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Edinburgh 1990

'New Prospects for Mission': An Inaugural Event in Mission Studies

TIMOTHY YATES

Edinburgh 1910 remains in retrospect a watershed for the modern missionary and the modern ecumenical movements. So much of modern world Christianity was present in embryonic form there. Eighty years on from that great international gathering, a much smaller but still significant meeting took place at New College, Edinburgh, which had considerable potential for the theory and practice of mission and its serious study in the UK. It was the inauguration in July 1990 of the British and Irish Association for Mission Studies, when some 70 members were invited by the faculty of New College to the Mound. Here, with some sense of occasion and appropriateness, the inaugural lecture was given by Professor Andrew Walls in the same great assembly hall of the Church of Scotland which, since 1910, has been a place of pilgrimage for many Christians and, in what now seems a different political era, was the scene of a Prime Ministerial address, known locally as the 'Sermon on the Mound'. Professor Walls' lecture 'Edinburgh 1910 and the Prospect for Mission' reminded the hearers of the amazing changes over eighty years. These include an African continent, which in 1900 had a Christian population of 10 million and today 'at an educated guess' has over 225 million; some indication that John Mott's words at Edinburgh that 'the best is yet to be' had validity then and may have even greater historical validity yet. Perhaps what was launched at Edinburgh in 1990 may make some small contribution towards the fulfilment of that prophecy.

A glance at the bibliographies provided in each issue of the *International Review of Mission* by Professor Walls and Dr Christopher Smith serves to underline what a vigorous field mission studies represents. An earlier issue of *Anvil* carried a report of a meeting of the International Association for Mission Studies in Zimbabwe (vol.2, no.1, 1985), an association which undoubtedly provided much of the stimulus for a British and Irish equivalent; a welcome letter of good wishes from the veteran Norwegian missiologist, Professor Myklebust, founding father and visionary of IAMS, was a symbolic link between them. The Rome meeting of IAMS in 1988 had provided further stimulus for British participants (notably Martin Conway, President of the Selly Oak College in Birmingham) to convene a meeting in Birmingham in September 1989 towards such a British association. A committee which included, among others, Dr Andrew Kirk, Dean of Mission at Selly Oak and Theologian Missioner of CMS, Professor Walls, Dr Haddon Willmer of Leeds Uni-

versity, Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, Canon James Anderson of the General Synod Board of Mission and Dr Aylward Shorter, President of the Roman Catholic Missionary Institute in London, was set up at the end of the consultation; and it was agreed that, like the WCC prior to Amsterdam 1948, the association should be termed 'in process of formation'. Participants at the inauguration in July included representatives from theological departments, colleges, missionary societies, synodical and diocesan boards of mission, the Bible Society and the Centre for New Religious Movements in Birmingham. There were also representatives of the overseas churches present who were working and studying in this country, including those from Uganda, Burma, South India and Europeans who had served in the Latin American and African continents in a variety of capacities. Those present testified to the value of a gathering which included 'ecumenicals' and 'evangelicals' and represented different confessional allegiances, among them Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, and other Anglican provinces, Methodists and Baptists.

Mission in the 1990's

The conference papers began with a wide ranging survey by Dr Andrew Kirk on 'The World Setting of Christian Mission'. Here the contrast of our world with that of Edinburgh 1910 was stressed, notably the speed of communication and travel, combined with the explosion of knowledge, its complexity, and its accessibility by use of computers, the specialisation which such an explosion of data has necessarily resulted in, leading to an accelerating professionalism. The contrast between the location and the distribution of the world's resources was described, a Third World rich in natural resources and labour, while the wealthy nations hold the capital and technological resources, leading to a burden of debt resting on the poorer nations. In terms of population, there has been the movement into cities, often accompanied by the splitting up of families and the phenomenon of 'guest workers'. Nations such as India were able to double their population between 1955 and 1980 and others such as Egypt and Kenya were moving in the same direction, while the developed nations often showed, by contrast, ageing populations. Faced by the manifest challenges of the modern world, the identifiable tendencies seem to be to 'go east' (the New Age movement was described as an amalgam of India and California) to 'go green' in recognition that the future of the planet is at stake ecologically, or to 'go broke', when the availability of credit leads to the disintegration of families and nations. There is a growing clash of religious convictions and a fundamentalist resistance to pluralism. Economic determinism is being resisted, whether in the 'green' cause or in the name of the poor. For some, the response to complexity is to lapse into dependency and, on a macroscale, to lay overwhelming demands on the state.

Responding to this sombre analysis, Dr Aylward Shorter wanted to emphasise the hopeful things, representing a faith-response in the modern world, the stress on justice and the work of liberation theologians; others pointed to new hope in Eastern Europe. Dr Willmer cast doubt on such a survey, with its necessarily large generalisations, leading in his view to equally suspect 'strategies for mission'. Dr Kirk used the experience of his wide travels to reply that these had brought home to him the 'one world' aspect of economic and cultural influence: families of the Third World are affected by factors he had mentioned, a view endorsed by Bishop Patrick Kalilombe. People are, however, looking for an alternative to what the west and its civilisation has offered, as its promises have failed to be fulfilled.

