

Medical missionary Christian T. Oftebro's strenuous life and tragic destiny

Medical missionary, 3-1 Christian T. Oftebro worked in Zululand (now KwaZulu), South Africa, from 1877 to 1888. He wanted to change mission practice from exclusively involving evangelization, to in a significant way also include training in various forms of practical work. He worked intensely to develop the practical conditions for such mission approach. He claimed to be able to prove significant progress in missionary work by such approach.

His thoughts, however, were opposed by his guardians, the mission management in Stavanger, Norway, and in 1888 he was brutally dismissed from his position. The counteraction by his superiors and the dismissal was a very strong strain to Christian Oftebro. He died few weeks after having been dismissed, and his tragic fate has for generations been a felt trauma in the Oftebro family.

A number of people in the Oftebro family have over the years given great attention to Christian Oftebro's case. One collected written statements from those who had known him and worked with him. The statements were reproduced and distributed widely in the family. Some had plans to record his story and obtain full clarity of the circumstances around his tragic fate. The person who got closest to such a goal was farmer 3-2-9 Anna Elisabeth Asheim, Sola, Norway. In 1947 she published an article series about Christian Oftebro's case in the local newspaper "Samleren", Mandal, Norway. This series, which was based precisely on the forenamed statements, gave no detailed explanation, however, of all the circumstances surrounding the counteraction and the dismissal of Christian Oftebro. And it said not much about his long struggle and his arduous efforts.

3-6-2-4 Torstein Oftebro has tried to meet the challenge. In 2013 he published the book "Visjon og Tragedie, liv og virke til misjonslege Christian T. Oftebro, 1842-1888". (Vision and tragedy, life and work of medical missionary Christian T. Oftebro, 1842-1888.") In this book he describes Christian Oftebro's life, from his upbringing in Lyngdal, Norway, through his life as a sailor and as a technical assistant at Eshowe mission, Zululand, to his study at the Mission school in Stavanger, and further his education as a medical missionary in Scotland, before we follow his work and endeavors as a medical missionary in Zululand. The book is thorough in its presentation, where a plethora of contemporary documents are presented and discussed. Along with other documentation and analysis Christian Oftebro's effort, the counteractions from his superiors, the brutal dismissal and the tragic death is described in full width.

With the thorough documentation that is presented in the book at hand, Torstein Oftebro urged the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) to review the dismissal case of Christian Oftebro. NMS did so in spring 2014.

NMS is now expressing recognition of Christian Oftebro's ideas and endeavors, and regrets the treatment he received. It is being pointed out that Christian Oftebro was ahead of his time, and that the mission principles he tried to introduce in Zululand in the 1880-ies are quite similar to the mission principles applied today.

NMS' assessment is done by college director Kristin Fjelde Tjelle, Ph.D. The School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway. Tjelle possesses, not least through her doctoral thesis and other literary work on early Norwegian missionary endeavors in South Africa (1870-1930), a special expertise on these subjects.

Moreover, NMS' Secretary General, Jeffrey Huseby, in a separate statement, has given an unconditional recognition of Christian Oftebro's work, and a regret of the treatment he received.

The assessment and the Secretary-General's regret are published in NMS' periodical "Misjonstidende" in September 2014, and are reproduced on the following pages.

On behalf of the Oftebro family committee I want to express great gratitude to NMS and for the conclusions they have drawn in this case. Such unreserved acknowledgment and apology show that NMS has the ability and willingness to reconsider an older, confrontational issue with today's eyes. At the same time they show understanding for our large family's long-awaited needs for rehabilitation of Christian Oftebro. For this we are very grateful.

Furthermore the family committee wish to express a special gratitude to Torstein Oftebro for his impressive research on Christian Oftebro, and for having collected his research between two covers. As we see it, this was the last opportunity to raise this issue. More than 125 years have passed since Christian Oftebro met his sad fate. It is beyond doubt that the work, "Vision and Tragedy", has contributed to NMS' response. For this the extended Oftebro family has special reasons to thank Torstein Oftebro.

On behalf of Oftebro family committee

Inge Chr. Oftebro (3-6-2-4-3)
Chairman

FIRED FOR HIS OPINIONS

The Norwegian Mission Society's (NMS) first medical missionary was fired because of his controversial views, but his ideas live on in the organization today.

Text: Kristin Fjelde Tjelle

Photo: Mission Archives, School of Mission and Theology

Mission history is full of drama. People who felt called by God often disagreed on how to carry out mission work. The history of Christian Oftebro is one such story.

MEDICAL MISSIONARY

Christian Oftebro, the farmer's son from Lyngdal, Norway went to sea after his confirmation, contracted typhoid fever and ended up in a hospital in Mauritius. Here he was visited by Hans Paludan Smith Schreuder, a pioneer missionary from NMS who was on his way to Zululand. Schreuder brought the patient to his uncle Ommund Oftebro's mission, where Christian worked as an assistant for a few years. In 1868 he entered the Missionary School in Stavanger, and afterwards was sent to Scotland to study medicine. In 1877 he returned to Zululand to work as a medical missionary for NMS.

