

# THE NORWEGIAN-LUTHERAN CHURCHES IN AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

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Properly speaking, Norwegian immigration to America did not begin until about the year 1840. Before that time only a few men dared to risk the long, unsafe, and difficult voyage across the ocean, and the far more difficult continuation of the journey through the almost boundless forests and plains of the new continent. But from the year 1840 there was a steady stream of people from Norway to America, and the number of immigrants increased from year to year. Gradually this stream included people from all walks of life, persons who had enjoyed the most varied degrees of education, and who often had very different views.

These Norwegian immigrants to America have found new homes in one of the most fertile regions of the earth; the political institutions suit them to a dot; and the complete separation of state and church has given them an opportunity to devote all their faculties and energies to their church work according to what they firmly believed to be in accordance with the word of God and his holy will.

Few peoples in the world are more religious than the Norwegians. But their religious life has been somewhat warped by remains from Catholicism and the stress on external ceremonialism, which are bound to result from the coercion exercised by a state church. The Norwegians being a very conservative people, the religion of their forebears has a deep and firm grip on their hearts, and being constantly threatened by death in their daily occupation among the

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mountains and at sea, they are constantly urged to keep their minds on eternal and invisible things and to remember the almighty hand that rules the destinies of man.

And as to the Norwegians, the nineteenth century has been an era of extraordinary activity, religiously, and mutually antagonistic forces have caused energetic religious struggles among them.

At the close of the previous, and the beginning of the present century, while France and the rest of Europe were shaken by revolution, distant little Norway was profoundly aroused by a religious awakening caused by the lay preacher Hans Nielsen Hauge. He has been called the "Prophet of Norway," and in this man's life and work there is indeed much that reminds one of John the Baptist. The aim of his cry was to arouse the people, his sermons called them to repentance. He found the people steeped in vice, ignorance and superstition, without a conscious, spiritual Christian life, and yet they were often tied down by blind confidence in their pastors, their church and its formal ceremonies.

Hans Nielsen Hauge was firmly convinced that God had called him to shout, "Awake!" to every settlement, to every congregation, nay, to every Norwegian man and woman, if possible. For eight years (1796- 1804) he travelled untiringly through the country, and many were those who eagerly listened to his bold testimony, received the word in their hearts, and were converted to the living God. It has been felt and acknowledged in Norway that these awakened and believing men and women became a "sacred salt" in the church as well as in the life of the people. But there were also many who were moved with indignation against this plain layman who dared to hold before them eternal damnation if they did not turn from their sinful ways.

The ministers in particular, almost all of whom were rationalists at that time, were highly incensed against this faithful witness who so plainly preached the Biblical truth and the way of

salvation and urged the necessity of repentance and faith; for it must be admitted that Hauge often blamed the ministers for permitting the people to sleep in their sins, and for offering them a false hope of salvation. It seemed to the rationalistic ministers that Hauge led the people back to a darkness from which the modern enlightenment was just about to deliver them; and an intense hatred was aroused in them against the man who by means of the keen sword of the Word of God disturbed the lovely peace which prevailed when the souls were satisfied with the prescribed religious ceremonies, devoid of a conscious Christian life. Upon instigation by the ministers, Hauge was arrested and imprisoned, accused of having violated a law of 1741 which put certain obstacles in the way of religious gatherings. Hauge pined in jail for eight years, and finally, though no guilt was proved against him, he was sentenced to pay a heavy fine before he was set free. He was now mentally and physically broken down.

From that time there has been, and still is, occasionally considerable antagonism in the Norwegian church between those who are the children of this religious revival and those who are opposed to it. Indeed, most of the Norwegian clergymen are among those who place wreaths on the grave of the martyr-prophet; but still there is a considerable difference and antagonism with regard to religious views between those who in their Christian worship lay the main stress on the Christian life of the individual, and those who look upon Christianity as more of a matter of the church and of ecclesiastical institutions.

The movement started by Hauge took root especially in the western part of Norway; and one of its many blessed results is the Norwegian Mission Society, which was organized in Stavanger in 1842. The passionate zeal for the salvation of souls which characterized all those who were captivated by the movement would not be limited by the boundary lines of Norway.

An irresistible urge arose in the believers to send the Gospel to the heathens in order that their souls might be saved from death.

It was almost exclusively lay Christians that organized the mission society, opened a mission school, and began to send out missionaries, at first to South Africa and later to Madagascar. But little by little the cause of missions overcame the apathy and antagonism among the clergy, so that at the present time, the Norwegian church is practically united in supporting the mission society in Stavanger.

The religious controversies found in Norway from the beginning of the century naturally followed those who emigrated to America. In this country said controversies found a far more fertile ground, for here the people were no longer within the legal barrier of the state church. In Norway people following different currents of religious life, were closed up under one roof; in America each one of them could start an organization or "samfund" (synod) and thus keep aloof from the rest, so that mutual influence developed at a very slow rate.

