

'A much-needed Tract for the Times' or 'an extremely dangerous book'?

James Hope Moulton's *Religions and Religion* (1913)

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On 4 April 1917 the British passenger steamship SS *City of Paris*, travelling from Karachi to Liverpool, was torpedoed by a German submarine in the Gulf of Lions, and sank with considerable loss of life. Among the passengers were two eminent scholars, the Quaker James Rendel Harris and the Wesleyan Methodist James Hope Moulton. Both survived the sinking of the ship, but Moulton died of exposure three days later and was buried at sea.¹ Rendel Harris wrote and published a moving account of Moulton's heroic behaviour in the life-boat, sharing the burdens of rowing and baling, and ministering to Indian crew members.² The incident became something of a cause célèbre, an example of '[t]he ruthlessness of our enemies, unrestrained by moral scruples or humane principles'.³ Paying tribute to his friend and colleague in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Arthur Samuel Peake recorded the 'tragic irony' of the death under such circumstances of an eloquent advocate of peace and of a scholar whose international reputation in New Testament studies, built on his *Grammar of New Testament Greek* (1906) was signalled by plaudits from Harnack, a doctorate from the University of Berlin and a long-standing academic friendship with Adolf Deissmann.⁴ James Hope Moulton, however, was more than a New Testament scholar. His presence in the dangerous waters of the Mediterranean in the spring of 1917 came about through his second area of acknowledged expertise, the history and thought of Zoroastrianism, which took him to India for eighteen months' work with the Parsee community under the auspices of the Indian YMCA.⁵ In his life and in his writings Moulton brought together biblical scholarship, a fascination with the evolution of religion and a passionate enthusiasm for Christian missions. These commitments combined in his Fernley Lecture of 1913, *Religions and Religion*, which according to Eric Sharpe, 'virtually summarizes all the liberal theological concerns of the pre-war period.'⁶ The purpose of the present paper is to situate *Religions and Religion* in its contexts and to explore the significance of the book and its reception in capturing the varied and evolving attitudes of early twentieth-century Methodists to other faith-communities.

The first context for *Religions and Religion*, giving the lecture its occasion, was the centenary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society.⁷ Although modern scholarship has rightly insisted that the formal constitution of the WMMS by the Wesleyan Conference did not take place until 1818, the

¹ William F. Moulton, *James Hope Moulton. By His Brother* (London: Epworth Press, 1919), 193-5; Harold K. Moulton (ed.), *James Hope Moulton, 11 October 1863-7 April 1917* (London: Epworth Press, 1963), 20; Methodist Recorder (London) [hereafter MR], 12 April 1917, 4; Times (London), 11 April 1917, 8.

² W. Moulton, *James Hope Moulton*, 194-8; James Hope Moulton, *The Treasure of the Magi* (London, OUP, 1917), x-xii.

³ Arthur S. Peake, 'Obituary: James Hope Moulton', *The Classical Review* (London: OUP), May-June 1917, 108.

⁴ A.S. Peake, 'A Record of Professor J.H. Moulton's Work', *BJRL*, May-August 1917, 18-23; Peake, 'Obituary', 109; the Moulton MSS in the Methodist Archives and Research Centre, John Rylands University Library of Manchester, contain many letters from Deissmann.

⁵ W. Moulton, *James Hope Moulton*, 134, 139-45; Moulton, *Treasure of the Magi*, ix-x.

⁶ Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester, 1904-1979* (Manchester: John Rylands Library, 1980), 151.

⁷ For the history of the WMMS, see N. Allen Birtwhistle, 'Methodist Missions', in Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George and Gordon Rupp, eds, *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, 4 vols (London: Epworth Press, 1965-88), 3:1-116.

creation five years earlier of a society in the Leeds District to support Wesleyan foreign missions was seen as the real beginning of organised missionary endeavour by the Connexion. The Wesleyans had marked the jubilee of the WMMS in 1863, and by 1912 plans were in hand to commemorate the centenary.⁸ The Fernley Lecture, originally endowed in 1869 by a Wesleyan philanthropist, required a discourse on the doctrines or polity of Wesleyan Methodism, adapted to 'the necessities of the times', to be given at the annual Conference, for the benefit of the representatives and of those about to be ordained to the ministry.⁹ The endowment envisaged development into a book, and by the early twentieth century the practice was to use the lecture to summarise and launch the published work. Mindful of the approaching WMMS centenary, the Fernley trustees initially invited the distinguished missionary statesman W.H. Findlay to give the 1913 lecture, but Findlay eventually declined, due to ill-health. At comparatively short notice, therefore, J.H. Moulton took on the commission, snatching 'a few weeks' intervals' in the summer of 1912 from the major task of preparing his Hibbert Lectures, and writing 'in a hayloft on a lakeland holiday, with occasional intermissions to feed the pony in the stable below.'¹⁰

