

# Interdenominational Co-operation contra Lutheran Orthodoxy?

## The National Christian Council of China and the Norwegian Lutheran Mission

Frederick Hale  
North-West University  
halef@hope.ac.uk

**Abstract:** In the history of twentieth-century global Protestantism, causative relationships have often been seen in the cooperation of missionary organisations and the subsequent development of ecumenical relations between their sponsoring denominations. A key example is the World Missionary Conference of 1910, from which numerous such ties sprang. One of these was the National Christian Conference in Shanghai, which attracted representatives of well over 100 agencies and gave rise to the National Christian Council of China and it, in turn, to the Church of Christ in China. However, owing in large measure to theological differences, that composite denomination failed to attract numerous missionary agencies in China. However, that body failed to attract and retain many of the denominations which then existed in the land. Various strains of post-orthodox theology had been brought to China, where the strife continued. Many conservatives refused to participate in ecumenical ventures. One such organisation which only briefly participated was the Norwegian Lutheran Mission. It was involved in the National Christian Conference in 1922 and briefly in the NCC but soon cut its ties to that organisation. This article explores reasons for the brevity of this participation and places it into the context of Norwegian Lutheranism early in the 20th century.

**Sammendrag:** I den globale protestantismen i det 20. århundre har ofte de grunnleggende relasjoner vært å finne i samvirket mellom misjonsorganisasjoner og den etterfølgende utvikling av økumeniske forhold mellom kirkesamfunn som støttet dem. Et nøkkelekspelel the 1910 World Missionary Conference i Edinburgh, som førte til mange slike bånd. Ett av disse var National Christian Conference (NCC) i Shanghai, som tiltrakk seg representanter fra godt over 100 virksomheter, og som

var opptakten til National Christian Council of China og etter hvert til Church of Christ in China. Men på grunn av et stort antall teologiske forskjeller, som gjerne preger et kirkesamfunn, mislyktes man med å trekke til seg tallrike misjonsinitiativ og opprettholde kontakten med mange av kirkesamfunnene som da eksisterte i landet. Forskjellige spenninger av post-ortodoks teologi var blitt brakt til Kina. Mange konservative nektet å delta i økumeniske satsinger. En slik organisasjon, som bare var med en kortperiode, var Norsk Luthersk Misjonssamband, som sa nei til å ta del i opprettelsen av Union Lutheran Theological Seminary i 1913. Lederne i denne misjonsorganisasjonen både i Norge og på kinesisk mark var skeptiske og svært kritiske til teologisk modernisme. En tok del i NCC i 1922 men etter kort tid skar en over båndene til denne institusjonen. Denne artikkelen undersøker grunnene til denne korte deltakelsen og analyserer det som skjedde i lys av konteksten som preget norsk lutherdom tidlig i det 20. århundre.

Keywords: Norwegian Lutheran Mission, National Christian Council of China, Church of Christ in China, Bible Union of China, ecumenism, orthodoxy, liberal theology

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Within the broad scope of global Protestantism, interdenominational co-operation became a prominent and at times efficacious feature in numerous mission fields in several parts of the world during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, since at least the 1950s the twentieth-century phase of the “ecumenical movement” has commonly interpreted as stemming to a significant degree from the World Missionary Conference which took place in Edinburgh in June 1910 and the “Continuation Committee” appointed to carry its work further.<sup>2</sup> In China, where dozens of foreign Protestant agencies were then evangelising and conducting other forms of ministry, this led to the formation of the National Christian Council in 1922. After five additional years, the Church of Christ in China was founded. It

1 A significant part of the research for and the writing of this article were done at Fjellhaug International University College in Oslo, where I was privileged to be a Visiting Scholar for three months in 2022. I wish to express my gratitude to archivist Håkon Bakken, former archivist Erik Kjebekk, and librarian Tom Erik Hamre for their assistance in my quest for the diverse historical sources on which this article rests.

2 The standard history is Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009). See also Kenneth Scott Latourette, “Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council”, in Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 355-362.

linked the ongoing efforts of numerous affiliates but encompassed only a minority of the nation's Protestant agencies and their members within the nation's overall Protestant population.

How does one explain the limited nature of ecumenism in the challenging Chinese mission field? Interdenominational co-operation and aloofness therefrom have generally not been a particularly fertile field of research in the history of Norwegian foreign missions. Generally speaking, the endeavours of both Lutheran and other missionary agencies have been described without considerable reference to their relations with other organisations. This has certainly been the case with regard to the annals of Norway's largest organisation in China, the Norwegian Lutheran Mission, or NLM, which during most of its six decades of evangelisation and other forms of ministry chiefly in the provinces of Hubei and Henan was known as *Det norske lutherske Kinamisjonsforbund* (literally The Norwegian Lutheran China Mission Alliance). This noteworthy dimension of missions history in the 1920s has remained largely unexplored for a century. Although the lack of enthusiasm of numerous other missionary agencies and denominations for the ecumenical endeavours of that decade is commonly mentioned in the relevant scholarly literature, that of the NLM is not. One will search Kenneth Scott Latourette's groundbreaking *A History of Christian Missions in China* in vain for any mention of it apart from an acknowledgment that Lutherans, Anglicans, and certain other Protestants were absent from the first General Assembly of the Church of Christ in Shanghai.<sup>3</sup> In the twenty-first century, this absence from scholarly literature has continued. R.G. Tiedemann's useful summary published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* sheds no light on this Norwegian non-participation.<sup>4</sup> Much the same can be said of Daniel H. Bays's *A New History of Christianity in China*.<sup>5</sup> Even Erik Kjebekk's forthcoming and eminently readable popular history of the NLM's endeavours in Henan and Hubei reveals nothing in this regard.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Silje Dragsund Aase's recent doctoral thesis, "Negotiating Church in China's Red Province: A Lutheran Church in Hunan 1902-1951", provides

3 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1929), 800.

4 R.G. Tiedemann, "Comity Agreements and Sheep Stealers: The Elusive Search for Christian Unity Among Protestants in China", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 36, nr. 1 (2012), 3–8

5 Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

6 I express my gratitude to Lunde Forlag in Oslo and to Erik Kjebekk for allowing me to read his as yet unpublished book manuscript. As of April 2023 it bore the imprecise provisional title *Et glimt av Kinas kirkehistorie i provinsene Hubei og Henan*.

at least basic information about the participation of the Norwegian Missionary Society in certain ecumenical ventures.<sup>7</sup>

The NLM occupied a distinctive place in the spectrum of Norwegian Lutheranism. It is generally regarded as standing historically at the most staunchly conservative pole, a position which goes far towards explaining its marked hesitancy to engage in ecumenical ventures. With its headquarters in the Norwegian capital, Kristiania (since 1925 called Oslo), its leaders, especially general secretary Johannes Brandtzæg, viewed the theological strife in the Church of Norway at very close range and frequently crossed verbal swords with liberal theologians at the country's sole university. This was particularly the case during the first half of the 1920s when the NLM and other Christian organisations resolved not to co-operate with agencies that they regarded as doctrinally questionable. The Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) was also rooted in Norwegian pietism to an appreciable degree but tended to be less strident in its hostility to what were widely regarded as deviations from Lutheran orthodoxy.

