

## **The Contribution of Non-Western Participants to the Edinburgh Conference**

S. Wesley Ariarajah

### **The Non-Western Participants**

At the end of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, the leaders of the Conference decided to request the well-known Scottish missionary, W.H.T. Gairdner, to write an account of the Conference “for the people of the church.” The intention, they said, was that the volume should “make vivid to those who were not present at it, what the Conference really was and did and say and reached-after and believed and hoped” - a volume “which should be at once a narrative, an interpretation, and a summons.”<sup>1</sup> In his volume, Gairdner devoted a whole chapter to “The Delegates”, to give an impression to the reader of the people that had gathered in Edinburgh. This is what he had to say about the Non-Western participants at the Conference:

But perhaps the most interesting, certainly by far the most significant figures of all, were those of the Oriental and African delegates, yellow, brown, or black in race, that were scattered among the delegates in that World Conference. For not only by their presence but by their frequent contributions to the debates they gave final proof that the Christian religion is now rooted in all those great countries of the Orient and the South.<sup>2</sup>

Gairdner goes on to give more details of some of the prominent Non-Westerners present at the conference, but his opening remarks give the impression that Edinburgh had a good representation of Non-Western delegates. In reality, of the 1,215 official delegates at the Conference only 19 were from the Non-Western world. Of these 19 from the “Orient and the South” 18 were, in fact, from Asia. The only African from Liberia was a person of mixed descent born outside Africa. There were no delegates from the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean or Latin America which had active missionary work and considerable local Christian communities.

Brian Stanley, in his well-researched, and perhaps the most complete and accurate account of the Conference, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, reveals some the sentiments that had plagued the process of inviting Non-Western participants. Africans were looked down at that time as “primitive” and not yet ready to participate in such a Conference; the African Americans that were at the Conference, despite being born and brought up in the United States, were still looked upon as “Africans”. Latin America, the Pacific, and the Caribbean islands were considered the extensions of the Western Christendom. Stanley points out that

quite a number of the Asians, especially from North and East Asia, were there mainly because of the special efforts made by John R. Mott, who had come to know and appreciate them through his ministries in the Student Movement and the YMCA.<sup>3</sup>

Of the eighteen, eight were Indians (K.C. Chatterjee, V.S. Azariah, J.R. Chitambar, S.A.C. Ghose, Shivram Masoji, John Rangaiah, R.K. Sorabji, Thang Khan Sangma), four were Japanese (Honda Yoitsu, Harada Tasuku, Ibuka Kajinosuke, Chiba Yugoro) three were Chinese (Cheng Jingyi, Tsang Ding Tong, Tong Ching-en), one was Korean (Yun Ch'ih), one was Burmese (Ah Sou), and one was of Turkish origin (Joannes Awetaranian). According to Brian Stanley at least twelve were ordained in their respective communions and three had been elected as heads of their respective communions. Thus, despite their small number, many of the Asian delegates at the Conference were persons of very high caliber. Most of them have had high educational qualifications locally, had done post graduate work in Western universities and were holding responsible positions in the churches or were heads of prestigious educational institutions back in their home countries. In fact, the University of Edinburgh had conferred honorary degrees on two of them on the eve of the Conference. K.C. Chatterjee from India was awarded a D.D. and Harada from Japan, who already had a doctorate from Yale, a LL.D. Further, John R. Mott made sure that despite their small number they were given a number of opportunities to engage the conference at many points. More importantly, he invited two of the Asian participants to speak to the whole Conference at the special program of Evening Lectures, which gave them the opportunity to make substantive contributions to the Conference from the perspective of the Non-Western churches.<sup>4</sup>

### **Specific Contribution of the Non-Western Participants.**

Twelve of the seventeen Asian delegates spoke at the conference, either at the Evening Lectures or mainly through participation in the commission meetings and by joining the debate on the Reports of the Commissions. It is not my intention here to refer to or summarize all the interventions, but to highlight the substantial input made by three of them. These three made very specific and significant contributions to the Conference by boldly speaking their mind and highlighting one or other of the issues in the conduct of mission in relation to the Non-Western world that caught the attention of the Conference and would become subjects that demanded discussion in subsequent years. The nature of the contribution made by the Asian participants depended on their country of origin, its internal situation at the time of the Conference, and the issues that were pertinent to the churches about the missionary activities of the Missionary Societies and Agencies in their respective countries.

