



## Pastors and Piety: Perspectives from the American Novel

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The personal and professional life of clergy has figured importantly from the very inception of the concept of an “American novel.” From Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which established the genre of the American novel, through the classic *Elmer Gantry* of Sinclair Lewis to the contemporary work of John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, pastors have wrestled with piety, passion, and power. As North America entered the frontiers of a new land, modernity, and ethics, Lutheran pastors also experienced this literary scrutiny. Beginning with a contemporary of Nathaniel Hawthorne and continuing to John Updike’s most recent novel, American Lutheran clergymen\* have been examined, vilified, and praised for their preservation of heritage and response to the challenges of the New World.

In this essay novels are considered which have sought to illustrate the personal and professional piety of Lutheran pastors in the congregational context, as well as the pastor’s role in the development of piety among the laity. These novels have portrayed Lutheran pastors among diverse ethnic groups. The territory ranges from Nebraska to Pennsylvania and from Missouri to Minnesota. Each of the various ethnic groups, as well as geographical locales, offers unique insights and emphases.

### I. SWEDISH CLERGY

Marguerite de Angeli, *Elin’s Amerika* (Garden City: Doubleday Doran, 1941)

Clara Ingram Judson, *They Came From Sweden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942)

Vilhelm Moberg, *The Last Letter Home* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961)

\*I use “American” and “clergymen” with some reservations. However, for most emigrants “America” meant the United States of America. And the use of “clergymen” for pastors reflects the fact that until 1970 pastors were only males in the American Lutheran church communions. There was no other reality—historical or literary.

James K. Paulding, *Koningsmarke* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835)

A contemporary of Nathaniel Hawthorne, James K. Paulding was the first novelist in America to make use of Lutheran pastors as characters in his novel, *Koningsmarke*, which described the earliest settlements of Lutherans in Pennsylvania. The portrait was not positive of the first pastor, a Dominie Kanttwell, who “though a follower of Martin Luther, had little of the liberality of that illustrious reformer, being somewhat intolerant in his principles, bigoted in his doctrines, sour in his humour, and a most bitter enemy to all sorts of innocent sports” (p. 102).

Paulding seemed to have the pietistic pastors of his own day in mind, rather than the more rationalistic clergy of the seventeenth century. Yet even Paulding allowed that there were blessings among the ranks of clergy because Kanttwell is succeeded by “a man full of humility, and all the examples of a virtuous pastor,...as one of those chosen shepherds sent by Heaven as a blessing to some chosen flock” (p. 214f.).

An actual Swedish shepherd of colonial times, the Reverend John Campanius, was included in *Elin's Amerika*, in which the author portrayed Campanius' use of the Swedish divine service and his ministry among the natives of the region (p. 37). Elin, the title character, was a very young girl, so she did not find his sermons easy to understand; yet she was comforted by the realization that the order of service was exactly like that used in the old country (p. 41).

These works indicate the uneven quality of the ministry of the earliest pastors among American Lutherans. Being so distant from Old World supervision, the personality of a clergyman often ruled the congregation. Most pastors, however, did serviceable work. Some, such as Campanius, worked diligently among their people and reached out to others nearby, native and settler alike.

With the great immigration of the late 1800s, Swedes once more entered the new land in large numbers. Clara Ingram Judson mentioned the extensive missionary work performed by Pastor Eric Norelius during this time in the Red Wing, Minnesota, region and beyond. He was a tireless seeker of immigrant souls. Such was also the portrayal of the first Swedish pastor in Vilhelm Moberg's novel of life along the St. Croix River valley, *The Last Letter Home*. The name of Moberg's missionary character was not among the prominent, but he worked continuously by means of Word and Sacrament to bring God closer to the emigrated Swedes. As he was given to explain, “I want to help look after the souls of my countrymen. That's why I left my homeland and resigned my position there” (p. 51). True to historical developments among the Augustana Synod Swedes, such initial mission-minded pastors were all too often replaced by pastors whose pastoral identity was hierarchical, reflective more of the Church of Sweden than of the frontier mentality. The successor to Moberg's first pastor angered members of the congregation when he accused some farmers of being “Sabbath breakers” because they harvested on a Sunday when they saw rain coming (p. 298). He then headed the congregation toward serious disruption when he asserted “that he was not employed by the congregation, in his office he obeyed only God” (p. 298). This issue of the source of authority troubled not only Swedish Lutherans, but the immigrant Germans and Norwegians as well.

