

# Mission Station Christianity

Norwegian Missionaries in Colonial Natal and  
Zululand, Southern Africa 1850–1890

*By*  
Ingie Hovland



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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

## CHAPTER ONE

### THEORIZING THE MISSIONARY EXPERIENCE: CHRISTIANITY, COLONIALISM, AND SPACES

Umphumulo is the most beautiful place I know. Not because of any particular splendor, though the warm, hard-packed red earth, the hundreds of shades of encapsulating green, and the tall blue sky do something to your senses. I lived at Umphumulo in the late 1980s because my parents were missionaries for the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS),<sup>1</sup> working at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Umphumulo in KwaZulu, one of the infamous “homelands” of apartheid South Africa. The Seminary was run by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, and the students, most of them black, were monitored by the apartheid government. At one point my father was ordered to leave the country by the government because of his work at Umphumulo. After diplomatic intervention the order was withdrawn, though for us it lingered in the air. Umphumulo was a contested space and had been for a long time – since around 1850, to be exact.

In 1850 Umphumulo was set up as the first Norwegian Lutheran mission station in Southern Africa, with the aim of converting the surrounding people, whom the missionaries took to be Zulus. Its history, like that of the other Norwegian mission stations that were set up over the following decades, is filled with contradictions. The Christian faith tradition of NMS, which in the late 1980s was underlining that the gospel held a message of racial equality that directly contradicted apartheid, had a century earlier made an unresolved shift toward developing a theological justification for colonial overrule and racial inequality.

#### *Two Concepts-Being-Worked-Out*

In fact, two emphases – or perhaps more accurately two tensions, or two concepts-being-worked-out – are increasingly observable among the first

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<sup>1</sup> The official English name of the organization is now the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS), a literal translation of *Det Norske Misjonsselskap*. In the nineteenth century the missionaries seem to have referred to the Society as the Norwegian Missionary Society when communicating in English, and I shall therefore use this name in the remainder of the book.

Norwegian missionaries in the British Colony of Natal and the neighboring kingdom of Zululand, on the eastern coast of Southern Africa, from around 1850–1890. First, while the missionaries in theory started out in agreement with an abstract idea of equality between all Christians, whether European or African, they ended up in practice developing patterns of interaction that facilitated European rule over African converts, and began talking about a theological justification for European political rule over African populations. Second, and again in theory, the missionaries agreed with the abstract idea that it would be desirable to travel among the Zulus in order to reach as many as possible with the gospel, but in practice they repeatedly affirmed a “station strategy” (Simensen with Børhaug et al. 1986:230), that is, a strategy of building up and residing at permanent, physical settlements on the African landscape, which they called “mission stations” (*Missionsstationer*). This book considers the connection between these two trends over the first few decades of the Norwegian mission. How did the missionaries and their Christian faith influence the way that they set up the mission station spaces? And, in turn, how did the act of inhabiting these particular spaces influence the missionaries’ Christianity? I hope to show some of the complexity of how Christianity can shape spaces in both concrete and conceptual ways, and how, conversely, physical and imagined spaces can have an effect on Christianity as it is practiced.

Let me briefly flesh out each of the two concepts-being-worked-out in turn. Firstly, the Norwegian missionaries who arrived in Port Natal in the 1840s had been given instructions regarding their work that were based on abstract ideas about the fundamental equality of all Christians. In theory the mission held that anybody who converted to Christianity would join the Christian community on an equal footing. This early abstract idea contained, as Elizabeth Elbourne puts it, a “more *potentially* socially egalitarian message” (2002:101, orig. emph.). The missionaries’ instructions were to convert Zulus to Christianity, and then, as soon as possible, to ensure that the Zulus could set up and run a Zulu church. In the early days of NMS, in 1847, Andreas Hauge, the founder and editor of NMS’ mission magazine *Norsk Missions-Tidende*<sup>2</sup> (literally, *Norwegian Mission Tidings*) sought to spell out this idea:

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<sup>2</sup> Copies of *Norsk Missions-Tidende* can be found in the NMS Archives, housed in the Mission Archives at the School of Mission and Theology (Stavanger, Norway), as well as at Harvard and Yale. An almost complete run of the magazine from 1847–1906 is available online through the Harvard Library website. All articles in *Norsk Missions-Tidende* were written in Norwegian, and most translations here are my own; at times I have also benefited

But, is it not so that history has proved it impossible to establish an independent church among heathen peoples? We should say not! And as proof thereof it should be sufficient to point to our own Christian churches [in Norway], which are indeed independent, and became so without being supported by some foreign mission for any long period [...] In addition, the wild peoples of Australia also manifest what Christianity has the power to effect when the hearts of people are taken by it. Even among the West-Indian negroes, one independent church rises after the other. And how many could there not have been if Europeans had not believed European culture to be necessary for a Hottentot or a Greenland-pastor? [...] The principal occupation of our missionaries is plainly to walk about with the message of salvation in Christ, baptize as many as let themselves be persuaded to believe, and then in every place install some of these who are found able as elders and pastors.<sup>3</sup>

The same line of thought was evident in the set of instructions that the Board of the Norwegian Missionary Society drew up for the first missionaries. They were told “as soon as possible to seek to educate some children so that they can be [...] your future fellow-laborers.”<sup>4</sup> And the strategy of working toward an indigenous and independent church, in which African Christians held authority, was reiterated:

As the object of mission is to transplant the church of God, the missionary shall, once a few have been baptized, as soon as possible organize a congregation among them according to the apostolic pattern and care for its preservation and growth. For this purpose he shall also seek to train African converts as pastors and national assistants, and he shall encourage the congregation in general [...] to contribute to its subsistence and propagation.<sup>5</sup>

In practice, however, the Norwegian missionaries found that conversions to Christianity turned out to be painfully few and far between, and, as we shall see, they struggled with the question of how exactly to relate to those Africans who did convert. In fact, the Norwegians avoided ordaining any Christian African as a pastor until 1893, over forty years after the first mission station Umphumulo had been set up in 1850. By this time the male Norwegian missionaries had firmly established their authority over the African converts who lived on their mission stations. As a group, the Norwegians also developed a closer – if problematic – engagement with

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from Torstein Jørgensen's (1990) translations. In 1883 the spelling of the magazine's name was changed from *Norsk Missions-Tidende* to *Norsk Missionstidende*; I shall consistently use *Norsk Missions-Tidende* for ease of reference.

