

The Centenary of Edinburgh 1910: Its Possibilities

Given our decimal units of measurement, it is hard to avoid the sense that a significant moment strikes when we arrive at the centenary of a notable event. Notwithstanding the danger that anniversaries can degenerate into occasions of maudlin self-congratulation, when a cause is held dear there is a reluctance on the part of its advocates to let a centenary pass without due recognition. In fact, the centenary often offers the opportunity for a fresh affirmation of identity and a re-appropriation of purpose which energises all concerned. For those who value the worldwide movement of Christian mission, the centenary of Edinburgh 1910 presents itself as such an occasion. It demands recognition and the question is how to make the most of the opportunity it presents? This paper suggests some of the possibilities which are offered by the centenary.

A Vision Realised

The delegates who gathered in Edinburgh in 1910 caught a vision of something which did not then exist: a “world church” with deep roots and vigorous expression widely apparent on every continent. The fact that this is a manifest reality today indicates that their vision has been realised: something to be celebrated. Admittedly, the celebration must be tempered by recognition that, in many respects, the Edinburgh conference was over-heated and over-ambitious. It was carried away by the self-confidence of the Western powers at the height of the age of empire. Its slogans proved to be hollow. The world was not evangelised in that generation. The gospel was not carried to all the non-Christian world. Within a few years of the Conference, the energies of the Western “missionised” nations would be consumed by a war more destructive than any experienced hitherto and a great deal of the worldwide evangelistic effort would be put on hold. Nor was this to prove to be a temporary interruption. Edinburgh 1910 which understood itself to be on the brink of a great new surge of missionary advance was, in fact, the high point of the movement. Never again would the Western missionary movement occupy centre-stage in the way that it felt it did at Edinburgh. For most of the mission boards and societies represented, the 20th century would be one of remorseless decline in their operations.

Nonetheless, the 20th century has witnessed a vindication of a fundamental conviction of Edinburgh 1910: that the good news of Jesus Christ can take root in every culture across the world and produce fruit in church and society everywhere. The great drama of the coming century, in terms of church history, would be the growth of Christian faith in Asia, Africa, Oceania and Latin America. In some respects it has surpassed even the most sanguine expectations of 1910. The extraordinary growth of Christianity in Africa, for example, was not foreseen by any of the Edinburgh delegates. Nor had they anticipated how Latin America would become the theatre of a powerful renewal of Christian faith. This worldwide flourishing of the faith stands as a demonstration of the validity of their missionary vision that the gospel could be received and find expression in completely new contexts. As Andrew Walls notes, “The fact remains that, by a huge reversal of the position in 1910, the majority of Christians now live in Africa, Asia, Latin America or the Pacific, and that the proportion is rising. Simultaneously with the retreat from Christianity in the West in the twentieth century went – just as the visionaries of Edinburgh hoped – a massive accession to the Christian faith in the non-Western world. The map of the Christian

Church, its demographic and cultural make-up, changed more dramatically during the twentieth century than (probably) in any other since the first.”¹

Without the missionary impetus represented by Edinburgh 1910, the prospects for Christianity as a world religion might well be doubtful today, particularly as its long-time European homeland is proving inhospitable. Largely as a result of the seeds planted by missionary endeavour, vigorous and numerous expressions of Christian faith are to be found on all six continents today. Inasmuch as Edinburgh 1910 was the occasion on which the vision of the modern missionary movement found its most concentrated articulation, it calls for celebration as a vision fulfilled.

Repentance and Redirection

While the ultimate vision of Edinburgh 1910 may have been realised, it has to be acknowledged that this has taken place in spite of the limitations of the Conference. Its centenary calls for repentance from what, with hindsight, are features which caused the Christian message to be compromised. As a century of critique has made plain, the Conference did not acquire sufficient distance from the Western imperialism which was at its height at that time. The fact that the Western “Christian” powers dominated world affairs underlay a great deal of the optimism of the Conference regarding the missionary enterprise. It was assumed that the initiative and the authority in Christianity’s expansion would lie with the Western churches for generations. The new churches emerging in the mission fields were regarded as “infant” churches and it was expected that they would require the care and direction of their “parents” for many years to come.

With Western dominance still well entrenched today at the economic and political level, it cannot be taken for granted that relations between churches will not still be infected with the condescension and paternalism which was so evident in 1910. There is need for the repentance which recognises that initiative in Christian mission is not the exclusive prerogative of the West. Mission is “from everywhere to everywhere”.² Indeed increasingly it is to the churches of the non-Western world that responsibility is falling. Any celebration of the centenary of Edinburgh 1910 has to recognise that the Western sense of ownership of the missionary enterprise must give way to an appreciation of the worldwide church as the base for Christian mission.