### **The Call for Unity and Self-Governance**

From the very beginning of missionary activities in China, both the Roman Catholic and Protestant missions found it difficult to break through the firm hold of the Chinese culture on its people that was based on Confucian teachings. While the Chinese were attracted to the Christian

faith and the benefits of Western education, they resisted the imposition of Western culture and values that often came with the missionary enterprise. The Chinese were the earliest among Asian Christians that showed consistent interest in the indigenization of the church and its message, on maintaining traditional cultural practices within the church, and on indigenous inland missions. Well before the Edinburgh meeting the Chinese churches were advocating at the local level the three-self principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation. Further, the Chinese resented the denominational divisions that were being imported into their country and longed for the creation of a united Chinese Christian church on their soil.

The Edinburgh Conference gave to the Chinese delegation a world stage to advocate some of these ideas. The person who gave the stirring speech on this subject, during the debate of the Commission II Report on “The Church in the Mission Field,” was Cheng Jingyi, who was only 28 years old and was, at that time, the assistant pastor of the Mi-Shih Hutung Church in Beijing. Converted at the age of 17, Cheng Jingyi, after his studies in China, had the opportunity go to Britain in 1903 to help the London Missionary Society missionary, George Owen, professor of Chinese at Kings College, London, to assist him in revising the Union version of the Mandarin New Testament. He later studied at the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow. Having spent several years in Britain Cheng Jingyi had fluent English which enabled him to place his challenge before the conference with clarity and confidence. His speech is judged as perhaps the best speech from the Asian participants at the Conference.<sup>5</sup>

Faithful to the aspirations of his Christian brothers and sisters back home, in the debate of the Report of Commission II he called upon the missions “not to be afraid to allow the Chinese churches to assume the challenge of sustaining and managing its own life. Self-support must be seen as a joy and not a burden. The controlling power of the Chinese churches had been in the missionaries hands. The time has now come for every Chinese Christian to assume responsibility for their own church and the propagation of the faith.”<sup>6</sup>

One hundred years after the Edinburgh meeting, it is difficult for us today to fully grasp the significance of nature of the challenge that the call for self-governance and unity brought to the assembly. Even though the concept of self-support was not absent in missionary thinking as an ideal, the most common assumption within the missionary movement was that the “younger churches,” at that period of history, had neither the capacity nor the resources to manage themselves. Further, the basic suspicion of the Asian cultures and traditions at that time prompted most of the missionaries to try to wean the churches away from the native cultures in order to embrace the values of their “Christian” culture. This was, in fact, what was happening in much of the rest of the mission fields, and the cry of the younger churches was always for more resources from their parent churches. Further, the Missionary Societies were not too keen to lose control of the churches they had established. The missionaries had always maintained the leadership positions in the churches no matter how qualified and capable the locals were. The problem was that the Chinese were serious about the three-selves and the call for a united church

in China, which the missionary movement did not know how to handle. Mission work, at that time, was entirely based on denominational loyalties. The Faith and Order movement had not yet been initiated and no one in the West thought of creating broad based united church in any place. One of the reasons why Mott envisioned a world missionary conference was to try to avoid competition and overlap of missionary activities. So much so, Gairdner, while giving the full text of Cheng Jingyi's call for unity in Commission VIII on "Cooperation and Promotion of Unity," introduces his speech with the statement that the Chinese are "completely unaware of the difficulties and essentialities of the question."<sup>7</sup> The concept of "cooperation and promotion of unity" in the title of the Commission was about missionary agencies cooperating and agreeing on the strategies for the evangelization of the world.

Knowing that there would be reservations, Cheng Jingyi began his speech with these words:

As a representative of the Chinese Church, I speak entirely from the Chinese stand point. We may, and we may not, all agree, but I feel that it is my duty to present before you the mind of the Chinese church as frankly as possible.