The WMMS approached its centenary in good heart. The two preceding decades saw the Society move from a succession of ecclesiastical and financial crises to a position where the Wesleyan Conference of 1912 could confidently 'lay before the Methodist people ... the story of missionary triumph'.¹¹ In the early 1890s the WMMS was reeling from Henry Lunn's attack on the alleged luxury and indolence of Indian missionaries,¹² and the Society, already suffering financial difficulties, saw its income plummet.¹³ As the Connexion concentrated on the Forward Movement and the Twentieth Century Fund, the WMMS continued to languish. In 1902, however, the Conference resolved to adopt 'a more energetic and aggressive policy with regard to Foreign Missionary Work.' Missionary conventions were organised across the country to promote the cause, with the President, John Shaw Banks, himself a returned missionary, taking a leading role.¹⁴ Over the next decade the WMMS was reorganised, the Mission House in Bishopsgate Street was rebuilt, a new missionary periodical, *The Foreign Field*, was launched and the Methodist Publishing House increased its output of missionary literature.¹⁵ Buoyant membership in the overseas districts offset sagging statistics at home, encouraging Wesleyans to value the work of the WMMS. The centenary, therefore, was approached with careful organisation and great hopes. William Goudie, an experienced missionary, was appointed to supervise the 'Centenary movement',¹⁶ and he contributed weekly updates to the *Methodist Recorder*. Another round of conventions took place, achieving both 'abundant grace' and 'financial success'. A special week of 'Missionary Praise and Prayer' was appointed in November

⁸ J.R.P[ritchard], 'Missionary Societies', in John A. Vickers, ed., *A Dictionary of Methodism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 241-2.

⁹ G.S.W[akefield] and W.L[eary], 'Fernley-Hartley Lecture', in *ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰ James Hope Moulton, *Religions and Religion* (London: Charles Kelly, 1913), vii-viii; H.K. Moulton, *James Hope Moulton*, 18.

¹¹ *Minutes of the Wesleyan Conference 1912* (London), 10-11.

¹² Sir Henry S. Lunn, *Chapters from My Life* (London: Cassell and Co., 1918), 88-111.

¹³ George G. Findlay and Mary Grace Findlay, *Wesley's World Parish* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), 213, 215-16.

¹⁴ *Minutes of Conference 1902*, 12-13.

¹⁵ Birtwhistle, 'Methodist Missions', 113-14.

¹⁶ *Minutes of Conference 1912*, 648; *Minutes of Conference 1922*, 119-20.

1912, in preparation for the anniversary year.¹⁷ This was the immediate backdrop to Moulton's 1913 Fernley Lecture.

If the WMMS centenary gave Moulton an occasion, the theme of *Religions and Religion*, and its treatment, reflected three other contexts: Moulton's own expertise, the burgeoning interest in comparative religion in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period and the backdrop of the World Missionary Conference of 1910.

