

The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation

Anyone who has read Brian Stanley's history of Edinburgh 1910ⁱ will realise how much this article owes to that remarkable work published last year. From out of the dense material found in the questionnaires, returns, reports and presentations of the eight Commissions, he paints a picture not only of what happened in Edinburgh in the summer of 1910 but also of an emerging world church just before the age of high imperialism – itself a relatively recent phenomenon – was to be challenged by the changing world of the twentieth century.

The two missionary societies which were to form USPG in the 1960s saw the Conference differently. The Universities Mission to Central Africa rejected it altogether, not wishing to be associated with a gathering of “dissenters”. Its secretary, Duncan Travers, attended in a purely private capacity. But my other predecessor, Bishop Henry Montgomery, Secretary of SPG, came to play a significant role. Having persuaded his Standing Committee to overcome their suspicions and send an official delegation, he was also instrumental, together with the Bishops of Birmingham (Charles Gore) and Southwark (Edward Talbot), in getting the Archbishop of Canterbury (Randall Davidson) to accept the invitation to give the opening address.

Their participation was significant for the modern ecumenical movement which, to some extent, dates from Edinburgh 1910. It enlarged the base of what could have been just a pan-Protestant movement. Years later it would be the evangelicals rather than the catholics who left to set up their own organisation, even though they had seemingly accepted the more liberal sentiments found in some of 1910 reports. This year their third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation, to be held in South Africa, will easily eclipse the centenary events in Edinburgh.

But the presence of these so-called High Churchmen also had its cost. Montgomery negotiated it on the condition that missionary activity in countries where the majority of the population were already baptised could not be on the Conference agenda. So work amongst African American people in Latin America (Catholics), around the Middle East (Orthodox) and in the Caribbean was not included. These people were identified as part of Christendom, and so the territorial division between that and the heathen world became even more pronounced, and the concept of mission as the movement from the Christian nations of the West to the non-Christian nations of the East was made even stronger.

This would not have troubled Montgomery. On the boat home from his former post as Bishop of Tasmania, he had written “These are great times and one feels the stir of an Imperial Christianity”. He saw clergy as “officers in an imperial army” and when “full of the Imperial spirit, not merely of the empire of England but of something still greater, the empire of Christ” they could overcome both the sectarianism within the Church of England and the lack of zeal which was impeding missionary advance around the world.ⁱⁱ Anglicanism, he believed, could include many races but only if the C of E assumed its proper vocation to lead them!

Similar sentiments were heard in SPG's more evangelical counterpart, the Church Missionary Society. In 1907 the President of CMS, wrote of their missionary in the Sudan: “[Mr Lloyd] has been bearing his share of ‘the white man’s burden’ of ruling, civilising and Christianising the ‘silent peoples’ of whom John Bull carries no less than 350 millions on his back.... The duty is no light one, but it gives an outlet for the energies of our people, an object worthy of an Imperial race, of a Christian country, a call to put forth the highest qualities of the Anglo-Saxon character”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Much of Edinburgh 2010 reflected such turn-of-the-century European, and to some extent American, imperialisms. British missionary activity had not always been so identified with the Empire. Indeed the colonial activity itself had not always been so concerned with running the rest of the world. The original aim was more to do with trade, to improve the lot of people back home: such was the concern of the East India Company, which succeeded in banning missionaries altogether until its Charter was redrawn in 1813. It was relatively late in the nineteenth century that the idea of “civilizing the natives” and imposing imperial government

took over. Church of England clerics like Sydney Smith believed that there was no mandate for missionary activity anyway.

For missionaries to become associated with the ideals of “high imperialism” was doubly unfortunate because it meant buying into an ideology of racial hierarchy arising from the kind of social Darwinianism which contradicted the Gospel in so many ways. Yet, as Brian Stanley points out, it was on the basis of this line from the civilized to the barbarian that Edinburgh made its assessment of other cultures and other religions. Even Charles Gore, whose larger vision of catholicity included an openness to what God might be doing elsewhere, began with an estimation of these other insights from a very racist perspective.

