

REVIEW ESSAY

A Good Time for Looking Back

by MARK NOLL

Lutherans in America: A New History. By Mark Granquist. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015. x + 388 pp.

The near approach of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation provides a fitting occasion to consider the course of Christian movements that got their start in the years 1517 and following. Mark Granquist's full and programmatic account of American Lutheranism makes a signal contribution to such a retrospective. Especially when considering the Reformation in light of what came after it, one interesting way of engaging Granquist's recently published book is to observe which aspects of the original European inheritance he emphasizes as the book traces Lutheran developments on the North American continent. For that purpose, three particulars of the earlier history suggest a convenient place to begin: thus, at its origins Lutheranism offered a distinctive Christian theology, took for granted a specific social order, and configured itself against a sharply defined set of enemies.

Lutheran theology of course began with Martin Luther, but when it was codified in the Augsburg Confession of 1530 and (for many Lutherans) further codified in the Book of Concord (1577-1580), the tumultuous array of Luther's insights became at least somewhat formulaic. First in importance was justification by faith, but followed closely by a realistic depiction of the Lord's Supper or Eucharist as an objective presentation of God's free grace communicated through the body and blood of Christ. Luther's stress on the interwoven but distinct meanings of law and gospel, on the theology of the cross, and on the definition of a Christian as at the same time justified and

a sinner (*simul justus et peccator*) survived in later codifications, but these existentially charged doctrines were also tamed by the teachers and rulers who took charge of official Lutheranism. As argued persuasively by the late W. R. Ward, Luther's proclamation of the priesthood of all believers remained on the books, but lost almost all its force until quickened in the pietist revivals of the late seventeenth century.¹ Formal allegiance to the Bible as supreme guide (*scriptura sola*) remained crucial for sustaining Lutheran theological formation. Yet even more important were two vehicles that drew the laity into the theological enterprise: generation-by-generation instruction from the pared-down gospel message of Luther's Small Catechism and a hymn tradition as affective as it was effective in sealing Lutheran theology on the heart. That tradition also began with Luther but was then deepened by many first-rate authors and composers, including Johann Walther, Philipp Nicolai, Heinrich Schütz, Johann Schein, Johann Heermann, Johann Crüger, and culminating with Paul Gerhardt and J. S. Bach.

Establishmentarian Christendom defined the social order of early Lutheranism, as it continues to do in vestigial forms for some European nations to this day. The concise definition of Christendom supplied recently by Hugh McLeod well describes the environment in which Lutheranism became a powerful form of institutional Protestantism: "a society where there are close ties between leaders of the church and secular elites; where the laws purport to be based on Christian principles; where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, everyone is assumed to be Christian; and where Christianity provides a common language, shared alike by the devout and the religiously lukewarm."² Controversy aplenty marked negotiations between religious and political interests in Lutheran Christendom; yet assumptions remained fixed concerning the necessity of a unified religious-political-educational-social-cultural world.

Luther's enemies were first Roman Catholics, but then almost immediately the Schwärmer, who took *sola scriptura* far beyond where he and later Lutherans thought it should go, and Reformed Protestants, who differed in much less, but still with critical differences in how they followed *scriptura sola* in expressing their

doctrines and establishing their forms of social order. Lutheran efforts to quarantine themselves from Catholic, Anabaptist, and Reformed errors—and then later from the secular errors spawned by self-described avatars of Enlightenment—always constituted a prominent feature of European Lutheran history. Just as prominent, however, were the disputes among Lutherans that grew from conflicting reactions to the thoughts and practices of other Europeans. Wariness toward non-Lutherans because of their errors easily became wariness toward other Lutherans suspected of imbibing poisonous opinions from beyond the table of Lutheran fellowship.

If this sketch of European Lutheranism comes anywhere near what actually transpired, it provides a standard by which to assess Mark Granquist's new history of Lutherans in America. While the development of Lutheran theology is not unimportant in this book, it focuses most attention on what happened when the state-church establishmentarian descendents of Lutheran Christendom encountered the unregulated confusion of the United States' free exercise of religion.

For Lutherans the American challenge was two-fold. They first encountered a social setting almost completely at odds with their establishmentarian instincts. The United States opened up a religious environment where no formal ties existed between church and state. Yet if disestablishment defined the law of this new country, it did not preclude the erection of an informal "nonsectarian" Protestant quasi-establishment created by creative entrepreneurs of the sort almost unknown among European Lutherans until the emergence of revivalists like Hans Nielson Hauge in the early nineteenth century. Moreover, the early and informal "nonsectarian" Protestant establishment of the United States rested on strongly Reformed instincts which had no patience for the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel. As an illustration, the ease with which "nonsectarian" Protestants created public schools guided by no more than a generic Protestant ethos and "the Bible alone" defined a pattern very different from Lutheran education in Europe where the Catechism had always enjoyed a strongly confessional prominence.

