

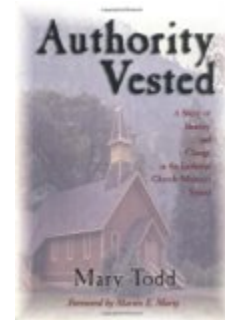
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Todd. *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod*. Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2000. xvi + 336 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-4457-6.

Reviewed by Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig (Faculty, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania)

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Women's Roles in a Teutonic Denomination: Change and Denial in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

Mary Todd's *Authority Vested* presents the history of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in its slow, begrudging and unfinished accommodation to women in ministry. The book is an exquisite example of the historical craft, and a real treat for readers. Todd makes contributions to three audiences: the broad readership of American religious history; historians of the Lutheran denominational traditions; and the Missouri Synod itself, Todd's lifelong ecclesiastical home.

American religious history has until now lacked an accessible and lucid account of the complex and interesting history of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. While the Missouri Synod is nearly unequalled in its preservation of its historical sources, and endowed with synodical custodians who have attempted to recount the sacred history of their denomination, a full narrative through which the uninitiated may enter and understand the Missouri Synod story has been lamentably missing from American religious historiography. Many a trained historian has quickly been tangled in the thicket of ethnicity, doctrinal complexity and political obscurity that await any investigator of this highly Teutonic band that fled the Prussian Union church and settled on the Mississippi in 1837.

From a painful impeachment of their first charismatic leader, whom they followed under episcopal authority amidst their pervasive pietism, to the paradox of a vaulted congregationalism alongside centralized pa-

triarchal authority, Todd summarizes the early story of the Missouri Synod in eighty pages more deftly than any of those who have tried before her. In the rest of the book, Todd traces the evolution of denominational authoritarianism through conflicts over the roles of women in church and ministry. Her evidence spans the situations of the many parochial school teachers in the synod, the deaconesses in social ministry, the Ladies' Aid societies, suffrage for women in church affairs, and finally the ordination of women, which the synod rejects to this day.

Within her narrative are the underpinnings for Todd's effective comparison to denominational authoritarianism in the Southern Baptist Convention and other conservative groups in her conclusion, along with broader observations about how the evidence she musters contributes to certain comprehensive theses about American religion. Those who study biblical conservatism will need this book to help locate the Missouri Synod "in but not of" American fundamentalism. Those who study the puzzling conditions of ministry and authority in the American environment will also be well served by this book.

For the history of American Lutherans, the third largest Protestant family in twentieth century America, Todd's study explains the roots of the most apparent difference between the larger Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Missouri Synod. Todd shows

that the Missouri Synod shifted from an adherence to traditional Lutheran sources (scripture and Confessions) to primary reliance upon the authority of the synod itself – something noticed by various dissenters that she quotes, and an ironic parallel to the synod’s unpleasant early experiences. The outcome for Lutheran unity in America has been that the ordination of women is a key differentiating mark of Missouri over other Lutherans, Todd notes, and a crucial element for maintenance of a separate synodical identity amidst a changing scene.

Originally, Lutherans held that correct teaching of the doctrine of justification by faith was the only issue worthy of dividing the church. Just weeks before the publication of Todd’s book, the ELCA and many Lutheran churches in the world signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification with the Roman Catholic Church, thereby ending mutual condemnations and affirming one another’s teachings on that crucial doctrine. The Missouri Synod did not enter the agreement. Hence, Missouri now has a renewal of its original mark of separation from the Roman Church and a new mark of separation from the ELCA. Meanwhile, the ELCA ironically bears the ordination of women as a leading mark of difference from Rome in the wake of the removal of justification as the fundamentally divisive mark. In years ahead, as the functions of the terms of the debates change, scholars of religion will need Todd’s book to explain the true nature of the intra-Lutheran rifts of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

For the Missouri Synod itself, Todd has provided an unflustered account of the inconsistencies of the denomination’s positions concerning the roles of women. Thereby she may help the synod in its emergence from both its legacy of authoritarianism, and its sluggishness on inclusion of women. In a tradition that placed the highest premium on loyalty to the synod, and even rent itself in differing versions of the same loyalty, Todd’s comprehensive documentation of the synod’s pulse on questions of women’s roles will go further in advanc-

ing the slow change of which Missouri is capable than all the fevered implosions or outside pressure to which the synod has shown itself to be resilient.

Two items would strengthen the study. While Todd treats the movement of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) toward ordination and its role in the failure of fellowship between ALC and Missouri, she gives little attention to the role of the larger Lutheran Church in America (LCA), the group that first ordained Lutheran women and whose consistent theological and cultural adaptation matched Missouri’s resistance step for step. She does treat the ventures of cooperative Lutheranism through which the LCA had some major influence, but not the LCA in detail.

Secondly, while Todd carefully unpacks historic Lutheran relativity concerning church order, the Lutheran anthropology of “simultaneously saint and sinner” is largely latent in her account of ecclesiological struggles. Hence, Todd’s study might leave some Lutheran women and men within a dilemma she cites from Rosemary Ruether: that one must accept either that the church is truly a patriarchal institution and in its core exclusive toward women, or one must affirm an institution that has been wrong in its exclusivity toward women and therefore apostate for most of its history. The dilemma rests upon an assumption that the church must be pure and not sinful. If however, the church is “simultaneously saint and sinner,” as Lutheran theology views those who are justified by Christ, then women and men can affirm a church that errs but is still the church. Todd’s study rings with the sensibility of such a Lutheran conviction, and it is probably why she has been able to produce a work that is at once historiographically critical, politically relevant in the church, and respectful – even loyal – to the Missouri Synod.

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