### **The National Christian Council and the Norwegian Lutheran Mission**

The story of the NLM's hesitancy begins well before the 1920s. Like its counterparts in the legacy of Martin Luther, early in the twentieth century the NLM was more orientated towards co-operation with Lutheran than non-Lutheran missionary agencies, but even in this regard it remained somewhat isolated. It did not, for example, participate in the creation and early maintenance of the Union Lutheran Theological Seminary, which was established at Shekou, near Hankou (now part of Wuhan) in March 1913. (The NMS, by contrast, did so.)<sup>8</sup> Neither was the NLM involved in the establishment of the Lutheran Church of China, which came into being in August 1920, although it joined that loose federation of synods in 1944, *i.e.* during the dark days of the Japanese occupation of much of the country.

On a broader Protestant scale, the National Christian Council came into being after a period of incubation which was characterised by unifying forces in international Protestantism but also bedevilled by heightening doctrinal strife in numerous denominations. Eventually these two trends, the one favouring doctrinal flexibility and toleration of differences, the other affording staunch resistance to and an unwillingness to participate in co-operative ventures with Christians who were perceived as sacrificing crucial doctrines on the altar of modernism, proved incompatible. An awareness of both is essential to an understanding of the stance of the NLM *vis-à-vis* ecumenical relations in China.

7 Silje Dragsund Aase, "Negotiating Church in China's Red Province: A Lutheran Church in Hunan 1902-1951" (Doctor of Philosophy thesis, VID Specialized University, 2022), 75-76, 117-119.

8 "The China Field" i: *The Chinese Recorder*, 56. nr. 8 (1925), 547-548.

Within the broad scope of global Protestantism, interdenominational co-operation became a prominent and at times efficacious feature in numerous mission fields in several parts of the world during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, what is sometimes loosely called the twentieth-century “ecumenical movement” is commonly interpreted as stemming to a significant degree from the previously mentioned World Missionary Conference of 1910. In China, where dozens of foreign Protestant agencies were then evangelising and conducting other forms of ministry, this led to the formation in 1927 of the Church of Christ in China.

A National Christian Conference was held in Shanghai in May 1922. At that time approximately 130 Protestant agencies in numerous countries and representing a relatively broad spectrum of denominations were sponsoring missionaries in China. Representatives of most of these organisations and churches attended; a majority of the delegates were Chinese. Foreshadowing the doctrinal disputes that would soon emerge, Paul Hutchinson, a Methodist pastor from the USA who edited the *China Christian Advocate* in Shanghai, acknowledged the rapid numerical growth of Protestant denominations in the Middle Kingdom but added words of caution: “China is seething with all sorts of radical ideas, but the missionary body is being agitated by the fears of conservative workers that the Christian message is becoming too ‘modernistic.’”<sup>9</sup>

These assembled Christians elected to create the National Christian Council (the NCC) that year as an amalgamation of foreign missionary organisations and Chinese churches. Its leaders expressed a vision of founding an inclusive Protestant Chinese body. The NCC would hold its first general meeting in May 1923. What emerged as the Church of Christ in China (the CCC) went through a protracted gestation period, however, owing to such factors as disagreement about what its polity should be, political discord and civil war in China, budgetary woes, and theological disputes. This fairly broadly defined denomination finally came into being in 1927, but by then interchurch ventures had fallen on hard times, and it failed to include such major bodies as the China Inland Mission, most Lutherans, and the Southern Baptists. As Daniel H. Bays noted in his *A New History of Christianity in China*, most of the delegates to its First General Assembly in October 1927 were affiliated with two American denominations, namely the Northern Presbyterians and the Congregationalists (through the latter’s American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions). Only sixteen of the several dozen mission boards then operating in China joined the CCC. They represented not more than a third of the country’s total Protestant population.<sup>10</sup>

9 “Protestant Gains in China Great”, *The New York Herald*, 23 April 1922, Section Two, 12.

10 Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 110-111.

The failure of the CCC to encompass most of its natural constituencies stemmed to a considerable degree from the doctrinal discord then rampant in the country. Bays's unsubstantiated assertion that "the world-wide 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy' began in China in the summer of 1920" is untenable; in fact, the disputes about theological modernism that came to the surface at missionary conferences at that time did little more than echo debates that had raged among North American, British, and continental European Protestants of various denominational identities for many years and had already reached as far as Australia. Even the semantically problematic and connotatively charged noun (and subsequently adjective) "fundamentalist" was far from new when it was supposedly coined by the Baptist editor Curtis Lee Laws in 1920 (an error made by the eminent church historian George Marsden in his *Fundamentalism and American Culture*<sup>11</sup> and uncritically reproduced in countless books and journal articles) was current on both sides of the Atlantic by the middle decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Defensor Fidei: The Bible Union of China***

That the NLM was repelled by the theological discord in China becomes readily understandable when one considers that other agencies also reacted against it in the 1920s. The formation of the Bible Union of China serves as a particularly lucid example. Its founding in 1920 was a reaction to doctrinal strife in several countries, among them Norway, where Protestant bodies had commissioned missionaries to China.

The Bible Union sprang from the concerns of numerous missionaries, initially chiefly Southern Presbyterians from the United States of America where doctrinal strife had become quite strident and indeed newsworthy. Its genesis was summarised by one of them, the physician L. Nelson Bell, who had been in China since 1916 and whose daughter Ruth would marry Billy Graham in 1943. At one of the many conferences which missionaries representing a spectrum of denominations arranged at the missionary centre at Kuling in Jiangxi province in 1920, eighteen participants, fifteen or sixteen of whom were Southern Presbyterians, held a private meeting at which they decided that "the time had come for making an open stand in defense of the faith once for all delivered to the Saints." Several hundred people attended a "general meeting" a few days later at which the desirability of doing so was discussed. The Bible Union of China was established at a third meeting that summer in which

11 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelism: 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 107.

