

Book review published in *One in Christ 43:2 (Winter 2010)*:

The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, Brian Stanley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), paperback, 324. ISBN: 9780802863607

Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now, ed. David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2009), paperback, 317. ISBN: 9781870345736

To reflect today on the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, 1910, is to approach an event that has acquired all the mythology and ambiguity of other world-historical transitions. It is common to conceive of the conference either as having “given birth” to Christian ecumenism in a direct and linear way, or else as being a fork in the road of global Christianity at which the evangelical and ecumenical communities began to diverge. But as we approach the centenary of the conference – an event which is being approached with a similar combination of sobriety and preemptive canonization – it is valuable to return to the source and gain a clear view of the proceedings, content, and immediate aftermath of Edinburgh 1910.

Towards this purpose, the two texts reviewed here have been recommended as reference material by the study process committee of Edinburgh 2010. Brian Stanley splits his work between “a close account of the [1910] World Missionary Conference as an event in itself and...a synthetic interpretation of the western Protestant missionary movement as it reached the apex of its size and influence” (p. xx). The book is first a narrative of the history, and then a reflection on the ideas, of Edinburgh 1910. David Kerr and Kenneth Ross take a different approach by bringing together diverse modern voices to consider the eight “commissions” of the 1910 conference and their distance or proximity to missionary concerns today.

Within the tremendous detail and methodical structure of Stanley’s text is one running theme of particular importance. From his first chapter, he calls attention to the discrepancy between the conveners’ expectations for Edinburgh 1910 and the legacy that modern scholars ascribe to the conference. Part of this variance is due to the limited horizon of the conference’s time and place – but to an equal or greater extent, Stanley argues, contemporary retrievals of Edinburgh 1910 as a great dawn of ecumenism tend to misread the trajectory on which the conference lies. Notably, he demonstrates that it was the inauguration of *neither* inter-denominational collaboration on mission, *nor* of the “ecumenical movement” per se. The former can be traced back much further – an inter-denominational mission conference, for instance, was held in 1810 at Capetown. Nor can the ecumenical movement, in Stanley’s analysis, be said to have properly begun at Edinburgh 1910, due to the conference’s almost unanimously evangelical Protestant orientation and studious evasion of most theological and ecclesiological questions. Certainly now this character does not reflect the meaning of “ecumenical,” but more strikingly, neither did it meet the criteria then! The term “ecumenical” was in fact *dropped* from the original name of the conference (“The Third Ecumenical Mission Conference”) and replaced by the term “World,” to reflect the horizon, rather than the perspective, of the assembly (p. 19).

But where unique groundwork for the ecumenical movement *was* laid at Edinburgh was in the conveners’ careful attention, before the conference even began, to the potential meltdown that could be caused by any suggestion that Protestant missionaries were justified to evangelize in Roman Catholic or Orthodox communities around the world. Stanley

emphasizes the tension that built as it was being deliberated whether to include the voices of Protestant missionaries in Latin America and Eastern Europe, and he discusses at length the final decision not to do so (although some delegates represented societies with *other* members in such countries – p. 303). Although the decision was largely, at the time, a point of compromise to secure Anglo-Catholic participation in the conference, it had ramifications beyond the subtle addition of “Non-Christian” to the conference’s original mantra: “the evangelization of the whole [non-Christian] world in this generation.” Throughout his text, Stanley turns a spotlight on Edinburgh 1910’s recognition of non-Protestants as *legitimately Christian*, which, however tacit, was indeed a keystone for later expansion of ecumenical relations.

There was a price to rejecting Christian proselytism in this way, one that we can see clearly in hindsight: an ever-more-pronounced binary between “Christian” and “non-Christian” lands, which Stanley describes as “the division of humanity into two along lines that were not strictly confessional, but primarily geographic” (p. 72). This binary, however, bore the weight of what fragile ecumenical consensus existed going into the conference – and while the binary of Christian and Non-Christian territory had begun to erode within two decades of the conference (p. 305), the ecumenical groundwork on which confessional difference *could* be overcome in solidarity remains essential to this day.