There is need also to recognise that the aggressive and confrontational understanding of Christian mission which characterised Edinburgh 1910 has provoked much resentment and does not serve to commend Christian faith today. This is not to say that Christians should lack confidence in the message they proclaim. The issue is one of respect for those who adhere to other faiths. For all that the Report of Commission IV showed the sympathetic appreciation of other faiths which many missionaries had developed, its militaristic and triumphalist language strikes a note of antagonism which could hardly be expected to make for cordial inter-faith relations or for a culture of peace. It concludes by celebrating: “the spectacle of the advance of the

¹ Andrew F. Walls, “The Great Commission 1910-2010”, unpublished lecture at the Towards 2010 Conference on Commission I “Carrying the Gospel to all the non-Christian World”, Edinburgh, Towards 2010, April 2002, www.towards2010.org.uk, p. 6.

² See Michael Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere: A World View of Christian Mission*, London: Collins, 1990.

Christian Church along many lines of action to the conquest of the five great religions of the modern world...³ In the discourse of the Conference, missionaries were often described as “soldiers” or Christian “forces”. The reports and speeches abounded with metaphors such as “army”, “crusade”, “council of war”, “conquest”, “advance” and “marching orders”.⁴ David Bosch detected the contrasting tone needed for authentic missionary witness: “It is ... a bold humility – or a humble boldness. We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure sales-persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.”⁵ In order to meet this challenge, the centenary needs to be a time of repentance and redirection.

Fragments Reconnecting

In institutional terms the direct outcome of Edinburgh 1910 was the International Missionary Council, constituted in 1921.⁶ For forty years it ran in parallel with the “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work” streams of ecumenical engagement which flowed together to form the World Council of Churches in 1948.⁷ Though these movements had themselves been galvanised by Edinburgh 1910, it was not apparent to everyone that a single ecumenical organisation should be formed. Debates on “integration” raged for many years in the mid-20th century before the IMC was finally integrated into the WCC in 1961.⁸ Those with a strong mission agenda and/or a conservative theological position feared that the “churchy” concerns of the World Council of Churches would lead to mission being sidelined, despite the formation of a Division of World Mission and Evangelism which was intended to carry forward the life and action of the International Missionary Council within the life of the WCC.

It has to be acknowledged that these tensions were never fully resolved. Indeed the formation of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in 1974 proved to be a rallying point for those who feared that the WCC was failing to deliver an explicit and convincing commitment to evangelism.⁹ Though in strictly institutional terms it is the World Council of Churches which is the heir of Edinburgh 1910, in terms of promoting the agenda of world evangelization the Lausanne movement might be seen as standing in direct continuity. Could the centenary provide an opportunity for both streams to re-engage with the Edinburgh 1910 heritage and with each other? As Andrew Walls suggests: “both ‘ecumenical’ and ‘evangelical’ today have their roots

³ *Report of Commission IV: The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions*, World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; New York, Chicago and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell, 1910, p. 273.

⁴ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis, 1991, p. 338.

⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 489.

⁶ See Tom Stransky, “International Missionary Council”, in Nicholas Lossky et al. ed., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva and Grand Rapids: World Council of Churches and Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 526-29; W.R. Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the IMC*, New York: Harper, 1952.

⁷ See Gunther Gassmann, “Faith and Order”, in Lossky, *Dictionary*, pp. 411-13; Paul Abrecht, “Life and Work”, in Lossky, *Dictionary*, pp. 612-14.

⁸ See Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 155-58.

⁹ See Robert T. Coote, “Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization”, in Lossky, *Dictionary*, pp. 594-95.

in Edinburgh 1910. If each will go back to the pit whence both were dug, each may understand both themselves and the other better.”¹⁰

The historical perspective opened up by the centenary also creates the possibility, for both traditions, to recognise how much they represent a mid-20th century response to world affairs and theological trends. Major new movements lay down the challenge that it may be in new paradigms that Christian mission discovers the cutting edge it needs for the very different world of the 21st century. While there are traditions arising from the 1910 conference which deserve all due respect, it may be that their renewal will come from reconnecting fragments which have broken apart and making new connections among contemporary movements of Christian mission. A process taking its inspiration from the 1910 Conference but thoroughly contemporary and forward-looking gives an opportunity for connections to be made which will be fruitful in shaping Christian mission for a new age.

Taking Stock

Some of the missionary movement’s most perceptive participant-critics have observed that we have arrived at a time of fundamental change in the shape and direction of Christian mission. Andrew Walls suggests that: “The missionary movement is now in its old age. What is changing is not the task [of world evangelization] but the means and the mode.”¹¹ Michael Amaladoss spoke for many when he said that: “We are living in an age of transition – a liminal period.”¹² There is need for new models to interpret and give coherence to new patterns of mission for a new century. Wilbert Shenk declares that: “Renewal will not come by way of incremental revisions of structures and liturgies inherited from the past.”¹³ Common to different schools of thought is an acknowledgement that the “old wineskins” are no longer holding the new wine of the gospel and that new wineskins are required.