12 This will be amply demonstrated in the present writer's forthcoming semantic history of the words "fundamentalist" and "fundamentalism". A synopsis of the findings is given in Frederick Hale, "Fundamentally flawed words: Fundamentalists, fundamentalism and semantic change", *Babel: The Language Magazine*, no. 26 (February 2019), 9-13.

approximately 500 people participated. Bell emphasised in his recollection of this development that the “great mass” of missionaries in that country were “loyal to the Scriptures” but nevertheless declared the “known fact” that “Modernism is invidiously and openly being propagated in China.”<sup>13</sup>

A fellow Southern Presbyterian, Donald W. Richardson, conceded in 1922 that in the earliest stage of the Bible Union’s history “some” of its members “seemed to desire it to degenerate into a heresy hunting organization pure and simple”. He insisted, however, that those inquisitors were not representative and that within two years those who “set themselves in violent and unalterable opposition to all union institutions and organizations for co-operative work in building up the Kingdom of Christ in China” represented a minority position. Richardson also professed that “the prevalence of modernism and the presence of modernists in the mission body of China has been very much magnified.”<sup>14</sup> As will be seen below, however, leaders of the NLM, both in Norway and in China, perceived theological liberalism as a major obstacle to continued participation with Christians, especially non-Lutherans, whose views did not mesh well with their own. In his study of what he termed “the fundamentalist movement” among missionaries in China during the 1920s and 1930s, Kevin Xiyi Yao concentrated much of his analysis on the history of the Bible Union and its spirited criticism of the spectre of theological modernism.<sup>15</sup> In *A New History of Christianity in China*, Bays attributed the delay in the establishment of the Church of Christ in China and the unwillingness of many denominations and mission agencies to join it in large measure to “the constant sniping of the conservatives from the Bible Union of China and other theological critics” in the 1920s.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Foe on the Home Front: Liberal Theology in Norway**

The limits of the NLM’s participation in these truncated developments in interdenominational co-operation and its leaders’ severe indictment of the alleged theological shortcomings of the NCC cannot be understood part from what is known in Norwegian church history as *kirkestriden*. Literally translated as “the ecclesiastical strife”, this noun is an inclusive signifier that refers to the protracted series of disputes that shaped much of the theological history of Norwegian Lutheranism from the 1880s until approximately the early 1930s. A consideration of *kirkestriden* is in accordance with but extends a generalisation made by the eminent historian of missionary Christianity

13 Nelson Bell, “The Bible Union of China”, *The Presbyterian of the South* (Richmond, Virginia), 8 November 1922, 3.

14 Donald W. Richardson, “Modernism on the China Mission Field”, *The Presbyterian of the South*, 30 August 1922, 2-3.

15 Kevin Xiyi Yao, *The Fundamentalist Movement Among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920-1937* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2003).

16 Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 110.

in East Asia, Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his *A History of Christian Missions in China*. Himself both a first-person observer of and participant in some of the developments outlined above, this American Baptist noted that by the 1920s striving for “cooperation and union” had yielded sufficient fruit as to nurture expectations that they would result in “some sort of consummation”. Militating against its attainment, however, was *inter alia* the clash of “fundamentalism” and “modernism” which was driving ever-deeper wedges into British and North American Protestantism. Disputes over the inroads which caused either *de facto* or formal schisms in Baptist, Presbyterian, and other denominations in those North Atlantic countries which were still sending large numbers of missionaries to East Asia and other parts of the world in the 1920s were thus transplanted to Chinese Protestantism. “The conflict was early carried to China,” Latourette explained, “and there became even more divisive than in the Occident.”<sup>17</sup>

In Norway, the so-called “breakthrough of modernity” during the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century had permanently altered the once predominantly orthodox Lutheran landscape, although the transformation occurred relatively slowly and was never complete. Conservative Lutheranism continued to exist side by side with liberalising cultural and theological trends throughout not only the nineteenth but also for several decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, by the 1880s it was evident that a new era had begun. Such Norwegian writers as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Arne Garborg began to shoot volleys across the bow of the church, and the Dane Georg Brandes did likewise from Copenhagen in works which were widely read in Norway and also in his lectures in the Norwegian capital Kristiania. The works of the evolutionary prophet Charles Darwin, particularly his *Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, became known in Norway, where, as elsewhere, they challenged long-accepted notions about the Biblical account of creation. The views of other cultural radicals also became known in Norway as the century of scientific discovery, democratisation, and other modernising trends proceeded towards its conclusion. It became increasingly evident among educated Norwegians, including many in positions of responsibility in the Lutheran establishment, that a new era of challenges to the church was at hand.

As the eminent church historian Einar Molland pointed out, a subsequently published lecture by Fredrik Petersen, a professor of theology at the university in Kristiania who had spent several years at German universities during the 1860s, heralded its advent more than any other single event. Speaking at a diocesan meeting on “How Should the Church Meet the Infidelity of Our Times?”, he addressed the relationship between Christianity and culture. Keenly aware that the mounting tensions between the two, long evident in numerous other European countries, were being felt in Norway as a hallmark of things to come, Petersen declared that a pivotal task of Christians was to demonstrate “that Christianity was not at all in an unfriendly

17 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 794-795.



relationship to the progress of enlightenment; on the contrary, it stands at the forefront in desiring a positive one.” This did not mean, he insisted, that the essential doctrinal content of Christianity must adapt to the modern world. On the contrary, it was eternal. However, it was necessary, Petersen believed, to embrace modern science as well as democratising tendencies while retaining the core of the Christian faith.<sup>18</sup>

During the following decade the old guard in conservative Lutheran theology began to pass from the scene. After Petersen’s death in 1903, the government appointed as his successor Johannes Ording, a Norwegian pastor then in his mid-thirties who had declared his respect for the eminent German liberal theologian Albrecht Ritschl. His candidature was stiffly resisted by conservative Lutherans who presciently predicted that his appointment would cause an irreparable breach in the established church. The controversy over Ording’s nomination was the core of the so-called *professorstrid*, or *professorsak*, which more than any other event stimulated the *kirkestrid*. One highly consequential result of the dispute at the university was the resignation of the conservative professor Sigurd Odland who, more than any other theologian there, had resisted the appointment of Ording. He and like-minded orthodox Lutherans established Menighetsfakultetet in 1907 as an alternative institution for educating clergymen for the Church of Norway.

### **The Norwegian Lutheran Mission *contra* Liberal Theology in the 1920s**

It was on this disputatious doctrinal landscape that the NLM came into being and spent its early decades. The theologically conservative spirit in which it commissioned its first missionaries to China in the 1890s remained normative in the NLM three decades later. Perhaps this was most clearly demonstrated by the participation of Secretary Johannes Brandtzæg in the national meeting of approximately 950 orthodox Lutherans representing some twenty-five organisations in January at the Calmeyergatens Mission House in the capital in January 1920. In the historiography of Norwegian Lutheranism, this highly publicised “national meeting” is interpreted as a crucial event in which the allied forces of orthodoxy took a decisive stand against “liberal” theology and vowed not to interact with theologians who were its spokesmen. Brandtzæg was elected one of its two vice directors. In an essay published a fortnight later in the NLM’s generally weekly periodical *Kineseren*, he expressed his unalloyed confidence that the assembly would be “a beneficial and necessary battle cry against liberal theology and modernism in general”. Its ripple effects, he predicted, would

18 Einar Molland, *Norges kirkehistorie i det 19. århundre*, II (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1979), 134-135.