Brian Stanley’s text can be dry and circumambulating, but it is exhaustively researched and annotated, making it an important reference text. The level of detail provided in every aspect of the conference – from the tensions between American and British convening assemblies (p. 31), to the particular timing structure of the delegates’ presentation of and responses to each commission (Chapter Four), to the particular questions asked of each committee’s contacts in “the field” (various chapters’ appendices), straight down to the delegates’ various lunch options (p. 84!) – is well above satisfactory for those seeking to review the proceedings chronologically and with scholarly distance from contemporary chilliness towards the Edinburgh 1910’s more imperialistic or naïve ambitions. Indeed, Stanley has written an excellent work of history.

However, when it comes to our full appreciation of the *content* of the Edinburgh 1910 commissions in the present day, such a strict historical approach has its limitations. Although Stanley is justified in stressing the extent of the delegates’ ideological homogeneity (whose extreme fringe – absurdly so today – was occupied by the Anglo-Catholics and the few Asian Protestants present), if the 1910 conference is to provide value as we articulate the inheritance and horizon of 21st century mission, it will need to be addressed by more than one, historical-critical voice. We will need more polycentric, polyglottal, multidisciplinary reflections.

And here is the value of *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, edited by David Kerr and Kenneth Ross. In this collection of 17 essays, with introductions and commentary by the editors, each of Edinburgh 1910’s eight commissions is addressed from perspectives that confront head on the impact that the 1910 conference had on the theological and ecclesiological history of the subsequent century.

Kerr & Ross introduce their text in a similar way as Stanley does his: while less cautionary than Stanley, they do remind the reader that Edinburgh 1910 was neither without precedent nor *in and of itself* ecumenically significant without the reflection we bring to it (p. 4). But they too emphasize the elements of the conference’s organization and content that were inaugural in various ways. Of particular import: the conference was a milestone in Protestant theology of religions – indeed, this was the only theology examined closely by the

delegates (p. 13), as a “safe” question that did not appear to have controversial ecclesiological implications. Perhaps it is because these implications were avoided that Visser’t Hooft essentially passes over Edinburgh 1910 in his account of the genesis of the WCC (p. 17). But the question of whether the conference is or is not a turning point in the overall history of ecumenism comes back to the “true sense” of the term, and who is defining it. Was Edinburgh 1910 “proto-ecumenical” or *genuinely* ecumenical – just in the narrowest, intra-Protestant, pre-expanded sense? This question hits home for us in 2010 as we consider the ways in which ecumenism has pushed its horizons outward over the last century, coming to encompass not only a far broader spectrum of Christian witness but inter-religious solidarity on behalf of the shared “household of life” (cf. Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, 1989). The extent to which this expansion is legitimate and of consequence for inter-religious relations, whether missionary or otherwise, is likely to be a concern of Edinburgh 2010.

As noted above, the wrestling reflection on Protestant mission in Roman Catholic and Orthodox countries was inspiration for both the stripping of “ecumenical” from the conference’s name and for the formulation of the final version of that name: “World Missionary Conference: to Consider Missionary Problems in Relation to the Non-Christian World” (p. 17). It is in this light that Commission One – “Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World” – can be considered, though perhaps not in retrospect the “most important,” certainly the “flagship” commission of the conference itself.

Commission One’s depiction of the “Non-Christian World” is at the heart of the missionary discussion both in 1910 and 2010. In the Kerr/Ross text specifically, the two authors writing on this commission agree that this depiction took for granted a *fully evangelized home base* – in other words, a clear binary in territory, not only in identity. And both agree, unremarkably, that this classification is obsolete. But there is some disagreement between the respondents, Andrew Walls and Kosuke Koyama, which for me exemplifies the importance of such a plural perspective in interpreting Edinburgh 1910 and its legacy. Walls argues that the most striking rejoinder to Commission One (and indeed to Commission Two, “The Church in the Mission Field”) is that today the binary has inverted – 2010’s representative Christians are African, Asian, Latin American, while it is Europe that could be described as the “non-Christian culture” (p. 37) in need of missionary attention in all its nuance. But for Koyama this is too glib, discounting the divisions and ambiguities within civilizations that eroded the binary to begin with. He suggests, rather, that “the concept of the Christian world is as unrealistic as that of the non-Christian world” (p. 42). From this perspective, the missionary task is not merely to redirect the translation of the gospel towards the idiom of Western, humanistic society – it is to consider how the work of loving *relationship* between culturally and spiritually divergent people has become a relevant issue at every point on the earth.

