The Legacy of Olav Guttorm Myklebust

Aasulv Lande

The missionary career of Olav Guttorm Myklebust (1905–2001) began in South Africa. There he spent eight years together with his wife, most of the time as principal of the Umpumulo teacher training seminary. He then was called home to Norway for academic studies, where he devoted the rest of his life to developing and promoting mission in both the academy and the church. During his professional life Myklebust introduced two generations of Norwegian theological students to missiology and ecumenics. He founded and facilitated interchurch establishments for mission studies, both in Norway and internationally. Myklebust familiarized his audiences with the term “global,” which he interpreted in the light of Christ’s Great Commission.

Biographical Outline

Olav Guttorm Myklebust was born in Bergen, Norway, on July 24, 1905. His parents—business manager Ole Peter Myklebust and Elisa Karoline née Hole—were mission supporters. In their local congregation of Nykirken, overseas mission enjoyed a high priority. Already during his high school days Olav Guttorm joined a youth group for mission linked to the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS). Inspired by Peter Hognestad, well-known bishop of Bergen, Olav Guttorm’s church brought together a focused spirituality with cultural and ecumenical openness.

In 1924 Myklebust enrolled in the Lutheran School of Theology (Det teologiske menighetsfakultet) in Oslo.1 With his missionary interest, the seminary of NMS in Stavanger had also been an option. The choice of the school of theology indicates his attraction to its higher academic ambitions and to its overt

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ecclesiastical focus. His interest in mission, however, did not subside. In 1926, together with his friend Emil Birkeli (who later became a renowned missionary leader, scholar, and bishop), he initiated the first NMS summer school for youth. After he completed his theological degree and his practical seminary work, he was ordained in 1930 as a minister of the Norwegian Lutheran Church.

On January 20, 1931, he married Gudrun Josefine Nilsen (1905–90) from his hometown of Bergen. Employed by the NMS, they left for South Africa, where Olav Guttorm studied education in Pietermaritzburg. Thereafter the couple began the prescribed study of a South African language, in their case the Zulu language. In 1933 they moved to the Umpumulo Lutheran Teacher Training Seminary, where Olav Guttorm served as principal from 1934 to 1939. A dormitory for girls, a hospital, and a chapel were built during this period. In 1935 Myklebust initiated the English-language magazine Inkanyezi (The Star) in Umpumulo. In its first issue he addressed themes he consistently returned to during his career as a missiologist: Christ-centeredness, concern for the whole human being, and human equality. “Umpumulo stands for Christ-centered education. We believe that without Christ, education falls short of its full end. Furthermore, without Christ, education will have the effect of giving the rising generation stones for bread. . . . Again, Umpumulo aims to prepare Bantu youth for complete living. We want to make accessible the heritage of culture to the indigenous races of South Africa by providing an education that is at once thorough and comprehensive. We stand for equal education facilities for all races, whether white or black. We are not to ignore the tradition and environment of the Bantu. . . . Umpumulo stands for creative cooperation between black and white. The color problem is the problem of South Africa.”

The Myklebust’s African life came to an end in 1939, when Olav Guttorm accepted a scholarship from the Lutheran School of Theology in Oslo. His teaching focus was “church history, with particular reference to mission.” In Norway, as a member of the school faculty, he devoted himself to the time-consuming process of laying the groundwork for mission studies. He also sought to inspire students, scholars, and church people for the missionary cause. One of his early students, Nils Egede Bloch-Hoell (later a professor), attended Myklebust’s inaugural lecture on October 11, 1939. He remembered in particular the concluding words of the young missionary scholar: “It is my desire and my prayer that the office into which I now am about to enter will lead not only to scholarly interest in mission [misjonsvidenskap] but to enthusiasm for mission [misjonslidenskap].”

The invasion and occupation of Norway during World War II led to an academic standstill between 1940 and 1945. After liberation in 1945, academic work was resumed. In 1947 Myklebust founded Egede Institutet for misjonskunnskap og misjonsgranskning (Egede Institute of Missionary Study and Research), which began publication of the missiological quarterly Norsk misjons tidsskrift (changed later to Norsk tidsskrift for misjon) (Norwegian missionary journal). Gaining academic acceptance, however, was a long, uphill struggle. Despite its roots in and relations to missionary movements, the Lutheran School of Theology was slow to appreciate the scholarly relevance of mission studies. Not until 1962, ten years after having completed an exceptionally solid doctoral dissertation, was Myklebust promoted to professor. He retired in 1973 but then continued active scholarly work for more than two decades. In 1990 his beloved wife and partner, Gudrun, passed away. Professor Myklebust could look back on a long, happy, and eventful married life. One of the last times I saw him, he said to me, “We both agreed that our best years were in South Africa!” He died peacefully in Oslo on November 29, 2001.

