Kristen Fjelde Tjelle

In 1866 Hans Paludan Smith Schreuder, the NMS’s first missionary to the Zulus, was consecrated as a Bishop of the ‘Church of Norway’s Mission Field.’ His consecration in Norway met with enthusiastic crowds of supporters – hundreds of thousands of people gathered to greet this first-returned missionary and his wife Jakobine Emilie Adelheid Løwenthal. ‘The prime minister invited the couple to a dinner party, and the King of the Union of Sweden-Norway donated presents. National and regional newspapers covered their three-month tour, and poets wrote romantic epics hailing Schreuder as a great Norwegian pioneer’ (p. 27). By 1873, however, Schreuder had resigned from the NMS in the midst of a power-struggle about mission authority. At the general assembly of that year, 384 delegates met to discuss his resignation, and ultimately to decide whether the NMS should be run through Episcopal authority or through local mission conferences. The delegates accepted the Bishop’s resignation, and published a selection of their correspondence with Schreuder to appease a public generally in his favour. While Schreuder continued his own independent mission, the resignation of their first ever missionary marked a structural break in the history of the NMS that remains controversial to this day.

In beginning with this meticulously researched case, Kristen Fjelde Tjelle perfectly sets out her stall for the book as a whole. The case of Bishop Schreuder reveals the surprising level of popularity for Christian mission in Norway, demonstrates the tensions arising in the idea of Christian modernity in the later nineteenth century, and sets out the broader methodology of this book as a whole, which takes a case study approach to exploring missionary masculinity in the NMS’s ‘Zulu Mission’ across the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, this crisis in the NMS’s organisational history, argues Kristen Fjelde Tjelle, was really a crisis about masculinity, or rather a moment during which two types of missionary masculinity came into conflict with one another: the romantic, upper-class and confessional masculinity of the Bishop, and the middle-class, “self-made” and muscular masculinity of his younger and ultimately triumphant colleague and rival, Lars Dahl.

Missionary Masculinity is essentially about how late nineteenth and early twentieth-century missionaries navigated changing codes of masculinity. While late nineteenth-century ideals of “manliness” spoke to robust, practical, strong and rational virtues, Christianity seemed to emphasise more “feminine” qualities: emotion, faith and obedience. “In the mission discourse, however, Christian virtues and modern masculinity ideals were not regarded as incom-
patible” (p. 213), argues Kristen Fjelde Tjelle. Missionaries navigated a course between “self-making” and “self-denial” which focussed on internal, rather than external control. While nineteenth-century manly imperialists strove to control the world around them (the external), male missionaries performed their masculinity through (internal) self-control, and thus united middle-class ideals of manliness in modernity and Christian ideals of obedience and self-reform. Here Kristen Fjelde Tjelle traces the changing discourses of missionary masculinity, through both the writings and organisational disputes of the mission organisation, the rhetorical and practical role of important “Others” (the Zulu man and the Norwegian woman) in gender formation, and the lives and experiences of male missionaries in the field, balancing their personal and professional identities through the missionary life cycle.

As such, this book makes a timely intervention into the history of nineteenth and twentieth century masculinity, and the missionary enterprise. Missionary masculinity is a burgeoning and exciting field in mission studies at the moment. Studies of gender have long been insistent that gender identities are social and cultural constructs – that masculinity and femininity are creations and reflections of their historical context. Studies of masculinity in the nineteenth-century, meanwhile, have shown this to be a crucial period in the structuring of gender identities, as men and women navigated the rapid currents of industrialisation, urbanisation and indeed, western imperialism. Kristen Fjelde Tjelle’s book is thus extremely timely in examining and exploring masculinity in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Norwegian Missionary Society.

Using a sociological framework hinged around both the idea of (and tensions between) “manliness/unmanliness” and the “self-made man” of western “modernity”, Kristen Fjelde Tjelle examines the history of the NMS through a gendered perspective. In so doing, she uses the formulation of “types/countertypes” and “manliness/unmanliness”, building on the recognition that gender identities are constructed against identified “Others” – here both upper-class men, Zulu men, and Norwegian women. While this conceptual formulation is revealing, I am not always convinced that it does justice to either the material here painstakingly assembled, or the complexities of gender identities formulated in the crucible of western colonialism. At times it seems to rely rather too heavily on strong and clear distinctions between self and other, type and countertype. Gender identities are rather more fluid than such a dichotomy implies, and Kristen Fjelde Tjelle herself recognises the ambiguities implicit in the mission’s treatment of Zulu masculinity, which travelled ambivalently between emotional and childlike (“feminine”) and the idealised “noble savage” (“masculine”). It was the tensions between these representations that may be