

China in the Discussion of Edinburgh 1910

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Introduction

In this contribution I will look back into the debates of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference 1910. In preparation of its jubilee in 2010 new studies have been undertaken on this conference, and it is striking which prominent place Asia and, more specifically, China had in the mind of many present at Edinburgh and, more generally, in the eyes of the missiologists of the epoch.

I will first give a brief introduction to the conference and its objectives and focus there on the observations made on China.

Relating the conference's deliberations to our topic I will, in a second part, outline the discussion in the Edinburgh report on China's religions, as it was termed at that time, and how mission around 1910 thought to relate to the believers of these religions.

One of the points which in looking back to the conference has often been criticised was that of 1215 official delegates only 18 came from the so-called younger churches. But among those the delegates from South and East Asia played an important role. In a third part I will briefly present the contributions of two Chinese delegates to the conference and propose an evaluation of how their input was received.

1. The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910

The eight intensively prepared Commission reports are one of the striking features which distinguish the First World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh of 1910 from earlier conferences.¹ They were based on the work of core groups studying and summarising materials provided by missionaries and correspondents round the globe who had answered to a questionnaire. The resulting volumes range from 190 to 450 pages and were discussed at the Edinburgh conference.

The report of Commission I was named "Carrying the Gospel to the Non-Christian World" and begun thus:

"It is a startling and solemnising fact that even as late as the twentieth century the Great Command of Jesus Christ to carry the Gospel to all mankind is still so largely unfulfilled. It is a ground for great hopefulness that, notwithstanding the serious situation occasioned by such neglect, the Church is confronted to-day, as in no preceding generation, with a literally world-wide opportunity to make Christ known. There may have been times when in certain non-Christian lands the missionary forces of Christianity stood face to face with as pressing opportunities as those now presented in the same fields, but never before has there been such a conjunction of crises and of opening of doors in all parts of the world as that which characterises the present decade. It is likewise true that never on the home field have the conditions been more favourable for waging a campaign of evangelisation adequate in scope, in thoroughness, and in power. Therefore, the first duty of a World Missionary Conference meeting at such an auspicious time is to consider the present world situation from the point of view of making the Gospel

¹ In the volume "History and Records" the organizers of the Edinburgh conference present how they placed their own conference in relation to earlier meetings, see World Missionary Conference, 1910. The History and records of the Conference together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Meetings, Edinburgh, London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, n. y., 4-14. It is striking to realise how their own assumptions about the conference have in the later studies been omitted. Stanley notes that the Edinburgh conference was counted originally as the Third Ecumenical Conference and is probably the one conference "which suffers from the distortions of hindsight"; see Brian Stanley, The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910 (Studies in the History of Christian Missions) Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2009, 9, 18.

known to all men, and to determine what should be done to accomplish this Christ-given purpose."²

This opening paragraph succinctly states the purpose of the meeting in 1910. The conference was conceived to study together (1) the situation of Christian mission and (2) that of the other religions on the globe in order to undertake (3) strategic planning for common action in the non-Christian world (4) in an auspicious hour.

To carry the Gospel – in an almost literal sense – to the non-Christian world was possible because those regions had been explored like never before, because communication was possible and because even the remotest areas were now accessible to Westerners.³

1.1 Map and territories

Here the Christian nations and there the non-Christian world: the organizers and the participants shared this geographical perspective with the majority of the mission movement of their time. The map of the territories considered to form the non-Christian world was, however, in part due to a confessional dispute. The Protestant organizers of the conference worked hard in order to win Anglicans to participate. Those should be called more precisely Anglo-Catholics to make the debate understandable. They insisted that one could count on their presence only if the other Protestant denominations ruled out any suspicion that they saw Catholic or orthodox Christians as objects of possible Protestant missionary activities. Therefore Latin America was excluded from the conference's geography as a Christian continent although some Protestants like the well-known German missiologist Julius Richter regarded Catholics as semi-Christians who needed to be evangelised.⁴ The easiest way to ensure the participation of the Anglicans was that the architects of the conference agreed to look solely on these areas where definitely only non-Christians were dwelling.⁵ In other words, the drawing of the map of the non-Christian world was in part a concession to make a wider Christian participation of the home basis possible by excluding some of the hot issues like proselytism.