wash across Norway from Nordkapp in the far north to Lindesnes on the southern coast.<sup>19</sup>

### **A Contrastive *Imprimatur* on Chinese Buddhism: Kristian Schjelderup**

The zeal of the NLM in evangelising Chinese people in what it understood to be orthodox Lutheran Christianity and its reluctance to co-operate with any Christian agency of whose orthodoxy it was not convinced stand out in bold relief when juxtaposed with the attitude of a young Norwegian in the 1920s whom Brandtzæg openly criticised and who eventually became one of his country's most notorious liberal theologians—and eventually a controversial bishop in its state Lutheran church—Kristian Schjelderup. A brief consideration of this compatriot is particularly relevant because of his explicit endorsement of non-Christian religious practices in China which the NLM opposed. Born in Dypvåg in 1894, this later bishop's son graduated from what was eventually redubbed the University of Oslo in 1918 and spent most of 1922 in China, India, and Japan studying Eastern religions, especially Buddhism, in those lands. He then returned to the Norwegian capital and earned a theological doctorate with a thesis about comparative spirituality in various religions. During his months in East Asia he served as a special correspondent of the daily newspaper *Aftenposten* and filed numerous reports about religious, political, and other topics.<sup>20</sup>

In April 1922 Schjelderup attended the World Student Christian Federation assembly at Tsinghua University in Beijing and reported on how the general anti-missionary sentiment that plagued large numbers of missionaries in China for several years in the mid-1920s was apparent among many of the Chinese and other Asian participants.<sup>21</sup> Rejecting as simplistic accusations that it was inspired by Bolshevism, he perceived it as “a quite natural reaction to a hasty Christianising of China”. Schjelderup also explained the campaign as a defensive reaction to “the West's efforts to insinuate itself and impose hegemony over China's ancient culture and way of thinking”. He did not veil his sympathies: “The Chinese have seen so many of the faults of European and American Christianity, its alliances with militarism, capitalism, and much else, that

19 Johannes Brandtzæg, “Landsmøtet”, *Kineseren* 30, nr. 5 (1 February 1920), 39. For details of, including speeches delivered at, the four-day sequel, see Joh. M. Wisløff (ed.), *Landsmøtet i anledning av kirkestriden avholdt i Calmeyergatens Missionshus 15.–18. februar 1920* (Kristiania: Lutherstiftelsens Boghandel, 1920).

20 Schjelderup's journey to the Far East is briefly sketched in Pål Repstad, *Mannen som ville åpne kirken. Kristian Schjelderups liv* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1989), 97-100.

21 For this dimension of hostility to Christianity, see Ka-che Yip, *Religion, Nationalism and Chinese Students: The Anti-Christian Movement of 1922-1927* (Bellingham, Washington: Center for East Asian Studies, 1989).

they believe they have every right to take a stand against its further intrusion into the lands of the East.”<sup>22</sup>

Two months later Schjelderup openly expressed his sympathy for Chinese Buddhism in the same series of articles. After spending nearly three weeks as a guest at the Buddhist monastery on Mount Putuo in Zhejiang province, he wrote an article lauding the revered *bodhisattva* Kwanyin as “Chinese Buddhism’s Virgin Mary” and declaring that one sensed the same worshipful love and “moving moment” for her that pious Catholics evince when adoring the Holy Mother of God. Schjelderup launched a frontal attack on missionary Christian attitudes towards Buddhism. Whoever visits one of its centres, he declared, soon learns that religious life in China is not only still strong and alive, but also *partly* deep and correct. “To be sure, Christian missionaries often claim that the opposite is true,” Schjelderup admitted, but “that is because they have never thought it worth the trouble to immerse themselves in the life and faith of ‘the heathens.’” He acknowledged that “much superstition” and “mechanical religion” existed among Buddhists; moreover, he had met “many” Buddhist priests “whose morals and education are below non-existent”. Nevertheless, he found a great deal to be admired in more enlightened devotees and, returning to Kwanyin, concluded that “in the final analysis she represents one side of the eternal God’s infinite being!”<sup>23</sup>

The NLM never approved of Schjelderup and his post-orthodox theology and at times explicitly distanced itself from him. In 1924, for example, its organ *Kineseren* expressed the agency’s displeasure that this “extremely modern” theologian had been elected president of the Norwegian Christian Student Society, defeating the well-known and theologically conservative Professor Ole Hallesby for that position.<sup>24</sup> This illustrates the anti-liberal mind-set that militated against what the leadership of the NLM perceived as a challenge to its endeavours to promote in China the exclusive claims of orthodox Christianity as it understood it.

### Initial Participation in the National Christian Council

The NLM was never a totally isolated entity in China. Despite the great distance of Shanghai on the Pacific coast from its mission field in two central provinces of the country, the NLM sent a five-person delegation to the NCC in May 1922. It included two seasoned Chinese pastors, Ma Bao-geng and Liu Dao-seng. The three Nordic delegates were Olaf Lie, Even Staurseth, and Ingeborg Haakonson. They joined approximately 1,200 counterparts from some 130 missionary agencies for meetings held chiefly in the city’s Town Hall. Lie filed a lengthy report of the proceedings, interlaced with his sometimes quite critical comments, which was published serially

22 “Den store internationale studenterkonference i Kina”, *Aftenposten* (Kristiania), 3 June 1922, 1.

23 “Kwanyin Pusa”, *Aftenposten*, 26 August 1922, 1, 3.

24 “Nyt kristelig studenterforbund”, *Kineseren* 34, nr. 12 (23 March 1924), 3.

in three issues of *Kineseren* that summer.<sup>25</sup> Read in the context of Norwegian missions history, his recorded observations and opinions are particularly valuable and harmonise well with what colleagues in the NLM would continue to write about interdenominational relations in China during the 1920s. They illuminate concerns that continued to reverberate in the reports which Lie and his colleagues sent from the field to Norway throughout that decade.

Lie's accounts of the proceedings in Shanghai incorporated several of the forebodings which he perceived there. They offer one seasoned missionary's perspective on how much of Protestantism in China was then evolving in directions which were unacceptable to the NLM's leadership. To be sure, missionaries who stood at different points of the theological compass could be more accommodating of what Lie perceived as too far removed from what his agency stood for, but his recorded perceptions harmonised with the positions which the NLM had taken in Norway and help to illuminate its subsequent reluctance to engage in ecumenical undertakings in China. To begin with, he had misgivings about the frequent use of the terms "the Chinese church" and "China's church", apparently because they suggested the legitimacy of a geographical and cultural segment of Christianity which could differ significantly from what he regarded as normative. To Lie, "the Christian church in China" would have been preferable, and indeed that would emerge as the official name of the ecumenical Protestant denomination which was founded five years later. Even more consequentially, he reported that young Chinese Christians were most enthusiastic about "social work", *i.e.* "elevating the land and its people up from ignorance, illness, falsehoods, and poverty to the state which the currently civilised countries now have – and indeed they dream of even more." It seemed to Lie that "a considerable part of the Anglo-Saxon church" (a vague concept referring to *inter alios* Anglicans, Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and others whose roots were in the British Isles) "have precisely the same programme".<sup>26</sup> The primary emphasis, he clearly believed, should be on evangelism and eternal salvation, not on social reforms.