## II. GERMAN CLERGY

Robert J. Koenig, *Except the Corn Die* (La Grange, Texas: Privately published, 1975)

Herbert Krause, *Wind Without Rain* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1939)

Herbert Krause, *The Threshers* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1946)

The novel which dealt most extensively with the issue of ministerial authority is *Except the Corn Die*, published by the author. Though a very recent contribution to clergy-charactered novels, Pastor Koenig's work explores the particulars of the Saxon immigration to Perry County, Missouri, and the ensuing debate concerning the basis of a pastor's call which was carried on

between C. F. W. Walther and a layperson, F. A. Marbach. Koenig's book is faithful to the debate's outcome, and in the form of fiction it allows those formative years of the Missouri Synod to come alive.

Although Walther's position stressed the derivative nature of the clergy call, two other novels concerning German pastors portrayed most clergy in the "Herr Pastor" role. Two of the three pastors in Herbert Krause's novels were fierce and domineering men. Their physical presence was marked by a "long black coat" and the "darkness" with which it seemed to fill parishioners' homes whenever the pastor visited (1939, pp. 33 & 296). From the pulpit these pastors pounded their people with the law, sin, guilt, doubt, and unworthiness. Only once did one of the austere German pastors doubt himself in public; he questioned whether he had been too harsh, but he was nevertheless finally convinced of his rectitude by a return to the Scriptures as he understood them: "It is written. It cannot be otherwise" (1946, p. 486).

This obstinate attitude was grounded in the conviction that God's will was being done. The dying words of one ("I have been-Thy-servant Lord," p. 499) were not merely for show. The pastors were convinced that they were rightly preaching the law and gospel. The law was obvious; it permeated the entire Sunday sermon. The gospel? The gospel in very Midwestern, German conception was "right doctrine"—doctrine which needed to be protected from the falsehood into which the laity could have stumbled.

In spite of the harshness, the pastors were still sought for counsel, for comfort at death's door, and for funerals, weddings, and baptisms. They were the congregations' pastors. One member voiced the ambivalent thoughts of many by reflecting that the pastor "inspired awe as much as respect....But this was also true. The gentleness of the shepherd, friendliness and understanding who in the parish had felt the touch of these?" (1946, p. 132).

Additionally, these two pastors had problems with the issues of alcohol and keeping the Sabbath. In *Wind Without Rain* the pastor was hastened from celebrations by plying him with beer until he was tipsy (p. 298). Yet his own weakness did not dissuade him from criticizing those he considered immoderate (1939, p. 140f.). The pastor in *The Threshers* railed against "Sabbath-breakers" during the harvest season, as the threshing crews worked constantly to bring in the grain. He was, however, especially silent on the subject when they threshed *his* wheat one Sunday (1946, pp. 220f., 363, 463).

The third pastor, a younger pastor, brought sermons with less law and a more positive view of humanity. But his message, such as "Forgiveness arises in a conviction within ourselves" (1946, p. 522), could be perceived as a new law. The congregational members responded favorably to the new message. Nevertheless, the new pastor stressed human capabilities and choices—the same theme as the older pastors, merely a revised version.

The issues which the Germans debated and the positions which they supported deeply affected the emerging Norwegian Lutheran church. It was to these Germans that the Norwegian leadership looked for direction in thought and action.

### III. NORWEGIAN CLERGY

Waldemar Ager, *Christ Before Pilate: An American Story* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1924)

- Hjalmar H. Boyesen, *Falconberg* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879)  
 Borghild Dahl, *Homecoming* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1954)  
 H. A. Foss, *Tobias: A Story of the Northwest* (Minneapolis: H. Petersen & Co., 1899)  
 Simon Johnson, *From Fjord to Prairie or In the New Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1916)  
 J. N. Kildahl, *When Jesus Enters the Home* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1917)  
 Martin V. Odland, *The New Canaan: In Which Onon Bjornson Tells the Saga of the Early Norse Migration to America and the Story of a Great Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1933)  
 James A. Peterson, *Solstad: The Old and the New* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1923)  
 O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927)  
 O. E. Rølvaag, *Peder Victorious* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929)  
 O. E. Rølvaag, *Their Fathers' God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931)  
 O. E. Rølvaag, *The Third Life of Per Smevik* (Minneapolis: Dillon, 1971)  
 N. N. Rønning, *Lars Lee: The Boy from Norway* (Minneapolis: Christian Literature, 1928)  
 N. N. Rønning, *A Servant of the Lord* (Minneapolis: The Friend, 1931)  
 Peer Strømme, *How Halvor Became a Minister* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1936)