Then, referring to the Christian Federation Movement that was active in China in which different denominations were joining hands in educational and evangelistic work, he continued:

Since the Chinese Christians have enjoyed the sweetness of such a unity, they long for more and look for yet greater things. They are watching with keen eyes, and listening with attentive ears, for what this conference will show and say to them concerning this all-important question. I am sure they will not be disappointed.

Speaking plainly, we hope to see in the near future a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions. This may be somewhat peculiar to some of you, but, friends, do not forget to view us from our standpoint, and if you fail to do that, the Chinese will remain always a mysterious people to you.

After elaborating on six points on the reasons and the nature of the unity they are looking for, he made the following suggestion and challenge:

I would, if you would allow me, make one suggestion, *i.e.*, that this conference will recommend that the Continuation Committee, when appointed, make careful investigation, and will consult all the Chinese pastors and Christian leaders, and obtain from them a free and frank expression of their opinion as to the needs of such a united effort, and the best method to bring this about. For, after all, it is not your particular denomination, nor even your particular mission that you are working for, but the establishment of the Church of Christ in China that you have in view.

It is the earnest hope of your present speaker, humble as he is, that this Conference will not allow the present opportunity to pass away without taking any definitive action.

In conclusion, let us go with our divine Master up on the top of the Mount of Olives, and there we shall obtain a wider, broader, and larger view of the needs of the church and the world.<sup>8</sup>

John R. Mott, the brain behind the Conference, had seen and experienced the need and the possibility of Christian unity in the student and the YMCA movements. He was, however, painfully aware that the deep denominational divisions in the churches in the Western hemisphere cannot be easily healed. Therefore, the vision of the Edinburgh Conference was not the unity of churches or even of the Missionary Societies and Agencies, but their coming together to pool resources and to develop a strategy for the evangelization of the world in that generation. It is fascinating that the call for a “wider, broader, and a larger view” that the churches needed and could, in fact, accomplish if they had the real will, came from one of the Non-Western participants. It was up to him to remind the Conference that “after all, it is not your particular denomination, nor even your particular mission that you are working for but the establishment of the Church of Christ.” However justified the divisions of the church in Europe at the time they occurred, transplanting and maintaining the divisions in the Non-Western world was one of the major drawbacks of the missionary enterprise. What the missions were doing was to transplant the divisions and enmities that were part of the European history into areas of the world that never shared that history.

Cheng Chingyi was appointed to the Continuing Committee; and one of the Indian participants, V. S. Azaraiah, would return to India and plunge himself fully into the search for the unity of the churches also in South India, that would eventually become a reality, and the very first instance in Church’s history where Episcopal and non-Episcopal churches were brought together into an organic unity. Chinese churches would themselves achieve, to some measure, their hope of a the post-denominational church based on the principle of three-selves, but only after the missionaries were thrown out of the country and much of the church’s life came under the control of the Communist Revolution.

### **The Call to Respect the National Realities**

The Japanese churches were rather small at the time the Edinburgh Conference with some 80,000 Christians in a population of 32 Millions. Yet, four high profiled delegates attended the Conference, mainly because of the personal knowledge, contact, and appreciation Mott had had for them. While the Chinese delegation challenged the conference on the need for the national churches to be independent from the control of the missionary societies to develop into authentic Chinese churches, the Japanese delegation presented a strong case for the missions to be mindful of the reality and strength of Asian nationalisms and to respect the necessity of the

Japanese Christians to identify with their national culture and show loyalty to the nation, the two realities that binds them with the rest of the community into a nation.

The concern arises from the fact that the content of the preached message and the nature of the missionary activities appeared to demand a change of loyalty on the part of the converts. Even though the content of the new loyalty to which the new Christians should move to was not officially defined (except in very general terms as “loyalty to Christ”), in actual practice it involved moving away from the traditional practices to “Christian” practices and moving away from festivals, rituals, symbols, and loyalties that bound the nation together. In the case of Japan, ancestor worship and the loyalty to, and veneration of the Emperor were issues that came into conflict with the demands of becoming a Christian. The missionary antagonism to the veneration of the Emperor and to ancestor worship was so vehement and public that many in Japan began to question the loyalty of the Christians to the nation and the emperor- which put Christians in a precarious situation.