It seems to me that the authors of Report I had a division of the non-Christian world into three symbolic areas in mind: Asia, especially China takes a key position in the conquest and occupation of the non-Christian world. One hint to this is that the part on China is titled "The Chinese Empire". In contrast to this, India is presented not as a political but a regional entity. Edinburgh "presumed that the great civilizations of Asia stood on the brink of progressive transformation by a specifically Christian movement of reform and modernisation led by educated elites".⁶ The second division was made up of these regions which so far had not been conquered and which were a challenge to Christian Western governments and mission alike. The third division was formed by one religion: Islam as a competing faith and missionary religion clashing again and again with Christian mission in various regions. Islam was considered to be a mighty and aggressive missionary power that threatened to stop Christian mission and to do successful mission itself.⁷

In the report of Commission I some conditions are identified as to why the situation in China was considered to be so favourable to the proclamation of the Gospel by foreign missionaries. The climate was relatively favourable for foreign missionaries (83)⁸, the dense population in many

² World Missionary Conference, 1910. Report of Commission II: The Church in the Mission Field, Edinburgh, London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, n. y., 1.

³ World Missionary Conference, 1910. Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to the Non-Christian World, Edinburgh, London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, n. y., 5.

⁴ Stanley, World Missionary Conference, 2.

⁵ Stanley, World Missionary Conference, 50ff. The cases of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Persia demonstrate that this was no easy exercise. Here one had to be very precise as to whom to include and whom not, 63.

⁶ Stanley, World Missionary Conference, 16. World Missionary Conference, 1910. Report of Commission I.

⁷ World Missionary Conference, 1910. Report of Commission I, 18; 110 ("British Malaysia"), 213 and 218 (Africa); Report of Commission IV, 122.

⁸ The following page numbers refer to World Missionary Conference, 1910. Report of Commission I.

regions heightened the effectiveness of missionary work and called for less stations and church buildings (84f.), and the Mandarin language was widespread so that one translation of the Bible and of evangelistic literature could be used in large regions (86).

Other points highlight the importance of the Chinese mission field, although they are not developed. Interestingly enough for a report on mission, the enormous carbon reserves and the occurrence of iron are mentioned: "China is likely to be the coming power in our age of steel." (82) To this adds Report IV: "the incalculable consequences for Western civilisation which must result from the industrialising of China and the entrance of her enormous population as an efficient factor into 'the great industry' of the world." (IV: 224)

The second point underlines the long and rich history culminating in a highly developed civilization. This process would, in the opinion of the commentators, find a new culmination in a conversion of China to the Christian faith: "All these religions [e.g. those of China] are utterly inadequate to meet China's spiritual need, despite the laudations of Confucius' highly ethical teachings and the attractive mysticism of Lao-Tse. These religious systems have had full opportunity to be tested, and have failed." (89)

1.2 "The Hour"

The Edinburgh conference did not only understand its planning in a spatial dimension but also in an eschatological dimension. The participants shared, by and large, the perception of living at a moment in history which was marked by an exceptional "conjunction of crises and opening of doors".

"One of the most significant and hopeful facts with reference to world evangelisation its that the vast majority of the people of the non-Christian nations and races are under the sway, either of Christian Governments or of those not antagonistic to Christian missions."⁹

"The minds of the people in most countries are more open and favourable to the wise and friendly approach of the Christian missionaries than at any time in the past."¹⁰

"The leaders of the nation [Japan, Formosa, Luhu islands] and other thoughtful men are feeling the need of a new moral basis, and many of them are looking to Christianity to furnish it."¹¹

(One question we tackled in our consultation echoes the last statement of almost a hundred years ago, formulated in the language of that time.)

"The non-Christian religions are losing their hold on certain classes."¹²

The above-mentioned quotes demonstrate that the delegates of the Edinburgh conference saw themselves as living in an unprecedented time. They understood the historical situation as an eschatological moment in God's plan for the non-Christian world. Thanks to God, the resources in numbers of believers and supporters at the home basis were great, the mission-fields sufficiently extended, and the number and strength of the missionary societies were more than sufficient to accomplish the task. In short:

"It is possible to-day as never before to have a campaign adequate to carry the Gospel to all the non-Christian world *so far as the Christian Church is concerned*." (10)

However, it is remarked: "In some parts of the world the non-Christian religions are attempting to adapt themselves to modern conditions and are manifesting increased activities, enterprise and aggressiveness." (13f.)