Shifting his focus from social ethics to theology, Lie cited Dr. Timothy T'ingfang Lew, an *alumnus* of Yale Divinity School who had earned a doctorate at Columbia University before becoming a lecturer in theology at the University of Beijing and editor of the periodical *Life Journal*, as a lucid example of what seemed ominous in the younger generation of Chinese Christians. He acknowledged that Lew was intellectually gifted and an eloquent orator but warned that he was also a theological modernist whose views were anathema to "older, orthodox" Christians. Furthermore, Lie commented acidly, Lew's views of the Bible as indicated in his publications left no doubt that "he does not stand with both legs in the ranks of the pietists." He added that "several" of the young Chinese Protestant leaders had studied at "semi-rationalistic

25 Olaf Lie, "Kinas kristelige landsmøte" i *Kineseren* 32 (16 July 1922), 1.

26 Olaf Lie, "Kina's kristelige landsmøte" i: *Kineseren* 32, nr. 28 (16 July 1922), 4.

universities in America” but did not adduce specific examples of individuals or institutions to substantiate this assertion.<sup>27</sup>

Lie expressed scepticism about the envisaged NCC because “strife and unrest” had resulted when many delegates proposed that it not have a confession of faith, something they feared could prove divisive. Rather, to his dismay, they argued that it should be anchored in “Christian work” rather than doctrine. He was relieved, however, when Dixon Edward Hoste, who had served for twenty years as the director of the China Inland Mission, demanded that the proposed council profess belief in the sovereignty of God, Jesus as God’s son and salvation in his blood, and the Bible as the true, infallible Word of God. This had been approved. Had it not been, Lie believed, all of the Lutheran delegates would have joined the CIM in declining to participate in the planned council.<sup>28</sup>

Lie’s published interpretation of the National Christian Conference left no doubt that he was wary of co-operation with many of those Christians whom he loosely called “Reformed”, especially those whom he thought were purveying the poison of theological modernism. However, this NLM emissary had no illusions that his fellow Lutherans were entirely free of that doctrinal virus. Lie reported that he and the other Lutheran missionaries from several countries had held “unity meetings” outside the programme of the conference “to make our voice and authority heard against the Reformed”, adding that one Biblical motto of the conference was “that they all may be one” (John 17:21), not that “*all* must be one”. Indeed, he conceded, even when from the larger, international Lutheran faction a select group “who could generally be called ‘low-church’” met secretly, it was difficult to achieve unanimity. This remained the case even after some “Lutheran dinners”, but what the stumbling blocks were Lie did not specify. Foreshadowing the NLM’s eventual attitude towards the NCC and its withdrawal from that body, he found it gratifying to hear at one of the Lutheran meetings outside the conference that “we are doing well as we are; we have enough work to do and seek to maintain that as well as we can. We feel no need for affiliations, so if you will come to us, you are welcome, [but] if you demand that we come to you we feel no need to do so.”<sup>29</sup>

Finally, Lie’s commentary foreshadowed a point of contention that reverberated in the NLM’s later critiques of the NCC. Discussions about an envisaged ecumenical Protestant denomination revealed that its would-be architects thought in terms of creating an ecclesiastical body that would be “far too much of a *worldly* factor”. “It should be social, intrude into all conditions and make its influence and authority felt on both the municipal and state levels,” he feared. Lie believed that all the emphasis would be on institutions, especially schools, and on medical ministry and other forms

27 Olaf Lie, “Kina’s kristelige landsmøte” i: *Kineseren* 32, nr. 29 (30 July 1922), 1, 2.

28 Olaf Lie, “Kina’s kristelige landsmøte” i: *Kineseren* 32, nr. 29 (30 July 1922), 2.

29 Olaf Lie, “Kinas kristelige landsmøte” i: *Kineseren* 32, nr. 29 (30 July 1922), 2.

of benevolence. He found support for his concern in a speech delivered by his fellow Lutheran Siegfried Knak, the director of the Berlin Missionary Society, who had urged the delegates to distinguish between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. The church, this German cleric reminded his audience, had often suffered when it became heavily involved in secular activities. Lie agreed wholeheartedly and remarked that in the discussions “a so simple and undemanding person as Jesus Christ was nearly ignored.”<sup>30</sup>

Misgivings about the creation of an NCC were by no means exclusively Lutheran. To cite but one example from a quite different denominational tradition, the personnel in the Southern Presbyterian’s North Jiangsu Mission (in which Absalom Sydenstricker, the father of the later Nobel laureate Pearl S. Buck, had served) declined by a wide vote not to participate. “Our Church already has abundant agencies to do all the work Providence has entrusted to us,” they explained. “Our commission is to preach the gospel, heal the sick, teach the ignorant and relieve the distressed; and accordingly we have chapels, hospitals, schools [and] orphanages and have done more than our share of famine relief work.” They added that many of their Chinese pastors agreed and quoted one of them indirectly: “Far better spend these thousands in preaching the gospel and saving souls.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the underlying response of the NLM personnel in central China was “ja og amen”, but they nevertheless chose to co-operate for the time being.

### **The NLM vs. Liberal Theology in the 1920s**

Meanwhile, in Norway the protests of the orthodox against the rising tide of liberal theology continued apace. Prominent men in the NLM joined other theologically conservative Norwegian Lutherans in criticising the appointment of post-orthodox compatriots to influential ecclesiastical and theological positions. The controversial naming of Jens Gleditsch as bishop of Nidaros (Trondheim) in 1923, for example, drew their ire. The editor of *Kineseren* quoted at length an opinion piece in *Luthersk Kirketidende*, then one of the periodicals of the orthodox group within the Church of Norway, decrying the consecration of Gleditsch, “one of our most consistently liberal theologians”.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the NLM had never endorsed Johannes Ordning’s appointment as a professor of theology in 1906 and unabashedly rejoiced at his resignation two decades later. How the conservative government of Prime Minister Christian Michelsen could have named “the most radical of applicants” to that post seemed

30 Olaf Lie, “Kinas kristelige landsmøte” i: *Kineseren* 32, nr. 30 (6 August 1922), 2.

31 “Why the North Kiangsu Mission Declined to Approve of a National Christian Council in China” i: *The Presbyterian of the South* (Richmond, Virginia) 17, nr. 50 (13 December 1922), 3.

