

# The Conversion of Missionaries in China: The Case of N. Astrup Larsen, 1913-1927

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**Editors' Note:** This article was presented as part of the panel, "Perspectives on Christian Missions in China and Thailand," held during the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the ASIANetwork on March 15<sup>th</sup>, in San Antonio, Texas. Professor Scholl's judicious use of Astrup Larsen's personal papers in his analysis of Larsen's intellectual and spiritual development, with regard to his relationship with the Lutheran Church, and his evolving understanding of Chinese affairs, make this piece an especially important scholarly contribution.

Nikolai Astrup Larsen (1878-1961) went to China as the second ordained missionary from the Synod of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America. The Scandinavian-American missions were active from about 1890 and were concentrated in Henan and northern Hubei Provinces. Larsen was the superintendent of the Synod's mission at its start in 1914 and was a member of several boards and committees, including one responsible for planning the Lutheran Church in China (pinyin, *Xin Yi Hui*, organized 1920), which he hoped would diminish intra-Lutheran sectarian differences and foster indigenous leadership. He was elected president of the LCC in 1924. He was a friend of K. L. Reichelt, and promoted his Christian Mission to Buddhists. He was a member of the China Continuation Committee (CCC), a non-denominational Protestant organization, and in 1924 Larsen was elected to membership in the National Christian Council (NCC), a group of one hundred Protestants within the CCC, committed to work for the indigenization of the Chinese church. In his last year in China, he taught at the short-lived Union Lutheran College in Hunan.<sup>1</sup> Larsen wrote dozens of

articles concerning missions and carried on a voluminous correspondence, a great deal of which is preserved in the archives of

conservative in its theology. Larsen had literally been born in the Old Main of Luther College, the first institution created to train pastors who would maintain its strict orthodoxy. At Luther Seminary (1896-1900), he had been a disciple of Walther, the theologian who heavily influenced most of the pastors of his denomination. Yet during a decade as a pastor, he had begun to move away from his heritage of "cocksure Missourianism."<sup>2</sup> His decision in 1913 to go to China as a missionary, then, was preceded by a spiritual journey that would eventually produce an outspoken reaction against what he felt to be the prevalent dogmatism, blind loyalty to tradition, and narrow-mindedness of his denomination.

His years in China changed him in ways he could not have foreseen. Once there, Larsen would take increasingly strong and public stands on the issues of his day, especially concerning church union and social and political action. Even so, by



Norwegian Lutheran Church in America mission field, c. 1932.  
(Credit: Larsen papers, Luther College Archives)

Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, and at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. These records provide an abundant and richly textured look into the workings of the China missions of the Norwegian-American Lutherans during an era of great ferment and historical significance.

Since its origins in the pioneer days of the Middle West, the Synod had been

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way of comparison, Larsen was neither so evangelically zealous when he went to China, nor so spiritually confused when he went home as John Hersey's fictional missionary David Treadup in the novel *The*

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Call (1985). Treadup, born in the same year as Larsen, went to China full of enthusiasm, "To evangelize the world in our generation." But he moved so far away from orthodoxy that he was dismissed from his service with the YMCA, and he ended his days as an agnostic.<sup>3</sup> The arc of Larsen's career generally follows the lines of the well-known missionaries profiled in Lian Xi's *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932*, including Edward Hicks Hume, Frank W. Rawlinson, and Pearl S. Buck. Yet although his theology was questioned by the Synod hierarchy, his call was not retracted, as happened in the case of Frank Rawlinson; nor did he ever renounce what he considered an orthodox Christianity, as did Rawlinson, Pearl Buck, and David Treadup.<sup>4</sup> Larsen's conservatism waned during his China years, but he never drifted into syncretism or agnosticism. When he returned to the United States he remained in the ministry where he became a



Nikolai (Nick) Astrup Larsen and his Chinese teacher, c. 1920.

prominent advocate for ecumenism and the greater involvement of his church in social and economic issues.

Just three years into his China service, Larsen fully expected he would soon resign his call, since he felt that the Synod might dismiss him as a heretic if it knew how far he had moved away from some of its

teachings.<sup>5</sup> But after another year, he came to believe that he "was not alone," as he wrote a brother in 1917, in his conviction that his denomination was in dire need of a theological reawakening if it was not to suffer catastrophic reversals.<sup>6</sup> He consequently took upon himself the goal

liberal missionaries, and Larsen's early experiences with famine victims undoubtedly was one of many which propelled him toward the side of the liberals.

By the end of 1917, Larsen had decided he would not resign from the

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of working with select others in his own denomination and with other liberal Protestant missionaries to move his church in the paths that would best advance true Christianity and human welfare in the mission field and at home.