Christ-Centered and Relational Theology

Myklebust’s 1976 textbook for theological students, Misjonskunnskap. En innføring (Missiology. An introduction), criticizes pluralist-oriented historians and theologians of religion, including Helmut von Glasenapp, Arnold Toynbee, C. G. Jung, Karl Jaspers, and W. Cantwell Smith. Myklebust warns against relativistic views of truth and argues for a courageous tolerance that implies understanding and respect for the views of others. He criticizes the idea of continuity between religions, as argued by W. E. Hocking in the 1930s and by later Roman Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner, Hans Küng, and Raymond Panikkar. He was unable to follow Paul Tillich and Kaj Baage, a Danish missiologist in India, in their anthropological interpretations of Christian faith. Agreeing with statements from the Indian National Council of Churches in 1966 and the All Africa Conference of Churches in 1969, Myklebust argued for “a call to conversion” and against a theology of continuity between religions. He frequently expressed concern for the whole human being, identifying himself with the ecumenical Christian struggle against racism, for he valued the contributions of leaders like J. H. Oldham and initiatives by the World Council of Churches (WCC) such as their Program to Combat Racism. Several of Myklebust’s articles commented on the apartheid system in South Africa, which he consistently and strongly opposed.

Myklebust’s evangelical commitment to racial justice was nurtured already during his formative years in South Africa. He recalled a conversation during the early years at Umpumulo with a black coworker, who said, “We black people are perfectly right in demanding political, social, and economic justice. Basically, however, we demand only one single right: respect for our equality as human beings.” He concluded his article “The Church and Racial Segregation in South Africa” with the following five statements:

- South African whites cannot in the long run ignore the unanimous critique of apartheid by the whole world.
- Attempts at retaining a Western hegemony in South Africa today will by no means succeed.
- Church identification with unjust regimes in Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique have led to collapse; similar dynamics are at work in South Africa.
- Continued insistence on South African apartheid will more than any other factor lead to Communism in the country.
Myklebust’s theology of religions might appear conventional, and in a way it was. He considered himself a theologian loyal to the church, a faithful Lutheran. But that is not the whole picture, for he was not attracted by doctrinal theology that was concerned only with local issues and traditional formulations. Africa and the world remained central in his thinking after he returned to Norway. Myklebust constantly looked outside the church to the world. He willingly accepted established theological statements but raised critical questions about their application and direction.

He had a global vision for his theology, which we could define as relational. He was fascinated with key terms such as “unity” and emphasized one God, one Gospel, one church, and one world. He communicated closely with ecumenical figures such as Willem Visser ‘t Hooft, Lesslie Newbigin, and Stephen Neill. To Myklebust, the Great Commission was no intolerant expression of Christian exclusivity; on the contrary, it opened the church to becoming aware of its external responsibilities.

Along with his impressive rhetoric and skill in public speaking, Myklebust most of all possessed an ability to listen, having been well prepared by his training and practice in South Africa. There he had met an “other” culture. In his teaching he took students’ questions seriously, recommending literature for further reading when he felt his own answers might be incomplete. His theology was dialogical, and it also was cultural. It appeared in his classes but privately and outside the classroom as well. As was commonly done by theological teachers, he invited the members of his classes to his home at the end of each term. In that comfortable setting we students experienced his wide cultural interests, for he was well versed in literature and was a passionate lover of music. At these gatherings we often listened to music; questions of doctrine and church politics were rarely discussed.

Olav Guttorm Myklebust differed from other teachers at the Lutheran School of Theology in that respect. His home parties offered relaxation, fun, and games. His wife, Gudrun, enjoyed our imitation of the teachers at the Lutheran School—including of her own husband! We laughed in their company and somehow unconsciously entered a human space of beauty and fun beyond doctrinal theology.

Myklebust proposed an ecumenical vision of the one church for the one world. Conservative Lutherans, however, were not convinced.

Struggle for Mission in Church and Academy

With his broad understanding of theology, Myklebust had a difficult struggle at home. He left South Africa after a missionary experience of eight years, turning for the rest of his life to missionary research and teaching. The Lutheran School of Theology in Oslo became the home base for his academic vision, namely, Jesus’ Great Commission. His doctoral dissertation was an impressive attempt to relate his vision to the academy. He received his doctorate in 1952, and his dissertation was published in two volumes under the title The Study of Missions in Theological Education: An Historical Inquiry into the Place of World Evangelisation in Western Protestant Ministerial Training, with Particular Reference to Alexander Duff’s Chair of Evangelistic Theology (1955–57).