Most of the commissions are treated in this multi-voice manner, and the text holds interest all the way through. There is no space here to discuss each commission in depth, but a few additional reflections should serve to highlight issues that were both of central importance in 1910 and achieving new resonance in 2010.

According to Kerr and Ross, Commission Four (“The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions”) and Commission Eight (“Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity”) are the two that have received the most attention from ecumenical scholars to date. Of all the commissions, Four received the greatest number of responses from the field (over 200) and Eight had the greatest number of speakers address it at the conference itself (over 50).

Each commission, moreover, demonstrates a high degree of reflection from missionaries in the field and a significant level of continuing commitment after the conference ended, and each complicates the caricatured picture of turn-of-the-century evangelism that many today may hold. In their introduction to Commission Four, for instance, Kerr and Ross include a number of quotes from the commission's organizers that exemplify this complexity (pp. 122-123). Phrases such as "We are all agreed that Christianity is the final and absolute religion" (Robert Speer) are combined with those such as "Do we not need the broadening and deepening of all our conceptions of the living God?" (David Cairns), "Christ's own attitude towards Judaism ought to be our attitude to other faiths" (J. N. Farquhar), and "No one believes we have the whole Christian truth" (Speer again!) to give a picture of genuine, if not yet wholly coherent, pilgrimage in love among other faiths.

Vinoth Ramachandra, in his own reflections on the commission, asks us to consider that it may have been a blessing in disguise that no conclusion was reached on this theme in 1910; perhaps, to attempt closure today would equally risk being "inevitably reductionist" (p. 147) in the attempt to systematize a theology of religions. The tension of missionary encounters – between the need to communicate the truth we have inherited and the need to approach other faith traditions with humble unknowing towards the truth that they contain and can convey – remains today at the heart of a viable approach to missionary vocation. Ramachandra might not agree entirely with this formulation, but he does invoke the closing words of the Commission Four Report, which I do believe to be aligned with it: "But at least as remarkable as that spectacle of the outward advance of the Church is that which has also been revealed to us of the inward transformations that are in process in the mind of the missionary, the changes of perspective, the softening of wrong antagonisms, the centralising and deepening of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the growth of the spirit of love to the brethren and to the world. Once again the Church is doing its duty, and therefore once more the ancient guiding fires begin to burn and shine." (p. 150).

The treatment of Commission Eight in Kerr's and Ross's text is significant because it approaches Edinburgh 1910's inter-denominational cooperation not only from the single synthetic perspective of the WCC or from the historically apt stance of Protestant evangelicals, but also through authors within the major Christian traditions that were conspicuously absent at the conference: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal. However, the reflections of these authors tend to fall somewhat short of the opportunity to look towards a uniquely 21st century ecumenism. In each chapter, the future of mission resembles the best of 20th century mission – in each writer's tradition of reference. For Ionita (Orthodox), mission will be oriented by a renewal of high Christology (p. 268) and a balance between liturgical richness and diaconal service (p. 270). For Radano (Catholic), visible unity, repentance, respect, and continuity will remain at center stage (pp. 286-287). For Robeck (Pentecostal), ecclesiological unity will increasingly be recognized as not an end in itself but chiefly as a tool for the free movement of the Spirit into all corners of the world (p. 299).

The point is not that these values are themselves problematic, nor that they do not deserve to be voiced just because they are specific to their traditions. Indeed, viable ecumenism requires such insights grown within tradition, in addition to synthetic theologies at the constructive crossroads. But to the extent that the ecumenical worldview has become polycentric over the last century (p. 308), it is the responsibility of each tradition to speak not only from its own experiential center but *also to the heart of each other tradition*.

Both in terms of inter-denominational communion and inter-religious hospitality, mission after 2010 may well be an open-ended dialectic of parts, rather than a crowding together of existing wholes. Kerr and Ross suggest as much in their concluding chapter, and

they invoke Ramachandra's statement that when we reach out to the other in ecumenical solidarity we must "go expecting to meet the God who has preceded us" (p. 311). It is a sentiment that is uniquely resonant both with the pluralistic and post-pluralistic instincts of the contemporary theological academy and with the moments of deepest and humblest vision in the documents of Edinburgh 1910. Some of the closing words of Commission Six – an example of these moments that inspire us equally today – are also the closing words of this wonderfully rich and diverse anthology: "We can never understand our own Holy Scriptures until they are interpreted to us through the language of every nation under heaven..."

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