Turning first to the author's expertise, one reviewer of *Religions and Religion* observed that Moulton's name was 'not generally associated with missionary enterprise' and Moulton himself acknowledged that it might seem strange to write on missions with 'less than four weeks' experience' of work overseas.¹⁸ Moulton, however, brought a rare combination of gifts to his task.¹⁹ Born in 1863 into a Wesleyan family of impeccable connections, high culture and undoubted missionary credentials,²⁰ he was educated at the Leys School, Cambridge, where his father was the first headmaster. He proceeded to King's College, Cambridge, taking a double first and attaining a fellowship, while simultaneously pursuing a series of London University degrees by examination. Work on Indo-European philology as part of the Classical tripos laid the foundation both for Moulton's subsequent New Testament scholarship and for a growing interest in Zoroastrianism,²¹ fostered by study with 'that Prince of Orientalists', E.B. Cowell, the Professor of Sanskrit.²² Cambridge also brought friendship with J.G. Frazer, engaged in successive editions and enlargements of *The Golden Bough*.²³ After sixteen years teaching at the Leys, Moulton left Cambridge for Didsbury College, Manchester, in 1902, where he taught New Testament to Wesleyan student ministers. His academic prowess, indicated by a formidable list of publications, was acknowledged by appointment to the Greenwood Chair of Hellenistic Greek and Indo-European Philology in the University of Manchester. He was also a staunch advocate of Wesleyan home and overseas missions and an outspoken champion of the social, political and spiritual values at the heart of Edwardian Nonconformity, as happy preaching in a rural chapel, speaking on Christian apologetics for Samuel Collier's Manchester Mission or writing an indignant letter to the *Manchester Guardian* as poring over the papyri.²⁴ Moulton sought to make scholarship accessible, and *Religions and Religion* found its place in a succession of publications from lesson notes in the *Sunday School Journal* in the late 1880s to *From Egyptian Rubbish Heaps* (1916), on the papyri, to a work on modern Zoroastrianism, posthumously published as *The Treasure of the Magi* (1917).

Moulton described his own intellectual formation and interests thus in a letter to Peake in 1904: 'a comparative philologist at Cambridge, a classic mostly for teaching purposes, a NT [sic] student from

¹⁷ *Minutes of Conference 1912*, 10-11.

¹⁸ [H.B. Kendall], 'Current Literature', *Holborn Review* (London), October 1913, 727; Moulton, *Religions and Religion*, vii.

¹⁹ A. S. Peake, rev. Tim Macquiban, 'Moulton, James Hope', *ODNB*.

²⁰ Moulton, *Religions and Religion*, x, pays homage to the author's uncle, James Egan Moulton, a missionary in the South Seas, although without the explicit dedication of the volume to J.E. Moulton, F.W. Kellett and W.C. Tucker implied in *MR* 31 July 1913, 23.

²¹ H.K. Moulton, *James Hope Moulton*, 24.

²² Moulton, *Religions and Religion*, viii. For Cowell, see F.W. Thomas, rev. J.B. Katz, 'Cowell, Edward Byles', *ODNB*.

²³ Moulton, *Religions and Religion*, viii. Several letters from Frazer survive in the Moulton MSS.

²⁴ *MR*, 12 April 1917, 4, refers to Moulton as a 'stalwart agitator'; W. Moulton, *James Hope Moulton*, 97-103; *British Weekly* (London), 17 July 1919, 363.

the grammar side ... and a Zendist as a philologue originally, finally a disciple of Frazer from the growing taste for comparative religion.²⁵ The last phrase was particularly significant: both the theme of *Religions and Religion* and its treatment owed much to the developing discipline of comparative religion and to the assimilation of its conclusions by theologians and missionaries.

The discipline variously denoted the 'science of religion', the 'comparative study of religion' or 'comparative religion' drew its raw materials and methodology from many sources.²⁶ European awareness of and curiosity about other faiths reached back for many centuries, although these encounters owed more to evangelism or apologetics than scientific study.²⁷ From the late eighteenth century, however, scholars and learned societies began to publish editions of Eastern sacred texts, comparative philology started to tease out connections between languages, and archaeologists brought ancient civilisations to light. Above all, the historical sense promoted by romanticism, and the mechanism of evolution, offered students of religion a method of organisation and interpretation for a growing body of data.²⁸ Not all were disciples of Darwinism, but nonetheless evolution became the master-theory accounting for religious development. A traditional Christian scheme of original divine revelation to humanity followed by fall, degeneration and a fresh revelation of truth in the gospel gave way to an understanding of religion advancing in conjunction with the evolution of culture and civilisation.

The leading exponents of the new discipline differed in their approaches and their religious commitments. Max Müller, whose books and lectures did much to make comparative religion a subject of fashionable interest from the late 1860s, was a philologist in method and a liberal Anglican in belief; E.B. Tylor, a Quaker-turned-agnostic, was a pioneer of anthropology; William Robertson Smith, who emphasised the importance of ritual and religious community, was an orthodox if controversial evangelical; James Frazer, who shared Smith's background in the Free Church of Scotland but moved some distance from orthodoxy, assembled a vast compendium of information about religious belief and practice in *The Golden Bough*, and offered changing interpretations in successive editions of the increasingly voluminous work. Each, however, made the point that religion was not – or was not solely – a divine revelation: it was also an element of human culture, open to scientific investigation.