For Myklebust, mission primarily meant world evangelization, as it appears in the title of his dissertation. His doctoral study explored missionary research and education in Western academic institutions, as well as within mission movements themselves. He focused on three basic periods. The first was 1867–1910, with an emphasis on Alexander Duff in Edinburgh, who held the first chair in mission studies. In this period he also considered the role of Gustav Warneck, founder of the study of mission in Halle. The second period was 1910–45, which Myklebust called the years of expansion. The third period was 1945–50, or the period of his own basic research. The educational treatment of mission at academic institutions in the United States and Europe is presented against the background of social factors and in the context of ecclesiastical and theological developments. The work is still unsurpassed in providing insight into the difficult struggle to establish the science of mission in Western universities. It also documents the development of teaching and research in missionary institutions. Although the 1950s in many ways saw a breakthrough of mission studies as an academic subject, Myklebust describes the academic acceptance of this “odd” subject as indeed a slow and difficult process.

Did the churches and missionary organizations embrace his educational program? We might expect so, for he was a gifted, conservative theologian with a burning commitment to the missionary command. The Egede Institute of Missionary Study and Research, founded 1947, became a dynamic center for ecclesiastically oriented academic mission studies in his country. Myklebust was furthermore instrumental in founding the Nordic Institute for Missiology and Ecumenism (NIME) in 1972, together with Swedish professor Bengt Sundkler from Uppsala, the latter’s successor Carl Fredrik Hallencreutz, Johannes Aagaard from Århus, Henrik Smedjebacka from Åbo, and others. He also became a cofounder of the International Association for Mission Studies ( IAM S).

Myklebust devoted most of his energy to the Egede Institute, named after Hans Egede (1686–1758), pioneer Norwegian missionary to Greenland. And he championed ecumenism. In articles, speeches, lectures, and seminars he defended membership of the Church of Norway in the World Council of Churches. He argued passionately on biblical, confessional, and missiological grounds for the legitimacy of the WCC. He saw its rationale in mission outreach, Trinitarian faith, and social justice. Disputes continued, however, with traditionalist Norwegian missionary leaders and doctrinally conservative colleagues at the Lutheran School of Theology. His book on the Lutheran World Federation and the Lutheran worldwide community offered a solid and well-documented defense of ecumenism from a classic, evangelical Lutheran point of view. Based on confessional documents and Lutheran theology, he argued against a narrow, exclusivist Lutheranism, proposing a humble Lutheran contribution toward an ecumenical vision of the one church for the one world. Conservative Lutherans, however, were not convinced.

Missionary organizations opposed his ideas of mission as church based. Conservative evangelical groups in Norway turned away from him, despite his clear support of the Great Commission. They feared the “theological confusion” of the
WCC, as well as church dominance over missionary activities. Myklebust was not considered heretical, but he was unpopular and marginalized in the Norwegian missionary establishment. His dispute with Norwegian mission societies led him to take on a particular apologetic task: reinterpretting Hans Paludan Smith Schreuder (1817–82), Norwegian pioneer missionary to the Zulus in South Africa.

Myklebust’s first serious analysis of Schreuder as a missionary to Africa was given in a lengthy presentation on South Africa in volume 3 of the history of the NMS.11 The subject recurs, however, in lectures, seminars, and articles. Seven years after retirement, in 1980, he completed a monograph on Schreuder based on his detailed research over many years. Although the study of Schreuder is the work of a professional historian advocating objectivity, it is conducted with deep personal theological commitment. Schreuder was a figure who brought the conflict between church and mission society into focus. The exceptionally gifted Schreuder did not enjoy a happy relationship with his employer, NMS. After an extended conflict with the board about administrative responsibilities, he broke with the society.

Later biographers have seen him as a High Church aristocrat, having no understanding of the democratic breakthrough in nineteenth-century Norwegian missionary movements. Myklebust draws on broad empirical material to support an alternative view: Analyzing biographies and biographers historiographically and utilizing historical material from Africa as well as drawing on Schreuder’s correspondences, he concludes that previous biographers tended to interpret Schreuder from attitudes, events, and evaluations of a later date. Based on new and wider documentation and interpretation in the light of Schreuder’s own time, Myklebust portrays him differently, finding that Schreuder had a genuine commitment to the church, that he viewed mission as the church’s apostolic foundation and character.

