

Crusade, Christian Expansion or Cultural Exchange?

Lars Österlin

Korstågen till Kina. Linjer i protestantisk Kinamission.

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The following is a review and also an evaluation of Lars Österlin's *Korstågen till Kina. Linjer i protestantisk Kinamission* [*The Crusades to China: Lines in Protestant China Missions*]. Let me first congratulate readers who are familiar with Scandinavian languages on having this solid documentation of the main guidelines for Protestant missionary work in China. Lars Österlin (1923-2006) – himself a child of China missionaries to Hunan, the Rev. Gustaf Österlin and Mrs. Ellen Österlin – fortunately managed to complete and publish this monograph a year before he passed away. In short, his work is an impressive, systematic and lucid account of international as well as Swedish Protestant mission activities in China, as well as policies relating to the missionary work there. The work is founded on solid research, based on archive studies and other reliable historical documents. It shows a profound understanding of the dominant Protestant missiological reflections, both in general and with regard to China, from the beginning of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century. His account reflects considerable knowledge also of China and Chinese history during this period, especially the last hundred years leading up to the 1950s.

This historical documentation – and interpretation – is well written by an author who captures his readers and keeps them alert. The many pictures and illustrations found in the book add to its value. The account has found a good balance between presenting and analyzing the main lines of Protestant missionary thinking of the West during the period, and the development of Swedish missionary engagement in China, and how the former in many ways influenced the latter. In a fine way Österlin describes how the evangelical missionary movement engaged the Swedish Christians and missionary societies also. Even in Sweden the Christian student movement engaged in so-called crusades – in that context obviously understood as

evangelistic outreach and campaigns in Sweden itself. And although John Mott seems never to have understood the strong Christian influence and value of the national churches ("folk churches") on the European continent and in the Nordic countries – and therefore had little confidence in the Christian strength of these churches- he had some influence on the YMCA and Christian student movements in the Nordic countries, and also motivated them for participation in the world wide mission enterprise (p. 123-129).

Lars Österlin has chosen crusades as a key word for understanding Protestant mission involvement in China – inspired, as he admits, by the church historian Robert T. Handy. Österlin had his reasons for using this concept, since it corresponds with the nomenclature used by both Hudson Taylor – the engineer behind the China Inland Mission – and John Mott of the Christian student movement. He demonstrates beyond doubt that in both the two dominant evangelical movements which inspired Protestant missionary enterprises in China, the concept "crusade" was extensively used. Thus the movement of Christian expansion toward and inside China made use of a terminology which echoes the political slogans of Euro-American colonialistic efforts in China – namely of territorial influence, occupation, economic and cultural dominance. The very title of the status report of Christian missionary endeavours in China which came in 1922 – *The Christian Occupation of China* – also signals a colonial attitude. It is therefore not surprising that the title caused reactions by both contemporary Chinese and Western critics, both within and outside the Christian church (p. 282, 290f). The title, as well as the close to 600 pages of documentary material, caused the Christian missionary endeavour to be understood as a Christian parallel to the political, economic and cultural colonial efforts of Western nations to dominate China. And, as Robert T. Handy and other historians have shown, the view that the church's mission was "crusading" and promoting a "Protestant Commonwealth" was commonly held also in the West. It is, however, questionable whether crusade was wisely chosen as a concept to depict the entire missiological thinking and missional practise during the period, since it can only cover part of the rationale behind Christian missions to China. And, as an analytical tool, it is not sufficiently clear, defined or consistent.

