

The Norwegian Immigrant and His Church

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During the century following 1825, sparsely settled Norway contributed more than three quarters of a million of her sons and daughters to the making of America. While that figure does not seem large compared with the numerical strength of other immigrant groups, Norway's proportional contribution was exceeded only by that of Ireland (in the post-Civil War period) and by Italy (from the 1890's on). The Upper Midwest was the destination of most of these Norwegian immigrants: northern Illinois, Wisconsin, northern Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. Then the line of settlement stretched westward across northern Montana and Idaho into Washington. There were enclaves of settlement in many other areas as well in New York City and its environs, Texas, and California, for example.

Nearly all of these Norwegian immigrants were Lutheran in background and upbringing. Norway has had an episcopally organized Lutheran state church, or folk church, since the time of the Reformation. Many who came to America had a deep affection for the faith, worship, and practice of the Lutheran Church; others did not. None, however, desired to duplicate on American soil the authoritarian organizational structure of the church of Norway.

The nineteenth century was for Norway an era of great change and progress on many fronts. It saw the establishment of a democratic form of government with the adoption of a liberal constitution in 1814, the emergence of a strong nationalistic spirit, and the development of a virile intellectual and cultural renaissance represented by such writers as Wergeland, Bjørnson, and Ibsen. More or less closely related to these phenomena were vigorous religious movements that profoundly influenced the immigrant and his relationship to his church. One of these is known as the Haugean revival, taking its name from the lay evangelist Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824), who was imprisoned for his teachings, 1804-14. Haugeanism was a pietistic, grass-roots movement that brought new life and vitality into a church characterized by formalism and lethargy. It served as a leaven in all of Norwegian society, playing an important part in nurturing the democratic folk movement of the time, and stimulating the entrance into politics of representatives of the rural population. It increased tensions between the more privileged classes and the common people, as well as between the clergy and the laity. Some of these tensions were carried to the American frontier.

In the 1850's a second religious movement began in Norway, known as the Johnsonian awakening. It takes its name from Professor Gisle Johnson (1822-94) of the theological faculty of the Royal Fredrik University in Christiania (now Oslo). It resembled the earlier Haugean revival in many of its emphases, with the difference that in this instance leadership was provided by the theological faculty and the clergy trained by them. It added a theological dimension lacking in Haugeanism. Johnsonianism represented an emphasis on both piety and orthodoxy

that has been typical of Norwegian Lutheranism in both Norway and America. It gave a pietistic tone to all of Norwegian life. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, religious skepticism developed rapidly in Norwegian intellectual circles, and many of Norway's cultural leaders became indifferent or hostile to the church.

Both the Haugean and Johnsonian awakenings were powerful influences in shaping the views of both laymen and pastors who migrated to the United States. Dean Theodore C. Blegen, who has so effectively tapped the riches of communications sent back to Norway by immigrants, says that expressions of piety "flood the 'America letters.'" And he observes that large numbers of Norwegian immigrants brought with them to America "a deep religious impulse."

Religion, however, played a relatively minor role as a cause of emigration. The basic motivation was a desire for material betterment. Intertwined with this fundamental interest was discontent with aspects of the Norwegian social and political situation.

By and large, the attitude in Norway toward emigration, of both government and church, was skeptical and unsympathetic. Most leaders in public life looked upon it as a national catastrophe, practically a traitorous desertion of the fatherland. For one illustration, as early as May, 1887, Bishop Jacob Neumann of Bergen issued an episcopal letter to the "emigration-smitten" farmers of his diocese. He appealed to their patriotism in urging them to remain in Norway and strongly emphasized the trials, disasters, and spiritual deprivation that were the lot of the emigrant. Toward the close of his epistle he made this dramatic appeal: "Here in Norway rest the ashes of your fathers; here you first saw the light of day; here you enjoyed many childhood pleasures; here you received your first impressions of God and His love; here you are still surrounded by relatives and friends who share your joy and your sorrow, while there, when you are far away from all that has been dear to you, who shall close your eyes in the last hour of life? A stranger's hand! And who shall weep at your grave? Perhaps no one! Give heed, then, to the advice David gave to his people: Stay in the land and support yourself honestly."