It is in this context that China is mentioned for the first time in the report of Commission I. It is Confucianism which presents Confucius, the sage par excellence, as a heavenly figure "possibly to give him a place corresponding to that of Jesus Christ in the worship of the West" (16).

⁹ World Missionary Conference, 1910. Report of Commission I, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid. 6.

¹¹ Ibid. 6.

¹² Ibid. 11. Namely, the educated classes.

My point is that the quoted statements are presented in the introduction as "facts". In part 3 of volume I we find a passage titled "The Superhuman Factor in Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World". In this section, it is stated that missionaries could not have accomplished anything without God's power and interference. The facts reported in the introduction are here interpreted thus that the favourable conditions and especially the diagnosed weakness of the non-Christian religions are God's deeds: "He has entrusted enormous powers to Christian nations. His providence has opened the approach to Non-Christian countries, determined the order of their occupation, and developed agencies and influences which facilitate the spread of Christianity." (352) "He has been working through the non-Christian religions, not alone in using such truth as they may possess for the betterment of men, but also in making these religions a schoolmaster to lead the peoples to recognise in due time their need of Christ." (352)

It is conspicuous that the examples of God's working in history and in the life of the people quoted in this passage stem almost exclusively from Asia and, more prominently, from China. One example which is presented is how God turned the consequences of the Boxer Rebellion against those who had planned to wipe out Christians:

"Many have called attention to the overruling hand of God in connection with the boxer uprising in China. They recognise His power and guidance in the fact that the very action which was intended to extirpate Christianity in China has had, as one of its results, an unprecedented forward movement in missionary work in that country, and that since the year 1900 the doors have been opened to the Gospel far wider than before." (354)

Then we read about the persecution of the Chinese Church: "For example the most marked characteristic of the Chinese Christians is their steadfastness, their willingness to endure hardship and even death for the sake of Christ." (358)

An amusing detail which condenses some of these assessments is a remark on the Emperor who had read a New Testament translation with interest and proposed some improvements in style! (101. It does not, however, become clear whether the authors quote this ironically or understand it as a positive sign; but to me the emperor's comment on style instead of content is somehow telling in the context of classical Chinese education.)

On the other hand, it is outstanding that in the report on China a bishop by the name of Ding is mentioned as "a leading Chinese Christian" (104). That is remarkable in two ways: firstly, that a native Christian is mentioned at all, which is rare in these reports which quote almost exclusively Western missionaries. And, secondly, because the three Chinese delegates in Edinburgh were prominent and one of them, Cheng Jingyi, delivered two speeches in the meetings.

2. Chinese religions discussed

In the report of Commission IV "The Christian message in relation to Non-Christian Religions" the non-Christian religions are presented in five divisions: animistic religions, Chinese religions, the religions of Japan, Islam, Hinduism. Compared to a list of what usually is considered as a world religion this division is somewhat surprising. Some religions are characterised, so to speak, by their nature: animistic; others are referred to by a name as a distinctive entity – Islam, Hinduism – and still others are grouped by regions. I think this reflects in a way the specific way the conference had been drawing its map of the non-Christian world. As a consequence Buddhism is not addressed separately and dealt with only in the Mahayana tradition and as a regional religion of China and of Japan.

The above-mentioned quote that the religions are God's schoolmaster leading people to Christ introduces the ruling perspective on other religions: the fulfilment theory. Most of the delegates had no doubt that the fate of all non-Christian religions was ultimately to recognise their fulfilment in Christ which meant that the missionaries expected the Christian religion eventually to win over the non-Christian world.

Ramachandra estimates in his recent review on Report IV that most of the responses to the questionnaire came on Hinduism but that clearly the religions of China and Japan caught the imagination of the readers in the West. He comments that the commission received only four

responses on Buddhism but that ironically today only Buddhism could get some hold on Western minds.¹³