<sup>3</sup> *Norsk Missions-Tidende* 1847/48:3–4.

<sup>4</sup> *Norsk Missions-Tidende* 1851/52:168.

<sup>5</sup> *Norsk Missions-Tidende* 1851/52:190.

white colonial rule over the people identified as Zulus, and by the 1880s many of the Norwegian missionaries had even developed a theological justification for the British military invasion of Zululand. How did this trend take shape between 1850 and 1890, as the Norwegian missionaries tried to work out the tension between abstract ideas of potential equality between Norwegian and Zulu Christians, which the Board had instructed them to implement, and their own practices, which supported unequal relationships and structures that were racially marked, culminating in their theological support for the violent implementation of colonial, white, male authority over the Zulus?

Secondly, the first Norwegian missionaries who left for Southern Africa were instructed by the Board of the Norwegian Missionary Society to focus their mission activity around preaching the Word. The Board in Stavanger clearly envisaged this to involve at least some traveling among the Zulus. To repeat Andreas Hauge's words from above, "The principal occupation of our missionaries is plainly to walk about with the message of salvation in Christ."<sup>6</sup> The Norwegian missionaries who were sent to Southern Africa also expressed that they wished to incorporate itinerant preaching into their work – and at least twice they expressed this as a group, at their annual missionary conferences in 1863<sup>7</sup> and 1881.<sup>8</sup> Yet despite this avowed purpose, it soon became apparent that the missionaries established a pattern of building and settling on permanent mission stations, and the majority of them never undertook any longer itinerant preaching journeys at all. During the first decades after Umphumulo was established, from 1850 to the mid-1870s, only three, perhaps four Norwegian missionaries undertook one longer journey each among the Zulus – and the primary purpose of these expeditions was to assess the feasibility of establishing a new station in the area that the missionary traveled to, though they also preached when given the opportunity (Jørgensen 1990:111). Most of the early missionaries never undertook any longer journeys of itinerant preaching, and the vast majority of the missionaries' time and energy was spent on their stations.

The Norwegian missionaries were not alone in this trend. European and American missionaries arrived in Southern Africa in the 1830s and 40s with differing strategies in mind, but with the same broad goal of evangelizing to as many people as possible, in order to convert them. However, by 1880

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<sup>6</sup> *Norsk Missions-Tidende* 1847/48:4.

<sup>7</sup> *Norsk Missions-Tidende* 1863:284.

<sup>8</sup> NMS Archives, "Referat fra konferansen på Eshowe 13.-22. juni 1881" (Minutes from the missionary conference, 1881); cited in Myklebust (1949:92).

they had all, without exception, chosen to concentrate primarily on the work on their mission stations – partially in contravention of requests from their home boards to reach further out (Etherington 1978). This focus on a station strategy included nurturing small resident communities of converts on the stations, which were set somewhat apart from local society. What could account for this trend? Why did the missionaries in practice feel so “stationary” – so tied to their stations? What effect did this have on them and on their Christianity? And what consequences did this have for their relationship with the converts and, more generally, with the people they knew as the Zulus?

I will argue that these two developments among the Norwegian missionaries from around 1850–1890 were related: on the one hand, their deepening dependence on and commitment to Christianized spaces, and on the other, their growing tendency to take on a role of divinely sanctioned authority in relation to growing numbers of Africans. Both these processes were gendered and racialized. By the 1880s, everyday life within the differentiated space of the mission station, where white, male authority was partly taken for granted and partly actively established, made it possible for the majority of the Norwegian male missionaries to argue that British military invasion and overrule of Zululand was theologically justifiable.

The fact that this had become a possibility for them does not mean that it necessarily had to happen. The most obvious counter-example is the alternative response of the Anglican missionary Bishop John Colenso in Natal (Guy 1983), who vocally criticized the British agenda in the Anglo-Zulu War, and who shows that other responses were possible. The Norwegian missionary Bishop Hans Schreuder was also at least partly critical of the war, as will be discussed further below. This study of the Norwegian missionaries from around 1850–1890 does not show, therefore, that their overall shift toward a Christianity that supported a military invasion of Zululand and thoroughgoing devastation of Zulu ways of life was inevitable. But it shows how this shift in emphasis had been prepared and become thinkable for the majority of them over the preceding three decades on the mission stations. As Peter Pels (1997:171) notes in his overview of the anthropology of colonialism, “even a single blow requires cultural preparations.”

#### *Scholarship on Christian Mission in Nineteenth-Century Southern Africa*

There is a sophisticated and growing body of scholarship on Christian mission in nineteenth-century Southern Africa that contributes to an understanding of the dynamics that have shaped South African Christianity and

modernity.<sup>9</sup> Within this field there has been a relative paucity of scholarly work on French, German, Swiss and Scandinavian missions, compared to existing work on British and American missions.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, there are a few published academic studies on the nineteenth-century Norwegian missionaries that were sent by NMS to Natal and Zululand. Three of these studies are especially relevant to my time period (1850–1890). Firstly, Olav Guttorm Myklebust, theologian and missionary for NMS to South Africa from 1931–1939, wrote a biography of NMS' first missionary, Hans Palludan Smith Schreuder, who stepped ashore in Port Natal in 1844 (Myklebust 1980, 1986).<sup>11</sup> Myklebust's extensive study on Hans Schreuder contains a mass of information, but it is, as Norman Etherington (1996:207) also notes, a spirited exercise in hagiography, and it often has to bend over backwards to defend this complex, intrepid, and sometimes difficult man.

Two more robust scholarly studies then appeared. In 1984, the historian Jarle Simensen drew on a collection of Masters theses written by his students for an edited volume in Norwegian (Simensen 1984a), subsequently published in English, in different version, as *Norwegian Missions in African History, Vol. 1: South Africa 1845–1906* (Simensen 1986a). And in 1990, Torstein Jørgensen published his doctoral dissertation in church history, *Contact and Conflict: Norwegian Missionaries, the Zulu Kingdom, and the Gospel, 1850–1873*.<sup>12</sup> Simensen and Jørgensen's studies are both attempts at achieving a fuller understanding of the nineteenth-century Norwegian missionaries in Natal and Zululand. Simensen approaches this task from the premise

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<sup>9</sup> There is a large body of work on nineteenth-century mission in Southern Africa. Some excellent sources are the studies by the Comaroffs (1991, 1997), Elbourne (2002), Etherington (1978), and Landau (1995). See also the edited collections by Bredekamp and Ross (1995b), Elphick and Davenport (1997), and Jeannerat, Kirkaldy and Ross (2009), as well as the literature listed in footnotes 10 and 14 below.

