Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World (Resolution of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh) (Scotland, 1910)

Introduction

The 1910 World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh was a culmination of the missionary movement of the nineteenth century. Its aim was to concentrate and coordinate the efforts of the Protestant mission societies which were striving “to evangelize the whole world within this generation.”

Christian missionary activities underwent a revival as a Protestant enterprise independent from military conquest and state power. The pre-millenarian or Pietist movement of mission societies started with the Christian Mission Society in London and the Basel Missionary Society at the end of the eighteenth century. This movement did not institutionally originate in the Christian Churches and was not directed by religious experts such as theologians and clergy, but by lay people. They formed societies whose members came both from urban and (especially) from rural Christian communities which belonged to the ‘Awakening’ or ‘Revival Movement’ (Erweckungsbewegung). Important for their self-understanding was a literal interpretation of Matthew 28, 18–20 (King James Version):

[...] All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

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1 The motto of the conference in Edinburgh was a quotation from John R. Mott, *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation* (New York: Students Volunteer Movement for Foreign Mission, 1900).

2 ‘Pre-millenarian’ alludes to the drama of the end of the world, the ‘script’ of which is given in the last book of the bible, the Apocalypse of John. The last stage of this drama is the reign of Christ and his chosen people for one thousand years (‘millennium’ from Lat. *mille annos*; ‘chiliasm’ from Gr. *chilia etê*).
Even casualties among the missionaries were interpreted as signs of success; based on the assumption that the resistance of native elites was the work of the devil, the death of a missionary was the necessary martyrdom of the ‘Man of God.’

The conference brought together representatives of every Protestant missionary society, altogether some 1200 participants from Europe and North America. Catholic societies were not invited, and only few ‘native’ Christians participated. John R. Mott, an American Methodist, a leading figure of the YMCA and secretary general of the World’s Student Christian Federation, presided. The conference was modelled on the ‘Congo Conference’ held at Berlin in 1884–85; during that meeting, and as a reaction to the Belgian imperialism in Congo, the leading nations of Europe had negotiated their respective colonial aspirations, channelling them into a system of competing yet separate activities. That involved the division of Africa into spheres of influence that allowed each European power to build up its own colony and incorporate it into their ‘empire.’ The aim of colonisation, the ‘European mission,’ was to lead the ‘young nations’ into a better future by educating the so-called ‘primitive people.’ The underlying concept of education comprised violence and coercion if necessary. Similarly, the Edinburgh conference wanted to coordinate the activities of the missionary societies in the field of religion in order to prepare the way for the second coming of Christ for the Last Judgment. This theological concept opened up a first phase under the control of European experts. During the following phase, the African, Asian or Oceanic Christians were expected to build their own autonomous Churches. This concept has its roots in the (heterogeneous) Protestant ecclesiology: every nation agrees on its own religion and ecclesial organisation (e.g. a state church), using the vernacular. The Roman Catholic Church and its missions used mainly Latin (for liturgical and administrative purposes) or the languages enforced by the colonial nations, e.g. English and French.

The challenge of globalisation—described by British imperial rhetoric as ‘Commonwealth’ and by Karl Marx critically in economic terms—was met in the West with conferences that seemed to answer the needs of a globalising world. Thus, the first ‘World Exposition’ (Expo) was held in London in 1850. It was supposed to foster peaceful trade and mainly displayed technical innovations. The 10th Expo in Chicago in 1893 took place 400 years after Columbus had conquered the New World. In conjunction with this ‘Columbian fair,’ Protestant lay groups—mainly Unitarian—organised the World Parliament of Religions which intended to promote religious dialogue and to guide the way towards an unmediated Unitarian religion as the new universal and therefore