During the afternoon, a twenty four gun salute, welcoming Her Majesty the Queen to Holyrood House, made reports of such force and proximity that some participants needed to be reassured against the threat of a coup or the presence of the IRA. In the evening, Professor Duncan Forrester, Principal of New College, introduced the inaugural lecture by Andrew Walls already referred to, a fascinating and widely informed historical account. He expressed his own hopes for the future of the association. In summary they were: that, as at Edinburgh in 1910, there should be glimpsed a Christianity far larger than itself; that, as had followed 1910 through the initiative of J.H. Oldham and the founding of the IRM, there should be a renaissance of serious, rigorous and productive mission studies; finally that, as then, the conference should provide common goals for both ecumenical and evangelical Christians, who need still to discover their unity.

Cross cultural Mission

The second day contained a paper by the Revd Yemi Lapido, a Nigerian Anglican with experience of parochial work in Northern Nigeria and Canonbury in North London, with the further qualification in this setting of being a former Muslim, who found Christ in his twenties. He was moved from this basis of experience, later in the conference, to ask those who spoke on inter-faith matters not to be 'more charitable than Christ himself', speaking as one who had experienced at a profound level what conversion from Islam to Christ could mean. On his subject 'The Equipment and Transformation of the Church for Mission' he had come to the reluctant conclusion, that the wish of the average layperson is for a church building, a clergyman, services and, above all, to be left alone! While it might be important for the clergy to delegate, this is not an invitation to abdicate. For all the dangers of clericalism, lay tyranny can be as bad as clerical oppression. In Britain, although people admired him for his cross-cultural commitment, he shared the view of a woman missionary who had said to him on her leave 'they admire me but they do not listen to me'. As he compared the churches in Africa with those of the

west, the younger churches are strong on evangelism but weak on discipleship but he found the reverse true in the west. Among many insights, he emphasised that maturity in the Church is not of the old 'three selfs' kind (self-support, self-government, self-propagation) but in a growth of inter-dependency 'going and letting others come'. A self-centred Church, he affirmed, is a contradiction-in-terms of Christian maturity.

Mission and the environment

The next paper, 'Environment, Society and Human Rights', given by Father Sean MacDonagh, until recently a Roman Catholic missionary in the Philippines, was a stirring appeal to face the theological and ecological challenges of our day, delivered with a combination of wide intellectual grasp and profound sense of urgency and passion. After introducing the excitement of the post-Vatican II era (he had arrived in the Philippines three years later) in areas such as inculturation, styles of worship, dialogue with other faiths, and the option for the poor, he underlined that the core of his message was that 'the earth has been virtually forgotten'. To thumb through journals of mission for the years 1985-90 is to find, with the single exception of the *International Review of Mission* of April 1990, that environmental issues are ignored. Yet the magnitude and urgency of the task is overwhelming, not only on the more familiar items of acid rain, pollution of the oceans, depletion of the water table and greenhouse gases but in the destruction of arable land and what he termed the 'mega-extinction' of species. E.O. Wilson has estimated that there are 10,000 species lost per annum. The Christian tradition is strong on human suicide but inadequate on biocide. As he looked at the tribal communities who face destruction in the modern world they seem like the canaries that miners used to take into the mines: their deaths are a warning to the whole human race of its precarious situation. Roman Catholic missions have helped tribal people in the Philippines, then facing extinction, but another decade will lose them. He pointed to one mountain in the Philippines where more novel species had been discovered than in the whole of the USA, yet these could be lost in two or three years if present tendencies in relation to de-forestation and soil erosion continued with their sequential effects. Vatican II was a major achievement but it offered nothing on the destruction of the natural world but a theology of domination. In *Gaudium et Spes* all things are related to man, in sharp contrast to the Filipino tribal (or Buddhist) understanding of reverence for the creation. Yet the Old Testament exhibits a real respect not only for human beings but also for the land itself, which is also to be given a sabbath rest. The battle for the environment will be won or lost in the 1990's and an adequate theology is needed whereby converts are not made to an 'extracted' Christ but to the Christ who is central to the creation in his resurrected being and as creation's goal.

Responding to the powerful impact of MacDonagh's paper Dr Ayl-

ward Shorter pointed to aspects of the Roman Catholic tradition which need reasserting, notably the symbiotic approach (to God and the earth) witnessed to by a figure like Gerard Manley Hopkins in 'strike the earth and it gives sparks of God'. Bishop Patrick Kalilombe underlined that the real challenge lay with the consumerism of the West and its reversal. Dr Christopher Wright of All Nations College drew attention to the eschatological element in the creation's relationship to God in the OT and the need for attitudes which might reflect some of the New Age concerns without going overboard into New Age thinking.

