

Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference and Edinburgh 2010 Compared with specific focus on interfaith relations

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In this paper, I seek to explore the shift and changes in the understanding of the theme of interfaith relations in two of the key ecumenical world mission conferences, namely, Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference and Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today.¹ Using selected primary resources from both of these conferences, this paper aims to compare the Christian self-understanding of what it is to be in mission in interfaith contexts.

More specifically, using selected responses, this paper will explore the perspectives of women, and those of persons from the formerly *receiving* communities. In the concluding pages, the paper seeks to envision how best the voices of women and lived experiences of today's Asian immigrant Christians in the U.S. can contribute to the collective interfaith journey.

In 1910, the aim of Commission IV, "The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions, was to "study the problems involved in the presentation of Christianity to the minds of the non-Christian peoples...We have to enquire into the conflict of faiths in the non-Christian lands, the influence of that conflict on the minds of the missionary, the effect of the whole upon the theology of the Church at home, and the suggestions which it offers for the training of missionaries."² The minutes of an earlier meeting of the 1908 International Committee, shows the two-fold emphasis of the Commission. That is, to "set out the elements in Christianity which have most influenced non-Christians" and "to set out the Christian Apologetic in relation to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and animist religions."³ The study process of 1910 used a questionnaire that was sent out to missionaries who were engaged in mission in interfaith

¹ Edinburgh 2010 is one of the four key international conferences that celebrated the 100th anniversary of 1910 World Missionary Conference. The other three were the Global Mission Consultation in Tokyo, Japan (May 11-15, 2010), Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town, South Africa (October 16-25, 2010), and the conference on "The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity" sponsored by the Boston Theological Institute and the consortium of theological schools in the Greater Boston area in Boston, U.S. (November 4-7, 2010).

² *Report of Commission IV*, p. 1. The *Report* is in the archives of the Union Seminary, Columbia University Libraries, New York.

³ *Minutes*, items 4 and 5 printed and unbound at the Burke Library at the archives of the Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University Libraries, New York.

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contexts.⁴ A key quest of the questionnaire was to gather the insights of the missionaries working in their various missional contexts, and to impact the “future teaching of Apologetics to missionaries.” A letter sent out by David Cairns, marked “Strictly Private and Confidential,” went on to say, “It would almost certainly influence deeply the whole future teaching of Apologetics to missionaries and would be certain also to cast a flood of light on almost every department of Theology, Dogmatics, Church History and Interpretation of Scriptures.”⁵ A well-grounded assumption of the 1910 World Missionary Conference was that the old ideals of mission, framed in a prior period, were no longer adequate for a new world. ⁶

Women’s voices in Commission IV:

The organizers made sure to collect the insights of women, albeit very few. Some of these women’s perspectives failed to make it to the report. Nevertheless, it is never too late to make some of their voices heard in this paper and their contribution acknowledged in their interfaith relations.

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1. ⁴ Kindly give your name, station, and the Church or Society in connection with which you are working. Name the non-Christian religion or religions with which you have to deal in your missionary work, and say with what classes of the populations you yourself come into contact.
 2. Can you distinguish among the doctrines and forms of religious observances current among these classes any which are mainly traditional and formal from others which are taken in earnest and are genuinely prized as a religious help and consolation?
 3. What you consider to be the chief moral, intellectual and social hindrances in the way of a full acceptance of Christianity?
 4. Have you found individuals any dissatisfaction with their own faith on specific points? If so, give details.
 5. What attitude should the Christian preacher take towards the religion of the people among whom he labours?
 6. What are the elements in the said religion or religions which present points of contact with Christianity and may be regarded as a preparation for it?
 7. Which elements in the Christian Gospel and the Christian life have you found to possess the greatest power of appeal and which have awakened the greatest opposition?
 8. Have the people among whom you work a practical belief in a personal immortality and in the existence of a Supreme God?
 9. To what extent do questions of ‘higher criticism’ and other developments of modern Western thought exert an influence in your part of the mission field, and what effect do they have on your missionary work?
 10. (addressed only to foreign missionaries). Has your experience in missionary labour altered in either form or substance your impression as to what constitute the most important and vital elements in the Christian Gospel?
 11. (addressed only to converts to Christianity). What was it in Christianity that made special appeal to you? Did the Western form in which Christianity that made special appeal to you? Did the Western form in which Christianity was presented to you perplex you? What are the distinctively Western elements, as you see them, in the missionary message as now presented? Was it the sense of sin which enabled you to go behind the Western forms? If not, what was it? (Archives, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York).