This demand that the converts break with their culture was also the case in all other Asian nations, but this was most strongly experienced in the East Asian countries, especially in Japan. The missionaries were of course not overtly presenting their culture as the “Christian culture” or the one to which the converts should move. However, they did expect the local Christians to give up some of the key aspects of the local cultures and religions that were deemed either to be superstitious or inconsistent with the Gospel message. The converts had no local alternatives to emulate, and soon had to accept the culture and values of the missionary as the Christian culture and values.

The contribution the Japanese delegates made was to put this thorny question before the Conference as something that missionary movement has to deal and come to terms with. This involved challenging the missionary movement to re-examine some of their assumptions about nationalisms and Asian cultures. The Japanese delegation constituted highly educated group, many of whom were from the Samurai class that was proud of the national culture and highly valued loyalty to the nation. The main advocate of the Japanese position was Harada Tasuku, who after his education in Japan went to the University of Chicago, and later to the Yale Divinity School where he got his doctorate. He had also been in England and Germany and was the Professor of Japanese history, literature, and language and dean at the University of Hawaii.<sup>9</sup>

Harada spoke on three occasions at the assembly. During the debate of the Report of Commission II on “The Church on the Mission Field” he challenged the practice of uncritical transporting of doctrines that were developed in the West into Asia. His argument was that the proclaimed Christian message should result in the natural growth of distinctive Christian life, spirituality, and doctrines from within the local soil. To this end he maintained that even the Bible should be taught in Asia without too much of the existing interpretations so that it would eventually produce its own spirituality from the context in which people lived. Harada spoke the

second time during the debate of the report of “The Missionary Message in Relation to Other Religions,” where he again wanted the missionary movement to move away, in the Japanese context, from preaching the doctrines, but to proclaim and set forth the “courage, sympathy, serenity, and self-sacrifice” of Jesus Christ. This, he said, would readily connect with the Japanese national character and love of hero worship. For he argued that the youth in Japan will not respond to any message that undermines their loyalty to the nation and the emperor, but would readily embrace the love of God and the character of Jesus.

The most significant presentation, however, was Harada’s Evening Address in the Assembly Hall, where he maintained that the ‘European race’s’ comprehension of the Gospel is of necessity partial, and needs to be supplemented and enriched by distinctive insights of other ‘races’. Brian Stanley gives a useful summary of how Harada developed this notion in his address:

The ‘Indian race’ possessed ‘a deep religious consciousness’ and a ‘reflective spirit’ that had already made its mark on Christian spirituality through the devoted lives of such Christian leaders like ... Chinese Christians were distinguished by the Confucian ethic of obedience to superiors- a virtue enshrined in the fifth commandment – and by patience under suffering, as exemplified during the Boxer rising, Japanese spirituality was characterized by the intense loyalty rooted in patriotism and the cult of the emperor but capable also of being fused with the Christian faith.<sup>10</sup>

Harada apologized for not having the time to speak about what contributions that Koreans, Africans, Polynesians and other nations could contribute to the glory of Christ, but the focus of his presentation was not lost on the Conference. He was challenging the Conference of the tendency of looking upon the Gospel as a finished product and not as a living message that would find its own expressions in various cultures. He was also pointing out that without such confidence in the power of the gospel message the missionary movement would mishandle the religious and cultural traditions to which the message was taken.

### **The Call to Friendship**

The Asian speaker that, in contemporary language, “caught the attention of the press”, without ever intending to do so, was V.S. Azariah, an Anglican clergyman from Tirunelveli in South India. Azariah came to the attention of Mott because of his involvement in the YMCA and by pioneering the establishment of the first two missionary societies that were founded and run entirely by Indians- the Indian Missionary Society of Tirunelveli (1903) and the National Missionary Society (1905). Azariah was a fervent evangelist. Himself a person of one of the lower castes (Nadar) in India, he succeeded in drawing into the church persons of lower castes and of the outcaste community (the Dalits) in their thousands. His invitation to the Edinburgh Conference, however, was not initiated by Mott, but by the Anglican Bishop of Madras, Henry

Whitehead, who was, in fact, the one that recommended him to Mott as one of the possible Evening Speakers.

