

## THE WORLD MISSIONARY CONFERENCE, EDINBURGH 1910

By Brian Stanley

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*Reviewed by Jesudas M. Athyal*

Once every few years or so, a book is published which almost instantaneously takes on the aura of a classic in that area. Brian Stanley's recent book *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* easily fits into this category. During the last one decade, Stanley has emerged as perhaps the global authority on the study of the Edinburgh Conference. He has researched, written and spoken extensively about it. With regard to the current book, in the preface itself the writer clarifies its main purpose: "This book is intended to supply both an account of the World Missionary Conference as an event in itself and is also a synthetic interpretation of the western Protestant missionary movement as it neared the apex of its size and influence" (p. xx).

What makes this book unique is the exhaustive research that has gone into its writing. Stanley travelled extensively – especially in Europe and North America – collecting and dissecting primary data on the original documents preserved in archives and libraries in different locations. In addition to the published reports of the eight constituent Commissions, he has made extensive use of surviving manuscripts which indicate "the long and sometimes contested process" that led to the conference. The writer is modest enough to say that there are still more materials left for anyone interested in further research to peruse, though it is doubtful if anyone has attempted in the past, or will in the future, as comprehensive a study of the Edinburgh Conference as Stanley himself has.

The main text of the book is divided into eleven chapters, each dealing with a significant aspect of the conference. The first three chapters discuss the preparatory phase of the event. Chapter I outlines the significance of Edinburgh 1910 for the history of ecumenism. This section discusses the expectations the event generated and also, the impact of the conference on later developments. Chapter 2 outlines the origins of the conference, its relationship to previous conferences, and the process of planning the conference which began in 1907. And chapter 3 deals with the fragile ecumenical balance that had to be maintained so as to make Edinburgh 1910 as much of a *world* conference as possible. Ecumenism – like politics – seems to be the art of the possible where "compromises" are made for the sake of unity.

The next few chapters deal with the actual working of the conference. Chapter 4 discusses the opening ceremony and the logistics that went into the organization of such a huge gathering. Of enormous contemporary significance are the contents of Chapter 5 which deal with the contribution of the few delegates who came from what were then termed the 'younger churches'. The significant impact of several of the Asian participants – including the legendry Cheng Jingyi of China and V. S. Azariah of India – are discussed in detail.

The chapters that follow deal with the work of the various commissions, as well as with discussions which their reports provoked in the conference sessions. Chapter 6 is concerned with Commission II which dealt with the subject of the church in the mission field and chapter 7 examines Commission III which was devoted to mission education and "the rationale for a multicultural Christian catholicity". Commission IV which dealt with 'The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions' is the subject matter of chapter 8. Chapter 9

discusses the work that went into the Commission VII report on 'Missions and Governments'. It also addresses the relation between colonialism and mission, a topic of enormous interest in subsequent decades as the colonies emerged independent. Chapter 10 focuses on the question of mission and/or unity, another question that was later to dog the ecumenical movement. Finally, chapter 11 attempts to sum up the many-sided legacy of the Edinburgh conference, and its relevance for subsequent discussions on race, gender and culture relations.

A few points that emerge from the book are highlighted below:

*The Asian presence in Edinburgh:* Brian Stanley discusses in considerable detail the Asian presence at the Edinburgh conference. While the conference was initially called the "Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference" following the conferences in London (1888) and New York (1900), the writer argues that two other conferences held in Asia had, perhaps, a greater impact on the world meeting. The Indian Decennial Missionary Conference held in Madras in 1902 and the Shanghai Missionary Conference of 1907 were meticulously organized events and were used "as the templates for Edinburgh 1910" (p. 28). These preparatory Asian meetings also helped in a stronger Asian voice emerging in Edinburgh where, all except one of the non-Western participants were Asians. Stanley corrects the popular theory that the modern ecumenical movement is a Western-inspired phenomenon. "The World Missionary Conference, which is often credited with instigating ecumenical formation in Asia, was in fact deeply indebted from the outset to ecumenical missionary precedents from India and China for its mode of proceeding." (p. 28).

The writer also maintains that Edinburgh set the pace for the emergence of an Asian theology. After narrating the significant contributions of the Asian delegates in Edinburgh - to an audience often characterised by hostility and prejudice to non-western interventions - he asks: "From the perspective of a century later, it is hard to identify what more the Asians could have done to convince western Protestant missionary strategists that the Asian interpretations of Christianity which they professed so much to desire were in fact already emerging before their eyes." (p. 131). More than the cultural and theological arrogance of the western Protestant missions, Stanley senses here a certain reluctance to accept the reality that Christianity is taking roots in the Asian soil. Such reluctance, he believes, was due to "fundamental mis-readings of the signs of the future of Christianity" (p. 17).