Wesleyan responses to the first ventures in comparative religion were very wary. Modern scholarship has drawn attention to theological resources in John Wesley's works for constructive engagement with other faiths,²⁹ but the tenor of Wesleyan commentary in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century largely assumed that non-Christian religions represented a fall from primitive revelation and constituted a field of endeavour for missionaries. Thus in the first chapters of his

²⁵ W. Moulton, *James Hope Moulton*, 75.

²⁶ For the development of the discipline and for the chief protagonists, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1986); Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002); Margaret Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860-1915* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

²⁷ David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 104, 114-16, 121-31.

²⁸ Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 27.

²⁹ Randy L. Maddox, 'Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (San Diego, CA), 27 (1992), 7-29; Philip R. Meadows, "'Candidates for Heaven": Wesleyan Resources for a Theology of Religions', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (San Diego, CA), 35 (2000), 99-129.

Theological Institutes, Richard Watson laboured to show that ‘those Truths which are found in the Writings and Religious Systems of the Heathen’ must derive from the biblical patriarchs.³⁰ Sixty years later, in his *Compendium of Christian Theology*, William Burt Pope criticised ‘the Science of Religion’ for comparing Christianity – ‘the one only religion that the world has received directly from heaven’ – with other faiths.³¹ A similar criticism was offered by John Shaw Banks in his Fernley Lecture of 1880, *Christianity and the Science of Religion*, and by several writers in the *London Quarterly Review*, eager to defend revelation. By the end of the century, however, A.S. Geden could acknowledge the value of comparative religion as ‘a systematic endeavour to classify the various religions of the world, to ascertain their mutual relationship ... and to present an orderly and historical account of human belief and practice with regard to the supernatural and the unseen.’³² Geden insisted on ‘the unapproached excellence’ of Christianity, and repeated the point fifteen years later, while acknowledging that ‘in all the more important systems of religion there is a measure of truth ... which ... has made it *live*, a vital force in the hearts and lives of its professors.’³³ Geden gave credit to Max Müller and the scholars of comparative religion for helping Christian thinkers to approach ‘alien faiths’ with ‘sympathy and intelligent appreciation’ rather than ‘mere denunciation of error.’³⁴ As will be seen below, Moulton took a similar position.

J.H. Moulton’s first-hand experience of foreign missions before 1913 was limited to a brief tour of the West Indies in the summer of 1911.³⁵ A year earlier, however, Moulton had attended the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, where he found his enthusiasm for mission strengthened and his theology of religion reinforced.³⁶ Moulton was a long-standing supporter of the Student Christian Movement and of the Student Volunteer Missionary Union, streams which fed into Edinburgh 1910, and writing in the *Methodist Recorder* in the immediate aftermath of the Conference, he described it as more significant even than the Council of Nicaea.³⁷ Moulton drew heavily in *Religions and Religion* on the report of the fourth preparatory commission for the Conference, *The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions*, taking from the material submitted by missionaries and from the analysis offered by the commission strong evidence in support of a sympathetic understanding of other faiths. Brian Stanley’s recent study of the conference notes the ‘adulation ... heaped on the Commission IV report’ by contemporaries and by later scholars, and comments on the use made of the report by advocates of inter-faith dialogue.³⁸ Stanley shows that the Commission wrestled with the task of reconciling the traditional imperative of Christian missions with the challenge of comparative religion. He also shows that the raw

³⁰ Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, 3 vols (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1831), 1: 33.

³¹ William Burt Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, 3 vols (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1880), 1:57.

³² Alfred S. Geden, *Studies in Comparative Religion* (London: Charles Kelly, 1898), 6.

³³ Geden, *Ibid.*, 3; Alfred S. Geden, *Studies in the Religions of the East* (London: Charles Kelly, 1913), 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ Moulton, *Religions and Religion*, ix.

³⁶ *World Missionary Conference Edinburgh 1910 Official Handbook* (Edinburgh: WMC Office, 1910), 72, 106. Moulton was one of thirty eight delegates appointed by the WMMS. For the conference, see Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2009); for Moulton and the conference, Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions 1846-1914* (London: Epworth Press, 1995), 271-82.

³⁷ Tissington Tatlow, *The Story of the Student Christian Movement* (London: SCM Press, 1933), 483; J.H.

Moulton, ‘Into all the World. What the World Missionary Conference is doing’, *MR*, 23 June 1910, 5.