Azariah had spoken once at Commission I meeting, but the speech that got the attention was his Evening Address. He took as his subject yet another issue within the mission work- the relationship between the missionaries and the “native” workers. This was too sensitive a subject even for personal conversation, let alone for a World Conference of over a thousand people. He began his address by saying that “The problem of race relationship is one of the problems confronting the church today,” and went on to complain that there was “a certain aloofness, a lack of mutual understanding and openness, a lack of frank intercourse and friendliness” between European missionaries and national Christians. He went on to point out that there were many experienced Indian national missionaries who had never once been invited to share a meal with any of the European missionaries. Similarly, he said, the European missionaries never visit the homes of their Indian missionary colleagues. “Friendship is more than condescending love,” he said, and argued that from his own experience he knows that friendship is possible between two very different races.

In his account of this story, Brian Stanley says that according to one of the stewards of the Conference, H.F. Houlder, Azariah went on to remark that “Too often you promise us thrones in heaven, but will not offer us chairs in your drawing rooms” and that this remark significantly did not find its way into the official conference account of the address.<sup>11</sup>

Azariah’s speech that was very personal touched a sensitive nerve of the missionaries gathered at the conference. What Azariah was saying was true, and he maintained that this is because the national church and its workers are totally dependent on foreign funds for their salaries. As long as the missionary was the ‘paymaster’ the disparity of relationships will remain. But what was more troubling to those who heard him was his assertion that the real problem is one of Christian spirituality. Using the sentiments expressed by Paul in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter, verses 18-19, of his letter to the Ephesians Azariah pressed for an understanding of the church as a spiritual fellowship that cut across racial lines. Azariah’s passionate plea for friendship, in the following words, echoing Paul’s call for love to the church in Corinth, are perhaps among the most often quoted passages from the Edinburgh Conference:

The exceeding riches of the glory of Christ can be fully realized not by the Englishman, the American, the Continental alone, nor by the Japanese, the Chinese and the Indians by themselves – but by all working together, worshipping together, and learning together the Perfect Image of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is ‘with all the saints’ that we can ‘comprehend the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that we might be filled with all the fullness of God.’ This will be possible only from the spiritual friendships between the two races. We ought to be willing to learn from one another and to help one another.

Through all the ages to come the Indian church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and the self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We ask for love, give us FRIENDS!<sup>12</sup>

Many of the records of the Edinburgh Conference dwell on Azariah's Evening Speech and the response of the participants to it both during and at the end. To begin with, he took the audience by surprise because of the honest, direct, and passionate way in which he addressed one of the main problems within the missionary movement, that was very much there, but no one was willing to talk about. Secondly, many of the missionaries were embarrassed because he was holding up a mirror in front of them in which they could see themselves. It is said that half the audience agreed with what he said and loved it, and the other also half agreed with what he said and hated it! Stanley says this about Azariah's speech and the nature of its impact:

If Azariah's speech was an accurate identification of the heart of "The problem of Co-operation between Foreign and Native Workers", as surely it was, hardly anyone in the Western churches in 1910 seemed ready to listen. Only in retrospect, from the standpoint of the 1940s, during the turbulent years of the end of the British Raj in India, did some of those who had listened as young people to Azariah in 1910, recognized that he had then spoken a word of prophecy that the western Christians desperately needed to hear.