DISCUSSED MISSION METHODS

In the 1880s, discussions about mission strategies went back and forth between missionaries in South Africa and the mission board in Norway. Oftebro became the main spokesman for a strategy that was accused of violating Lutheran tradition. He emphasized



Christian Oftebro (1842-1888) was NMS' first medical missionary. He was dismissed for his opinions about missionary work and the missionary role.

more “the plow” than “the Word”, and was inspired by other international organizations: the Scottish Free Church Mission, American Congregationalists and British Methodists. They practiced a practical, down to earth Christianity, where vocational training and education were emphasized along with evangelization and church building. The mission stations became centers for an aspiring African, Christian middle class who found new opportunities within the capitalist, colonial economy. Oftebro's mission stations included commercial agriculture, workshops, small industries and some mining. He advocated the ideas of mission stations as economically self-supported colonies of free peasants. He urged Christian Zulus to be trained in farming, crafts and small industries. This

was as important as evangelism, he said. In this way, he challenged the distinction between “direct” and “indirect” missionary work. Direct missionary work consisted of evangelism, teaching and pastoral work and was regarded as the superior duty. Operation of the mission stations, education, health care and social work were secondary.

DRAMATIC DISMISSAL OF A MISSIONARY

Oftebro introduced the idea of aid as part of missions. This is currently accepted thinking in NMS, and expressed through the program “Message, Aid and Construction”. In the 1880s this was controversial, and caused Oftebro’s dramatic dismissal. The board sent secretary-general Ole Gjerløw on an inspection tour to the mission field for the first time. He summoned an extraordinary missionary conference shortly after his arrival, and at the meeting he openly announced the decision to dismiss Oftebro. Oftebro’s methods and ideas were criticized and he was accused of working in violation of Lutheran theology. His commercial activities on behalf of himself and on behalf of the mission station were found incompatible with the role of a missionary. Missionaries were to meet “spiritual needs” and not the worldly or physical needs. Oftebro’s struggle for greater autonomy and self-determination for the local mission was perceived as a lack of obedience and insubordination. In addition, he was accused of having a worldly lifestyle and for

OFTEBRO INTRODUCED THE IDEA OF AID AS PART OF THE MISSION WORK

socializing with British settlers, both of which were considered incompatible with the ideal of “renouncing the world.”

The dismissal was received with disbelief and shock by the colleagues on the mission field. Shortly after Oftebro became sick and died. The incident was intensely discussed both within the mission movement and in the regional newspapers in Norway. The case also attracted attention among the settlers in Natal, South Africa and a fundraising campaign to erect a memorial at his grave was launched. Oftebro’s case was not discussed in an NMS context until 1949, when Olav Guttorm Myklebust included him in a history of NMS’ first centenary in South Africa.

FAMILY TRAGEDY

Christian Oftebro’s family received the news of his death with grief and shock. Not only did they lose a dear relative, the circumstances surrounding his death were humiliating and shameful. The fact that the mission questioned Oftebro’s faith, and if he had ever been truly converted, hit the family hard. The tragedy has followed the family for generations, according to Torstein Oftebro, who in 2013 published a book on Christian Oftebro.

RECOGNITION OF VISION AND APOLOGY FOR TRAGEDY

The story of Christian Oftebro is a story about a man and a missionary who in several respects was ahead of his time. He received

impulses from various traditions and was international in a good sense. He advocated an overall understanding of missions where



Jeffrey Huseby

diaconia and aid as well as evangelism and parish building were of equal importance.

This is consistent with NMS' own mission understanding as presented in NMS' mission theological profile document "Worldwide Joy" from 2004. In our time this has also been prevailing missions strategy of the worldwide church. The mission documents: "Mission in Context" published by the Lutheran World Federation (2004), "Transforming Missions" by The Norwegian Church (2012) and "Together Towards Life" by the World Council of Churches (2013) are examples of this.

Kristin Fjelde Tjelle writes that Oftebro had a vision of making people able to take care of themselves, spiritually and physically. Today we call this "empowerment". Oftebro was far ahead of his time.

In the conflict with NMS' leadership, it is tragic that Oftebro was treated the way he was. It is highly regrettable that he was dismissed, and that NMS put a lid on Oftebro's fate for so many years. It is not possible to make amends to Oftebro, but his descendants deserve an apology. On behalf of NMS, I hereby offer our sincerest and official apologies. We hope this will rectify Oftebro's reputation and provide some redress.

Jeffrey Huseby, Secretary-General

Original articles in:

NMS' periodical, MISJONSTIDENDE NO 7 – 2014

Translation into English by:

Kristin Måge Areklett and

Torstein Oftebro