³⁸ Stanley, *World Missionary Conference*, 205-08, 245.

evidence submitted by missionaries suggested different ways of resolving that dilemma. The position taken by the Commission – sometimes in defiance of the missionaries’ evidence – was to arrange the world’s religions in an evolutionary hierarchy, with Christianity as the crowning revelation gathering up the partial insights of other traditions. This theology of fulfilment foresaw a gradual absorption of other faiths into Christianity and suggested that Christian missions would be most effective in engaging with the ‘higher’ religions of India, Japan and China.³⁹ Not all missionaries agreed with this analysis, and Commission IV’s predictions were not borne out by the trajectory of Christian expansion in the twentieth century, but Moulton took up the argument of *The Missionary Message* with enthusiasm. It echoed his own understanding of Zoroastrianism and his admiration of the Parsees, ‘this little community ... so honest and truth-loving, so free from the accumulated burdens which ages of superstition and the manifold horrors of the caste system have imposed on the Hindu.’⁴⁰ The conviction that ‘Christ comes not to destroy but to fulfil ... to complete and crown the broken arch of truth, reared by the seekers after God in many lands’⁴¹ made Moulton very receptive to the dominant approach of Commission IV and ensured that the Commission’s report received a warm endorsement in *Religions and Religion*, to which attention may now be turned.

In its printed form *Religions and Religion* comprised four chapters. In the first, ‘A century and its lessons’, Moulton set the missionary task in context by describing the principal changes of the ‘wonderful’ nineteenth century.⁴² Passing quickly over improvements in transport and communications, all put to good effect by Christian missions, noting progress in health and education, and hailing ‘serious moral advance’ and an increasing recognition of ‘the solidarity of mankind’,⁴³ Moulton turned to intellectual developments, highlighting biblical criticism,⁴⁴ the impact of Darwinism⁴⁵ and the application of evolution to the science of language.⁴⁶ In Moulton’s view, ‘a revelation of the Reign of Law invaded every field of thought.’⁴⁷ He welcomed this development, asserting that it placed theology and the study of religion on a proper scientific basis. At the end of the chapter Moulton turned to comparative religion, citing the monumental works of J.G. Frazer and the fifty volumes of *The Sacred Books of the East*. Such studies, he claimed, did not undermine the missionary enterprise, but brought a new motivation, based on ‘a wider and truer view of God.’⁴⁸

The second chapter of *Religions and Religion* discussed ‘Comparative Religion and Christian Origins’, looking at claims that beliefs and practices hitherto regarded as distinctively or uniquely Christian might have derived from other faiths. Moulton gave short shrift to suggestions that Jesus was a wholly mythical figure or that gospel stories were borrowed from Greek or Persian sources.⁴⁹ Although scornful of Drews and sceptical of Gunkel, Moulton gave greater credence to Kirsopp Lake’s theories on the possible influence of mystery religions, if not on Paul, then on later Christian

³⁹ Ibid., 205-47, esp. 246-7.

⁴⁰ J.H. Moulton, ‘Parseeism and Christianity’, *The East and the West* (London), vol. 5, no. 20 (October 1907), 408-18 (quotation at 418).

⁴¹ Ibid., 418.

⁴² Moulton, *Religions and Religion*, 1.

⁴³ Ibid., 2-5.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 13, 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 23-6.

sacramentalism.⁵⁰ Moulton took from the work of Frazer and of E.B. Tylor not a reductionist explaining away of Judaeo-Christian religion as mere natural evolution, but a confidence in ‘the upward progress’ of humanity’s religious awareness, with God choosing to work in ‘the evolutionary mode’.⁵¹ Moulton asserted a theism which sees God in the normal and the supernatural in the natural, holding together confident Christian faith with an absolute commitment to the scientific quest for truth.⁵² Moulton could quote Rendel Harris’ dictum that ‘for us the infallibilities are gone’, while believing that the discoveries of biblical criticism, comparative philology and anthropology had placed Christianity on a much firmer foundation than the discredited former authorities of Church, Pope or Bible.⁵³

