This is an attempt to write the history of Lutherans in America from my context in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and I hope that, if nothing else, I have furthered in some way the understanding of the history of Lutherans in America. It is my hope also that current and future scholars will push this story and our understanding of it even further.

The writing of such a book is a large undertaking, and one that requires tremendous support, which I have been fortunate enough to have received. Many thanks to Will Bergkamp and his team at Fortress Press; Will suggested a project of this shape, and has been of invaluable assistance in the composition and writing of this book. A number of colleagues in the field of American Lutheran history have read drafts or portions of the book and given valuable advice, including David Settje, Maria Erling, Walter Sundberg, Mary Jane Haemig, David Preus, Martin Marty, Patrick Keifert, and many others. Special thanks must be given to Jim Albers of Valparaiso University, who read through the draft and provided copious suggestions and revisions. Thanks as well to my students at Luther Seminary, some of whom read this manuscript in preliminary form for their classes and gave their honest insights into its effectiveness; this book is intended for them and for other students yet to come. So many others assisted with this work, and the

book has been greatly strengthened by their suggestions; if the book has its limitations (and certainly it does) it is due to me alone. Special thanks should be given to Victoria Smith for the preparation of the index. Finally, I must give my deepest appreciation to my family—my wife, Kathy, and adult children, Beth and Rob—for their patience and support. Without their love this book could never have been written.