Norwegians far outpaced all ethnic groups in the production of literature in which the church, the congregation, and the pastor figured prominently. For the Norwegian-American authors, the life portrayed took place in the vast Midwest between the Civil War and the early years of the 1920s. Some of their concerns extended throughout this entire period. Other issues were short-lived, or they died early only to be reborn at a later date. Amidst this expansion of the frontier or the change in issues, the pastor was a figure constantly in the forefront of the community, rural or urban.

A majority of the ordained ministers in the novels were of the Norwegian Synod; they were pastors in the tradition of the State Church of Norway. Such pastors were marked by the black gown and fluted collar, the "robe and ruff."

The minority clergy, those in the Free Church or Haugean tradition who rejected vestments, were also important character figures.

In *Christ Before Pilate* the presence of two pastors as characters allowed some of the other differing opinions between the two groups to be contrasted.

Rev. Mr. Mosevig, who served the small church, looked with scorn upon Rev. Mr. Welde, who served the large one. He did not even like the church building itself. Stained glass windows and decorations were to him only the lust of the eyes and a superfluity. The Lord would certainly permit His gracious Spirit to descend upon His servant even tho [sic] the pulpit had no gilded molding or carved panels, and He received the sinners who came to Him even tho [sic] there were no velvet cushions for them to kneel upon. (p.5)

Mosevig and Welde were set as contrasts to one another. Mosevig was called from his carpenter's trade to the pulpit. Welde, on the other hand, "belonged to the old aristocracy of Norway. The father and grandfather were both ministers" (p. 6). Whereas Mosevig had been a sailor, then a carpenter, then a pastor, "Pastor Welde had known since his earliest childhood that he would become a minister, or had at least heard it from many others" (p. 19). Welde wrote down his sermons; Mosevig's "came to him as an inspiration" (p. 7).

The difference in preaching style was an element which N. N. Rønning noted in his work, *Lars Lee: The Boy from Norway*. Lars, fresh off the boat from Norway, was taken to services by relatives. The first Sunday, Lars attended a more pietistic service in which the congregational members led in prayers and singing prior to the sermon. Then the pastor went to the pulpit:

The pastor was an elderly man, tall, straight, and authoritative. His sermon was a combination of Scriptural exposition, of exhortation, and of the narration of experiences, his own and those of others. (p. 116)

Although impressed by this classic pietistic service and pastor, Lars Lee also accompanied an uncle to a more formal service. He heard the chanting of the service and listened as the pastor read his sermon in musical cadence. Lars thought to himself, "Oh, yes, this was a real minister. There was no doubt about that" (p. 121). After the service Lars and his relatives discussed the differences. Young Mr. Lee tended to support the more formal; however, his aunt queried pointedly, "But if the minister can't remember his sermon, how can he expect others to remember it?" (p. 123).

Preaching from the manuscript aroused many a suspicion. In *How Halvor Became a Minister* the arrival of Pastor H. A. Preus in the community is recounted. He preached, baptized, and instructed those gathered on how to organize a congregation in the new, free-church society of America. Yet some doubted his conversion because of the manuscript usage. They preferred the styles of Elling Eielsen or Ole Andrewson, pastors with allegiance to the pietist revivalism.

Eielsen of the Haugean tradition had been the first ordained Norwegian pastor in the United States, though the more formal church of men like Preus neglected to recognize it. They regarded the name of J. W. C. Dietrichson more

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page 183

highly, for he had been sent by the Church of Norway. Eielsen and Dietrichson are both mentioned in *The New Canaan*, Martin V. Odland's fictionalized memoirs of an early Norwegian settler. It might be indicative of the immigrants' opinions that Eielsen's preaching is praised (p. 181), but Pastor Dietrichson was asked to perform the wedding of that settler (p. 199).

The disagreement about preaching style could not, however, overshadow the primary place of the pastor as deliverer of Word and Sacraments. Whether in the pulpit or before the altar he was, as one parishioner was given to explain,

quite a different being from the minister in private life. When he preached or performed the sacred office of the church, he stood before her in exalted abstraction, and was raised high above the possibility of criticism. (Boyesen, p. 99)

Any energy expended in disagreements over preachers and preaching styles simply illustrated the importance of the proclaimed Word, an importance shared with the Sacraments: Baptism and Communion (Boyesen, p. 35; Johnson, p. 266; Kildahl, p. 37; Rølvaag, 1927, pp. 376-378 and 406f.; and Rølvaag, 1931, p. 205).

