

Mission history with an anthropological twist

Ingie Hovland, *Mission Station Christianity: Norwegian Missionaries in Colonial Natal and Zululand, Southern Africa, 1850-1890*

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Ingie Hovland's *Mission Station Christianity* is a consummate and welcome addition to the mission history canon. Histories of Christianity and mission in southern Africa enjoyed a heyday during the 1990s. This was due to growing interest in religious identities among colonised peoples and the complex connections between Christianity and indigenous resistance and assimilation at the time. The works of Jean and John Comaroff and Elizabeth Elbourne were exemplars of this trend. Their path-breaking studies were worthy heirs to the remarkable, earlier contributions by Norman Etherington. After a quiet decade, histories of Christianity and mission are showing signs of resurgence. Richard Elphick's recent monograph, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (2012), signals renewed momentum in the field. Hot on his heels is Ingie Hovland's new offering. This thought-provoking text proffers a mission history with an anthropological twist. In doing so, Hovland has taken up a call made by Etherington back in the 1970s for interdisciplinary studies to provide more comprehensive analyses of the study of mission.

Histories of mission have tended to focus on African experiences while sidelining the missionaries. British and American mission societies have also

received the lion's share of attention when compared to studies on Swiss, German, French and Scandinavian missions (p 8). Hovland's anthropological history of the Norwegian mission in the Kingdom of Zululand and neighbouring British Natal between 1850 and 1890 forwards an exciting new direction for mission history in light of these imbalances. The book manages to bring missionaries and Africans into the same analytical frame. It does so by focusing on space. The study explores the centrality of mission station space in shaping interactions between the Norwegian missionaries and the Zulu they were attempting to convert (Hovland ought to be commended for her deft handling of the complicated matter of "Zulu" identity in the mid to late nineteenth century). Space emerges from her argument as a valuable analytical lens through which to view contests over colonial politics, hierarchies, religious practices, and moralities, among, and between, both the missionaries and their target community. Hovland's strongest and most valuable contribution rests on her sublime treatment of the Norwegian missionaries, who constitute the focus of the work.

Missionaries in the ranks of the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) adhered to the principles of Lutheran Evangelical Christianity which emphasised the importance of pietism, conversion and a personal relationship with God (p 10). In the 1840s when the NMS first committed missionaries to Zululand and British Natal the mission was guided by the "abstract idea of the equality of all Christians, whether European or African" (p 4). African members of the new Christian community were also to be afforded the opportunity to establish indigenous churches. In contrast, though, the Norwegian mission "ended up developing practices and patterns of interaction that facilitated European rule over African converts" and even found theological reasons to justify European political control in Africa (p 4). In step with this development, the author points out that there was a significant policy shift on how the mission was to be implemented. In theory, the mission started out championing the itinerant strategy; regularly travelling across Zululand in a bid to reach potential converts. In practice, the missionaries came to affirm a station strategy; establishing and residing at a permanent, physical settlement.

The Norwegian missionaries occupied an awkward position, traversing the border between the independent Zulu kingdom (until 1879) and the British colony of Natal (p 17). They were not members of the dominant class on either side. They had few resources, constant pecuniary difficulties and they did not share a common language with the local, British colonial officials. Given that they did not originate from an imperial or expansionist European nation, and given their precarious place on a British colonial frontier, it could be assumed that they would have acted differently to British, French, German or American missionaries (p 201). Rather, as noted, the missionaries of the NMS actually came to endorse European control of Africans. They even supported the British annexation of Zululand in 1879, though not without a few dissenting voices (pp 206 210). In an attempt to account for this apparent contradiction, Hovland draws a convincing connection between the original intentions of the mission, namely to consider all Christians as equals and to embrace itinerancy, and how the mission actually unfolded. This is where Hovland's use of space as an organising concept proves its worth.

With the mission coming to reside in the physical form of a station, the role of space and the effect it had on Christianity in practice is illuminating. In many ways, mission stations were borne out of a practical challenge inherent in the Christian faith: “the problem of presence”; how to make an invisible God visible; how to communicate Christ (p 30). This task necessarily took on a material form. For the Norwegian missionaries, it came to involve the construction of “a new kind of space” that would facilitate a substantial share of the necessary communication; space and things can “speak” as loudly as words, perhaps even louder (p 30). But by taking hold of pieces of land in order to establish their mission stations, the missionaries inadvertently created spaces “that facilitated a Christianity closely aligned with colonialism” (p 21).

Hovland contends that this was because mission stations, as “Christianised” spaces and moral domains, emphasised difference and separateness while being located in a social and cultural landscape not of their own making. Cordoning off the mission space was important for the Norwegian missionaries and the Zulu royal house alike, because it protected the authority of each. Yet, by being cordoned off, the missionaries were able to use the mission stations to subvert and prohibit “integral parts of Zulu culture and social structure” which were considered inimical to Christianity. These actions ended up posing a political threat to the Zulu king and his chiefs (p 163). Even so, the royal house considered it useful to allow the missionaries to stay in Zululand. Hovland shows how mission stations came to be regarded as extraterritorial spaces by the Zulu leadership. Though this measure was opposed by the missionaries, as they insisted that Zulu converts could still be Zulu subjects, it underlined the separation of the mission station as a distinct space with its own internal hierarchy, atop of which stood the European missionary.

Though the Norwegian missionaries initially “focused on religious difference between Christian and “heathen” customs”, Hovland demonstrates that “the way the missionaries organised the spatial set-up of the mission stations” actually produced racial separation and accentuated racial difference (pp 163 165). Mission land came to be regarded as “white land”. The sole figure of authority on the mission station was a white man. The mission station bore a striking resemblance to a Zulu homestead, except with a white, male missionary as headman. The hierarchical relations stemming from this spatial arrangement flowed along racial and gendered lines, as opposed to solely religious ones. While the missionaries may have originally subscribed to the abstract idea of the equality of all believers, the “stylised movements of everyday life” on the mission station came to reflect a colonial state of affairs (p 165). Hovland suggests that this colonially-inspired spatial order influenced a shift in missionary thinking over time. By the late 1870s, the majority of missionaries residing in Zululand and British Natal were approving of the extension of imperial rule, with African political independence increasingly regarded as an obstacle to effective evangelisation (p 209). The author has provided a persuasive argument in this regard.

It must be noted that Hovland often ends up arriving at the same conclusions made by earlier writers on the history of mission in southern Africa, in particular Etherington, Elbourne and the Comaroffs. The extent to which the collective works of these authors has come to dominate the field is made evident

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by Hovland's regular deferral to their arguments. While the anthropological approach of the study is novel, large sections of the book present known conclusions, re-packaged via a new example. That being said, *Mission Station Christianity* is an engaging text filled with intriguing insight into how "being Christian" in a colonial border region of southern Africa was communicated through contests over space. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the fields of mission history and the anthropology of Christianity.

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