<sup>10</sup> Norman Etherington (1996:218) noted this lack in the mid-1990s; Etherington has himself made efforts to include sources from non-Anglophone missions in his work (Etherington 1978). Since then a number of studies on Swiss, German and Scandinavian missions have been published, e.g. Harries (2007), Keegan (2004), Kirkaldy (2005), Rütther (2001), and the literature cited in footnote 14 below.

<sup>11</sup> Myklebust also wrote the section on South Africa for the official NMS centennial history (Myklebust 1949), as well as a number of articles on mission, e.g. Myklebust (1977).

<sup>12</sup> Both Simensen and Jørgensen have also published journal articles that sum up some of their key arguments (Jørgensen 1985, Simensen 1986b), and Simensen, who acted as one of Jørgensen's doctoral examiners, has published his extended examiner's review of Jørgensen's dissertation (Simensen 1988). Torstein Jørgensen has also authored the chapter on NMS' first hundred years for the organization's official 150-year history (Jørgensen 1992), a book chapter on Zulu responses to the Norwegian missionaries (Jørgensen 2002a), and a book chapter on one of the early Zulu converts (Jørgensen 2002b).

that mission, as he says in the preface to the Norwegian volume, was “also something other and far more” than Christian preaching (Simensen 1984b:5). He pays attention to processes of exchange and political implications, choosing to rely mainly on Fredrik Barth’s (1966) transaction theory as a conceptual framework (which, as I shall argue in chapter 5, proves rather limiting when trying to understand mission stations).<sup>13</sup> Jørgensen, on the other hand, approaches his study of the missionaries with the explicit aim of looking at the “process of mission by which Christian religion was transmitted from the one party to the other” (Jørgensen 1990:9), and he details the missionaries’ theological understandings, how they tried to convey these to the Zulus, and the various Zulu responses they encountered. Jørgensen’s book is replete with citations and examples from the writings of the missionaries, and he has organized this wealth of information into categories. His book deals with the period 1850–1873 and thus stops short of analyzing the missionaries’ religious understandings as expressed in the build-up to the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and its aftermath. Nevertheless, both Jørgensen and Simensen have something to contribute, and I shall draw on and engage with their work throughout the text.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The edited volume (Simensen 1986a) consists of four chapters. The first, on the social and religious background of the Norwegian missionaries (Simensen with Gynnild 1986), and the chapter on the missionaries’ – especially Hans Schreuder’s – political actions and shifts (Hernæs 1986), are both clear and interesting. The chapter by Charles Ballard (1986) on Zulu historical background is insightful. Chapter 4, “Christian missions and socio-cultural change in Zululand 1850–1906: Norwegian strategy and African response” (Simensen with Børhaug et al. 1986), which builds on three separate Masters theses, is unfortunately marred by several factual errors and the conclusions appear weaker. This has also been pointed out in a couple of the reviews of the book, e.g. Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding’s assessment that the chapter demonstrates “the book’s authors’ relative unfamiliarity with Zulu society and religion” (1992:280, quoted in Dannevig 2008:58), and Kristoffer Dannevig’s (2008) related conclusion that the religious life of the Zulus is largely overlooked, as well as his observation that their chapter includes numerous citation and referencing errors. While I have not attempted to compile an exhaustive list of errors and misrepresentations in their chapter, I will mention some of the most significant mistakes in footnotes in the chapters below. For other reviews, which are on the whole positive, see e.g. Etherington (1988), Porter (1988), and Ross (1992).

<sup>14</sup> Further published academic work on nineteenth-century Norwegian mission in Southern Africa includes Nils E. Bloch-Hoell’s (1982) chapter defending the morality of the Norwegian missionaries; Frederick Hale’s (1997) translation of a selection of nineteenth-century Norwegian missionary letters from Natal and Zululand; Knut Holter’s (2009) article on the role of reading; Thor Halvor Hovland’s (2002a, 2002b) articles on some of the theological differences between Hans Schreuder and Lars Dahle; Hege Roaldset’s (2010) observations on the Norwegian mission’s interaction with Zulu congregants from around 1879–1940; and Kristin Fjelde Tjelle’s (2010b, 2011, and forthcoming) research on missionary masculinity from around 1870–1930, as well as her work on missionary children (2010a). For studies of Norwegian mission in Southern Africa around the turn of the century and into

More widely, there is lively scholarly debate within the field of scholarship that surrounds European and American Christian missions in nineteenth-century Southern Africa, as demonstrated by a number of book reviews, eager “replies” and comments.<sup>15</sup> I shall engage with these debates in the chapters that follow; for now, let me simply make note of one point. Until recently, most of this work explored the impact that the encounter between the missionaries and the “missionized” had on the latter. The impact of the encounter on the missionaries themselves was less often a primary focus. Recently a number of interesting studies have accorded more space to theorizing the missionary experience – or, more accurately, missionary experiences – in nineteenth-century Southern Africa.<sup>16</sup> One of the contributions of the present study to the debate, therefore, will be to add to this line of inquiry and to offer a theoretically informed analysis of missionary experiences, focusing particularly on how the majority of the Norwegian missionaries were “made” into cheerleaders of Empire. I wish to show how a deeper and more detailed understanding of the missionaries themselves, and the spaces that they constructed, can help us to understand their encounter with others and the ambiguous role that they came to play in the history of South Africa.