And he quotes one of the British missionary to India, J. Z. Hodge, for whom in 1946 the 'outstanding memory' of Edinburgh 1910 was Azariah's speech which he now recognized as 'the first shot in the campaign against "missionary imperialism."'”<sup>13</sup>

### **An assessment**

Much more could be said about brief contributions that the other Asian participants made during the debates at different points of the Conference, but it would also give the wrong impression that the Non-Western participants made a huge contribution to the Conference. One should not forget the reality that they were only 17 in the midst of 1,215 delegates that had world renowned mission personalities, professors of theology and missiology, sociologists and anthropologists, heads of missionary societies and agencies, and many hundreds of active missionaries from all parts of the world who had, or at least claimed to have, expert knowledge of the countries they were working in and the state of the missionary work in them. Almost all the Non-Western countries where missions were active were represented by missionaries working in them. In Commission IV on "The Christian Message in Relation to the Non-Christian Religions", for instance, very radical and provocatively forward-looking attitudes to the other religious traditions were expressed and recorded as the Report, but mainly based on the experience of and feed-back from missionaries in the field. There was no dearth of talent or expertise at Edinburgh. It is surprising, and in fact it is to the credit of leaders like Mott and

Oldham, that the Non-Western delegation had the visibility they had and the opportunities to make several interventions to give their input.

Further, the Non-Western delegation had been drawn from Asian nations that were very different from one another; their interests and the issues they faced in relation to mission were also vastly different. It is remarkable, therefore, that they were able to impress on the Conference some of the important issues of mission that had received serious consideration in most subsequent discussions on mission.

In a general assessment one has to be critical of the arbitrariness of the choice of Non-Western participants. The absence of Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and Oceania was a very large gap. It would appear that in general there was no genuine interest in Non-Western participation, and the Conference might well have gone on without their presence, but for the insistence of a few leaders like John R. Mott and his friend, J.H. Oldham. And since there was no established process to select delegates from among the local Christians (except for the very few chosen as part of their delegation by the Missionary Societies), those who were present were invariably hand-picked by the main leaders.

In the discussions of the Non-Western participants at Edinburgh, the question is often raised also about the nature of the Non-Western delegation in relation to the actual realities of the Christians back in their home countries. Most of them were from the most privileged and educated groups in their churches. A number of them had travelled and studied in Europe or the United States. What would have been the challenge if some from the grassroots of the Christian communities in Asia, Africa and elsewhere had spoken at Edinburgh?

There is considerable validity to this question and we are yet to learn and find ways to organize and run conferences where the people who ought to be there can participate and contribute to the deliberations. But as someone who had been active in the Ecumenical Movement for decades, I am also aware that such a World Conference- held in Edinburgh, in the year 1910, with such a big delegation, and numerous issues for discussion - did demand the participation of people who could articulate their concerns in ways and in language that would make the necessary impact. In fact, history of many of the Non-Western nations would show that leaders who led the people in their struggle against colonialism were those who loved their countries but had also acquired the necessary skills to confront power in thought forms and language that it understood.

By any measure or standard the Non-Western delegation at Edinburgh was neither truly representative nor had all authority to speak for the Non-Western world. Yet it is to their credit that they used the opportunities that they had to boldly raise some of the hard and abiding questions about missionary assumptions, practices, and message that persist to this day.

## End Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> W.H.T. Gairdner, *Echoes from Edinburgh, 1910 - An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference*, (London and Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910) first page (no number)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 56-57

<sup>3</sup> Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2009) p. 12 -13 and the discussions in p.91ff.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Brian Stanley for this information. Ibid. p.93-95.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Report of Commission II, p. 352-3 as quoted by Brian Stanley. Op.cit.

<sup>7</sup> *Echoes from Edinburgh, 1910*, op.cit. p.184.

<sup>8</sup> Gairdner, op.cit. p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Brian Stanley, op.cit, p.112.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.113-114.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.124.

<sup>12</sup> Cited by Brian Stanley from the *History and Records of the Conference*, p. 306 -15.

<sup>13</sup> Op. Cit. p.128.

S. Wesley Ariarajah, Methodist Minister from Sri Lanka, served the World Council of Churches, Geneva, for sixteen years as Director of the Interfaith Dialogue Program and as the Council's Deputy General Secretary. He is currently the Professor of Ecumenical Theology at Drew University School of Theology in Madison, NJ, USA.