Presentations by Myklebust in the journal Norsk tidsskrift for misjon and elsewhere opened a fresh awareness of contemporary Christianity coming into being. In Myklebust’s “new missiology,” mission and church merged in a unified vision. It was Myklebust’s deep concern to underline and demonstrate from ecclesiastical documents and contemporary ecumenical developments that mission was an organic part of church identity, and vice versa. Referring to statements by the Lutheran World Congress in Minneapolis 1957, he stated: “The life of the church is mission. The church cannot exist without mission, and mission cannot exist without the church. . . . The wonderful commission given by the Lord to preach the gospel is not a concern of an isolated group of people. . . . but of the whole church and is valid until he returns.” Myklebust, however, saw this commission as a responsibility not solely of Western Christendom but of the church universal.12 Here lay the real heart of Myklebust’s professional interest. He worked to introduce this new theology and to enhance the understanding of a new era of mission in which the Third World churches would take an active part. Norsk tidsskrift for misjon published information from the young churches, their thinkers, and their leaders—topics that dominated all twenty-eight volumes from 1947 until 1974. The glowing concern for new thought along these lines and for contributions from the young churches colored his lectures. Year “zero” of his personal vision dawned in 1961, when the International Missionary Council merged with the WCC. He envisaged this merger being translated into ecclesiastical reality worldwide—in particular, into his own Norwegian home church. Norwegian mission societies, however, also feared the initiatives of Third World churches. The winds of mission societies blew markedly against him.

Myklebust’s Final Publication

A surprising addition to the scholarly output of Olav Guttorm Myklebust appeared toward the end of his life. In 1995, at the age of ninety, he published a monograph on the Austrian composer Anton Bruckner (1824–96). Myklebust subtitled his work Geni og skjebne (Genius and fate), signaling his interpretative perspective on the artist. In his sophisticated interpretation of Bruckner’s works, Myklebust emphasizes emotional dimensions: “When the art of Bruckner overpowers so many of us, this is first of all due to its inner qualities. Bruckner is genuine, clear, uplifted, and clean. But he also expresses will, intensity, and conviction.” He refers to a feature particularly identified by Carlo Maria Giulini: tenderness—“calling on our smile and tears.”13 And he quotes from Bruckner’s pupil and close friend Franz Schalk: “The soul of Bruckner’s music is song.”14

There is no reason to believe that this last piece of research was a break with his earlier commitments. On the contrary, there is a similarity between Bruckner, Schreuder, and Myklebust, who shared a common struggle for acceptance and recognition. Bruckner himself had a hard struggle for acceptance. One might thus see the work of Myklebust on Bruckner as a kind of self-defense. Such an explanation might contain valuable insights, but it should be seen in a wider perspective. From his personal experience, as well as from his theology, Myklebust was well aware of Christian missionary existence as existence under the cross. His presentations of pioneers from mission history (especially Schreuder) described people struggling to overcome resistance and prejudices. His study of missions made him well aware of the difficult academic struggle of missiology. Bruckner could thus be seen as embodying the fighting spirit of the whole missionary struggle. The connection between the fates of Bruckner, Schreuder, and Myklebust in this respect and the links to the uphill fight for a full understanding of mission are obvious.

Another complementary reason should not be overlooked: Myklebust’s deep interest in culture and the arts, which had not been allowed to fully color his understanding of mission. His interpretation of the Great Commission was so far basically activist: “Go and do!” Could we not see in the book on Bruckner a cosmic component of mission, hitherto withheld? To Myklebust, mission was linked to emotions and encompassed a cosmic vision, even a cosmic Christ. Ideas of universality pervaded his thought.

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simply enhance the globality and universality of the divine message for the whole human being and for the whole world. Might the joyful dimension of the Great Commission possibly reach fulfillment by music?

The missionary legacy of Myklebust emerged from early experiences in South Africa. Returning to Europe with a somewhat redefined commission, he directed his missionary concern toward the academic and the ecclesiastical fields, which became a lifelong commitment. With his intellectual powers, cultural sensitivity, and Christian loyalty born in his Bergen environment and refined in South Africa, he envisaged new relationships between the sociohistorical realities of mission, church, and academy. Olav Guttorm Myklebust’s open-minded vision and concern for a new theology directed toward the world brought no immediate or complete success in his home context. He ushered in, however, a new paradigm of relational missionary thought. My qualified guess is that his burning commitment to the missionary task finally found its supreme expression in the language of music.

Notes
1. Det teologiske menighetsfakultetet was founded in 1908 as the result of theological conflict within the Church of Norway. It represented cooperation between pietistic and confessionally conservative movements that confronted the current, more liberal theology of the theological faculty at Oslo University.
2. The name of the place was alternatively spelled “Umphumolo.” Later the seminary added training programs for Lutheran ministers and became a Lutheran theological seminary.
4. Ibid., p. 9.
8. Ibid., p. 120.
14. Ibid.

Selected Bibliography

Works by Olav Guttorm Myklebust


1955–57 The Study of Missions in Theological Education: An Historical Inquiry into the Place of World Evangelisation in Western Protestant Ministerial Training, with Particular Reference to Alexander Duff’s Chair of Evangelistic Theology. Oslo: Egede Institute.


Works About Olav Guttorm Myklebust


Resources for advancing the Gospel at the edges of the Kingdom