### *The Norwegian Missionary Society*

The Norwegian Missionary Society largely sprang out of a particular type of Lutheran Evangelical Christianity with a pietistic bent, set in motion by the Evangelical revivals.<sup>17</sup> The Evangelical revivals were, in brief, a series of waves of upheaval and renewal that swept across the Protestant populations of Europe and North America over a period of more than two

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the twentieth century, see e.g. Bakke (2010, 2012a, 2012b), Hale (1998, 2000, 2011), and Mellemsether (2001a, 2001b, 2003). For studies of the Norwegian mission in Madagascar, active from 1866, see e.g. Fuglestad and Simensen (1986), Predelli (2000, 2003a, 2003b), and Skeie (1999, 2001, 2009, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> To gain a flavor of some of this debate, see e.g. the Comaroffs (1997:36–53, 2001), Crais (1994), Elbourne (2003), Erlank (2005), Etherington (1996), Landau (2000), Peel (1995), and Ranger (2001).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Gaitskell (2003), Harries (2007), Price (2008), Skeie (2013), Tjelle (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> I will only present a brief summary here of the nineteenth-century mission movement in Norway and the background of the Norwegian Missionary Society. For more detailed presentations, see e.g. Berg (2010), Jørgensen (1990:63–93, 1992), Mikaelsson (2003:37–94), Nome (1942, 1943a), Simensen with Gynnild (1986), and Skeie (2013:17–36).

centuries – from the eighteenth century, through the nineteenth, and into the beginning of the twentieth. In North America they are referred to as a series of “Great Awakenings.” It is fitting that these religious waves, which had such a rebellious and independent feel to them, are quite difficult to pin down, though they are commonly traced back to the Pietists in Germany in the late seventeenth century (Ward 1992). The Pietists were concerned with revitalizing the spiritual life of the church, and they gave prominence to the idea of the “new birth,” that is, an “inner conversion,” which they held made one a “new person” in Christ. The Pietist movement also aimed for social renewal, and established orphan houses, dispensaries, schools, and printing presses. As this revitalizing spirit spread, it took on many different forms and new organizational names – it gave rise, for example, to the Methodists, the Congregationalists, and the Baptists, amongst others.

While the Evangelical revivals encompassed a wide range of groups and innumerable aims and sentiments, and continued over a long period of time, many of these diverse groups can be seen to hold some core ideals in common. David Bebbington summarizes these core characteristics as:

*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. (Bebbington 1989:2–3, orig. emph.)

The importance placed on conversion extended not just to others but also to oneself. Most Evangelicals emphasized the importance of a personal experience of conversion, which was thought of as “being saved.” In many places – including on the southern and western coasts of Norway – the revivals were deeply influenced by the original pietistic sentiments, which placed special importance on sincerity, on rigorous self-examination of the state of one’s “heart,” and on one’s personal relationship with God. Groups inspired by the revivals often held meetings outside the formal structure of a church, including open-air camp-meetings and meetings in private homes. Since most of them emphasized and encouraged evangelism, that is, the act of sharing their religious belief with non-believers, many of them organized charitable collections at their meetings in order to raise funds for mission, both within their own countries and overseas.

On the southern and western coasts of Norway there were especially two Evangelical revivalist groups that started engaging with the idea of Christian mission overseas: the Moravians and the Haugeans (Nome 1942). Moravian Christianity had spread from Germany northwards to Norway in the early nineteenth century. Although there were not many Moravians in Norway,

they were “a hot-bed of Christocentric piety and heartiness at a time when [Norwegian] intellectual life in general and the church was dominated by a cool climate” (Molland 1979:98, quoted in Jørgensen 1990:80). They savored the more intense experiences of Evangelicalism. They encouraged meditation on the beauty of salvation in Jesus, and were especially drawn to meditate on the image of Jesus on the cross. The Haugeans, on the other hand, represented a more sober version of the Evangelical revivals. The Haugean movement had been founded by the Norwegian lay preacher Hans Nilsen Hauge around the turn of the nineteenth century, who encouraged devout belief and hard work among his followers. Haugeans were known to be frugal people – and as a result some of them saved up considerable wealth. They emphasized the importance of a temperate and honest life.

In the 1820s, Moravians and Haugeans started to form “mission groups” that met to hear news of Christian missions overseas, to pray for them, and to donate money (Nome 1942). In 1842, representatives from 65 of these recently formed “mission groups” as well as a number of other interested men, including some clergy from the (Lutheran) Church of Norway, met to endorse a set of bylaws for a loosely structured Norwegian mission initiative. The initiative was named the Norwegian Missionary Society (*Det Norske Missionselskab*). They set up a Board to act as decision-making body. The following year, in 1843, they sent out their first missionary, the Norwegian Lutheran pastor Hans Schreuder. On the recommendation of the British missionary Robert Moffat who worked among the Tswana in Southern Africa, Hans Schreuder traveled to the eastern coast of Southern Africa to see if he could establish a mission among the people identified as the Zulus.<sup>18</sup> The Zulu King Mpande had not yet allowed any permanent Christian mission to be established within his kingdom, which lay just north of the British Colony of Natal.

The Norwegian Missionary Society also set up a “Mission School” in the town of Stavanger, on the west coast of Norway. In the 1840s, three young men enrolled – Tobias Udland, Ommund Oftebro, and Lars Larsen. Like most of the other young men who were recruited to the nineteenth-century mission cause in Western Europe, they came from farming, craftsmen or artisan backgrounds, and had strong Evangelical conversion experiences in their teens or early twenties (Simensen with Gynnild 1986:28, 33). (Hans Schreuder was an exception to both of these trends.) At the Mission School

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<sup>18</sup> *Norsk Missions-Tidende* 1888:358, “Referat af Forhandlingerne paa Generalforsamlingen i Kristiansand fra 5.-8. juli 1888.”

they were taught geography, world history, church and mission history, the Old and New Testaments, systematic theology, and Norwegian, English and German (Nome 1943a:119–20, 137). They practiced preaching in mission groups. After around five years of study, they were deemed ready to join Hans Schreuder in the mission field. They arrived in Port Natal in October 1849. Lars Larsen traveled with his wife, Martha (née Thommesen), while Tobias Udland and Ommund Oftebro's fiancées, Guri Messing and Guri Hogstad, were not allowed by the Board to join them in Africa until 1852.<sup>19</sup>

Over the first half century of its existence, up until 1892, the Norwegian Missionary Society sent 35 male missionaries and male mission assistants to Natal and Zululand, the majority of whom had been educated at the Mission School in Stavanger. Twenty-nine of these men were married when they began or at some time during their missionary service in Natal or Zululand (two were married twice during their time of service), making a total number of 31 “missionary wives” during this period. In addition, NMS sent a total of 10 unmarried female mission assistants before 1892; nine of these were sent in the decade after the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, mainly as teachers or matrons for the Norwegian missionary children, or as nurse-midwives.<sup>20</sup>