32 “Omkring bispestriden” i: *Kineseren* 33, nr. 255-26 (24 June 1923), 2.

inexplicable to a writer in *Kineseren*, who expressed hope that the nation's politicians might have learned a lesson from the consequences of that "blunder".<sup>33</sup>

Part of the salvation of orthodoxy seemed to come from overseas. As early as 1924, one of the editors of *Kineseren* called readers' attention to a theological movement in the United States of America which he erroneously believed was quite new and centred at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He defined this "fundamentalism" as a swiftly advancing campaign "for a whole Bible, and open Bible, and a literally accepted Bible". This writer was confident that "fundamentalism" would soon flow from American shores to other countries and hoped that it would awaken Norwegian Christians to join in a seriously defined front against every movement that violated the Holy Scriptures.<sup>34</sup>

The infamous and internationally publicised "Scopes monkey trial" which took place in Dayton, Tennessee, in the summer of the following year also caught the attention of the NLM. Particularly the theologically orthodox Presbyterian lawyer William Jennings Bryan, who staunchly rejected Darwinian evolution as unbiblical, drew praise. After the trial concluded, one of the NLM editors found humour in the efforts of the former chancellor of Stanford University, David Starr Jordan, to raise \$5,000 to defray the cost of John Scopes's postgraduate studies at the university of his choice. "Yes, declaring that one is related to apes has its advantages," wrote Gustav Nielssen with no mean sarcasm.<sup>35</sup>

On the home front, Kristian Schjelderup remained one of the NLM's principal targets after his appointment to the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo in 1921. Going far beyond a previous generation of liberal theologians' questioning of various conventional doctrines, his dismissal of much that orthodox Lutherans regarded as foundational theology scandalised some of his opponents, including those within the NLM. This opposition came to a head in the autumn of 1924 when Schjelderup crossed verbal swords with a colleague, the liberal New Testament scholar Lyder Brun. Writing in the Kristiania daily newspaper *Dagbladet*, Schjelderup declared, "Most of what one has learned to regard as central in Christianity does not stem from Jesus!" Among the doctrines which he professed to have arisen later in the early church were the divinity, atonement, and physical resurrection and ascent to heaven of Christ. Such beliefs, Schjelderup insisted, were products of history and thus have "no claim to validity in scientific consciousness of our time".<sup>36</sup> An alarmed anonymous writer in *Kineseren* reported these shocking assertions *verbatim* and found scant consolation in Brun's challenges to them. On the contrary, that NLM journalist

33 "Ording" i: *Kineseren* 36, nr. 9 (28 February 1926), 1.

34 "Utlandet" i: *Kineseren* 34, nr. 22-23 (Pentecost, 1924), 6.

35 "Utlandet" i: *Kineseren* 35, nr. 33 (13 September 1925), 4.

36 Kristian Schjelderup, "Kristendommens opprinnelse i religionshistorisk belysning", *Dagbladet* (Kristiania), 13 September 1924), 1.

cautioned readers that Schjelderup's radical position was essentially "an extension of the view which Brun and other moderately liberal theologians represent".<sup>37</sup>

## Leaving the National Christian Council

The misgivings which Olaf Lie expressed about the ecumenical co-operation and the lack of commitment to what he regarded as theological orthodoxy at the National Christian Conference in 1922 clearly foreshadowed the waxing dissatisfaction of the NLM with the NCC during the next three years. There is abundant documentation that both the Norwegian personnel in the field and at its headquarters in Norway soon began to regard further participation in the Council as incompatible with the NLM's staunch opposition to theological modernism and doctrinal diversity. Furthermore, as will be seen below, at least some of these Lutherans echoed the suspicion of prioritising social reform and willingness to become involved in political activism that had been expressed at the Shanghai conference in 1922.

Olav Espegren, then the superintendent of the NLM field, laid bare the depth of his concern about the theological state of much missionary Christianity in China against a backdrop of civil unrest when he drafted his annual report for 1924. That the country was in turmoil was obvious to this seasoned missionary, but he opined that "the revolution in spiritual life was stronger than and more consequential than the civil war, the terror of banditry, and financial hardship." China's national awakening was a powder keg waiting to explode, Espegren feared, and as one component of this broad development students had come under the sway of what he called "the New Civilisation movement".<sup>38</sup> A Darwinist conceptualisation of nature and communist social philosophy were eroding conventional beliefs and social relations.<sup>39</sup>

Turning directly to religious dimensions of the shifting sands, Espegren did not veil his alarm at what he termed "the devastation of rationalism among missionaries in China". As stealthily as tuberculosis bacteria, he lamented, it had infected most institutions of tertiary education in the country. Espegren quoted one unidentified writer "from the quarters of the old faithful" who had declared that rationalism was

37 "Ny-teologer i kamp", i: *Kineseren* 34, nr. 46 (14 December 1924), 2, 4.

38 Presumably meant is actually the New Culture Movement, which arose during the early years of the Republic of China and was advancing notably in the 1920s. In brief, it criticised much in traditional Chinese culture and called for national revitalisation through emphasis on natural science and democracy. See Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960), and Svera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

39 Olav Espegren, "Aarsmelding 1924" i: *Det norske lutherske Kinamissionsforbund Aarbok 1925* (Bergen: A/S Lunde & Co.s Forlag, 1925), 17-18.



being taught at every one of the universities which missionaries had founded and that of thirteen theological faculties and seminaries for the training of pastors only four were free of rationalism. Moreover, of nearly fifty Bible schools, perhaps only nine or ten remained uninfected. Espegren's hope lay partly in the fact that four years earlier "those who were faithful to the Bible began to raise their voices" by founding their own "ring" and publishing a periodical. This was undoubtedly a reference to the Bible Union which had been established in 1920. Espegren was confident that at least the voice of theologically orthodox protest would remain audible, but he regretted that some unidentified people were trying to muffle it in the interest of "unity". Such co-operation, Espegren explained, was superficially being maintained by the NCC in Shanghai, but departures from it were already underway. "And one fine day the entire unity hysteria will collapse," he predicted.<sup>40</sup>

By then Espegren had corresponded disharmoniously with Edwin C. Lobenstine of the NCC, indicating his displeasure with the course that body was following. The Norwegian's side of the correspondence does not appear to be extant, but the gist of his dissatisfaction is readily discerned from that official's responses. An American Presbyterian who had served as a missionary in China for more than two decades beginning shortly before the eruption of the Boxer Rebellion,<sup>41</sup> Lobenstine rejected Espegren's complaint in August 1924 that the NCC was inviting theologically questionable speakers to China. This was a "total misapprehension", he insisted, for the Council did not invite evangelists or lecturers from abroad, but used personnel from its member organisations.<sup>42</sup>

By that time, however, Espegren may have nearly washed hands of the NCC. He seems to have chosen not to reply to Lobenstine, who sought to keep a channel of communication with him open by writing again in early November. Lobenstine lamented that he had not heard from the disgruntled Norwegian superintendent and admitted that the NCC hoped to serve numerous foreign missionary agencies by developing an extensive body of Christian literature in Chinese. This had been possible in India, he noted, but not yet in China. A thorny underlying problem, according to Lobenstine, lay in "the difficulty . . . in satisfying the varied elements of the Christian constituency", an explanation which no doubt was meaningful to the disgruntled personnel in the NLM.<sup>43</sup>

40 Espegren, "Aarsmelding 1924", 20-21.

41 "Training Missionaries", i: *The New York Times*, 18 June 1898, 5.