By becoming a missionary in China, he hoped he could evade the theological doubts and conflicts he had been struggling with for over a decade, that there would "be permitted to preach the simple unadorned Gospel of Christ, without having to engage in theological controversy." He confessed to his pastor brother Lauritz, "To this extent at least my offer to go to the mission field was selfish, and perhaps it is condign punishment when I have been troubled by the old controversies here in China too."<sup>7</sup> Though missionaries who preached hellfire and inerrancy of the Bible battled those who accepted historical criticism and emphasized the need for social and institutional reformation, China offered him a new perspective and a whole new range of influences and experiences.

At the Synod's chief station in Kwangchow (now called Huangchuan) in 1914 there was tremendous flooding in the region, followed by an extended drought and resulting famine: "Wherever one went in the country," Larsen reported, "it was a common thing to see trees stripped of their bark, which was ground and used as food."<sup>8</sup> Witnessing mass migrations, starvation, and killings and plundering by the roving robber and warlord bands in his region affected him profoundly. To what degree missionaries should address the material as opposed to the spiritual needs of the Chinese people was a principal point of contention between conservative and

mission field after all. For one thing, he had found some trusted friends of like mind.<sup>9</sup> One of these, Joseph Tetlie, would be investigated in 1924 by the church hierarchy for heretical beliefs and at the end of the same year, Larsen, too, was directed to give a full accounting of his theological position.<sup>10</sup>

In that same year, the widespread political unrest in China was sharpened by the Shanghai Incident of May 30, 1925 when British police fired into a crowd of student demonstrators, and by summer of 1926 the Northern Expedition began. The Lutheran mission field was situated where much of the fighting took place. When Larsen described these events, he tried to explain the causes from the point of view of the Chinese: "Most Chinese Christian leaders, without condoning the excesses of the students, feel that China has just grievances against the foreign powers." Drawing on recent sessions at the National Christian Council meeting, he made a case to explain how the anti-Christian organizations were at heart anti-foreign rather than anti-religion.<sup>11</sup>

Lian Xi observes that by 1927, "a broad liberalizing of the missionary attitude toward Chinese religion and culture had occurred."<sup>12</sup> To represent conservative missionaries who resisted this trend, however, he quotes Edward Søvik, a missionary colleague of Larsen, who in 1926 published an attack on liberal "compromises."<sup>13</sup> An undated speech by Larsen probably delivered in late May 1926, offers a direct refutation of Søvik, who argued that "the intellectual and progressive element of society [are] up in arms against Christianity."<sup>14</sup> Worse, among leading missionaries there is a widespread

“spirit of compromise” with nationalistic and anti-Christian movements. Instead of preaching the Word and emphasizing the salvation of souls, “liberal thought” has substituted “social and economic uplift. Is it strange that with such training the young Chinese Church is turning Bolshevistic?”<sup>15</sup>

Though Larsen does not name him, he quotes directly from the Søvik’s article. The NCC’s attention to economic and social concerns, he argued, is easily justified, since Christianity that is not applied in daily life is “incomplete,” a “caricature.” “How,” Larsen asked, “can one have lived a few years among the Chinese and not have felt that it is just social and economic conditions,—the intellectually, spiritually, and morally dulling influence of grinding poverty . . . which keeps countless numbers from Christ?”<sup>16</sup>

The political turmoil reached a crisis in early 1927, when most missionaries in the interior of China left among them Larsen and his family. Among the various reasons why Larsen never returned, was his sense that prospects for advancing Christianity through the efforts of foreign missionaries had eroded significantly. Most if not all of the missionaries, he believed, should return home because the current dangers signaled the end of an era:

This is going to be much more than a mere political revolution. It is going to profoundly influence the whole relation between foreigners and Chinese . . . There will be no room hereafter for the autocratic missionary, the “benevolent despot” who comes with a purseful of money . . . while

he expects the Chinese to subserviently kiss his hand and thank him for his doles.<sup>17</sup>

What Larsen had learned in China continued to inform his life and work. His career journey might be epitomized in the words of the Baptist missionary Earl H. Cressy, describing the transformative effect of China: “He had gone out to change the East, and was returning, himself a changed man . . . The conversion of the missionary by the Far East results in his being not only a missionary but an internationalist, an intermediary between the two great civilizations that inherit the Earth.”<sup>18</sup>

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Van W. Symons, former Executive Director of ASIANetwork, wrote a paper on this college in 1989, titled “A Failed College: The Abortive Attempt by the Lutheran Church of China to Establish a College at Yiyang, Hunan Between 1923-1931.”