It is therefore to be regretted that Lars Österlin, in using the term crusade(s), has not, from the very beginning of his book, made an effort to define the

term and its usage in Christian propaganda more carefully. Instead he largely leaves it to the reader to find out – gradually – how the term is used. If one looks up the word in *A New Century Chinese-English Dictionary* (Beijing 2003), the first, and therefore the most central meaning of the word, renders the term *Shìzìjūn* [‘cross-war’], explaining Crusades as “eight expeditions by European Christians to recover Jerusalem from the Moslems, 1096-1270”. This, of course, is the historical understanding of the term, and the one likely to be associated with the word both by Chinese and Western readers. It is only toward the end of his account that Österlin reveal to his readers that the great campaigns normally went under the designation crusades, but that this most probably did not reflect a conscious allusion to the medieval ages’ crusades. Österlin nonetheless contends that there are some resemblances (p. 354f). Hence, it would have been beneficial for the readers if the author had not only indicated at the very outset of his account that the term crusade(s) can be used – and indeed was used in the Protestant movement and secular society – with different connotations, but that he had also followed this up throughout the book with attempts to understand how, in the different contexts, the term was used and interpreted. Surely Lars Österlin does refer to Robert T. Handy’s critical analysis of how the term crusades became entangled by western imperialism (p. 7), and also shows that the term in American usage nowadays comprises enterprises without specific religious character (p. 107). But he never really makes an effort to detect whether it always carried the same connotation, or different connotations, when it was used in the Protestant missionary propaganda, or for that reason, how commonly used it was among the missionaries to China themselves to describe the nature of their work. Nevertheless Österlin’s account gives more than sufficient evidence to the fact that when crusade was used it was mostly referring to John Mott’s *The Christian Conquest of the World* (p. 106f), and particularly adopted in the efforts to christianize China. I shall, however, return below to other terms which are equally fitting to describe the missionary movement to China, and which contribute other perspectives which not only relevantly describe the missionary movement to China, but do so, as I see it, in a more profound way than when merely reflecting the propaganda slogans in Hudson Taylor’s and John Mott’s campaigns for mission outreach to China.

Österlin’s book is well organized and structured. On the one hand he shows the development within the international Protestant evangelical revival

movement of world wide missionary commitment and activities, as well as the motivating factors behind the international mission campaigns (p. 47-82). Further, the book shows how the missionary enterprise to China was seen as an effort to modernize the country (p. 83-115). Finally, it shows how it came to inspire mission in churches, organizations and among individual Christians in the Nordic countries, especially in Sweden, to engage in missionary outreach and to send missionaries to other countries, in particular to Africa, India and China (p. 117-148). On the other hand he has described how the Swedish missionary societies developed in response to and parallell to the international movement, and sent missionaries (p. 140-157). He starts with what he calls a *prelude*, namely the China missionary activity of the Lund Missionary Society (Lunds Missionssällskaps Kinamission), which lasted only a few years (p. 19-45). Then follows an account of the engagement of the YWCA and Swedish female missionaries to China (p. 131-148) and finally comes the history of the confessionally based Church of Sweden Mission (Svenska Kyrkans Mission – SKM) to China (p. 149-346). The account of SKM in China (1919-1951) is also the major part of Österlin's book.

Although he introduces Chinese voices (p. 226-230) as well as the lives and personalities of some Chinese Christians (p. 281-284, 295-300, 305f), more use of Chinese native voices would have strengthened the documentary value of the history and possibly brought in some other, adjusting perspectives. Österlin has, however documented well the important role which American, European and Scandinavian women had in the mission movement (p. 133-148, 271-275). But again, too little attention is paid to the general situation of Chinese women and girls, and to how Chinese Christian women contributed in this movement in China, for instance the academically trained.¹ This is surprising, since Österlin generally is keen to show how the Swedish involvement in China related to the theological, academic and emancipatory streams in the homeland, and not only to the general streams of thought within the Anglo-American movement.

Österlin is justified in placing the main focus on the role of China Inland Mission and John Mott. After all, the majority of Protestant missionaries were recruited as a response to the missiological tones reflected in these

¹ See e.g., Margaret Burton, *Notable Women of Modern China*, New York, Chicago, Toronto, London & Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company 1912.

circles. However, there were also other other mainline church missions – Anglican, Lutheran and others – which showed more awareness of the fact that mission work implied also the cultural encounter, and was far more sensitive than the other evangelicals to the views and signals from the Chinese, in that they listened to their advice and respected many aspects of Chinese culture – more so than the other evangelicals.