Such understandings of the world did not last long. Edinburgh’s talk of “the evangelisation of the world in this generation” was from an awareness of the political, economic and religious circumstances that made this a time of unique opportunity, but also an urgency that it must be grasped now. Four years later Europe was at war, shattering the assumptions of Christian confidence and Social Evolution with regard to human progress. It destroyed the idealism around European civilization and the consequent belief that the rest of the world must not be denied it. By the 1930s the organisers of Edinburgh 1910 were denouncing the vulgar materialism of Western civilization, and calling for missionary activity to combat this “new paganism”. By the 1950s the countries who had been on the receiving end of Western missions were discovering their own identities and seeking, in both state and church, an increasing degree of independence.

We now live in a different kind of world, and a very different kind of world church. In 1910 the Anglican Communion consisted of a few autonomous Provinces, and the rest still led by missionary bishops. In the 1960s it sought to turn its back on colonialism and dependency by asserting “mutual responsibility and interdependence”. Some feel that that Christian imperialism is now coming back in the other direction, as growing Provinces like Nigeria and Uganda try to tell the other parts of the Communion what to do. That would have surprised the participants at Edinburgh 1910 who looked to the East rather than Africa for the expansion of Christianity. But in other ways the issues before the Conference one hundred years ago are still alive today. I mention just five.

1) Missionary Activity

In 1910 mission meant sending people from the West to the East. Some of them saw themselves as part of the imperial advance, others were simply taking advantage of it to spread the Gospel, but like it or not they were all part of a movement which assumed that the Western worldview was normative, and indeed superior. Some of them made great sacrifices, most of them did a great deal of good, they built hospitals and schools, but all the time they were inculcating European moral and spiritual values. They were humanitarian in their actions, even if strict and condescending, and they are still highly praised in the churches which they helped establish. Whilst some of them found the national independence difficult to accept, the reality is that these movements grew from the kind of modernisation and individualism which the missionaries had introduced. Most of all their commitment to translating Scripture and liturgy (in contrast to the Moslems) both strengthened the local language and identity, and opened up the possibility of things which had come from the West taking on a more indigenous shape in different cultures.

At the time of Edinburgh USPG had around a thousand missionaries across the world. Today we have only a few, offering a particular skill at the invitation of the local church. Today missionaries are more likely to be nationals working within their own country, as in India, or people sent out from large evangelical churches in America or Korea - charismatic or fundamentalist, or both – where (echoes of 1910) they take a Gospel which has been shaped by their own individualist, consumer culture, and inevitably they are preaching the values of that Empire rather than those of another Kingdom which might challenge them.

We Anglicans are not immune from this. The Episcopal Church in the States still talks about its “overseas mission”, and I attended one commissioning service where we were told that the couple were “taking the Gospel to Tanzania”, as if the Anglican Church of Tanzania didn’t have at least as much to teach the Americans. At Companion Link meetings here in Britain I increasingly hear people saying that they are “going on mission”, as if two weeks in their linked diocese is to be an act of giving rather than receiving. Even when mission service is more long-term, there are dangers of repeating the old mistakes: it’s true that church people here prefer raising money to send “our own mission partner” rather than fund the church over there to do its own thing, but what is that saying about control and accountability?

The other unfortunate phrase that’s around is “reverse mission”, in which people now come from the South, where the church is growing, to the North which is deemed in need of their spiritual energy. In theory this is a good thing, because mission should now be from everywhere to everywhere, but it’s proved more difficult in practice. In one of the keynote addresses at Edinburgh 2010, Fidon R. Mwombeki said “Many in the North still think their continent is not a mission field. It is Christian already with a few intruders of other religions. They do not understand the idea of a missionary coming from the South to serve in the North.... They regard mission as helping the poor, and therefore the people from the South have no mission in the North—no poor people they are in position to help.”

Unlike their 1910 predecessors missionaries from the South must work within a strange culture rather than impose their own. This can be tough, but when they fail to do so, assuming that their own kind of Christianity is superior, they repeat the old missionaries’ mistakes. Perhaps the most fruitful opening here is going to come from the immigrant Christians (although now second, third generation), like the West Africans who have revitalised inner-city churches in parts of London, and how they find a rightful place within Church of England structures.