The third chapter turned to ‘Christianity and Other Religions.’ Moulton cheerfully acknowledged that Christianity had borrowed from other faiths, praising the linking of Christmas to the winter solstice as a ‘stroke of genius’.⁵⁴ Sometimes, however, the Church had been unwise in its accommodation of existing practices. Moulton’s severest strictures were reserved for Roman Catholicism, whose cult of saints he interpreted as a re-working of pagan polytheism and whose Marian teaching he compared to the worship of Demeter.⁵⁵ Moving from Christian history to the contemporary mission field, Moulton drew on the report of the fourth preparatory commission of the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference to show that missionaries increasingly recognised in other faiths both elements of truth and points of contact with Christianity. The missionary method, argued Moulton, was no longer to destroy other faiths, but to understand them.⁵⁶ This did not mean undermining the supremacy of Christianity, because whatever valuable insights could be found elsewhere were brought to completion and fuller integration in Christianity: ‘the more carefully and sympathetically we study other religions, the more clearly does it appear that Christ completes and crowns them all.’ The missionary task became one of ‘bringing out the latent possibilities of backward tribes and developing to their highest ethical level the life of the more advanced races.’⁵⁷ This sympathetic appreciation of other faiths, argued Moulton, provoked Christians to rethink and restate inherited doctrines, discarding ‘some venerable lumber’ and some inadequate dogmatic formulations, like the ‘practical tritheism’ of much popular Trinitarian theology.⁵⁸ Moulton recognised the need for a new motivation to persuade Western Christians to support missions, given the decline of the belief that adherents of other faiths were destined for hell. He hoped for a growing sense of Christians’ responsibility to share the benefits of the gospel with others and for a realisation that a commitment to foreign missions would revitalise and reform the Church in the West and lead to ‘a Golden Age for all the world’.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ Ibid., 25, 30-1, 36-41. Moulton confessed to a strong ‘ultra-Protestant’ aversion to sacramentalism.

⁵¹ Ibid., 49-53.

⁵² Ibid., 57, 75.

⁵³ Ibid., 47. Compare ‘Three Lectures on Biblical Apologetics’, in James Hope Moulton, *The Christian Religion in the Study and the Street* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 1 and 4, attributing the phrase about ‘the infallibilities’ to Harris.

⁵⁴ Moulton, *Religions and Religion*, 86.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 87-8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 99-100.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 98, 123.

In the fourth and longest chapter of *Religions and Religion*, 'The Christ that is to be', Moulton returned to themes already discussed in previous sections of the book. Moulton defended the universal evangelistic commission of the Church as beginning with Jesus himself against Harnack's claim that the Gentile mission was a later development.⁶⁰ He urged that Christians are 'bound by the very fundamental law of our religion to pass it on to every man who does not yet possess it, *because* it is incomparably the mightiest power in enabling weak humanity to achieve the life that God demands.'⁶¹ An understanding that the love and knowledge of God motivated and enabled right conduct led Moulton to emphasise the unifying 'central and fundamental doctrines' and 'the vital elements in religion' – for him, the Fatherhood of God, the deity of Jesus and his supremacy as Saviour – and to call for toleration of diversity of opinions on such matters as biblical inspiration, higher criticism, church organisation and the sacraments.⁶² Moulton returned to the question of accommodation, accepting that some retention of elements of former religions might be harmless, but arguing nonetheless against the 'practical syncretism' of Roman Catholicism and affirming that 'to procure a real and permanent uplift in the character of a degraded people, there is an obvious need of a total change in their outlook.'⁶³ Animist spirit-worship, Chinese ancestor-worship and Hindu asceticism all fell under Moulton's criticism.⁶⁴ After a rapid tour of the opportunities and challenges facing the modern missionary movement, Moulton concluded with a peroration urging greater support for foreign missions and reminding his readers of the other-worldly orientation of the Christian hope.⁶⁵