*Approach to other religions:* The approach at the Edinburgh conference to other religions was clearly based on the missionary theology of T. S. Slater and J. N. Farquhar which saw Christianity as the "fulfilment" and "crown" of other religions and the ultimate answer to their "seeking". The task of the missionary accordingly, "was in a sympathetic spirit of humble enquiry to identify such 'points of contact' in non-Christian religions and then use them to draw adherents of other faiths towards the full revelation of truth found in the Christ who was the perfect manifestation of the fatherhood of God" (p. 212). Along with such triumphalist positions that identified Christianity as the "longing" of other religions, there was also a plea to make the Christian faith indigenous in the pluralistic context of the non-Western world. With regard to Hinduism in India, it was stated "that the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation of God in Christ was to be presented, not as 'an isolated Christian fact' - which was unacceptable to the Hindu passion for unity, but as the natural culmination of God... (T)here was a happy spiritual affinity between 'exactly those elements in the Christian gospel and life which are most distinctive, and all that was 'best and highest' in the Hindu religious nature" (p. 221). A. G. Hogg and others played a significant role in ensuring that a moderately sensitive approach, at least with regard to Hinduism, emerged in Edinburgh. Hogg maintained that in Hinduism "there is not only a seeking but also a finding". Edinburgh sowed the seeds of a theology of religions which dominated the discussions in subsequent mission conferences - especially in Jerusalem (1928), Tambaram (1938) and San Antonio (1989) - and paved the way for the evolution of the ecumenical programme for dialogue with people of living faiths and ideologies.

Despite detailed discussions in Edinburgh on the Christian approach to other religions, Brian Stanley recognized there a crude political agenda that resembled the crusades of the Middle Ages. As he puts it, the conference was conceived to “prepare its missionary armies to launch a concerted and final onslaught on the dark forces of heathendom that still ruled supreme beyond the frontiers of western Christendom” (p. 4). Relating a phrase from the language of contemporary religious extremists to the deliberations in Edinburgh, he adds that those who responded “with quiet determination” to the cause of the crusades would “be sure of the eternal blessing of God on their united endeavours”.

Along with Farquhar’s theory of fulfilment, therefore, Edinburgh’s approach to other religions was also marked by a clear distinction between the ‘Christendom’ of the north and the ‘heathendom’ of the south. “In practice, therefore, it had been decided that the conference was not in fact to be about *world* mission but rather about mission from ‘Christendom’ to ‘heathendom’.” (p. 50). The tendency to accept such a rather crude geographical division could have stemmed from the need to maintain the fragile ecumenical consensus needed to hold together diverse theological – ecclesiastical groups at Edinburgh. For most delegates at the conference, however, “such a territorial understanding of Christendom was a deeply ingrained feature of their understanding of the world. For others it may have been no more than a rough, even regrettable, working assumption” (p. 303).

*The Legacy of Edinburgh:* As the writer is trying to tell the story of the Edinburgh Conference as well as discuss the critical analysis of the preparatory documents that preceded it, he wonders if the book “may appear to oscillate between detailed chronological narrative and perspectival reflection on the issues thrown up...” (p. xxi). It must be stated that Stanley succeeds greatly in the narration of the conference as well as in a critical review of its impact on later developments. He recognizes “two intermingled voices” that emerged at the conference. One is the “boundless optimism and unsullied confidence” of western Christendom and the other is the one that spoke of “crisis and opportunity, of challenge and competition” (p. 16). As the centre of gravity of world Christianity has shifted during the last one century from north to south, the latter voices have proved to be sustainable. Yet, the writer sees that the division at Edinburgh of the world into two binary camps – the ‘Christian’ and the ‘non-Christian’ - was to soon lose momentum. “The assumption made by the organisers of the 1910 conference that the division between the Christian and non-Christian worlds could be delineated in simple geographical terms has long since capitulated to the mounting evidence to the contrary.” (p. 306). The Nazism of Germany and the apartheid of South Africa were, after all, threats unleashed by ‘Christian’ rulers.

This book is a part of the ‘Studies in the History of Christian Missions’ series. The bibliography in the book has valuable information on Archival collections preserved in various locations and will be of enormous value for students interested in doing further research in this area. Photographs of some of the leaders of the conference make the volume more attractive. What is significant about the book is that while being engrossed in the topic of the research and deeply appreciative of the historical significance of the conference, the writer is objective and dispassionate in his analysis. He informs and educates us on the conference without eulogizing the event. More importantly, he is a sensitive scholar and succeeds in highlighting the “little traditions” that were so underrepresented and stifled in Edinburgh. Without any reservations, therefore, we can join Lamin Sanneh in his words of appreciation: “Brian Stanley’s book gives us a full and comprehensive account of the conference, doing so from the perspective of developments in the hundred years since the conference. His study should serve not only as a work of history but also as a work of theological reflection about mission as an ongoing international movement. I welcome this book as an important resource in the church’s self-understanding and in its engagement with the world.”