During NMS' first half century, the NMS missionaries established fourteen mission stations in Southern Africa. Four of these were in colonial Natal: Umphumulo (1850), Esinyamboti (1886), Eotimati (1886), and a station in Durban (1890). Ten were in Zululand: Empangeni (1851), Entumeni (1852), Mahlabathini (1860), Eshowe (1861), Inhlazatshe (1862), Imfule (1865), Umbonambi (1869), Ekutembeni (1869) – which was subsequently moved to Emzinyati (1870) and then to Ekombe (1880), Kwahlabisa (1871) and Ungoye (1881). Following Hans Schreuder's break with NMS in 1873, the new Schreuder Mission kept the Entumeni mission station in Zululand,

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout the text I have sought to avoid the common practice of referring to male missionaries by their surname only (e.g. Oftebro, Larsen), since this serves to continue the historical precedent of giving primary status to the men on the mission stations (which will be discussed further in chapter 4). By referring to the male missionaries by their surnames only, e.g. Larsen, the invisibility of the other Larsen on the station, namely his wife Martha Larsen, is reiterated. I shall therefore follow Amanda Porterfield's (1997) practice of referring to both male and female personnel by first and last names, or first names only when this is clear.

<sup>20</sup> NMS Archives, “List of Norwegian missionaries working for the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa” (available at [http://www.mhs.no/uploads/List\\_NMS-missionaries\\_SouthAfrica.pdf](http://www.mhs.no/uploads/List_NMS-missionaries_SouthAfrica.pdf)). See also the appendix in Tjelle (2011:264–72), which provides a list of all NMS missionaries in Zululand and Natal until 1930.

established one new station in Natal, namely Untunjambili (1874), and also took over the Kwahlabisa station from NMS.

*The Anthropology of Christianity*

My study of these Norwegian missionaries and their mission stations will largely take an anthropological approach. In order to examine what this means when looking at a Christian group on the colonial frontier, let me start with a point of debate. Joel Robbins (2007) has argued that Jean and John Comaroffs' (1991, 1997) study of nineteenth-century British missionaries to the Tswana in Southern Africa has consistently downplayed the importance of Christianity as a system of meanings and behaviors. Fenella Cannell (2006a:11–12) includes a similar observation about the Comaroffs' work in her discussion of why Christianity is still largely an "occluded object" in cultural or social anthropology (cf. also Elbourne 2003:452). In short, the Comaroffs' focus is on how the encounter between missionaries and Tswana meshed with the historical dynamics of colonialism and modernity. I tend to think that the Comaroffs probably did not intend to examine Christianity in particular in these volumes, which are already exceptionally rich and readable, and therefore should not necessarily be held accountable for this lack (a point that Robbins also makes in his critique, 2007:9). But I do agree with Robbins and Cannell that the Comaroffs' study alerts us to a wider anthropological tendency to ignore or downplay Christianity as a subject of study. I read the critiques as calls for further work that would complement the approach of the Comaroffs, and my study therefore falls within the emerging field of the anthropology of Christianity.

Viewing Christianity through an anthropological lens raises the initial question: If cultural or social anthropology primarily engages with the amorphous stuff glossed as "culture," is Christianity "cultural" (cf. Robbins 2007)? This question may be understood in different ways. One way has been captured succinctly by Andrew Buckser and Stephen Glazier:

In many religious traditions, conversion marks the time when the hand of the divine is most plainly visible; conversion narratives overflow with expressions of supernatural agency, in which the individual feels guided, or coerced, or enraptured by a divine presence [...] To suggest – as anthropologists do – that even this moment owes something of its shape to cultural systems is to intrude culture into the very core of the religious experience. (Buckser and Glazier 2003:xii)

I agree with Buckser and Glazier's underlying concern here, namely that we need to find a way, as anthropologists (or historians), to take religion seriously on its own terms rather than rewriting it. I would hesitate, however, to draw as clear a distinction as them between culture and religious experience, even from the perspective of believers. It seems most helpful to me to think of "Christianity," like "religion," as a polythetic concept: it is made up of a cluster of interrelated themes or strands, and each version of Christianity has a selected bundle of these strands (Southwold 1978:369). Christianity, like other religious traditions, is understood, experienced and expressed in different cultural settings, and examining these different cultural expressions leads to a deeper understanding of the extraordinary multitude of Christian experiences. When I discuss how the missionaries' Christianity became intertwined with material forms and spaces, this does not imply that their religion is "reduced" to culture, but rather that their religion, as any other, was mediated through culturally shaped forms.

Was it also something more? That is, did their religious faith ultimately connect to a God who exists independently of human cultural forms? In this study I will hold to a stance of methodological agnosticism,<sup>21</sup> suggesting that the Christian God may or may not also exist beyond human culture, but that the missionaries' God was fashioned (and re-fashioned) in interaction with the cultural forms around them. This is not meant to reduce, in Carl Jung's words, "the Christian mystery" (Jung 1999:105):

I am always coming up against the misunderstanding that a psychological treatment or explanation reduces God to "nothing but" psychology. It is not a question of God at all, but of man's [and woman's] ideas of God, as I have repeatedly emphasized. (Jung 1999:117 n11)

In considering the missionaries' ideas of God, it is also necessary to underline the ever-present possibility of change, and that one's perception of God can be broadened, stretched, revised, transformed, rejected, forgotten, remembered, and so on, in life. In other words, the various cultural forms around the missionaries did not pre-determine their image of God, but rather assisted them in forming various (and changing) images of God. In fact, it quickly becomes obvious that in the case of the Norwegian missionaries, one of the problems they encountered was precisely how to hold

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<sup>21</sup> I would like to thank Fenella Cannell for first discussing the topic of "methodological agnosticism" with me. For further discussion see e.g. Russell McCutcheon's introduction to the topic (McCutcheon 1999a) and his selection of articles (McCutcheon 1999b).

on to the God that was familiar to them when it became difficult to show for certain that this God existed in a new cultural context, where material forms were given new meanings. It is against this background that I will speak of a particular culture of Christianity, the changing Christianity of the Norwegian missionaries who were based in Natal and Zululand from around 1850–1890.

