

Melbourne, Edinburgh & Kingston



This is a tale of three cities, each of which will cast a long shadow on the shape of theological education in the twenty-first century. Melbourne is the site of the Parliament of World's Religions in December 2009. It symbolizes our commitment to interfaith education at a place of significance for aboriginal religion. Edinburgh was the location for the 1910 World Missionary Conference, the centennial of which will be acknowledged in 2010 in Edinburgh and elsewhere around the world. It will provide a means and venue for working out Christian identity, as it did in 1910 by fostering Christian mission and ecumenism. Kingston (2011) is the site of the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation which brings to a close the World Council of Churches' Program, the Decade to Overcome Violence. It reminds us of the role of religion to exacerbate conflict and to heal.

Ever since the formation of the modern ecumenical movement there has been a growing consciousness of the interdependent nature of global Christianity. Following the World Missionary Conference, an International Missionary Council (IMC) was established at London (1921), meeting again at Jerusalem (1928) and Tambaram (1938), leading to the World Council of Churches (WCC) movement in 1939 and its founding General Assembly in 1948. The Parliament of World's Religions, founded in 1893 at the Chicago World Columbian Exposition, and re-energized a century later, finds in Melbourne dialogue partners shaped by a half century of notable Catholic theology in the wake of Vatican II (1962-65) and Protestant and Orthodox thought since the WCC's world mission conference of San Antonio (1989), notable for its affirmation of salvation through Jesus Christ but refusal to categorically reject God's saving power wherever it might be discerned.

While the 1910 International Missionary Council was surveying the global church as it then appeared, Harvard's Ernest Hocking led an effort to take an accounting of the real effectiveness of mission work. Organized in 1930, a fifteen member commission travelled across Asia and

produced *Re-Thinking Missions* (1932), a "counter" proposal to Edinburgh 1910 as successive conferences at Jerusalem (1928) and Tambaram (1938) and thereafter took mediating positions. At Tambaram, Hendrick Kraemer came up with his idea and later book, *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, which triggered debate on mission by D. T. Niles and M. M. Thomas and others. The dialogue that ensued set the agenda for third world mission conversations, in some ways for the kind of conversation that will shape discussion about religion and violence at Kingston. This is a conversation that affirms, as Hocking was later to argue in his Hibbert Lectures at Oxford, "The relation between religions must take increasingly hereafter the form of a common search for truth." In our day this is not an abstract search but reaches into questions of culture, the nature of religion and the justification of violence.

A further WCC conference on mission at Salvador da Bahia (Brazil, 1996) sets the backdrop for Kingston. It took up the theme of gospel and culture with attention to the effect of cultural and ethnic identity on violent conflict, more visible following the end of global bi-polar conflict (1918-1989). Building on this, a WCC Committee on World Mission and Evangelism assembly in Athens (2005) raised the question of how the churches can better become agencies of the healing and reconciliation they proclaim.

Fresh from a devastating conflict after 1945, the world summoned its energies to build a new international order. Melbourne, Edinburgh and Kingston will test our resolve to cooperate around some of the most daunting challenges facing the human community even as we come better to understand our own theological identity. These are issues that are sure to be discussed at the forthcoming meeting of the WCC's Commission on Faith and Order, at Kolympari, Crete, in October. Its study document, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, will be sure to carry theological resonance from Melbourne, Edinburgh and Kingston.