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

Peter A. Scholl
Luther College

Editors’ Note: This article was presented as part of the panel, “Perspectives on Christian Missions in China and Thailand,” held during the 16th Annual Conference of the ASIANetwork on March 15th, 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.1 Larsen wrote dozens of articles concerning missions and carried on a voluminous correspondence, a great deal of which is preserved in the archives of 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.

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 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. 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. Larsen’s conservativism 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 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. 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. He consequently took upon himself the goal 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.” 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 Huancian) 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.” 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 liberal missionaries, and Larsen’s early experiences with famine victims undoubtedly was one of many which propelled him toward the side of the liberals.

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“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?”

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?”

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.

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 civilizations that inherit the Earth.”

Endnotes

1 Van W. Symons, former Executive Director of ASIANetwork, wrote a paper on this college in 1989, titled “A Failed College: The Abortion Attempt by the Lutheran Church of China to Establish a College at Yiyang, Hunan Between 1923-1931.”
3 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.
4 In 1932 Pearl S. Buck denounced the aim of China: “He had gone out to change the East, and was returning, himself a changed man.” 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.
5 NAL to Lauritz Larsen, 28 April 1916, NAL-LCA.
6 NAL to Lauritz Larsen, 13 December 1917, Nikolai Astrup Larsen papers in the Luther Seminary Archives, St. Paul, Minnesota (hereafter cited as NAL-LSA).

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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.