Although the church of Norway, as an institution, did not take steps to provide spiritual leaders for the emigrants, many individual ministers followed them to America. Their numbers were insufficient, however, and the immigrant congregations soon realized that they would have to train their own ministers and in all other respects become completely self-sustaining.

Because the bulk of Norwegian immigrants who affiliated with churches in the United States remained Lutheran, the focus of this discussion is the Norwegian immigrant and the Lutheran Church. This restriction is in no way intended to minimize the importance of other Norwegian-American denominational groups, but is dictated by the need for brevity.

In September, 1843, the first Norwegian-American Lutheran congregation was organized in the Muskego settlement, about twenty miles southwest of Milwaukee. Its first pastor was Claus L. Clausen, a Danish schoolteacher with Haugean views. Within a few years many more congregations were organized in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois, several under the leadership of the aggressive pastor, J. W. C. Dietrichson. Prior to 1843, church work had not been formally organized, and spiritual guidance was provided by Haugean laymen. Steps to establish a church body were then taken under the leadership of the ablest and most aggressive

of these, Elling Eielsen, who at the urging of his followers was ordained that same year. The church formed in 1846, popularly referred to as the Eielsen Synod, underwent a reorganization a number of years later, when it became Hauge's Synod. Eielsen's group was radically Haugean, particularly in its early years, in its emphases lay oriented, somewhat anticlerical, low-churchly, pietistic, and evangelistic. (*The term "low church" refers to the absence of formalism, ritual, and the other trappings of the "high church" traditions found in the state Church of Norway.*)



This is a picture of the first church built by Norwegian immigrants in the United States. It's a Lutheran church built in 1844 in the Muskego Settlement of southeastern Wisconsin near Racine and Lake Michigan, not far north of Chicago. It was moved in 1904 to the campus of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota where it was restored and still stands.

A marked tendency toward divisiveness arose from the very start. As early as 1853 a second church body, destined to be much larger and more influential than Eielsen's group, was organized, popularly known as the Norwegian Synod. It was formed, and grew rapidly, under the leadership of young, aggressive, and well-educated pastors, including, in addition to Clausen, such men as Adolph C. Preus, Herman A. Preus, and Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, who successively served it as president. This group sought to perpetuate the worship, doctrine, and practice of the church of Norway. They were traditionalists in this respect. They stressed church order and organization and thus were critical of unsupervised lay preaching. Their concern for "pure doctrine" was increased and strengthened by the close ties which were early established with Missouri Synod Lutherans, a German body.

In the free environment of the American frontier, divergent views that held together in Norway under the broad umbrella of the state church were assuming separate institutional or synodical expression. Fortunately this decided tendency toward religious fragmentation was, in the course of time, chiefly in the twentieth century, to be counteracted and largely overcome by a strong union movement among Norwegian-American Lutherans.

The process of fragmentation continued as many immigrants sought to occupy religious ground somewhere between the options provided by Eielsen's type of Haugeanism and by the Norwegian Synod. Two additional church bodies emerged which aimed at an intermediate position, the very small Norwegian Augustana Synod and the larger Norwegian-Danish Conference, of which Professors Georg Sverdrup and Sven Oftedal were the best-known leaders. Despite the tendencies toward fragmentation, there were strong factors operating to overcome differences, the most forceful being a mutual heritage. These Norwegian Lutherans were unified by a common language, a common hymnody, the same form of catechetical instruction, uniform devotional books, and the like.