Although the fulfilment theory had been developed mainly in dialogue with Hinduism, most prominently Vedanta tradition and Bhakti, so to speak the great and philosophical tradition in the Hindu universe, it is interesting to see how the idea of fulfilment also dominates the view on Chinese religions. "The Gospel can only be made known widely by missionaries who keenly appreciate the intrinsic greatness of the Chinese and who are able to use helpful elements in Chinese history and racial character for the extension of the Kingdom of God." (97) Many of the missionaries attempted to find such points of contact, and a list of 13 such points, drawn from the questionnaire and ranging from divine providence over moral law to the Golden rule, was presented.¹⁴ Stanley writes: "Probably the majority of China respondents were willing to regard the moral teachings of Confucius as in some sense a preparation for the acceptance of Christianity."¹⁵

In the summary of the discussion on the reports one the Revd Lloyd of the CMS states that in China filial piety is considered as the highest gift and grace, and he continues to elaborate that therefore Chinese could find an easy way to the idea of the fatherhood of God (IV: 301). However, the overview over the Chinese religions is devastating. Some quotes to this effect:

The religion of the Chinese people is an incongruous mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This is only possible because there is no reasoned-out system of belief, and none of the three religions is carried to its logical issues. (38)

Some speak of the "inborn and inbred mendacity", Chinese lie and are dishonest, sexual vice is widespread as Opium smoking is. Chinese do not have a sense of sin but a sense of pride: Chinese civilisation is superior to all others, and this forms a hindrance to Christian mission.

To think and act as an independent individual is contrary to the current of Chinese social life – It destroys the family harmony and breaks up its cohesion. (46)

The great commandment is the ancestor worship. (46)

The biggest hindrance is its foreign origin. "The acceptance of an alien creed would be a reflection on their sages and a confession of inferiority." Christianity is the religion of those who have insulted and injured China. (48)

The good lives of many Christians, their well-doing, patient suffering, upright dealing, love of truth, trustworthiness, and good conduct generally appeal strongly to those who know them. (60)

... "the thing which China needs to-day beyond all else is moral power". (221)

The rituals and prayers etc. are considered to be purely formal and mere forms. (40)

Still, in search for points of contact the Chinese religions are not the devilish opponent. Report IV states in its passage on China: "All history shows that without religion no civilisation can live. No man can tell the evils and the sorrow to China and not to China alone but to the whole human race, that must follow the decay of religion throughout this great Empire. It would be far better for

¹³ Vinoth Ramachandra, 'The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions': The Edinburgh 1910 Commission IV Report and Beyond, 2.

¹⁴ World Missionary Conference. Report of Commission IV, 54f.

¹⁵ Stanley, World Missionary Conference, 234.

China to keep the religion that she has than to discard it for materialism and atheism. There is only one force that can prevent this disaster, and that is the power of Jesus Christ."¹⁶

The search for points of contact between Chinese religions and Christian faith and of a preparation of the believers of the Chinese religions for Christ is far from a modern understanding of dialogue, the more so because the analysis of the religious state of China was so devastating. But Stanley cites Cracknell who exalted the missionary Mackenzie as a forerunner of modern theories of interreligious dialogue. Mackenzie had proposed to the conference a list of ten points of contact and "gave such pronounced emphasis to the importance of sympathy, attentiveness, and discrimination in missionary evangelism" (235).

Here and there a quite modern idea appears in the reasoning on fulfilment theory and in the search for points of contact. That each religion is under the judgment of God is, according to the mission theologies of the time, true for all non-Christian religions. Whereas this idea seems to draw a line between Christian religion and others, it is interesting to note that some missionaries at the time continued and questioned in how far their own faith and their understanding could be considered to fully embody the religion of Christ.¹⁷ From here it would be only a small step to admit that a Christian could learn about his or her faith through exchange with others.

The idea that Christian theology could learn anything from the Chinese religions was, however, in Edinburgh explicitly denied.¹⁸ What is more, any suspicion that another than the Christian religion could somehow have a salvific quality was very far from the mind of the respondents and commentators. Ultimately, the figure of fulfilment presented the view that the best in these religions would be merging into Christianity. John Farquhar, a strong proponent of this fulfilment theory for Hinduism, stated quite clearly that Christianity, as climax and culmination, of all religion ultimately meant the extinction of other religions: "Clearly Christianity will be the one religion of man, or else there will be no religion."¹⁹

3. Chinese delegates and their input in Edinburgh

In a third part I would like to present the input of two Chinese delegates to Edinburgh which demonstrates that their main reflection was on other points than those presented so far from the Western perspective.