⁵ A copy of the letter at the archives in the Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University Libraries, New York.
⁶ *Report IV*, Minutes of June 23, 1910, p. 104.

The questionnaire was designed in such a way to elicit the theological insights of the missionaries on fulfillment theory in their respective working contexts. To the question, “What are the elements in the said religion or religions which present points of contact with Christianity and may be regarded as a preparation for it?,” a general response of the missionaries working in India on Hinduism was their inclination to either points of contacts between Christianity and Hinduism, or Christianity as a fulfillment of Hinduism.

In general, the responders to the questionnaire affirmed that the missionary’s attitude should be one of sympathy and understanding. The response of Deaconess Ellen L. Goreh, a second generation convert to Christianity in India, reflects the general tenor of most of the responses. Goreh identifies herself as an “ordained deaconess” of the Church of England with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and whose work chiefly relates to Hindu and Muslim women.⁷ Claiming the space of the set-apart ministry of the deaconess, this lay woman says that the missionary’s attitude towards followers of other religions should be one of “sympathy, patience, tact, and absence of any show of patronage,” and that the missionary “should try as far as possible to avoid all allusions especially disparaging ones, to their religions.” She cautions that it is good “to be prepared to answer arguments, but as a rule controversy is useless.”⁸

As for points of contacts between Christians and followers of Hinduism, she enumerates that “for Hindus, familiarity with the doctrine of a trinity, and Incarnation, the consciousness of the need for a propitiation for sin, and of cleansing from it, a somewhat help in the preparation for the reception of Christianity.”⁹ The local women responders did not wholeheartedly agree with the notion of other religions being preparatory ground for the reception of Christianity, as we will see in the response of Pandita Ramabai, also. None of Goreh’s response made it to the Report.

A towering Indian woman, Pandita Ramabai, a female convert to Christianity, a scholar in Hindu scriptures, and the founder of the famous Mukti mission which cared for needy children and affirms what is good in Hinduism, but she did not see the native religions of India, especially the dominant forms of Hinduism as “preparation for Christianity.”¹⁰ Further, she says,

The Christian preacher should gladly recognize what is good and acceptable in the ancestral religion of the people. But all arguments should be avoided as they are not beneficial to those who listen to them. When preaching the Gospel the preacher should refrain from quoting texts from the Hindu religious books as they are not often understood and taken in their true light, and their quotation by a Christian preacher

⁷ Ibid, p.1.

⁸ Deaconess Ellen Goreh, no. 164, p. 2.

⁹ Ibid, p.2.

¹⁰ Pandita Ramabai, Archives in the Union Seminary, Columbia University Libraries, 1910 World Missionary Conference, MRL 12. No. 212, p. 4.

exalts them unduly in the eyes of the ordinary Hindu listener. The more intelligent and thoughtful inquirer should have the texts and special teachings of the heathen religion explained to him as explicitly as possible, when great care should be taken to show the difference between its original meaning and that which has been put into by those who misappropriate all the principles of Christianity without accepting Christ.¹¹

While Ramabai's use of the phrase "heathen religion" is unfortunately in keeping with the discourse of her times, her view of the mission worker's use of the sacred texts of other religions is a valuable and timeless insight in interfaith relations. While many insights from scholars made it to the Report on actual interfaith relations, Ramabai's did not make it, though a quote from Ramabai's conversion found a place in it saying that she was drawn to Christianity by the "The teaching of Christ exemplified by His holy life and His love for sinners, "although it was presented to her by "non-Brahmans."¹² In the Report, she is seen more as a recipient of mission than as an agent of mission, although she combined both these roles. These two women are emigrants to Christianity whose identity nevertheless embodied a hybridity of lived experience in the multi-faith context of India.

