

Edinburgh, 1910 and the Religiously Plural World

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This is a decisive hour for Christian missions. The call of providence to all our Lord's disciples, of whatever ecclesiastical connections, is direct and urgent to undertake without delay the task of carrying the gospel to all the non-Christian world ... The opportunity is inspiring; the responsibility is undeniable...¹

These words from the Forward of the Findings of Commission - I is an indication of the mood in which the 1910 Edinburgh Conference had met. The Purpose of the conference was "to consider the missionary problem in relation to the non-Christian world." The work of the commission - I was done under the title "Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World," and constituted a survey of the "progress of evangelization" and the areas "yet to be occupied." John R. Mott, the prime mover behind the conference, had experienced the possibility of working across denominational and confessional barriers in the student and YMCA movements and was well aware of the earlier Ecumenical Missionary Conferences that had been held in London (1888) and New York (1900). The global political, economic and logistical situation in 1910, in his view, provided a rare opening to evangelize the world in that very generation. The money, the power, and the capacity to do it were also there; what were needed was a strategy and the will. The 1910 conference was, therefore, called to take stock, to strategize together, to pool resources, and to make that push that would help the task of taking the gospel to all the corners of the earth.

Each generation walks in its own light and seeks to fulfill what they perceive to be their calling; no one can read the history of the ecumenical movement without being inspired by the faith, courage, vision, and commitment that marked some of its pioneers. One hundred years later, however, we have the privilege to look back and to assess the assumptions that had inspired their vision, the successes and failures that marked their efforts, and to learn the necessary lessons that should inform our thinking in our day.

What were the assumptions about the religious life of our neighbors that inspired this vision of "occupying" all the non-Christian lands? At that time, some Christians in the Western Hemisphere simply assumed that the non-Christian lands were in "utter darkness" with little or no knowledge of God. Peoples in these lands were "heathens" and "pagans", their religions and cultures were "primitive". In any case, they were all in need of the saving message of the Gospel. Those that had travelled in other parts of the world had greater knowledge and appreciation of the civilizations that had been thriving in places like China and India. They were aware that we were not dealing with "heathens" but with people who had cultural heritages that

can be the envy of the West. And yet, theologically, they were also convinced that these civilizations were in desperate need of receiving the light of the Gospel.

Interestingly, already within the 1910 Conference there were strong voices that challenged some of the prevailing views of the Non-Christian world and its religious traditions. The Commission IV which was given the task of exploring the “Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions,” had adopted a methodology of doing its work on the basis of questionnaires sent to a large number of missionaries that were in the mission fields working among different religious communities. “What are the doctrines and observances in other religious traditions that seem to give genuine help and consolation to devotees in their religious life? What are the chief moral, intellectual and social hindrances to their responding to Christianity? What are the points at which people of other religious communities are dissatisfied with their own religious communities and faith? What should be the attitude of the Christian preacher to the religion of the people among whom he works?” Numerous questions along these lines were sent to active missionaries in Asia, Africa and elsewhere.

The Commission received hundreds of responses, some at considerable length, which challenge the common assumptions about other religious traditions. Many witnessed to the reality of undeniable spiritual life among people of other religious traditions. Others saw many points between these traditions and the gospel. Still others called for deep respect of other religious traditions and insisted that missionaries should first seek to study, discern and understand the depth of the spiritual resources in these traditions.

Based on these findings Commission IV wrote a very lively report which in many ways was the best Report of the conference. Without denying the legitimacy of mission, it challenged the basic assumptions of the missionary undertaking among other religious traditions. The final report of the conference, however, stayed with the emphasis on the urgency of the world mission as attested by the work in other Commission reports. The Commission IV Report was far ahead of its time.

The subject of how we understand the reality of other religious traditions was continued to be discussed in subsequent World Missionary Conferences, but those who set out to “conquer the world for Christ” had always won the battle. Today, however, we are faced with a new situation. Religious plurality has become a reality in all parts of the world; there is general awareness that plurality is here to stay; despite concerted attempts, some parts of the world could not be “occupied”; and it is clear that no one religion can displace all other religious traditions. In the face of this persistent and irreducible plurality we had to learn the art of talking and living together as religious traditions, resulting in the evolution of Interfaith Dialogue at all levels, and the birth of interfaith organizations at local, regional and global levels. More importantly, Theology of Religions – the attempt to come to terms theologically with the reality of other religious traditions- has developed into a significant branch within Christian Theology.

Therefore, the Centennial of the 1910 Conference is faced with the biggest challenge that no other Mission Conference has faced in the past, namely to restate a rationale for mission. Why are we in mission? What do we hope to achieve? And when is it achieved? Are we in mission because God is not present in the lives of others in a saving way? If we think so, what sense do we make of the spiritual riches in other traditions, and of those in other traditions that witness to having been touched by the grace of God?

We are familiar with all the traditional answers, and the classical fears of syncretism, relativism and universalism that are evoked in every mission discussion. The success of an attempt to re-think mission in 2010 depends on our willingness to find an entirely new rationale for mission and to give new shapes to what that mission would look like in a pluralistic world. The mission that threatens other religious traditions, that seeks to displace them, and create an alternate community has come to an end. Do we have the levels of faith, courage, and vision that the early pioneers had in 1910 to be able to break our moorings of the outmoded classical theologies of mission, to dream anew, and to dare to completely re-think mission for our day? That is the challenge of 2010.

ⁱ *World Missionary Conference 1910, Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World* (Edinburgh/London: Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, 1910?) p. 363.