Turning to the reception of *Religions and Religion*, three broad reactions may be identified. In the Methodist world, in the wider constituency of the British Free Churches and among the supporters of the Edinburgh movement, the response was overwhelmingly positive. A leading article in the *Methodist Times* called the book valuable and timely, and welcomed it as an effective restatement of the case for foreign missions in the light of modern knowledge.⁶⁶ Reviewing *Religions and Religion* in the same newspaper, Frederic Platt saluted Moulton's 'strong contagious optimism' and described the volume as 'noble and notable'. For Platt, Moulton presented 'a justification to the modern mind of the supremacy of this ideal of the Christian religion amongst the religions of the world', taking the insights of comparative religion and anthropology and using them to deepen understanding and strengthen the missionary cause.⁶⁷ Writing in the *Methodist Recorder*, W.T. Davison, a leading Wesleyan theologian and trenchant critic of Max Müller, also noted Moulton's 'contagious enthusiasm' and praised his demolition of the 'anarchists of criticism' like Drews and Robertson who deployed comparative religion to discredit Christian origins. Davison hailed *Religions and Religion* as 'a rare combination ... of scholarship and zeal, learning and enthusiasm.'⁶⁸ Beyond Wesleyan Methodism, Moulton's book was also welcomed by H.B. Kendall in the Primitive Methodist *Holborn*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 134-40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 128, 131, 147-8, 154-5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 158-9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 159-60; 169-70.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶⁶ 'A New Plea for Missions', *Methodist Times*, 21 August 1913, 3.

⁶⁷ F. Platt, 'Dr J.H. Moulton's Fernley Lecture', *Methodist Times*, 31 July 1913, 13.

⁶⁸ W.T.D., 'Religions and Religion. Dr Moulton's Fernley Lecture', *MR*, 7 August 1913, 3-4. For Davison's critique of Max Müller, see 'Max Müller on Natural Religion', *London Quarterly Review*, October 1889, 73-94.

Review,⁶⁹ and by James Denny in the *British Weekly*. Denny was no admirer of J.G. Frazer, but he described *Religions and Religion* as 'a much-needed Tract for the Times', rescuing missionary motivation from the perplexities created by comparative religion.⁷⁰ In a thoughtful review in the second volume of the *International Review of Missions*, J.H. Oldham, the principal organiser of the World Missionary Conference, commented that 'there are not many missionary books in which in the same degree scholarship of the highest distinction is combined with glowing missionary zeal, and openness of mind to all the currents of modern thought with an absolute conviction that Christ alone is the key to the world's spiritual history.' Oldham, not unnaturally, saw *Religions and Religion* as 'a striking revelation of the impression made by that conference on a highly cultured and unusually living mind.'⁷¹

Although very positive about *Religions and Religion*, Platt, Davison, Denny, Kendall and Oldham were not entirely uncritical of Moulton's book. Each wondered if Moulton gave too much ground to syncretism in Christian origins, and several regretted his tendency to make pungent and provocative asides, for instance about contemporary politics. A more weighty criticism came in the *Methodist Times* leading article, which noted the absence of a treatment of such important topics as sin, atonement, forgiveness and regeneration.⁷² This assessment was unsigned, but was almost certainly written by John Scott Lidgett, a former Fernley Lecturer, whose substantial tome on *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (1897) was dedicated to Moulton's father.⁷³

Moulton admitted in the preface to *Religions and Religion* that he had written in haste. The *Methodist Times* regretted this; other reviewers were less inhibited in their criticisms. 'G.A.C.', in the *Irish Church Quarterly*, was sorry that Moulton had produced his book 'in a few weeks, on a holiday, and *currente calamo*.'⁷⁴ Henry Preserved Smith, reviewing 'Works on the History of Religion' in the *American Journal of Theology*, noted inaccuracies of fact and errors of interpretation.⁷⁵ Most damning of all, Ambrose Vernon in the *Harvard Theological Review* called *Religions and Religion* 'ineffective as an argument, slipshod in construction, ordinary in style.'⁷⁶

The final response, and the most splenetic, came from the ultra-conservatives of the Wesley Bible Union. Moulton's immediate predecessor as Fernley Lecturer, George Jackson, alarmed and antagonised conservative Wesleyans by his lecture of 1912 on *The Preacher and the Modern Mind*. For much of the connexional year 1912-13 conservative forces were being marshalled to condemn Jackson's lecture and to prevent his appointment to a chair at Didsbury College. The controversy featured prominently in the Methodist press and it came to a head at the Plymouth Conference. Jackson was vindicated by an overwhelming majority in both sessions of the Conference, but

⁶⁹ [H.B. Kendall], 'Current Literature', *Holborn Review*, October 1913, 727-9.

⁷⁰ James Denny, 'Religions and the True Religion', *British Weekly*, 21 August 1913, 501-02. Compare Denny's comments on Frazer, *British Weekly*, 4 September 1913, 548.

⁷¹ J.H. Oldham, 'Religions and Religion', *International Review of Missions* (Edinburgh and London), vol. 2, no. 8 (October 1913), 804-06.