These conveyers of Sacraments and the Word were for the most part portrayed as good men who did their best to serve the scattered frontier flocks. At the same time, some were overbearing authoritarians, one of whom Boyesen described as having “sacerdotal pompousness” (p. 56). However, most of the pastors characterized in Norwegian-American novels were, as O. E. Rølvaag wrote, “friendly” and “not little popes” (1971, p. 67).

More than any other Lutheran ethnic group, the Norwegian-Americans and their pastors struggled with temperance. As early as 1899, as illustrated in *Tobias: A Story of the Northwest*, pastors argued with parishioners and one another over alcohol. A certain Pastor Traglie and moderation were pitted against a Pastor Fugelsang and abstinence. Traglie denounced drunkenness, but considered intoxicating drinks to be “gifts of God” in moderation (p. 163). But after Traglie’s death, Fugelsang served the congregation and

showed by the most striking logic and undeniable arguments that the saloons were responsible for the recent misfortunes that had occurred in their midst. (p. 221)

This reflected the growing temperance sentiment among Norwegian Lutherans, a sentiment shared by the novelists. Kildahl’s *When Jesus Enters the Home* has as its primary theme the degradation experienced by a Norwegian-American family bound to the power of alcohol. When the gospel message converted the family members’ hearts, alcohol was abandoned and prosperity and happiness blossomed. “‘Yes, indeed,’ the pastor remarked, ‘there is a change in the home when Jesus enters’” (p. 206).

It was this hope for change that prompted the interest in the temperance movement by pastor Welde of *Christ Before Pilate* and the pastor of *How Halvor Became a Minister* (Ager, pp. 143-144 and Strømme, p. 51). And when Lars Lee graduated from seminary in *A Servant of the Lord*, one of his foremost obstacles in his parish was a free-thinking imbibor (p. 76ff). Once Pastor Lee spent time with the man, a conversion followed. As the new member related, “Reverend Lee

did not want to debate with me. He gave his personal testimony and referred me to the Word of God” (p. 111). Pastor Lee was not one for quick answers for the problems of those who came to him; he listened first, and this method endeared him to the congregation.

#### IV. FINNISH AND DANISH CLERGY

Olav K. Lundeberg, *The Story of Aino: A Tale of Finland in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1941)

Sophus Keith Winther, *Take All to Nebraska* (New York: Macmillan, 1936)

Sophus Keith Winther, *Mortgage Your Heart* (New York: Macmillan, 1937)

Sophus Keith Winther, *This Passion Never Dies* (New York: Macmillan, 1938)

The Swedes and Norwegians were not the only Scandinavians to be served by pastors and included in novels. One Finnish settlement, its pastor, and Aino, the female protagonist, are the subjects of *The Story of Aino*. These Finns were obviously not the most conservative of Finns, as the pastor seemed to support public education. He was, however, nationalistic in his allegiance to Finland (pp. 64-66). By such support of his former homeland, this pastor displayed a rather common characteristic of the actual Finnish clergy in America.

Much like the experience of many Danes in the United States, the immigrant family of the Nebraska trilogy of Sophus Keith Winther did not remain Lutheran. A Danish Lutheran pastor baptized an infant (1936, pp. 32-36), and another pastor attempted to serve the area once a month with worship in the “mother tongue” (1937, p. 77), but the young sons were “Americans.” Their father expected them to follow an “American” denomination.

## V. “AMERICAN” LUTHERAN CLERGY

Conrad Richter, *The Waters of Kronos* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960)

Conrad Richter, *A Simple Honorable Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962)

John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960)

John Updike, *Rabbit is Rich* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981)

The four novels under this heading reflect an image of the pastor as an integrated member of the “American” community. He is not the pastor of a peculiar ethnic group, but serves a community church open to all. Conrad Richter wrote two novels to include pastors from his own experience. In *The Waters of Kronos* Richter remembered the service rendered by his grandfather, the pastor who “had baptized eleven thousand souls, worn out twelve horses, ruled three congregations and two wives” (p. 18). This pastor served the people, but with a tighter grasp than Pastor Harry Donner of *A Simple, Honorable Man*.