A minor criticism of Granquist's book at this point concerns the assertion (42) that "free" Lutheran congregations in the Netherlands

provided a “model” for how Lutherans later organized in the United States. Yet as the narrative advances, there is no reference to any American Lutheran body looking back to the Netherlands for how to organize their churches in the United States. Not disestablishmentarian models from the old world, but making it up as they went along characterized Lutheran progress in the new world.

The second organizational challenge arose from within Lutheranism’s own internal history. In the old world, Prussians, Saxons, Bohemians, Swedes, Finns, Danes, and Norwegians lived in regions with relative ethnic as well as religious homogeneity. By contrast, in the United States the immigrants found themselves all jumbled together—but without state authority to structure any sort of cohesion. This change of venue resulted, to mention one extreme example, in the simultaneous existence of “six different, rival Norwegian Lutheran synods” (173), divided by American region of settlement, time of arrival in the new world, and the influence of dominant personalities—but not by anything identifiable as historically Lutheran as such.

The fact that Granquist’s three-page glossary of “Abbreviations and Acronyms” (359-61) is so helpful for navigating the narrative that dominates his book highlights its main achievement, which is to sort out the thick alphabet soup of American Lutheran history. When combined with the book’s exposition, that glossary and three helpful genealogical trees bring the extraordinary institutional complexity of this story closer to the point of comprehension. The first eight “Abbreviations” in the glossary illustrate why so much of such a book must be devoted to organizational detail. So it is that we can learn that the (1) AALC (American Association of Lutheran Churches) came into existence in 1987 when twelve ALC (second instance) congregations chose not to go into the newly created ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America); that a first (2) AELC (American Evangelical Lutheran Church) existed from 1872 to 1962 as the second name of the formerly Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; that a second (3) AELC (Association of Evangelical Lutheran Congregations) existed from 1976 to 1987 as the part of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) pushed out of that denomination for what the LCMS considered doctrinal

liberalism; that the (4) AFLC has existed since 1962 as the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations that left the second ALC; that a first (5) ALC (American Lutheran Church), emerging in 1930 as the merger of several synods of German heritage, lasted until 1960; that a second (6) ALC was created in 1960 through the merger of four largely Midwestern denominations—the NLCA (Norwegian Lutheran Church in America), the first ALC, the UELC (United Evangelical Lutheran Church), and the Lutheran Free group; that the (7) ALConf represented a cooperative association serving Upper Midwestern synods associated with the first ALC; and that the (8) ALCW served as the women’s auxiliary during the existence of the second ALC from 1960 to 1988. Granquist’s great accomplishment is to provide clear, succinct, contextualized treatment for the scores of such denominations, associations, affiliates, and organizations named by such abbreviations. For non-Lutherans who would like very much to benefit from studying Lutheranism in America, it is both comic and off-putting to contemplate the energy necessary for grasping the tremendous Lutheran variety that has populated the American landscape.

The book’s focus on organizational developments flows naturally into sensitive treatment of ecumenical efforts that, while looking outwards, have often precipitated or defined internal Lutheran disputes. So it was in the nineteenth century when Samuel Simon Schmucker of Gettysburg Seminary proposed adjustments to the Augsburg Confession in order to enhance cooperation with other churches on the proprietary end of the American spectrum—which were also “evangelical” but in the American sense of that plastic term. Yet his fate was to have this initiative challenged by Lutherans from Tennessee, Missouri, Philadelphia, and elsewhere who regarded Schmucker’s ecumenical efforts as a betrayal of genuine Lutheranism.

Granquist’s last two chapters, which treat the periods 1965–1988 and 1988–2013, offer especially shrewd discussions of how this feature of European Lutheranism has also carried over into American history. Here he details a number of causes or emphases embraced by some Lutherans during the last half century that have aimed at broader Christian or cultural engagement, but that have ended in heightened intra-Lutheran controversy. The list of those causes or emphases is

long: mega-church seeker-sensitive practices, Evangelical Catholic convictions, progressive political initiatives, Liturgical Renewal, expanded pulpit and altar fellowship, and more. Controversies over such matters reprise a main feature of Lutheranism's European history: steps taken to draw Lutherans closer to non-Lutherans end by dividing Lutherans from each other.