<sup>2</sup>He uses the phrase “cocksure Missiourianism” in Norwegian in a letter to his father of Jan. 28, 1913 and our “cocksureness” in English in a typescript he wrote in response to a request to account for his theology, titled “What Do I Believe and Teach?” 28 February 1925, 5. Both documents are in the Nikolai Astrup Larsen papers in the Luther College Archives, Decorah, Iowa (hereafter cited as NAL-LCA). The contents of the NAL papers are described in Archie R. Crouch and others, *Christianity in China: A Scholar’s Guide to China Mission Resources in the Libraries and Archives of the United States* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), 130-31.

<sup>3</sup>The letter of dismissal denied that his humanism was a cause for dismissal, but Treadup identifies it as the essential cause. See John Hersey, *The Call* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 551.

<sup>4</sup>In 1932 Pearl S. Buck denounced the aim of conversion as a worthy goal, and in 1933 she “admitted that Confucius meant as much to her as Jesus Christ.” Pressured to assure her mission

board “that nothing has clouded your conviction of our Lord Jesus Christ,” she declined to do so and resigned from her position in the Presbyterian mission. See Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 120-24.

<sup>5</sup>NAL to Lauritz Larsen, 28 April 1916, NAL-LCA.

<sup>6</sup>NAL to Lauritz Larsen, 13 December 1917, Nikolai Astrup Larsen papers in the Luther Seminary Archives, St. Paul, Minnesota (hereafter cited as NAL-LSA).

<sup>7</sup>NAL to Lauritz Larsen, April 28, 1916, NAL-LCA.

<sup>8</sup>NAL, “The Lutheran Synod Mission,” in Ekeland, T. and others, eds. *White Unto Harvest: A Survey of Lutheran United Mission: The China Mission of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Board of Foreign Missions, 1919), 50.

<sup>9</sup>NAL to Lauritz Larsen, 13 December 1917, NAL-LSA.

<sup>10</sup>H.G. Stub to NAL, 24 December 1924, NAL-LCA. Stub was the president of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America and wrote NAL in Norwegian. The crucial request was stated as follows: “[L]a mig faa en udrødning av Deres hele teologiske standpunkt.” On heresy hunting in other Protestant missions in China during 1924, see Lian Xi, 217.

<sup>11</sup>NAL, “The National Christian Council of China,” *Lutheran Church Herald* 9 (11 August 1925): 1004.

<sup>12</sup>Lian Xi, 188.

<sup>13</sup>Edward Søvik, “Thoughts on How to Meet the New Movements that Confront Us,” *Lutheran Church Herald* 10 (1 June 1926): 686-690, continued in 10 (8 June 1926): 716-717.

<sup>14</sup>Søvik, 686.

<sup>15</sup>Søvik, 716.

<sup>16</sup>NAL, “Our Relation to the N.C.C.,” (holograph manuscript of an address probably delivered at a church meeting in China, n.d. [1926?]), 32 pp., NAL-LSA.

<sup>17</sup>NAL in Hankow to J. R. Birkelund in Minneapolis, 17 March 1927, NAL-LSA.

<sup>18</sup>Earl H. Cressy, qtd. in Notto R. Thelle, “Changed by the East: Notes on Missionary Communication and Transformation.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. 30.3 (July 2006): 115.

#### On Film (continued from page 8)

meaning of humiliation. On the other hand, the people I interviewed became my real crew, they welcomed me quickly as one of them, and were willing to work with me for the program as their voice. They always believed that my films would bring their sufferings of injustice to the authorities, make their appeal heard by the public, and eventually help resolve their problems. I have a clear project: I work with those issues and make documentaries in order to join their effort for the change—a consequence is that I am not neutral at all. My role and my documentaries are inevitably regarded with suspicion.

As it is now, although the urban audiences are sceptical of such documentaries and accuse them of being too propagandistic, the local authorities realize immediately that such kind of “propaganda” should not be circulated. Coincidentally, the head of the local Propaganda Bureau, who knows perfectly well the power of propaganda, is the sister of the head of the local hospital documented in the film where the HIV-contaminated blood bank caused so many villagers to contract AIDS. Unsurprisingly, the local government officials have made their way to mobilize the villagers to

prevent the screening of the film. I very much hope to maintain a friendly relationship with the local government, but at the same time I cannot betray the villagers. I also think that in a society where care and love are so rare, why should *Care and Love* be forbidden? I sincerely hope that more people will see this film and ask themselves the question: under such fatal circumstances, what actions should one expect to be taken by the villagers, the government, and the judges?

I repeat: do not regard the film as a work of art. It does nothing but raise questions and call for solutions.