From the start, therefore, two church parties grew up among the Norwegian Lutherans in the United States; and there was a great difference between them. One of them, which developed into the present Hauge Synod, was originally an extremely low church faction. It was firmly opposed to the all-inclusive state church congregations and the state church clergymen, who depending on their authority as royal officials, so often had shown contempt for the attempts of lay Christians to lead truly Christian lives. Now, therefore, they try to organize congregations out of true believers exclusively, and they repudiated the customary education of clergymen by way of schooling and the acquisition of knowledge in general. All that a congregation required of its pastor was that he should have personal experience as a Christian, and be able to preach the Word of God for the edification of his hearers.

The other party--the present Norwegian Synod--stressed the importance of the clergy as professional teachers rising above their hearers as to learning and insight. This party had no objection to congregations of indiscriminate membership. But in America there was no such thing as the strong arm of the secular law to keep the people together under the clergymen; hence "the pure doctrine" was made to serve as a sort of substitute for the secular law; and those clergymen denounced most vehemently all those who deviated as much as a hair's breadth from "the pure doctrine." This zeal for "the pure doctrine" among the Norwegian Lutherans had come, to some extent, from their contact with German Lutherans of the most extremely confessional and dogmatic faction, the so-called Missourians. So great was the admiration of, and the enthusiasm for, these German fellow-believers that the Norwegian Synod found it most safe to have its ministers educated at the theological seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, where the chief teacher was the learned and energetic Professor Walther. At this school the ministers of the Norwegian Synod acquired an almost fanatical zeal for the old Lutheran dogmatics and the general view that Christianity is essentially a doctrine, and at the same time they lost much of their connection with their own nationality and with the church interests of the believers in the church of their homeland.

Meanwhile, however, not all the Norwegian Lutherans in America were ready to join either of these parties, each of which had assumed such a radical attitude. Hence, through various disputes and struggles there grew up a third party, which may be characterized as the moderate, or central party. They organized a synod known as the "Norwegian-Danish Conference" which dates from 1870. They assumed a central position between the two extremes. They laid exceedingly great stress on the congregation, in which they tried to find a solution of contradictions. They would not only emphasize the Christian life of the individual, but also held

that Christianity must assume associate form in the congregation. The pastoral office they looked upon as one of the functions of the congregation and they stressed very strongly that the pastor is not mainly the liturgist performing the sacramental ceremonies, nor the teacher instructing his ignorant hearers but the organ of the congregation proclaiming the Word of God. Therefore they demanded that the education of the pastor should be Biblical and Christian above everything else, and not mainly humanistic and classical. They asked for a divinity school that did not lift the pastors above and out of the congregation by means of humanistic learning, but which conducted the future pastors into the deep springs of the congregations, in God's eternal counsel and its revelation through the prophets and the apostles. They eagerly sought a thorough study of the Scriptures and the history of the church, and demanded an absolutely definite and unequivocal testimony as to the personal Christian experience of those who wanted to become preachers of the Word of God in the congregation. They were also decidedly national in their work, and held that Norwegian ministers ought to be educated at Norwegian divinity schools. Though they were definitely opposed to the organizing of congregations after the methods in vogue in the state church, they were in favor of having the Norwegian Lutheran churches in America co-operate in the unity of spirit with the awakened Christian people in Norway-especially with those who had united in supporting the Norwegian Mission Society. Therefore, their first endeavor was to establish a Norwegian Lutheran Divinity School in America. They succeeded, and the result was Augsburg Seminary, Minneapolis, Minnesota, which is over twenty-six years old, considerably older than the other Norwegian theological seminaries in this country. Their next great endeavor was to start a vigorous mission work; Christianity being looked upon mainly as God's kingdom on earth established through the Gospel.

Since 1870 these three synods, or associations of congregations, have worked side by side, being often engaged in vigorous competition. This competition, which occasionally degenerated into bitter rivalry, had a baneful influence upon Christian life and the church work. Yet some benefits were derived. The contending parties compelled each other to keep within certain bounds and to endeavor to outdo one another in good works. All wanted to be orthodox, and all wanted to work in the best way for the advancement of the kingdom of God. It is wonderful to see the influence exerted by Augsburg Seminary in this competition. It became necessary for Hauge Synod to establish a theological seminary of its own and change its views with regard to the importance of the education of ministers. Likewise the Norwegian Synod had to cut itself loose from the German Missourians with regard to the training of ministers and get a theological seminary of its own.

Along these lines the church work kept on developing until a controversy arose in the Norwegian Synod with regard to election, or predestination, which split that organization into two factions of practically equal strength. The Calvinistic faction kept the name and property of the synod, while the Armenian faction seceded and became known as the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood. This schism took place in 1887 and 1888; and after a series of negotiations and preparations the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood, the Norwegian-Danish Conference, and the Norwegian Augustana Synod (a very small body) were united in 1890, assuming the name of the United Church. This was largely a fruit of the views which Augsburg Seminary had worked for, and therefore this school was to be the theological seminary and the institution of higher learning in general for the new synod.