In 1890, the intermediate groups were consolidated, under the presidency of Gjermund Hoyme, in the United Norwegian Lutheran Church, which sought to hold in balance church order and lay activity, pietism and orthodoxy, and other divisive tendencies. This effort at union was not entirely successful, for in 1897 a minority in the United Church organized the Lutheran Free Church. The formation of the United Church had been the first step on the way to a second merger in 1917, which saw the reunion of the great majority of Norwegian-American Lutherans in the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, which was later called the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The largest group not included in 1917 was the Lutheran Free Church; in 1963, it joined many Norwegian-American Lutherans in the American Lutheran Church, of which the Evangelical Lutheran Church had become a part. Unquestionably, the 1917 merger was one of the great events in the story of the Norwegian immigrant and his church.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, these Lutheran churches were involved in a number of controversies. The differences were rooted in deep religious convictions but probably were also an expression of individualism. Some were simply transplanted from Norway, such as the long dispute about the legitimacy or function of lay preaching. Others were provoked by the American environment, manifesting themselves in sharp debates about slavery and the American public school. The most violent controversy of all, one centering in the difficult doctrine of predestination and related questions, came about through contacts with other American Lutherans (the Missouri Synod) and involved tensions transplanted from Norway.

The theological position of all these immigrant churches was a most conservative one, as their doctrinal debates and discussions revealed. As one brief illustration: In 1880:81 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Norway's poet-patriot, visited the United States and during his stay made a lecture tour through the Midwest. He was greatly admired by the immigrants for his patriotism, his poetry and novels, and for his rather democratic political theories. But on his American tour, he proceeded to air his liberal religious views. Since he denied many traditional Christian teachings, his discussions of religious subjects created a tremendous furor. His chief critics were clergymen, "the real leaders of the people," according to Arthur Paulson, who has studied the incident. A small group of Norwegian-American intelligentsia, led by Luth Jaeger, a Minneapolis editor, loyally defended and championed Bjørnson. Anything smacking strongly of theological innovation or liberalism was rejected by most of these immigrant people. The same treatment was accorded the Norwegian liberal pastor Kristofer Janson, who also made a lecture tour in America (1879:80), and spent a dozen years in Minneapolis in the 1880's and 1890's.

The type of life inculcated by the Norwegian Lutheran churches was generally pietistic. The church, in seeking to strengthen the moral fiber of its people under rough frontier conditions which often tempted them to forget traditional morality, stressed strict standards, sometimes emphasizing prohibitions; for example, the rejection of many types of amusement, strict observance of the sabbath, abstinence from alcoholic beverages, and the like. William Warren Sweet, a historian of American churches, in writing about the role of religion on the frontier, has said that the many admirable qualities brought there and nurtured "would have gone for naught had there not been planted in the far flung communities of the west the seeds of moral, spiritual and cultural life. As Horace Bushnell stated long ago in referring to the American west, barbarism was the first danger." The churches of the Norwegian immigrants, like other denominations, made their contributions to moral, spiritual, and cultural uplift on the frontier.

In a famous essay, Professor Marcus L. Hansen has set forth the thesis that frontier churches are always inclined to be puritanical. His proposition is undoubtedly sound. In the case of the Norwegian immigrants, however, it must be strongly underscored that a pietistic-puritanical orientation was part of the cargo brought across the Atlantic as a result of the impact of the Haugean and Johnsonian awakenings. While, generally speaking, the standards of conduct promoted by the church among Norwegian immigrants were rather austere, one is at the same time faced with extensive evidence that drunkenness was an extremely serious problem in many Norwegian-American communities, as it was in Norway in the 1830's and 1840's. Nevertheless, many Norwegian Lutheran church people, following the exhortations of their pastors and other leaders, became promoters and supporters of the prohibition movement.

Undoubtedly, one of the stupendous achievements recorded in our national history was the conquest and settlement of the westward-moving frontier. Norwegian immigrants played a significant part in this accomplishment, particularly in the Upper Midwest. From the mid-nineteenth century and on, much of the history of church work among Norwegian Americans is the story of what we would call "home missions" carried on under pioneer conditions. The various church bodies and individual congregations strove valiantly to follow the waves of immigrants to their places of settlement. In so doing, they established hundreds of congregations, dotting prairies, valleys, and woodlands with churches. The constitution of a Norwegian Lutheran congregation in southern Wisconsin (Wiotia), dating from 1851, includes a paragraph which begins: "This congregation's territory shall extend as far north, south, east, and west as there are Norwegian settlers who will accept this constitution." The Midwestern frontier provided an almost limitless mission challenge to congregations and pastors.