A suggestion given by Mrs. Davie Ferguson, Society of the Propagation of the Gospel, North Punjab, India in her questionnaire offers an interesting and insightful cross-cultural suggestion that a Western missionary should "leave controversy to converts who have had a thorough knowledge of their own religion before becoming Christians." Ferguson goes on to give specific examples how it was done in two cases, while the missionary was simply being present to "to see that the discussion is carried on in a fair and temperate manner. "¹³ Missionary's role as a facilitator of hard discussion and not as one who necessarily leads the discussion is a model lifted up.

A nuanced response to fulfillment theory regarding Hinduism is from Rev. N.C. Mukerjee from Allahabad, India working with North India American Presbyterian Mission, who says, "While the method of fulfillment should be the method in Christian work, we should not forget that the other method-that of contrast-has a legitimate place."¹⁴ As agents of mission work, the converts are cognizant of the complexity of theological non-negotiables in interfaith relations. For Mukerjee, the greatest appeal of Christianity is from the character of Christ, and he says the "quarrel is with Christians and Christianity, not with Christ."¹⁵ The Report captures this and his genuine conversion experience and leaves out his insights on his interfaith relations. The picture of local Christian leaders as recipients of mission submerges that of these local leaders

11 Ibid

12 Commission IV Report, p. 12

13 Mrs. Davie Ferguson, no. 155, p. 17.

14 N.C. Mukerjee, No. 208, p. 3

15 *Report*, p. 188

being agents of mission.¹⁶ The women (not all of them!) and the local leaders may be present but their perspectives are not fully represented. Being visible may not necessarily lead to inclusion of one's perspectives.

The Report attests to a poignant observation made by a missionary which George Lefroy, Anglican Bishop of Lahore, in his response. It was "very nice to see pictures of missionaries with their arms, perhaps, round the neck of some convert, or in a brotherly attitude of some kind- but he noticed that it was always the Englishman's arm which was round the Indian's neck, never the converse position."¹⁷ In a figurative sense, this asymmetrical relationship between the missionary and the native workers has left its own side effect on the production of knowledge about interfaith relations and the training of mission workers in relation to that. Commenting on the response of Lefroy, Kenneth Cracknell sees in it the anticipation of the "cry of anguish from V.S. Azariah" of South India in Edinburgh 1910 conference, "Give us FRIENDS."¹⁸

I submit the impact of Edinburgh 1910 on women and mission has been a complex one. By and large, the impact has been a negative one. I have dealt with this in my writing elsewhere.¹⁹ This aside, the key position on interfaith relations that emerged from 1910 World Missionary Conference was one of affirmation of "absoluteness of the Christian faith" that Jesus Christ "fulfills and supersedes all other religions," while generously recognizing "all that is true and good" in other religions.²⁰ As scholars have rightly pointed out Edinburgh 1910 did not put forth any consolidated Christian apologetic.

The key milestones in interfaith debate since have been as follows²¹:

- Jerusalem 1928 conference with a focus on William Hocking and Henrik Kramer's varied positions on the uniqueness and universality of Jesus.
- "Rethinking Missions-A Laymen's Inquiry" in 1932 and its view of mission engagement with people of other religions

¹⁶ I have not included the views of Miss Chadwick (no. 289), Miss A.D. Selincourt (no. 224), Miss Anna Smith (no. 231) due to the limited scope of this paper.

¹⁷ George Lefroy, no. 190, 18. *Report*, p. 175.

¹⁸ Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy, and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846-1914* (Westminster, London: Epworth Press, 1995), p. 204. Azariah's famous speech asked for friendship more than paternalism saying, "Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor,. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us FRIENDS." The full speech is found in "The Problem of Co-Operation between Foreign and Native Workers" in *History Records and Addresses*, Vol. IX, 306-315.

¹⁹ "Edinburgh 2010: A Mission Practitioner's Perspective," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXIX, no. 2, April 2011, Electronic Issue, 23e-33e.

²⁰ *Report*, p. 268. See Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), p.219.

²¹ I am citing mainly the Protestant ecumenical mission conferences.

- Tambaram, India 1938 conference with special reference to radical disjuncture with one's religious past in matters of conversion
- Dialogue in 1960s.
- Pluralist, exclusivist, and inclusivist positions in the 1970s.
- "Ecumenicity of religions" and "pluralistic theology" in the 1990s.
- "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct" by the World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and World Evangelical Alliance (2011).