As Österlin very aptly describes it, the end of World War I and the Reformation jubilee in 1917 inspired the SKM to form a new vision for its work and to engage in a cultural project in China, i.e., the establishment of a Swedish university there (p. 158ff). The plan never materialized, in spite of strong efforts. Instead a Lutheran college was founded in Hunan province, at Taohwalun, close to the city of Yiyang, a joint effort of the SKM and the Norwegian Missionary Society – NMS (p. 252-265). In Swedish academic circles, as well as among the SKM missionaries, the vision was formed that Sweden had a world historic task which thereby inspired the cultural project. It is noteworthy, however, that when the Lutheran College was built, the building was greatly inspired by the traditional Chinese architecture – an indication of respect for Chinese cultural values. The college at Taohwalun, which was planned jointly by Gustaf Österlin and the Norwegian architect Valdemar Hansteen, and drawn by the latter, sought to implement the needs of a practical school building with Chinese inspired design (p. 259-265).

Österlin also accounts for the evangelistic project, namely that of spreading the Christian message through establishing local congregations in China, in the Hunan province. In this project his own parents, and especially his father, Gustaf Österlin, played an important role, not least in the development of an alternative mission program, which Lars Österlin accounts well for (p. 307-346). Like other Lutheran missionaries and the leadership of the Lutheran Church in China, Gustaf Österlin emphasized the importance of the Three-Self-Principles, advocated by Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn, and tried to implement the principles in his evangelistic ministry from the very beginning. Österlin also inspired Adolf von Harnack and the reform program which Roland Allen had developed, both of which pointed to the importance of learning from the missionary methods of St. Paul. But he was also eager to develop local Lutheran congregations that from the very beginning could function ecclesiastically as true churches – according to the Lutheran confession – that is, congregations which gathered for worship,

offered both baptism and eucharist, and at the same time were fully rooted in their local context. Hence it was important for Gustaf Österlin, since it was difficult to recruit and train a sufficient number of ordained pastors, to install elders who could administer the sacraments where there were no ordained pastors. And his strategy bore fruit; the number of Christians grew. The "Österlin Program" did not meet with the immediate approval of the SKM or his missionary colleagues in Africa or South India (p. 328-334), but it prevailed in China. Also his program was soon (1929) adopted by the NMS in their congregational work there (p. 340f).

Hence, the SKM missionary activities in China comprised both a cultural and an evangelistic project. One important reason why Lars Österlin's use of crusade becomes a too simplified and inaccurate term for describing the missionary enterprise in China during the period, is that he fails to recognize fully the importance and character of the comprehensive socio-diaconal work done by the missionaries and their societies there. Truly, the SKM was only engaged in the Lutheran College and congregational work, but as Österlin has rightly shown, the Swedish YWCA missionaries also engaged in socio-diaconal and other philanthropic work. By concentrating on the Swedish missionary activities only, he renders some justice to their sources. But the main lines of Protestant missionary missions to China cannot be told without also including documentary material which demonstrates the many-faceted character of the socio-diaconal work there, and which for instance resulted in institutions which still exist, and have developed further and are operated well today – albeit by the provincial or municipal authorities of the People's Republic of China, such as hospitals and educational institutions.

Österlin has in several places reflected on the importance of the contacts and co-operation between the SKM and the NMS and has made use of NMS documentary material, including its mission histories. It is therefore regrettable that he has not paid attention to the extensive socio-diaconal work of the NMS or any of the many other church-related societies operating in China during the period. As I have shown elsewhere, the NMS was in Hunan engaged in primary and secondary education, a home for the deaf and blind, the operation of hospitals and leprosy colonies, and was engaged in the movement of abolishing foot-binding of girls and rescuing people

from opium addiction and other societal illnesses ("samfunnssykdommer").² It may well be that crusade was part of the propaganda for Christian missions in the evangelical revival movement in the West, but this was certainly not a characteristic concept used in the socio-diaconal work within China. Rather the missionaries point to the liberating and emancipatory role which the socio-diaconal and educational institutions and connected outreach work played among the ordinary Chinese, and especially the sick, the poor and the marginalized people, including women and children. What one reads as their motivation is partly the attitude and acts of Jesus, partly the humanizing contribution which the socio-diaconal work had. The Chinese whom they met with through this work were regarded as fellow human beings in need of their services. And, although indirectly a part of the Western colonization of China, these missionaries did not exploit the Chinese financially or support the opium trade; in fact they engaged in a long-lasting fight against the trade itself and tried to heal drug addiction and reduce its effects on human lives.³ These activities played a far more important role in the missionary enterprise to China than Lars Österlin has acknowledged or shown awareness of in his book.