If Granquist's new book expands at length on how European Lutherans organized themselves in the new world and also considers how relationships outside of Lutheranism have complicated relationships within, the book does not do as much with either the ground level of quotidian Lutheran existence or the conceptual level of Lutheran theology. Although the book announces at the start that "this is a history of the Lutheran *people* in America" (2), a statement near the end of the book summarizes its focus more accurately: "by the beginning of the twenty-first century, Lutherans faced the end of one of the grand narratives of their history in America, the 175-year-long concern with its institutional arrangements" (349). This observation can hardly be a criticism, since a book that successfully explains a very complicated institutional picture in little more than 350 pages could not also undertake the effort required to describe American Lutheranism from the ground up—lay as well as clerical; rural, urban, and also suburban; linguistically isolated and transferring to English; educated in all manner of schools, colleges, and universities; and more. As a kind of compensation, however, it is important to note that some aspects of such history do appear in an earlier book co-authored by Granquist. That study—devoted to the Augustana Lutheran Synod, which was established in 1860 and survived until in 1962 it joined the churches merging into the Lutheran Church in America (LCA)—features rich accounts of the extensive family networks that sustained the Swedish-American Lutherans for more than a century.³

Registering criticism of a different sort, one might point out the relative paucity of Lutheran theological assessment in Granquist's story of American Lutheranism. Without such assessment, it remains an open question whether Lutheran churches in America represent a vibrant theological translation from Europe or only an example (to be sure, a complicated example) of ethnic assimilation by the

homogenizing force of American social, economic, political, and religious development. While the book does a good job describing the cruxes ripe for theological adjudication, it does not venture such judgments itself. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, the opponents of Samuel Simon Schmucker claimed that he violated foundational Lutheran commitment concerning the Real Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. A theological assessment of that charge might speculate on whether Schmucker's adjustment to the Augsburg Confession could have given a Lutheran witness more transaction in the American environment and so strengthened commitment to justification by faith during an era when America's other Protestant churches seemed bent on promoting a human-centered theology of glory. It could also ask if the way that Schmucker's opponents defended traditional Lutheran confessionalism facilitated a clericalism that made it difficult for the priesthood of all believers to flourish in an American setting.

Again, when from the 1960s, Lutherans took up their own version of Bible Battles by arguing over terms like "inerrant," "inspired," and "critical," might a form of intellectual works righteousness have been active among both "conservatives" and "moderates"—that is, by the implication communicated from both sides that a correct approach to Scripture constituted a human-created precondition for apprehending the Bible's message of justification by faith? Even more recently, have Lutheran proponents of recognizing same-sex marriage made convincing use of the law-gospel distinction in advancing their view? Or have their opponents considered whether justification by faith might mean salvation imparted without respect to conditions of nature (like same-sex attraction seems to be for some people) as well as to salvation imputed without respect to human works? The overarching question that Granquist does not take up is the extent to which Lutheran theology has guided the course of Lutheran history in America.

Admittedly, it would take a very different kind of book to attempt a Lutheran theological assessment of American Lutheran history. Granquist, however, does at least hint at one way in which such a history might proceed. At several points in his narrative he pauses to demonstrate how important hymnody and hymn books have been

for American Lutheran history. The great difference in theological outlook during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century between J. H. C. Helmuth of Philadelphia, who defended Lutheran traditions, and Frederick Quitman of New York, who seasoned Lutheranism with hefty doses of the Enlightenment, can be discerned in the content and arrangement of the hymnbooks they published. Similarly, at several places in the book Granquist shows how a new hymnbook for a newly merged denomination either succeeded or failed as an existentially effective meeting place for the groups coming together.

It is certainly significant that the last serious effort at pan-Lutheran cooperation in the era after World War II was a joint hymnal proposed for the ALC, LCA, and LCMS.⁴ The latest hymnals produced by the largest denominations, for which planning began not long after Missouri withdrew from that project and the LCA and ALC merged, provide promising resources for measuring the formal theology as well as the lived theology of main Lutheran expressions. In light of the fact that the ELCA's *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and the LCMS's *Lutheran Service Book*, both published in 2006, draw together song and creed, worship orders and liturgies, hymns from various Lutheran traditions and hymns from other Christian traditions, they offer direct evidence of the themes, interests, convictions, emotions, and memories for all who use these worship resources. Analyzing the content and arrangement of landmark hymnbooks requires a very different narrative strategy than era-by-era charting of institutional developments. But such an effort might take observers very close to the theological center of the movements under consideration.

When in 2017 American Lutherans join their fellow Lutherans from around the world in commemorating the posting of the Ninety Five Theses, they will also have cause to ponder their own consequential history. The awareness, which Granquist mentions more than once, that there are today more than twice as many Lutherans in Africa as in North America, provides one kind of perspective on their own American history. Even more perspective might be gained by exploring the treasures found in *Lutherans in America: A New History*. Yet still more would come from an effort to assess American Lutheran history with Lutheran theological standards.

NOTES

1. W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31, 44.
2. Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.
3. Maria Erling and Mark Granquist, *The Augustana Story: Shaping Lutheran Identity in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).
4. For provocative insights on the committee charged with preparing the pan-Lutheran hymnbook, see Philip H. Pfatteicher and Gracia Grindal, "Two Memoirs of Making the *Lutheran Book of Worship*," *Lutheran Forum* 49.2 (summer 2015), 22-27.