2) Dependency

In the middle of the nineteenth century Henry Venn, the visionary General Secretary of CMS, had longed for mission churches to become self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. There had been progress, not least in the consecration of Samuel Crowther as the first African bishop in 1864, but by 1910 this had been overtaken by imperialism, racial superiority and, when success seemed to be slipping away, millennialism. At Edinburgh there were only 19 non-Western participants. One of these was Samuel Azariah, from the SPG diocese of Madras, who would later become Bishop of Dornekal.

Of all the things said at the Conference, Azariah’s address to one of the evening meetings was probably the most significant. He drew attention to the different conditions and remuneration offered to native workers and foreign missionaries. He rooted this in a failure of spirituality, and pleaded for an equal partnership that goes beyond paternalism: “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!” According to Brian Stanley he put it more sharply off the record: “Too often you promise us thrones in heaven, but will not offer us chairs in your dining room”.

A hundred years later we have put that right constitutionally – there is equal representation in the instruments of the Anglican Communion, even if these days the interchange isn’t always friendly – but the financial disparities remain. One of the ironies of recent years is that while some mission agencies (like USPG) have changed their funding methods so that partner churches are helped to build their own capacity according to their own priorities, the donor culture here has increasingly required more direct sponsorship and ownership of what is being supported. Sending self-funded Western personnel, the employment of local personnel but under Western control, and donor selection of projects, are all in danger of recreating the dependencies of 1910.

3) Mission and Development

It's rather alarming to realize that Edinburgh had very little interest in any disinterested philanthropy. Education, for example, was to be provided not for humanitarian reasons but as an aid for evangelism, to equip the church, and to assist the infiltration of the Christian Gospel: its only aim was the direct or indirect making of Christian disciples.

In the century that has followed this has been turned on its head. While missionary societies have grown into a more healthy and holistic understanding of mission, others in the field of "Development", including some Christian agencies, have questioned whether there is anything more to Mission than confronting material poverty and social inequality. One root of this is the kind of 1960's thinking seen in the WCC's "The World Sets the Agenda" – later influenced by, but not fully reflecting, Latin American liberation theology – but another driver has been the funding available from increasingly secular Western governments. These are highly suspicious of what they would call "proselytizing", even when admitting that faith communities may have the best networks and access to delivery in poorer countries. Like their colonial forebears, they want to impose a Western ideology on people who are much more likely to hold the material and the spiritual together.

While the emergence of International Development is to be welcomed, not least for putting the Scriptural emphasis on Justice back on the Church's agenda, we must be careful not to repeat the patterns of self-interest and dependency which characterized the world of 1910. When governments give Aid, how far is it for their advantage and that of their trans-national companies? When trade is opened up and conditions set for the cancellation of debt, who is benefiting most? And when people and churches in the West give money, are we just "helping the poor" or really committed to building just relationships, even if our own standard of living might need to fall?

Needless to say, there was no awareness in 1910 of our current ecological crises. The world was just there to be used. Today we cannot talk about economic justice without being aware of the finitude of growth.

4) Inculcation

The Edinburgh conference gave a lot of thought to the cultural context of evangelism. Its reports show a fear of syncretism and "heathen imports", but also a wish to encourage native evangelists because these people could more easily understand the mind of non-Christians, and an awareness that Christian theology needed to be "written afresh" for every new race to which it came. We've already noted how Edinburgh divided the world between Christendom and "heathendom", and adopted a basically racist and hierarchical yardstick by which non-Western cultures could be assessed. As a result the Conference paid little attention to Africa, whereas in fact Africa became more Christian much more quickly, maybe due to the fact that the mass revival movements and independent churches which generated much of this growth were not under the control of European missionaries.

The Conference was much more sympathetic to Asian cultures. Brian Stanley records the particular contribution of Bishop Charles Gore in these discussions. Gore believed that catholicity was enriched by diversity, so it required that Christianity be inculturated in Asian forms: "each in receiving the one message brings out some different or special aspect of the universal truth or character which lies in the common religion". He wanted the church in every land to be "racy of the soil while it remains Catholic".