The missionaries who went to China from the Nordic countries – including the Finnish – were conscious of a Christian socio-diaconal heritage which they had received from the early church, as well as from the healing, educational and humanitarian ministries in the various monastic movements throughout the medieval era. It had been adopted by and inspired similar ministries in the Nordic countries and therefore was an ecumenical sign in the church and its mission. For the main-line churches, therefore, the socio-diaconal ministries formed an integral part of Christian life and faith expansion at home and abroad. They were not administered in order to conquer the Chinese, but in order to fight together with them against dehumanizing forces in society. Today many of the things which the missionaries aimed at and even achieved in their socio-diaconal and educational ministries are universally regarded as human rights, at least among nations which have adopted the UN declarations on human rights

² Thor Strandenæs (text), Nils Kristian Høimyr and Bjørg Bergøy Johansen (picture documentation), "Misjonsdiakonien i Kina. En tekst- og bildedokumentasjon fra Hunanprovinsen" in: Thor Strandenæs (Ed.), *Misjon og kultur. Festskrift til Jan-Martin Berentsen*, Stavanger: Misjonshøgskolens forlag 2006, 167-206.

³ *Ibid.*, 183ff and references to literature given there.

and its conventions on children's rights and against discrimination of women. Here the rights to receive education and medical care are also stated, and the right to hold a religious faith and to share it with others. It is in this context that concepts like liberation, cultural exchange, humanisation and Christian expansion are aspects of the missionary work in China which both describe it more comprehensively and far better than if one were to use *crusade*, which was the choice of Österlin. Also, if he had used implicit or subtle colonization to describe *one* aspect of the Western missionary movement in China, it would have been far better than his use of *crusade* as a concept to characterize and describe its main lines.

In spite of certain deficiencies, Lars Österlin's book is a remarkable documentation of guiding lines for modern mission enterprise to China in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with a main focus on the Swedish contribution. In his book Österlin demonstrates a profound understanding for Chinese society and political climate in the period. The author's perspective is, however, Western. In spite of his efforts to make use of some Chinese informants, his perspective is from the outside and not from within the Chinese society. A more generous use of Chinese informants would not only have added information, but adjusted his perspective(s) as well, for instance with regard to how they experienced the evangelistic, socio-diaconal and educational contributions of Protestant missions. Was it a *crusade* only, or did it contribute to social liberation, and also to the final liberation of the Chinese society from Western colonialism? It is to be hoped that Chinese researchers may follow up and supplement Österlin's scholarly and well-written study!

This is a Swedish book, but one cannot but complain that the author has not sought to provide Chinese names with Chinese characters, at least of his Chinese informants and other personalities who are introduced, especially since this is a historical record and relates new information with which only few in addition to the author are nowadays familiar. Chinese characters would have made it much easier not only for the Chinese but also for other persons to identify the persons, including their family relationships. For such accurate identification the transcription of their names according to the Wade Giles or *pinyin* systems (p.10) is not sufficient.

A final remark: The remonstrations and supplementary comments which I have made above, as part of a scholarly evaluation of Österlin's work, do not as such diminish the value of his book. I have only pointed out some weaknesses and suggested a fuller scope of perspectives which are needed when writing the history of Christian missions to China. The book nevertheless stands as a worthy memorial to the late Lars Österlin, himself a fruit of Christian missionaries to China, and an acute and able interpreter of its mission history. The best way of paying respect to his memory is to read the book, because it deserves to be read, and by many.

Thor Strandenæs