42 E.C. Lobenstine (Shanghai) to Olav Espegren, 12 September 1924, Box Da - 0003, Folder National National Christian Council in China, Feltarkiv, NLM Archives, Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo.

43 E.C. Lobenstine (Shanghai) to Olav Espegren, 5 November 1924, Box Da - 0003, Folder National National Christian Council in China, Feltarkiv, NLM Archives, Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo.

In January 1925 Lobenstine made what may have been a final effort to woo Espegren out of his *incommunicado* state by writing to him yet again. However, he may have undermined his case and further alienated the NLM superintendent by emphasising in detail what he believed were the NCC's beneficial efforts on behalf of Chinese Christianity and the numerous foreign agencies that were supporting it. Lobenstine stressed *inter alia* the major effort to organise throughout China "an effective Anti-Opium campaign". This had already led to the organisation of more than 230 local societies, most of which were under the supervision of Christians in Shanghai. Lobenstine emphasised that "the bulk of this work falls upon the National Christian Council" and was led by a member of its staff, K. T. Chung.<sup>44</sup> Presumably unbeknown to this enthusiastic American, underscoring such a social ethical dimension of ministry confirmed what Espegren and at least some of his colleagues in the NLM found objectionable in the NCC.

There is also evidence that the NLM perceived what it regarded as unacceptable *de facto* recognition of Buddhism on the part of many non-Lutheran missionaries in China. On Easter Sunday, 12 April 1925, Thubten Choekyi Nyima, the Ninth Panchen Lama of Tibetan Buddhism, who had trekked from Tibet to Beijing, was welcomed by nearly 1,000 Chinese and foreign representatives of numerous Christian and other religious bodies. The event had been arranged by Gilbert Reid, an ecumenically inclined American Presbyterian missionary who had been in China since the 1890s. As reported by the Associated Press, he welcomed the Panchen Lama warmly in an introductory address and expressed his hope that the occasion might enable the represented churches "to unite in their effort to attain the object which all had in view, namely the betterment of the world".<sup>45</sup>

Peder Simonsen Eikrem, who had served the NLM for many years in China before returning to Norway, was incensed at this meeting. Disparaging it in *Kineseren*, he relied heavily on and included a lengthy excerpt from an account published by Arie Kok, who was the chancellor of the Dutch Embassy and an unabashed Christian.<sup>46</sup> This diplomat had found it scandalous that on Easter, of all days, large numbers of Christians had thus honoured a man who was venerated as a modern incarnation of the Buddha. Eikrem concurred and urged readers of *Kineseren* to draw a lesson from the occasion at a time when missionaries of the Gospel were sailing against a brisk headwind. "The only thing we can and must do is to keep our own flock clean, and

44 E.C. Lobenstine (Shanghai) to Olav Espegren, 10 January 1925, Box Da - 0003, Folder National National Christian Council in China, Feltarkiv, NLM Archives, Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo.

45 "Foreigners See Spiritual Ruler in Peking Meet" i: *The Humboldt Times* (Eureka, California), 19 July 1925, 10.

46 "Arie Kok, 67, Dies At Collingswood; Church Leader" i: *Courier-Post* (Camden, New Jersey), 10 January 1951, 4.

then not have fellowship with those who deny [Christianity],” he asserted. “And if we can succeed in keeping the light of the Gospel shining in the little area of China which we call our own, that would be more crucial than ever. May we hold out until the end!”<sup>47</sup> Eikrem’s advocacy of such aloofness from more liberally minded Christians was, of course, in full harmony with the decision not to continue in the NCC.

When Secretary Brandtzæg from the NLM headquarters arrived in China in the autumn of 1926, missionaries warned him yet again of the potentially grave situation in which the country found itself and how serious the implications of the domestic tensions could be for the future of Christianity there. However, he believed those undeniable woes were of secondary importance. The greater danger, this dogmatically inflexible pastor asserted, was that the gospel of Christ was being eclipsed, especially by “modernism” in preaching, educational work, and “many other hidden and underground ways which cannot be traced and controlled”. Brandtzæg was certain that other missionaries shared his perception and pointed to a recently published book, *The Red Theology in the Far East* by Charles H. Coates of the China Inland Mission to corroborate his opinion. He assured readers that he could fill many issues of *Kineseren* with details of “modernism” and its dilatory effects on the missionary enterprise. Brandtzæg granted that in China, as elsewhere, one could find many “outstanding people” who were diligently promoting “Christianity as they understand and proclaim it”. Nevertheless, he thought that the consequences of theological modernism were “so sad that one could shed tears of blood over them”.<sup>48</sup>

By and large, the NLM did not evince regret that it had chosen not to continue to walk hand-in-hand with many other Protestant agencies in China. A lengthy review of the country’s spiritual state published in *Kineseren* in 1926 reflected its perception of it as far from conducive to sustaining a pietistic Lutheran position if such close ties had been maintained. Its author, veteran missionary Lars Fleisje who had gone to China in 1908, had returned to Norway in 1925 because of failing health but embedded in his survey insights gleaned from his last few years in the field. He noted that in accordance with nationalistic tendencies, Christianity was being Sinaicised in some quarters, *i.e.* adapted to fit Chinese culture and attitudes towards life. Fleisje refrained from passing explicit judgment on that tendency, but not on “the wave of rationalism which in the form of a one-sided scholarly wisdom has washed over China”. He consoled readers by asserting that it seemed to have reached its apex and might be in recession. Fleisje was also pleased to report that the China Inland Mission, along with a number of other societies, had cut its ties to the NCC because of the latter’s “rationalistic tendencies”.<sup>49</sup>

47 P. S. Eikrem, “Uten fæste. Et tidbillede fra Kina” i: *Kineseren* 35, nr. 26 (28 June 1925), 2.

48 “Stillingen i Kina”, 2.

49 Lars Fleisje, “Aandsretninger i nutidens Kina” i: *Kineseren* 36, nr. 37, nr. 37 (17 October 1926), 3-4.

## The Church of Christ in China

The quite limited denominational scope of participation in the initial general assembly of the Church of Christ in China, held in Shanghai during the first eleven days of October 1927, may have given the NLM personnel vindication for their refusal to participate. To be sure, 1927 was an *annus horribilis* for missionaries in China generally, many of whom had to abandon stations in the interior of the country and take shelter from the paroxysm of violence that shook the land at that time. Their resumption of responsibilities after many months' absence preoccupied them; ecumenical endeavours were necessarily surpassed in the hierarchy of priorities. The NLM remained largely silent about the constitution of the Church of Christ in China.