In so doing I wish to contribute to the growing field of the anthropology of Christianity.<sup>22</sup> Robbins (2007) has observed that in order to help this field build up a substantial amount of theoretical and methodological reflection, it is not enough simply to produce further ethnographic studies of Christian communities. Rather, the studies that are produced need to contribute to a community of scholarship in which common problems are formulated, discussed, and developed. To this end, I wish to pay careful attention to the ways in which the changing shape of the missionaries' Christianity was constituted through the construction of "different" spaces and the use of words and things (chapter 2), the bodies of the missionaries (chapter 3), the missionaries' relationship with Zulu converts (chapter 4), Zulu perceptions of the mission stations (chapter 5), and the missionaries' own visions of the stations (chapter 6). In the concluding part of the book (chapters 7 and 8) I return to the complex question of what happened to nineteenth-century missionary Christianity in its colonial context. Chapter 7 discusses the Norwegian missionaries' response to the events surrounding the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, including their uneven practical and moral support for British rule over the Zulus. Chapter 8 draws the book's themes together by reflecting on the effects that Christianity can have on spaces – and the profound effects that spaces can have on Christianity.

### *The Missionaries in a Colonial Context*

The terms "colonial" and "colonialism" cover a range of historical and social phenomena that are etched in a spectrum of hard political realities, different forms of violence, overrule, and economic exploitation, as well as in diffuse processes of cultural encounter, imposed social roles and definitions, moral justifications and debates (for a good discussion, see the

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<sup>22</sup> For a few good starting points and overviews of this field, see e.g. the contributions to the edited collections of Bandak and Jørgensen (2012), Cannell (2006b), and Engelke and Tomlinson (2006), as well as Cannell (2005), Hann (2007), Lampe (2010), McDougall (2009), Robbins (2003, 2004b), and Scott (2005).

Comaroffs' seven propositions on colonialism; Comaroffs 1997:19–29). Any process of colonialism – such as the one in nineteenth-century Southern Africa – is never fully coherent, but rather enacted through disparate sets of institutions and events, even self-contradictory gestures (Comaroff 1989). I am particularly interested in how colonialism, as Timothy Mitchell (1991:ix) has said, “inscrib[es] in the social world a new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the real”; at the same time as the new conception of space – or the various new conceptions – remain contested and never fully determined.

The nineteenth-century Norwegian missionaries operated on both sides of the border between the Colony of Natal, a British colony from 1843, and the neighboring sovereign Zulu kingdom, which was conquered by the British military in 1879 and formally annexed as a British protectorate in 1887. By paying attention to how the missionaries gradually took on a Christianity that tacitly and openly lent support to some central elements of the uneven process of colonialism unfolding around them, it is possible to examine how heterogenous the make-up of colonial rule and societies was.<sup>23</sup> The Norwegian missionaries are an intriguing case in this respect. One might assume that they would act somewhat differently from the British, German, French or American missionaries, since they did not come from a nation with colonial or expansionist aspirations. In fact, Norway was itself in forced political union with Sweden from 1814–1905, and did not have any leeway to formulate its own foreign policy. Yet it seems that despite this, or perhaps because of it, Norwegian missionaries actively sought their place among the dominant colonizing groups on the colonial frontier in Southern Africa.

While missionaries in general stood low in the hierarchy within the white colonizing groups and could be characterized as being a “dominated fraction of the dominant class” (Comaroff 1989:663, citing Bourdieu 1984:421), the Norwegian missionaries in particular occupied an even more nebulous position. They did not share a common language with the colonial officials in Natal, as the American and British missionaries did. Although Hans Schreuder seems to have written elegantly in English, this was certainly not true of all the Norwegian missionaries. They also had markedly less money at their disposal than other mission societies, and in

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<sup>23</sup> Some of the studies I have drawn on in this area include the Comaroffs (1991, 1997), Comaroff (1998), Cooper and Stoler (1997), Dirks (1992), Mitchell (1991), Pels (1997), Stoler (1995, 2002), and Thomas (1994).

Natal and Zululand they were subtly marginalized by other whites who apparently referred to them as “the poor Norwegians” right up until the 1880s (Myklebust 1949:97). The Norwegians mainly established themselves as frontier missionaries who had to “rough it” far from European colonial settlements. This was combined with their relative lack of financial funds. For example, while Hans Schreuder spent £150 on the household at the first Norwegian mission station Umphumulo over the first 12 months, and his colleagues Ommund Oftebro and Lars and Martha Larsen spent a total amount of £102 at Umphumulo over a 15-month period in 1853–54,<sup>24</sup> the British Bishop John Colenso of SPG (the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts) spent an average of over £1,500 per year for the first seven years at his station Bishopstowe in Natal in the late 1850s and early 1860s (Guy 1983:79).

This relative lack of money meant that the Norwegian missionaries’ standard of housing, furnishings, clothing, eating and general living conditions was at times met with thinly veiled ridicule from other whites. In 1875, Hans Schreuder was referred to as “Old Schroeder who is really more than half a Kaffir” by the high-ranking British army officer Sir Garnet Wolseley, then Governor of Natal (Preston 1971:223).<sup>25</sup> The Norwegians noticed the pressure surrounding their lack of means in relation to the Zulu royal court as well. In the early 1860s, the Norwegian missionary Jan Kielland at the station Empangeni complained that the Norwegians needed to give more costly gifts to the Zulu royal family than they might be inclined to, because “we have the British [missionaries] very near here, and they are people who do not usually come with trifles when paying their respects to the big men of the country.”<sup>26</sup>

In some ways the Norwegian missionaries were part of the derided collection of “poor whites” that was present in colonial societies. As Ann Laura Stoler has argued,

Colonial cultures were never direct translations of European society planted in the colonies, but unique cultural configurations, homespun creations in which European food, dress, housing, and morality were given new political meanings in the particular social order of colonial rule. (Stoler 2002:24)

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<sup>24</sup> NMS Archives, HA, Box 130, Jacket 4, Lars Larsen to the Board, May 8, 1854. The unpublished documents that have been consulted from the NMS Archives are in Norwegian and all translations into English are my own.

<sup>25</sup> The term “kaffir” was used by settlers and colonials in nineteenth-century Southern Africa to refer to black people, and came to hold a derogatory insinuation.

<sup>26</sup> *Norsk Missions-Tidende* 1863:207.

Within these shifting configurations, “poor whites” served both to define and threaten the boundaries of (white, male) colonial rule and control (Stoler 2002:34–8). The Norwegian missionaries, who were white but poor, European but not from a colonial power, Christian but “half-Kaffir,” occupied an ambiguous role on the colonial frontier, whether in the hinterland of the British Colony of Natal or across the border in Zululand.