⁷² 'A New Plea for Missions', 3.

⁷³ Alan Turberfield, *John Scott Lidgett. Archbishop of British Methodism?* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2003), 113-14; John Scott Lidgett, *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (London: Charles Kelly, 1897), iii.

⁷⁴ G.A.C., 'Religions and Religion', *Irish Church Quarterly* (Dublin), vol. 7, no. 26 (April 1914), 175.

⁷⁵ Henry Preserved Smith, 'Works on the History of Religion', *American Journal of Theology* (Chicago, IL), vol. 18, no. 3 (July 1914), 417.

⁷⁶ Ambrose W. Vernon, 'Religions and Religion', *Harvard Theological Review* (Cambridge, MA), vol. 8, no. 2 (April 1915), 267.

Moulton, already a tutor at Didsbury, prepared and delivered his lecture against a background of excitement and theological controversy.⁷⁷ It was significant, therefore, that Samuel Chadwick, Principal of Cliff College and a standard-bearer of constructive conservatism, praised Moulton and his lecture in the conservative weekly *Joyful News*, and that the *Methodist Recorder* made a point of reporting this endorsement.⁷⁸ Jackson's critics, outmanoeuvred in the Conference, coalesced in the autumn of 1913 in the Wesley Bible Union, and it was the WBU's *Journal* that denounced *Religions and Religion* as 'an extremely dangerous book'. For G.A. Bennetts, Moulton's faults were 'colloquialism approaching flippancy' in style; more seriously, acceptance of the higher criticism of the Bible; and, worst of all, 'thorough-going acceptance of the doctrine of evolution as the ruling principle of all created being and of every province of thought.' Bennetts saw Moulton's position as a denial of revelation and as a threat to the Person of Christ.⁷⁹ The undermining of revelation, the claim that Christ might be reduced to a product of evolution and the assertion that 'the infallibilities are gone' recurred in WBU strictures against Moulton for several years.⁸⁰

Bennetts was happy to acknowledge that 'elements of truth are to be found in the non-Christian religions', and he linked this recognition to 'the doctrine of universal redemption, upon which John Wesley and John Fletcher laid so much stress,' continuing that this emphasis 'has led Wesleyan Methodist theologians to a specially clear apprehension of this aspect of truth.'⁸¹ Scholars far removed from the outlook of the WBU have agreed with Bennetts in drawing attention to the contribution of Wesleyan and Methodist theologians to the study of other religions and to inter-faith dialogue, suggesting an implicit if not explicit connection between Wesleyan theology and openness to other faiths.⁸² Moulton nowhere acknowledged a debt to Wesley in *Religions and Religion*: his outlook demonstrated rather the transforming effect of contemporary currents of thought on Methodist evangelicalism. However, as a student of religion, an advocate of missions and a practitioner of dialogue, espousing and expressing an understanding of faiths fulfilled in Christ, James Hope Moulton occupied a representative and therefore significant place in the evolution of Methodist theology and missionary practice in the heyday of the Protestant missionary movement.

⁷⁷ D.W. Bebbington, 'The persecution of George Jackson: a British Fundamentalist controversy', in W.J. Sheils, ed., *Persecution and Toleration* (SCH 21) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 421-33; Martin Wellings, 'Methodist Fundamentalism before and after the First World War', in David W. Bebbington and David Ceri Jones, eds, *Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1913), 76-94.

⁷⁸ 'Mr Chadwick and the new Fernley Lecture', *MR*, 4 September 1913, 3.

⁷⁹ G. Armstrong Bennetts, 'The Fernley Lecture of 1913', *Journal of the Wesley Bible Union* [hereafter *JWBU*] (Gloucester: F.J. Brooke), July 1914, 103-05

⁸⁰ H.C. Morton, 'The Chief Corner Stone: An Attempt to lull Methodists into False Security', *JWBU*, October 1914, 133-4; G. Armstrong Bennetts, 'What is the Present Message of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference to Mankind?', *JWBU*, October 1915, 220; 'Book Notices', *JWBU*, August 1916, 189.

⁸¹ Bennetts, 'Fernley Lecture', 103.

⁸² Frank Whaling, 'Wesley's Premonitions of Inter-Faith Dialogue', in Tim Macquiban, ed., *Pure, Universal Love: Reflections on the Wesleys and Inter-Faith Dialogue* (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1995), 17.