

The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, by Brian Stanley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009; pp. xxii + 352. £24.99).

Once upon a time the history of modern western Christian missions seemed to be left largely to retired missionaries, with those trained in the secular academy all too often making do with whatever caricature of mission work best suited their analysis of western imperial history: missionaries were effectively collaborators, and as such were either educating, medicating humanitarians, or the portly, philistine defamers of non-western cultures beloved of nineteenth-century newspaper cartoonists. Since the 1990s, however, a renewed interest in religion and inter-religious encounter—as a consequence of its unexpected cultural longevity, its role in recent acts of war, terrorism, and criminality (whether as motivating force or rhetorical cover), and the steady rise of Christianity in parts of Africa and Asia—has tempted increasing numbers of scholars into mission archives across Europe, North America, and beyond. Here they find accounts of countries and cultures as diverse as Japan, India, and Uganda, often so closely observed and densely detailed that they far surpass government records, élite diaries and the like, in documenting the encounter of the post-Enlightenment West with the cultures of the Global South. This is largely because, to an extent greater than we might care to acknowledge, many missionaries were asking questions about the inner workings of local societies strikingly similar to those that now preoccupy historians, anthropologists, and sociologists.

Perhaps it is fitting that this scholarly interest in missions should be reaching a peak precisely a century after the modern missionary movement reached a high point of its own, freeze-framed for us in the expectations, rhetoric, discussions, and strategising of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910. Touring us around the Conference, Brian Stanley is sensitive at the outset to the event's resonances both now and then. At the time it functioned both as retrospective, celebrating the dramatic expansion of missionary work across the world which had occurred over the preceding decades, and as a moment of keen expectation—viewed by some as 'a *kairos* moment', with all the significance that history and time have for incarnational religion. Something of the atmosphere of the Conference, and of the Chairman John C. Mott's enthusiastic vision, seemed to spill over into later accounts of its proceedings, with, in Stanley's view, too many authors tempted to ascribe to the Edinburgh Conference achievements in organisation, ecumenism, and theology that more properly belong to an entire train of similar gatherings dating back to 1854 and extending through the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, while on some points the 1910 Conference was successful and remarkably prescient, on others—not least the minimal importance accorded to Africa—it was relatively inconsequential or altogether wide of the mark. Its ecumenical credentials were also rather thin: a sharp-tongued contemporary critic derided as 'clap-trap' the presence of 'World' in the Conference's title, given the absence of missions from within Roman Catholicism and Eastern Christianity. Missing too was any consideration of Latin America or the Caribbean, both of which were deemed already to be within 'Christendom' and therefore not eligible for consideration at the Conference.

Subsequent chapters of this volume offer an overview of the preparations for the Conference followed by analysis of three major themes: who the Conference delegates were, how they viewed their past and present work, and how they planned for the future. One of the most interesting aspects of the first theme, to which Stanley devotes a very welcome chapter, is that, out of around 1,200 delegates attending the Conference, there were just eighteen Asian delegates and a single solitary African (with a complex status that did not amount to that of a full delegate). All the remainder were expatriate missionaries, who found the optimistic atmosphere at Edinburgh was now and again threatened by the likes of Bishop V.S. Azariah of India. Azariah's call for 'spiritual friendship between ... races' communicated, with devastating understatement, the shadow still cast over the concept of a worldwide Christian community by the politics of race and culture together with myriad unresolved linguistic and theological difficulties.

Of two chapters on the second theme, the first deals with the organisation of mission work, including the payment of local mission workers, the problems of achieving financially self-supporting communities, and the relative shortage, as yet, of indigenous theological perspectives. The second chapter covers the work of Commission III of the Conference's eight Commissions, which dealt with education. So successful had missionary schools been by this point that, were missionary impact to be assessed in terms not of conversion statistics but, instead, of influence more generally upon national education, politics, culture, and social policy, then many of the more extravagant claims being bandied around Edinburgh in 1910 would seem rather justified. And indeed, as Stanley shows, the aim of this Commission was to consider not merely the education of young Christians but also the permeation of the national life of Asian and African countries with Christian ideals. In the end, the Commission retreated to more modest models of basic elementary education in societies still deemed 'backward', and élite institutions for those (chiefly in Asia) that were further advanced. A theme in Stanley's analysis here, as elsewhere, is the careful crafting of the Commission reports and the short shrift that was often given to dissenting voices.

Commission VII, on Missions and Governments, might have yielded valuable insights into mission thinking on their dealings with European colonial regimes—still something of a controversial topic—but, as Stanley notes, the Commission eschewed ethics in favour of concentrating upon 'technical questions of international relations'. Nevertheless, here, as elsewhere in the book, the author brings us the full benefit of the Conference's attempt at a global perspective. We see, for example, mission territories ranked in descending order of 'civilisation': Japan, China, India, the Dutch East Indies, and the Islamic world, with sub-Saharan Africa bringing up the rear. This hierarchy was intended to be of practical use in dealing with local governments and societies, but missionaries were warned off involvement in any new or revolutionary political movements—they could caution oppressive governments but should counsel obedience to the legitimate local authority. Once again the Commission report stood in contrast to a number of submissions sent in by individual missionaries who supported, to some degree, the aspirations of anti-colonial groupings such as the Indian National Congress.

Another major consideration for the future was the attitude to be adopted towards non-Christian religions, not least in the light of the emerging 'science'

of comparative religion. This had been pioneered in the second half of the nineteenth century by Max Müller and colleagues who were keen to see what Hinduism, Buddhism, and other traditions might reveal about man's religious impulse and the reality to which that impulse pointed. Though regretting the 'disproportionate attention' accorded to Commission IV (on 'The Christian Message in Relation to Non-Christian Traditions') Stanley notes the significance for the future of the Commission's basic message, which brought the evolutionary and hierarchical approach seen in other Commissions to bear upon religious phenomena. By suggesting that all or most religions were animated to some degree by the Spirit of God, preparing the way for God's full revelation in Christ, the Commission advocated an approach to non-Christian religions characterised by, as Stanley puts it, a 'gradual process of absorption' rather than 'confrontation'. Of equal significance to this theology of 'fulfilment', which went on to exert great influence in world Christianity, was the degree to which many missionaries—significant local figures as well as expatriates—simply saw too many areas where Christianity was in direct contradiction with other religious traditions, not least Islam, for fulfilment to be a meaningful way forward.

As Stanley points out, the notion of 'Christendom' current at the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, though crucial to its 'fragile ecumenical consensus', was cruelly destroyed by the First World War, and in the twenty-first century neither 'Christendom–Heathendom' nor 'West–East' seem any longer acceptable or particularly useful ('Global North–South' may well fare no better). The Conference's understanding of race and civilisation, too, now appears thoroughly out of date. Where the Conference did succeed, in Stanley's view, was in the impetus that it gave to inter-denominational co-operation in mission, the uniting of denominational mission territories into local Churches (notably in India, China, and Japan), the easing of gender separation in mission activity, and the encouragement of further discussion and better training through initiatives such as the new *International Review of Missions*.

In bringing to bear a formidably broad knowledge of diverse mission societies and regions upon the vivid and detailed missionary self-portrait that was the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, Brian Stanley has produced a work of very great utility for students of world Christianity, for researchers approaching this area of history for the first time, and indeed for any scholars of world Christianity wishing to broaden their regional expertise—something that, in this area of research, can open up opportunities for valuable comparative analysis. This is a vivid, assured, and deeply convincing account.

CHRISTOPHER HARDING
University of Edinburgh

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