The above characteristics of the Norwegian missionaries’ ambiguous status might seem to favor a negotiated non-involvement in British colonial politics, or a certain distancing from imperialist ambitions. Yet the Norwegians had by the 1880s not only become involved in colonial politics, they had even developed a theological justification for the breakdown and white overrule of Zulu society. They had also become caught up in the colonial question of land, and its fraught relationship to race, through their insistence on (white, male) missionary rule over mission stations, including the African communities resident on these stations. These dynamics tell us much about the lure of involvement, and about how diverse groups of colonizers were “made.” As the Comaroffs have outlined, drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the defining dimensions of colonialism is its instilment of colonial roles, so that certain people come to re-cognize themselves as “natives” (Comaroffs 1997:19, citing Sartre 1955:215). For my study, I am particularly concerned with the perceived opposite, the parallel process of how other people – such as the Norwegian missionaries – came to re-cognize themselves as having the right to rule, as being higher up in the colonial hierarchy, as being aligned with the colonizers rather than with the colonized (cf. Comaroffs 1997:19, 25), and as being “defenders of empire” (Stoler 2002:40).

I am also concerned with a second theme in relation to the study of colonialism, namely the theme of “epistemic murk,” which I shall return to in chapter 7. The term “epistemic murk” has been used by Michael Taussig (1984) and Ann Laura Stoler (1992) to denote the interplay of rumor, hearsay and conjectures, uncertain observations and changing interpretations that constituted the cultural knowledge of colonizing populations in the colonies or on the colonial frontier, as they sought to make sense of actions around them and gauged how to respond. For this study, I shall argue, an understanding of this “epistemic murk” helps to shed some light on the issue of why there are such deep disjunctures between the Norwegian missionaries’ intentions and the consequences of their practices. It points toward how policies and actions within a colonial context are fashioned in a context of incoherent knowledges. Specifically, it provides us with a case

in which historical agency, that is, the effort of the missionaries, seems markedly limited in the short term, and self-contradictory and paradoxical in the long term.

### *Spaces that Take Hold*

The heading “spaces that take hold” takes its cue from Terence Ranger’s (1987) article “Taking hold of the land: Holy places and pilgrimages in twentieth-century Zimbabwe.” Ranger examines how Christian missionaries in what is today Zimbabwe wished to “take hold” of the African landscape by defining Christian sacred sites, mission bases, pilgrimage routes, and so on – often in close interaction with surrounding Shona notions of sacred places and of how people and land stood in relation to each other. The missionaries’ symbolic and ritual endeavors in this regard were picked up by African evangelists and teachers of the mission, who found that they could draw authority from the ways in which Christianity could take hold of the land. Land, religion, power and people became entwined in ways that drew on traditional models, but were also new.

In this study, I wish to draw up a complementary argument. I will also look at how the Norwegian missionaries, a bit further south, sought to “take hold” of the land, particularly certain plots of land, among the Zulus. But I will then turn to the question of how the plots of land that they had taken hold of – the mission stations – soon came to “take hold” of them. I will argue that the spaces that they carefully fashioned, in turn came to fashion them – and their Christianity. One of the themes in this study is therefore the construction, perception and use of space, and how the setting up of spaces is shaped by and in turn gives shape to human ideas, experience and practice, including religious practice.

I am interested in the social and material microcosm of the mission station space. This was the place where the missionaries lived, farmed, and held reading classes and Sunday services – and where in due course resident communities of employees, converts, and visiting patients and refugees also became established. The domestic microcosm has been important more broadly in Southern African history. As the editors of the first volume of *The Cambridge History of South Africa* note, speaking of gender relations (and attendant social ideology) in the homesteads of the African pastoralists and the farms of the colonists, “[i]t is perhaps in the story of its domestic arrangements that South African history has been most conservative” (Hamilton, Mbenga and Ross 2010:xvi). Paul Landau too points out the

importance of the homestead structure among southern Bantu-speaking groups, which was based on a central cattle enclosure surrounded by arranged huts (the “Central Cattle Pattern”; Hall 2010), and he argues that “[t]he political history of early South Africa can be understood as a group of variations on what Jan Vansina calls ‘the house’” (Landau 2010a:395, cf. e.g. Vansina 1990, see also Kuper 1993). Similarly, Robert Ross suggests, based on his research on the Boers who trekked away from the Cape, that “there are good reasons to argue that both the continual expansion of the Trekboers toward the northeast and the brutality this entailed related to the microeconomics of the farming households” (Ross 2010:201). Despite this interest in the importance of domestic spaces in Southern African history in general, little sustained attention has been paid to the microcosm of the missionaries’ households, namely the mission stations (though for interesting exceptions see the Comaroffs 1997:274–322, MacKenzie 2003, Ranger 1987 and 1993, Sales 1975). A focus on these microcosms can speak to and illuminate broad themes, as I hope to show in the following chapters.

My focus on the spaces created by the missionaries echoes the significance accorded to spaces in cultural and social anthropology.<sup>27</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson note that:

The idea that space is made meaningful is, of course, a familiar one to anthropologists; indeed, there is hardly an older or better established anthropological truth. East or west, inside or outside, left or right, mound or floodplain [...] The more urgent task would seem to be to politicize this uncontested observation. With meaning-making understood as a practice, how are spatial meanings established? (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a:40)

Gupta and Ferguson develop this line of thought further by arguing that a closer examination of spaces leads – not to an examination of the cultural differences that exist in different spaces – but to an exploration of how cultural differences are produced and how they come to be spatially mapped (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a:43). The mission stations in nineteenth-century Natal and Zululand lend themselves well to this kind of analysis.

Drawing on different theoretical perspectives on space, I will argue that there are many connections between the “different space” that the missionaries managed to create on their stations and their increasing emphasis on a Christianity that was more closely aligned with colonialism,

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<sup>27</sup> For a good overview, see Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003b).

including their practice of placing a white male missionary as the head of the station. This does not mean, however, that the effect of the mission stations was a straightforward one, for example of simply increasing the power and status of the Norwegian male missionaries. The experiences (in the plural) of the different male and female missionaries on the stations also contained several ambiguities, tensions, and ironic results. This instability is a core element of the space of the mission stations, and I seek to draw it out by focusing variously on the ambiguities that surrounded the words and things that the missionaries placed within the space of the mission station (chapter 2), the struggles that were associated with the missionary body (chapter 3), the tensions that were introduced by the missionaries' relationship to Zulu converts on the stations (chapter 4), the tensions between Zulu perceptions of the mission stations and the missionaries' reactions to these (chapter 5), and the disjuncture between the missionaries' vision for the mission stations and their everyday experiences (chapter 6). These themes reveal passionate contestations over the meanings of the mission station, including over the many Zulu and Norwegian explanations given for it, and show how strongly the missionaries were affected by their own "defense" of the space.