The character of Pastor Donner was based on Richter’s father and his ministry. Donner was interested in people, as his wife stated, “He admired most of the human race, doted on people as they were” (p. 276). He sacrificed a successful business, his family’s goods, and his children’s closest affections for his ministry. When he died his possessions “were so pitifully few” (p. 302). His ministry was one of service to need as he understood it. That did not always

please those who were served; he made them uncomfortable. As one man told him,

I like you, Reverend, but you’re too damn good for your own good. Now I don’t mean goody-good....[You] don’t look after yourself like the rest of us. (p. 142)

Pastor Donner was portrayed clearly as “a simple honorable man,” a pastor whose personal experience of faith colored the ministry he accomplished.

Rabbit of *Rabbit, Run* was not, by most definitions, an honorable man. He was cheating on his wife, committing adultery. His wife’s pastor, an Episcopalian, decided to try speaking with Rabbit’s Lutheran pastor. The priest liked Fritz Kruppenbach least of all the clergy in town. He found him to be “rigid in his creed and a bully in manner” (p. 168).

The two ministers met—the Episcopalian concerned about Rabbit Angstrom’s marriage, the Lutheran sweating after mowing the lawn. The priest felt that “even in his undershirt [the Lutheran pastor] somehow wore vestments” (p. 170). When the worried priest related his distress over the Angstroms, the pastor responded forcefully that it was not the pastor’s task “to run around and plug up the holes and make everything smooth” (p. 170).

What do you think now it looks like to God, one childish husband leaving one childish wife? Do you ever think anymore what God sees?...It seems to you our role is to be cops, cops without handcuffs, without guns, without anything but our human good nature....I say, let the cops be cops and look after their laws that have nothing to do with us....*There* is your role: to make yourself an exemplar of faith. *There* is where comfort comes from: faith, not what little finagling a body can do here....Yes; you suffer, but you must *love* your pain, because it is *Christ’s* pain. When on Sunday morning then, when we go before their faces, we must walk up not worn out with misery but full of Christ, *hot...*with Christ, on *fire: burn* them with the force of our belief. That is why they come; why else would they pay us? Anything else we can do or say anyone can do and say. They have doctors and lawyers for that....There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness, is nothing. It is Devil’s work. (p. 170f.)

Kruppenbach seemed to have a grasp of the new situation in which pastors were cast. Were the clergy to be moral enforcers, prying into the lives of parishioners? Or were the clergy to be “exemplars of faith” for the laity? Did the one necessarily exclude the others? These questions were not addressed, really, by the Episcopalian or the Lutheran. Neither cleric’s position solved Rabbit’s problem—for it was his problem.

Pastor Kruppenbach, however, spoke a word of gospel for the frantic priest: “there is nothing but Christ for us.” The voice of the law, but in actuality the gospel, followed close behind as Kruppenbach accusingly asked, “Didn’t you know when you put that collar on, what you risked?” (p. 171). This risk was in the casting of all upon Christ, in expecting failure and pettiness, but responding with the promise of Christ to those who could hear the Word.

That Word stayed with Rabbit. Twenty years later Rabbit was back with his wife, successfully selling Toyotas, yet concerned about the future—his life and his son. He pondered his Sunday school days:

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page 186

under crusty old Fritz Kruppenbach, who pounded in the lesson that life has no terrors for those with faith but for those without faith there can be no salvation and no peace. *No peace.* (1981, p. 71)

Though Rabbit lived as though past pious lessons were childish, it was the pastor’s message of faith which offered hope to the questioning Rabbit—an uneasy answer, but the gospel for the frontiers of North America in the 1980s.



## V. IN SUMMATION

The novels considered in the preceding article are of uneven literary quality and varying cultural, geographical, and temporal settings. They reflect, however, the rich variety of the Lutheran experience in the United States of America. Taken as a whole, they offer a complementary glimpse into the laypeople and pastors who, usually outside the scope of historical scrutiny, exercised their personal faith and performed their tasks of continuing the mission of Christ's church in the world.

Among the portraits produced by the novelists, no single archetype "pastor" can be formulated. Each was an individual, educated in the faith, who sought to present that faith to changing situations and different eras. The pastors received various degrees of acceptance, rejection, and ridicule, but a pastor was there for the congregation's service. These ordained clergy were significant within the community, apart from their personality. They served a necessary community function; they were pastors, shepherds of a flock.