Added to this is the challenge of politicization of religions in the late part of 20th century which continues to this day.

Edinburgh 2010 and Interfaith

Edinburgh 2010 was an inclusive ecumenical body of delegates which included, to name a few, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Church leaders, Pentecostal Church leaders, Latin American Theological Fraternity--- delegates not represented in the 1910 World Missionary Conference.

Edinburgh 2010 was a study process with nine main themes and seven cross-cutting themes or transversals. It was envisioned as an "experiment" with a "multi-regional, cross-denominational, poly-centric study process.²² The aims of the actual conference study process during the event were to make clear the changes in mission thinking over the past century, to inspire the leadership in church and mission with a new vision, to encourage ecumenical networks and alliances across major divides, to identify priorities for church and mission leaders, and to find a common commitment to carry on the spirit of unity and cooperation. One of the main themes was Christian mission among other faiths.²³ Consideration of inclusivity in both gender and denomination was taken care of, to a great extent. Each study group was given a task to identify key questions and key priorities related to the theme, and propose strategic recommendations to consider and communicate.²⁴ The result was a 300-page book, *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ today*, vol. 2. Each delegate was asked to read the book before attending the conference. Through position papers and case studies, the conveners of theme 2, Niki Pagageorgiou from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece and Lalsangkima Pachuau from Asbury Seminary, USA, worked with a core group, and prepared the chapter on

²² Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim, eds. *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today*. Vol. ii. (Oxford, UK.: Regnum Books International, 2010), 1.

²³ The nine main themes were, Foundations for Mission, Christian Mission Among other Faiths, Mission and Postmodernities, Mission and Power, Forms of missionary engagement, Theological education and formation., Christian communities in contemporary contexts, Mission and unity—ecclesiology and mission, and Mission spirituality and authentic discipleship. The transversals were Women and mission, Youth and mission, Healing and Reconciliation, Bible and mission—mission in the Bible, Contextualization, inculturation and dialogue of worldviews, Subaltern voices, and Ecological perspectives in mission.

²⁴ For the whole list of outcomes, see Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim, eds. *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today*. Vol. ii. (Oxford, UK.: Regnum Books International, 2010), 9

“Christian Mission Among Other Faiths.” I had the privilege of attending the conference as a delegate of the World Methodist Council, and was given the honor of chairing a parallel session on “Christian Mission Among Other Faiths.”

Sessions on Interfaith

A set of preparatory questions, originating from the study process to prompt discussions were gathered and circulated especially among the resource persons and the participants.

These were:

Questions relating to theoretical issues:

1. How do we understand Christian mission in the religiously pluralistic context of today?
2. How has our understanding of other religious faiths and our relationship with people of other faiths been shaping and re-defining our understanding of mission?
3. How may churches in the West gain new insights from churches in the global South about witness and dialogue in a pluralistic setting?
4. Does the focus on the Holy Spirit in creation, culture and religion provide new avenues for a Christian theology of religion?
5. Can there be ‘un-baptised’ and/or ‘churchless’ Christianity (as some call it)? Should the church encourage un-baptised or churchless Christianity depending on the context?

Questions relating to priorities in mission

6. Is Christ the only way? Do other religions have ways of salvation?
7. What is the role of conversion in mission?
8. (a) How could Christians work together with people of other faiths? (b) How can Christians avoid compromising their faith in/while working with people of other faiths?
9. Should Christians compete with people of other faiths in seeking new adherents?

Some of the insights that came out of these parallel sessions which I am listing below are timeless queries²⁵:

- The question of salvation: “Must all people be Christian to be blessed/reconciled before God, or not?” This unsettling question within Christianity divides Christians, and prevents common witness.
- If God is at work in other faiths, can mission be a joint discovery of the action of God? Some insights grappled with the role of “dialogue” with people of other faiths.