In the concluding part of the book, I examine the implications of the mission stations as plots of land, especially in relation to the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and its aftermath of civil war. Many of the mission stations came to function as "native reserves" under expanded colonial rule, and building on previous scholarship by C. Tsheloane Keto (1976), I will touch on some of the contradictory consequences that the missionaries' careful demarcation of plots of land had for early racial separations and land distribution in what later came to be apartheid South Africa.

### *History in the Ethnographic Grain*

In my approach to the historical sources I have drawn on Jean and John Comaroff and Ann Laura Stoler's discussions of what it means to do "ethnography in the archives" (Comaroffs 1992:11, Stoler 2009:31, cf. Des Chene 1997). The Comaroffs cite the cultural historian Robert Darnton (1985:3), who says that he does "history in the ethnographic grain." In similar vein I take anthropological history to be primarily about maintaining a certain analytical stance – one that might be recognized as "ethnographic" – while using tools, materials and perspectives that are usually associated with the historian. An ethnographic stance may sometimes involve, amongst many

other things, trying to see things “from the native’s point of view” (Geertz 1999), paying attention to details of the everyday, thinking about what objects and actions mean to different people as well as how contestations over meaning are acted out, and being aware that meanings and customs can mask power. The historian’s materials, tools and perspectives might include, for example, sifting through and assessing archival sources, reading documents carefully and closely, attempting to imagine the past, being willing to be surprised by past thoughts and actions and acknowledging that they do not necessarily fit with our present assumptions, and paying attention to both streams of continuity and significant changes over time. For both the historian and the ethnographer it is usually considered important to be willing to engage with sources in their complexity. This might mean resisting the impulse to paper over inconsistencies or internal contradictions, and instead explore what the sources might be saying even in all their “messiness,” an inevitable aspect of studying human social life.

There are some further and more detailed methodological questions that need to be addressed, including questions related to the acts of reading and interpreting the missionary letters as historical texts, or the complex relationship between persons and processes in historical accounts. But rather than going into detail on these issues here, I have addressed them in brief sections throughout the book. In this way they speak more immediately to the interpretive questions at hand in each chapter. Each of these sections is prefaced with “A note on method”: “Persons and processes” in chapter 2; “Reading the missionary letters” in chapter 3; “Silences in the sources,” “Reading against the grain,” and “Problematizing historical processes” in chapter 4; “Interpreting binary metaphors” and “Reading mission images” in chapter 6; and “‘Front stage’ and ‘back stage’ narratives” in chapter 7.

For now, let me merely go into a little more detail on one methodological question: Should researchers describe what the missionaries *said* and apparently *believed* they were doing, or what they *seem* retrospectively, and through a different conceptual lens, to be doing? A related question concerns how researchers should approach the disjuncture between missionary ideals, intentions, actions, and consequences. These do not, of course, add up perfectly in any life. Yet during the first decades of the Norwegian mission in Natal and Zululand, the missionaries’ overall apparent inability to bring about their intentions, and the irony of many of the unanticipated outcomes of their actions – as detailed in the following chapters – seem especially strong. This was also true of other mission societies.

I have attempted to respond to this methodological concern by drawing on the ethnographic injunction to oscillate between experience-near and experience-distant descriptions, that is, between emic and etic perspectives (Geertz 1999). The text shifts between describing events and viewpoints “near” to the missionaries’ experience, and descriptions of other contemporary processes or perspectives – related, for example, to the colonial state or Zulu perceptions – that the missionaries might regard as more “distant” from their own experience. The text might then tack forward to perspectives offered by current historical interpretations, or relevant theoretical arguments.

This means that the scholarly text that is produced is *not* something that the missionaries themselves would have written. Instead, the resulting text moves between different viewpoints, including the different viewpoints of the Norwegian missionaries, of the people they interacted with, and of scholars. In short, it is precisely by including these different angles, and by sketching a description that goes beyond what the missionaries themselves would have said, that I can start to approach the ethnographic goal of trying to grasp and convey, in academic form, concepts that for some people (but not others) are experience-near, and to attempt to understand these well enough to place them in connection with experience-distant concepts (Geertz 1999:52).

It is important to note, however, that although this is considered standard practice in the academy, we should not forget the fact that for the people concerned – the people who are being described – the experience of having one’s intentions, actions, faith and identity re-told within a different frame of reference than one’s own, with experience-distant concepts, can be a profoundly sad, disturbing, or even bizarre experience (Hastrup 1992). As Elizabeth Elbourne (2003:455) has noted, the enormously complicated processes we are interpreting, together with their often painful implications, demand a certain sense of humility from the historian.

In conclusion, let me end with two quotes that each reflect on history as a methodological tool in a wider sense. They address the broader question: why look at history at all? Why try to draw out experience-distant concepts from a stack of old missionary letters in the archive, and why try to understand and interpret what these missionaries thought they were doing in colonial Natal and Zululand? First, Fernand Braudel, advocate of history in the *longue durée*, suggests that our surprise at the *difference* of the past is valuable. He underlines

the importance of the unfamiliar, of surprise in historical explanation: you are in the sixteenth century, and you stumble upon some peculiarity, something which seems peculiar to you [...] Why this difference? That is the question which one then has to set about answering. But I would claim that such surprise, such unfamiliarity, such distancing – these great highways to knowledge – are no less necessary to an understanding of all that surrounds us and which we are so close to that we cannot see clearly. (Braudel 2000:250)

The historian Howard Zinn, on the other hand, highlights a complementary notion, namely that the immediacy and *similarity* of the past can also surprise us and pull us out of facile interpretations:

Why do we need to reach into the past, into the days of slavery? Isn't the experience of Malcolm X, in our own time enough? I see two values in going back. One is that dealing with the past, our guard is down, because we start off thinking it is over and we have nothing to fear by taking it all in. We turn out to be wrong, because its immediacy strikes us, affects us before we know it; when we have recognized this, it is too late – we have been moved. (Zinn 2000:191)