What that means in practice continues to challenge Anglicans around the world whose common inheritance is the CofE Book of Common Prayer, and even Hymns Ancient and Modern. The opening session of the last Lambeth Conference featured a Gospel procession with Melanesian dance, and also a sermon by the Bishop of Colombo which finished with what

sounded like a Buddhist mantra: accusations of “syncretism” were on the Anglican Mainstream website before anyone discovered that he had sung the Christian doxology to a Sri Lankan chant. In many parts of Africa Anglican leaders fear losing their younger people whose wish for livelier worship comes from both their own culture and the American evangelists they now see on satellite T.V.

Beyond liturgy, the issue Inculturation also affects the way we read the Bible and make moral decisions, and so underlies the problems presently being experienced by the Anglican Communion. Many churches in the South believe that developments around same-sex partnerships in North America betray both traditional African culture and what they received from the nineteenth century European missionaries. From the opposite corner comes the argument that just as the kind of racism and imperialism which characterised Edinburgh 1910 needed to be corrected, so today the liberating Gospel needs to be extended to women, and to gay and lesbian people. The challenge to both sides is whether the stance they are taking is an authentic and faithful expression of their Christian faith, or a surrender to the particular culture in which they find themselves. We should not be surprised that a more African emphasis on the communal and hierarchical comes into tension with an American belief in individual fulfilment and self-determination. The deeper issue for Anglicans is whether the kind of catholicity which Gore began to develop at Edinburgh is strong enough to enable us to continue staying and travelling together.

5) Other Religions

The remarkable thing about Edinburgh was the recognition that many missionaries gave to other faiths, not so much in Africa where some failed to find the kind of dogma and institutions with which they associated religion, but certainly in the East. For many Christianity was to be seen and preached as the fulfilment of what others had sought and partially found in other faiths, although that was easier to claim, if only historically, for Hinduism than for Islam. Claims by later commentators that Edinburgh adopted at least an incipient dialogue model may be going too far, but there is certainly a foundation here for the more open inter-faith dialogue which we know today, and sometimes in marked contrast to the more crusading Christianity with which we often associate the missionary era.

Conclusion

The greatest achievement of Edinburgh 1910 may not have been the Conference, but the ecumenical developments which flowed from it, and in particular the International Missionary Council. The history of the I.M.C., up to the point where it became part of the World Council of Churches, reflects the changing patterns of missionary endeavour through the decades which followed Edinburgh, including the tensions between “social gospel” and a more Barthian theology of mission and evangelism.

It was at the Willingen meeting of the I.M.C. in 1952 that the phrase “*missio dei*” came into its own. It states that mission is the activity of God, and an expression of the life of the Triune God overflowing into our world. It marked the end of any assumption, as seen in Edinburgh, that missionary activity could be from one part of the world to another: the boundary was no longer geographical but between faith and non-faith, between Christian discipleship and simply identifying with your own culture. It sat in judgement on any distinctions based on power, race, history, or affluence. It took the Church seriously, but only if the Church will surrender its own mission and see itself as showing and engaging in the mission which belongs to God.

The *missio dei* is not an invitation to escape the demands of this world into a more spiritual understanding of mission or a more separated kind of church. In fact, quite the opposite. Those who gathered in Edinburgh in 1910, whatever the limits of their colonial worldview, had a

global vision, and the missionaries amongst them had sacrificed and risked much because they believed in the Gospel. The challenge for us today is to resist the new colonialisms presented by global economic systems, new patterns of dependency, a donor culture which wants to select the beneficiaries of our charity, and the temptation to be friends only with those with whom we agree. The invitation is to join in God's mission, in all its wholeness, in all its barrier-breaking power. If the Anglican Communion could get back to those priorities, who knows what the evangelisation of the world might mean in our generation.

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ⁱ The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910. Brian Stanley. Eerdmans. 2009

ⁱⁱ Foreign Missions, Henry H Montgomery, Longmans, Green & Co. 1902

ⁱⁱⁱ Preface to "In dwarf land and cannibal country". A B Lloyd. T Fisher Unwin (pub) 1907