²⁵ For the whole list of key issues, see Kirsteen Kim & Andrew Anderson, eds. *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow* (Oxford, UK.: Regnum Books International, 2010), 131-133

- Dialogue to be carried out with respect, honesty, and transparency.
- There can be tension between *conversion* and *partnership*, between mission and dialogue.
- Dialogue is a must especially in Muslim areas. Dialogue through witness is crucial. In connection with dialogue, the relevance of the “great commission” needs to be reviewed.
- The role of the Holy Spirit in other faiths: If God is at work in other faiths, can mission be a joint discovery of the action of God? To discern where the Holy Spirit is leading the global Church is urgent. Is it leading the church to repentance?
- Mutual education among different faith traditions is a crucial issue today. In a similar vein, another group endorsed that we should fight against misunderstanding or prejudices of Christianity. In this it is important especially to Hindus to meet genuine Christians.
- Lack of contacts with people of other faiths...is appalling! It is an important issue for today.
- Issues are different from continent to continent: Secularization in Europe, religious freedom in Africa, and diversity in Asia, especially India. Each of these issues needs to be dealt with in context.
- Violence against Christians
- Freeing Christianity from colonial Christendom and majority mentality continues to be a crucial issue in mission among other faiths.
- Caused by wrong use of religious terms that incite reactions or tie the gospel to colonial past [Indian context]: “conversion” brings with it a political baggage, as does “Christian mission.” “Targeting” groups [10/40 Window] has stiffened fundamentalism on both Christian and Hindu sides.
- Learn the power of “testimony” to the Truth in postmodern times. This is what we are left with in the postmodern times—to “tell our stories” and allow others to hear what we say. Invite storytelling!
- The “uniqueness of Christ,” different meanings or one?

The priorities that emerged from the discussion were:²⁶

- Key missiological terms selected are: authenticity, relationality, dialogical, bold humility, vulnerability, and respectful witness
- Dialogue to be carried out respectfully, honestly, and with transparency. Do so because people want to hear about what you really believe, and about who you are (more than

²⁶ Ibid, 133-134.

your religion's doctrines). In doing dialogue, it is important to differentiate the goals of dialogue and evangelism.

- Consciously reframe language for effective witness, i.e., Christians do not do “Christian mission”, they are “Friends of Faith in the Mission of God.”
- Also needed is inter-generational dialogue within Christianity on mission among other faiths.
- Increase our understanding of other faiths. Christians need to understand the dynamics of other religions (such as Islam). Teach our people how to befriend people of other faiths.
- Rootedness in Christ [against Christianity as a religion] realizing that Christ welcomes people of any faith.
- Give higher profile to religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and freedom of expression especially in contexts where Christians are in minority.
- Reconsideration of the whole question of the uniqueness of Christ by bringing theologians and practitioners together.

These key issues and priorities map out current challenges and opportunities. The participants lifted up today's mission in interfaith context as being good neighbors and faithful witnesses, and the need to deepen our understanding of the uniqueness of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. The report of the young adults in Europe raised the question, “Have western Christians lost confidence in the Gospel? Is it possible to maintain confidence in the Gospel and respect for people of other faith traditions?”²⁷

I submit, while bringing in a wide array of insights from a larger ecumenical body of representatives, Edinburgh 2010 does not clearly propose strategic recommendations to communicate, and leaves the task to the mission practitioners in their respective contexts.

Possibilities and Opportunities in the U.S. context:

I submit that multi-faith lived experience is still a fledgling in the U.S., and that we continue to engage in meaningful dialogue with people of other religious faiths, in multi-level and multi-lateral contexts.

I submit that we include the diaporic communities, especially the Asian immigrant Christians in the development of interfaith understanding and production of resources in the United Methodist Church. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor and scholar in Jerusalem, once remarked

²⁷ For the entire “Listening Group Report” in Edinburgh 2010 conference, see Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson, eds. *Christian Mission Among Other Faith in Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow*.

that western theologians “never ever consulted the Christians in the Middle East, to say nothing of drawing them into the dialogue.”²⁸

I submit that we create safe spaces for dialogue for addressing fundamentalisms, and resources and training need to be shared.

I submit that the era of professional messengers has mostly come to an end. 21st century is the age of laity. Hence we need to train and empower gifted laity in this important area of mission and ministry.

I submit that we continue to practice “neighborology” in the context of the kingdom of God that the gospel talks about.

²⁸ Mitri Rabeb, *I am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 57.