In this context, the centenary of Edinburgh 1910 is an occasion which challenges the global missionary movement to re-gather and take stock again of how it stands in relation to its task. This is not with a view to nostalgia but rather to be forward-looking. It is about attempting to do for the 21st century what Edinburgh 1910 did for the 20th, i.e. catching a vision and setting an agenda which would give direction and energy to the missionary movement. Today’s conditions offer the possibility to do so on a more comprehensive basis than could be imagined in 1910. Rather than being confined to Protestantism, there is the opportunity to gather Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Pentecostal participants as well as both Conciliar and Evangelical Protestants.

As noted above, the “centre of gravity” of Christianity is no longer in the North as was the case in 1910. Nonetheless Edinburgh, as the site of the 1910 conference,

¹⁰ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, New York and Edinburgh: Orbis and T. & T. Clark, 2002, p. 62.

¹¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, New York and Edinburgh: Orbis and T. & T. Clark, 1996, p. 261; cit. Norman Thomas, “Radical Mission in a Post 9/11 World: Creative Dissonances”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 29/1 (January 2005), p. 2.

¹² Michael Amaladoss, “The Future of Mission in the Third Millennium”, *Mission Studies*, Vol. 5/2 (1988), p. 96; cit. Norman Thomas, “Radical Mission”, p. 7.

¹³ Wilbert R. Shenk, “Mission, Renewal and the Future of the Church”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 21/4 (October 1997), p. 154; cit. Norman Thomas, “Radical Mission”, p.2.

excites the imagination and cannot be bypassed as a place of utmost historical significance for the world mission movement. In addition, for a comprehensive process of reflection, it could hope to provide something of a “neutral” space where many different participants in Christ’s mission worldwide could come together. Using Edinburgh and the upcoming centenary as a base could be a very effective way of engaging the various streams which make up Christian missionary outreach worldwide.

Edinburgh might hold value as a focal point but it is clear that the process leading to the centenary would need to be fully international. A possibility would be to embark upon a major international process of systematic missiological study and analysis, modelled on the principle of the 8 Commissions of 100 years ago, which would run from 2005 and report to one or several international “world missionary conference(s)” in 2010 itself. The idea would be that each of the new Commissions would engage with what the Edinburgh 1910 planners described as “matters of large importance and of timely interest at this stage in the missionary enterprise.”¹⁴ Each would be based at a centre with the skills and expertise to coordinate its work. While each centre would have a distinctive local base, it would carry out its task by creating an international network for the study of its particular theme.

Initial consultation has suggested that many individuals and organisations with Christian mission at heart recognise that the centenary presents an opportunity to be seized. A clear focusing of the task which awaits Christian mission in the 21st century is widely felt to be needed and the Edinburgh 1910 centenary carries the historical meaning and emotional resonance to engage the required energy and imagination.

Stimulating Fresh Movement

Given the historical significance of the Western missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries it would probably not be very difficult to organise a process of academic reflection around the centenary of Edinburgh 1910. A pertinent question, however, is whether this alone would do justice to the memory of the Conference. The ethos of the Conference was characterised, as Kathleen Bliss explained, by “... the common living convictions of practical men and women who are working together for the evangelization of the world.”¹⁵ For at its heart was a pressing sense of urgency about the fulfilment of the Christian imperative for mission which could find its proper expression only in action. As Latourette explained, it aimed to be a “consultation through which the missionary agencies could plan together the next steps in giving the Gospel to the world.”¹⁶ The preparations were made with the prayer that “the Church, dominated by a fresh vision of an unevangelized world and of that coming ecumenical, Christ-redeemed, triumphant multitude whom no man can number, may consecrate herself, as never before, to the sublime task of making Christ known and loved and obeyed by all men.”¹⁷ A celebration of the centenary which did

¹⁴ Cit. C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott 1865-1955: A Biography*, Geneva and Grand Rapids: WCC and Eerdmans, 1979, p. 344.

¹⁵ Kathleen Bliss, cit. Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontiers: A Life of J.H. Oldham*, Edinburgh and Geneva: T. & T. Clark and WCC, 1999, p. 74.

¹⁶ Kenneth Scott Latourette, “Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council”, chapter 8 in Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948, Vol. I*, 4th ed., Geneva: WCC, 1993 [1954], p. 358.

¹⁷ Cit. Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, p. 346.

not issue in new initiatives of a practical nature would have missed something essential to the original Conference.

Hence any process of reflection worthy of the centenary must issue in clear direction and fresh impetus for the Christian missionary movement. The discernment and elucidation of the key themes around which Christian mission will revolve in the 21st century must be undertaken in such a way as to stimulate a fresh concentration of missionary commitment and endeavour. Vital to the chemistry of the centenary celebration will be the interaction of the academic and the practitioner. The highest standards of academic rigour must be married to the action-oriented instincts of missionary practice. The famous words with which Mott concluded the Conference must also shape any worthy celebration of the centenary: “The end of the planning is the beginning of the doing.”¹⁸

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¹⁸ *World Missionary Conference 1910: The History and Records of the Conference*, Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; New York, Chicago and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell, p. 347.