Mission and religious pluralism

The final session of the day was devoted to 'Mission and Other Faiths'. The Revd Andrew Wingate, now Principal of the College of the Ascension, Birmingham and past member of staff of the Tamil Nadu Theological College, addressed the title in an original and arresting way, often by the use of theologically pointed anecdotes. It is imperative, he maintained, to remember that other faiths are changing and that, for example, Hinduism in Britain is different from Hinduism in India. Caste is present in Britain but less central. His own family illustrated inter-religious concerns: his sister married a Muslim and herself became a Muslim; his father, an Anglican clergyman, opened his vicarage to 30 Muslim girls and set aside a room in it as a prayer room. Is this to compromise Christian faith or is there something to learn from the intense gratitude of the guests, who said that they had not believed that such a thing could happen in Britain? He himself had visited a mosque with a group of students; was he right to defend his Christian faith when it was criticised and bear witness to it strongly, or were his students, in their silence as Christians, correct in viewing themselves as guests in the house of Islam with a reticence appropriate to their role? There was much more thought provoking material in this address; and, although one participant regarded it as a retreat into *praxis*, so avoiding the kind of central theological issues which a society like BIAMS might be expected to address, not least on the uniqueness of Christ, the concrete witness of inter-faith exchange, with their existential realities, may have reached those parts of the hearers which other theological mixtures might have failed to reach. They provoked an Indian Christian visitor, complete with *sari*, a lady of many generations of Christian background and connections with YWCA as a worker, to recount her own experiences as the Christian wife of a Hindu husband.

Mission and theology, culture and God's future

The three remaining papers were of an equally wide-ranging kind on important subjects. Colin Chapman, now Principal of Crowther Hall, Selly Oak, but then still teaching at Trinity College, Bristol and with

experience of the Cathedral and Coptic College in Cairo as also of the Lebanon, gave an able review on 'Mission and Theological Education', showing how the dominance of biblical, doctrinal and historical subjects in the theological syllabus make it hard for missiology to find its rightful place. As long ago as 1844 Alexander Duff had called for a chair of mission, but his own occupancy of it had been an example of the dictum 'an admirable idea... but exceedingly difficult to work out'. He listed various options for the inclusion of mission studies; he himself favoured a curriculum which has Bible, Doctrine and History as its surrounding features but at its core 'Mission and Ministry' as the integrating element which the other disciplines support and feed. David Bosch, the South African missiologist, also favoured an approach of this general kind. One result of this paper, which clearly articulated widely felt issues, was the formation of a continuing interest group aimed at putting missiology into the theological curriculum. Next, Dr Stan Nussbaum, a North American who studied under Professor Bosch and researched independent churches in Lesotho but is now working in Birmingham with the Centre for New Religious Movements, gave a paper on 'Mission and Culture'. He contrasted the approach of Edinburgh 1910, where the need to study, respect and assess culture was present, with North American tele-evangelism and modern trends of short-term engagement, where 'self-expression is an inalienable right, accommodation an intolerable burden'. He proposed a new 'three-selves' formula for the 1980's: the Church in each different culture should become self-initiating, self-contextualising and self-critical. Finally, Dr Eleanor Jackson, a church historian who has taught both in India and in Germany, presented a paper on 'Mission and the Fulness of the Church'. She revealed that her own great-uncle had attended Edinburgh 1910 and went on to give a profound theological and historical treatment of her theme. In the course of it she recounted her own rebuke to a German professor of theology who had remarked that 'missions are on the fringe of the Church's life': '*Ohne Mission gibt es keine Kirche*' (without mission there is no Church - nor, she added, theological professors). By contrast to this reductionist attitude, mission is of the *esse* and not just the *bene esse* of the Church, the bearer of God's fulness. In the context of the green debate, this implies wholeness which looks towards the consummation of the created order, so that the fulness of the Church involves the fulness of the world, of which the Christ is the first fruits and in which individual Christians find their fulness, self-fulfilment and salvation. Fulness in the church involves taking lay people seriously. It was a great layman, John Mott, standing at the same lectern as Andrew Walls had stood in the Assembly Hall, who declared 'our best days are yet to come'.

A group of Christians who can mount a gathering of such interconfessional and internationally-aware a character deserves congratulation. Edinburgh 1990 gave promise of contributions of real impor-

tance for the Church in Britain and beyond. BIAMS needs, as IAMS also needs, to live up to its name and to produce *studies* rooted in the *praxis* of mission, carrying conviction as theologically literate, with a contemporary application which is alive to the realities of mission today. If the papers read here are a sign of what is to come, the society should become a matrix of just the kind of living theology which the Church so greatly needs for its health and mission.

The Revd Canon Timothy Yates is Director of Ordinands in the Diocese of Derby.