In the absence of these Norwegians as well as Lutherans from several other countries, delegates representing chiefly denominations of Reformed ancestry gathered in Shanghai. In what may have struck some as an anomalous but gracious act, His Grace Frederick Rogers Graves, who had served as the bishop of the Anglican diocese of Shanghai since 1893, offered the campus of the prestigious St. Mary's Hall, an exclusive girls' school, as the venue for this parley. However, there was no Anglican involvement *per se* in the formation of the Church of Christ in China.

One of the participants, Andrew Weir, sought to paint a moderately roseate picture of the birth of this interdenominational denomination while tactfully acknowledging the absence of large numbers of foreign missionaries and Chinese church members from it. Filing a report in *The Chinese Recorder*, Weir gratefully recognising the role of Bishop Graves in providing a "beautiful" site for the proceedings, Weir asserted that "The meeting brought joy to many hearts both as the realization of the hopes of years and as an earnest expectation of even better things to come." At the same time, this ecumenist could "rejoice in the consummation of a union that include about one-third of the Protestant Christians of China and in the expansion and enrichment of our common life." Without going into extensive detail, he expressed hope that Anglicans, Lutherans, and Methodists who had "developed better than we some elements in the Christian way of life" would someday join the new denomination to create "a still wider and richer union".<sup>50</sup> Weir did not record the reasons underlying their decision not to join in 1927.

In his annual report for 1927, superintendent Olav Espegren did not even mention the Church of Christ in China. The NLM personnel under his supervision were preoccupied with reconstructing their temporarily vacated ministries and seeking to protect their flocks from the continued threats of banditry and warfare. Simultaneously, the NLM was busy implementing a new system of administration in its Chinese field which transferred more responsibility from the Norwegian personnel to indigenous church leaders. Revealingly, Espegren asserted that the greatest threat to the church in

50 Andrew Weir, "The First General Assembly of the Church of Christ in China" i: *The Christian Recorder* 59, nr. 11 (November 1927), 712-714.

China was “the modern denial of Christ and the Bible”. He judged that the Chinese people, with their “tolerant national character in matters of religion, were naturally predisposed to the liberal-rationalist infection”, against which, he thought, there was no impenetrable immunity. One could only “vaccinate” Christians against heresy, Espegren believed. In the same breath, this superintendent lamented the “friendly” relationship between the “modern” Chinese church leaders and the “modern” political authorities. Consequently, to maintain fidelity to “its first love”, the church must maintain its distance from politics.<sup>51</sup>

### **Retrospective Vindication in 1930**

The NLM remained steadfast in its unwillingness to compromise its Lutheran confessional foundations, and its leaders perceived continuing evidence in the course of Christianity which confirmed their conviction that they had acted prudently in cutting their ties with movements that they regarded as misdirected or unambiguously heterodox. As late as 1930, for example, veteran missionary Johannes Karstad lamented what he described as the partial secularisation of the Young Men’s Christian Association in China. He marshalled the misgivings of David Z.T. Yui, a Chinese-born but Harvard-educated educator and churchman who had been elected chairman of the NCC in 1922 and headed his country’s YMCA for many years, in describing what he regarded as a loss of spiritual vitality in that organisation owing to the expansion of its programmes that were not conventionally religious. “Clearly defined lines are absolutely essential in all Christian work, and especially in missions to the heathens,” Karstad asserted. “If the foundation, namely the Word of God, is shaken by doubt and modernist interpretations, we soon become helpless, and otherwise sensible people can come up with incredible madness and heathendom.”<sup>52</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The NLM’s brief involvement in interdenominational endeavours thus largely drew to a close in 1925 “not with a bang but a whimper”, to borrow a well-known line from T.S. Eliot’s endlessly quoted poem “The Hollow Men”, which coincidentally was also published that year. Perhaps it was nearly doomed from an early stage, if not from the outset. As noted above, there had been some unquantifiable measure of enthusiasm for co-operation with other Lutheran as well as non-Lutheran missionary agencies in China quite early in the century, as evidenced by the NLM’s participation in the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, and as late as 1922 several representatives trekked to Shanghai to join hands with counterparts in a large number of other agencies in forming the NCC. However, before either of these events certain

51 Olav Espegren, “Arbeidet på misjonsmarken” i: *Det Norsk Lutherske Kinamissionsforbund. Årbok 1928* (Bergen: A/S Lunde & Co.s Forlag, 1928), 14-15.

52 Johannes Karstad, “Klare linjer” i: *Kineseren* 40, nr. 41 (9 November 1930), 2.

leaders of the NLM, both in Norway and in the central Chinese field, had nailed their orthodox doctrinal colours to the mast and made known their fervent opposition to organisations which in their eyes were theologically controversial. In retrospect, it seems almost ironic that the NLM participated in the NCC as long as it did, considering the stance against co-operation with modernists that its leaders, particularly Brandtzæg, had already taken at the Calmeyergaten convention in 1920. It should be emphasised that the widening cleft between the NCC and the NLM between 1922 and 1925 was not merely a matter of the former not meeting the latter's criteria for theological orthodoxy, but also entailed the former's vigorous programme of social ministry, including such matters as its campaign against opium, that alienated these conservative Norwegian Lutherans whose unabashed emphasis on conventional evangelism and ecclesiastical life left little room for such supposedly secular movements.

This conscious choice to concentrate its personnel and other resources on evangelistic efforts and conventional Christian religious life at its stations rather than engaging with other agencies in an amalgam of religious and social endeavours, such as the sorely needed movement to check the proliferation of opium in China, is also understandable when one considers the pietistic origins of the NLM and its stance against any degree of theological liberalism in Norway. To be sure, almost from its inception the NLM had conducted medical ministry at some of its stations, and in 1923 a qualified physician, Olaf Olsen, arrived from Norway to strengthen this dimension significantly. Moreover, in April 1928 it dedicated the Frøyland Memorial Hospital at its large compound in Laohekou.<sup>53</sup> However, social ministries always held lower positions on the NLM's hierarchy of priorities. Furthermore, even when the *kirkestrid* seemed to be waning in some respects in the 1920s, men like Kristian Schelderup with his accommodation of Buddhism reminded the NLM that their efforts to maintain doctrinal orthodoxy could not be abandoned. The hostility of such leaders as Eikrem to the reception given the Panchen Lama in 1925 reinforced this unwillingness to continue in a co-operative mode that now smacked not only of theological modernism but also syncretism that apparently contradicted the NLM's purpose of living in accordance with the Great Commission and bringing the historic Christian faith as its emissaries knew it to China.

53 "Da 'dr. Frøylands Minne' blev innviet" i: *Kineseren* 38 nr. 25 (17 June 1928), 2.