There were 1215 official delegates at the conference. The proportions substantiate the conference's geographical perspective of the globe: 510 British, 490 North Americans, 171 continental Europeans, 28 from the white colonies of South Africa and Australasia. Only 18 of the 1215 could be called indigenous Christians, and eight of these were Indians, four Japanese, three Chinese, one Korean, one Burmese, and one of Turkish origin. Most of them very well educated.

The Chinese delegates were Mr. Cheng Jingyi, Mr. Tsang ding Tong [T. Y. Chang] and Prof. Tong Ching-En [Tong Tsing-En or Dong Jingan] from Shanghai Baptist Theological Seminary (95).²⁰

Stanley underlines that obviously John Mott, the chairman of the conference, exercised a kind of positive discrimination in making sure that the South and East Asian delegates were visible: "Each East Asian was given at least one opportunity to participate in the debates, whereas only four of the nine South Asians did so."²¹

¹⁶ World Missionary Conference. Report on Commission IV, 226.

¹⁷ Ramachandra, *The Missionary Message*, 2-3.

¹⁸ "Taken as a whole the religions of China to-day have nothing very distinctive to suggest to Christian theology, such as we shall find in Hinduism and Islam." World Missionary Conference. Report on Commission IV, 223.

¹⁹ Quoted in Stanley, *World Missionary Conference*, 219.

²⁰ Stanley, *World Missionary Conference*, 91. Two other Chinese were present, Dr. C. C. Wang from LMS, Shanghai, who made a strong statement in the context of Commission VII on the "missions' resort to the judicial and military aid of western powers" in China. Dr. Ida Kahn, a Chinese woman doctor in Jiangxi province, delivered a lecture in a side conference, see 93.

²¹ Stanley, *World Missionary Conference*, 94f.

Tong Ching-en was from Shanghai. In the debate on Report IV on Christian Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions he spoke about hindrances which Christian religion met. One major concern was the ethics or, I would like to say, morals effected by Confucianism over thousands of years. Piety to the parents, loyalty and faithfulness to the Emperor were named.

More especially, he reminded the younger generation that if they continued to prefer English literature in their education in the mission school to the Chinese classics, they risked to be considered as foreigners. Now we can read this as apologetics or, how it was termed, a search for points of contact. On the other hand, it can be read as an example of inculturation and a call for patriotism: Do not adapt such a Christian way of life which would allow the other Chinese to call you a foreigner. Not Christians in China, but Chinese Christians, we could say, echoing a famous Indian formula. Tong is also searching for points of contact. He mentions the insistence of Buddhism on asceticism and argues that Chinese Christians should live in a way like the Buddhists, clean and separated from evil and worldly ways (302).

The most noticeable Chinese at the conference was Cheng Jingyi, a young pastor of the Mi-shih Hutung Church in Beijing. He had worked in London on a revision of a Mandarin translation of the New Testament and after some years in England spoke English very fluently which at that time was an exception among Chinese (107f.). He was a Manchu, and Stanley highlights that it was surprising that a Manchu was able to take such important positions in Christian committees and churches, given that after the Republican revolution from 1911-12 the long Manchu reign in the Chinese Empire had been brought to an end (110).

Twice Cheng Jingyi addressed the main assembly. In the discussion of Commission II "The Church in the Mission Field" he provoked the delegates by challenging them to allow self-government of the indigenous churches (108).

In his second speech during the discussion of the report of Commission VIII on "Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity" he brought forward a strong conviction claiming: "We hope to see, in the near future, a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions"²², and he went on to declare that "denominationalism has never interested the Chinese mind. He finds no delight in it, but sometimes he suffers for it".²³

Now it is well known that the three selves – self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagation – are principles going back to the missionary discussion in the 19th century. As such they have been discussed in Edinburgh, and an indigenous Chinese Christian challenged the Ecumenical Conference on this and went on to ask for more self-responsibility. We will see later that Westerners doubted that the Chinese Christians were mature enough.

The Chinese contributions at Edinburgh highlight that two characteristics of today's official Chinese Christianity, the Three-selves and the claimed post-denominationalism, have already been claimed in Edinburgh.

4. Conclusion

If India was seen as "The White Man's Burden", China may have been more like a shadow on the Western self-esteem. The correspondents and the participants at Edinburgh seem to have seen China in analogy to themselves. Considering themselves as the heir of the Hellenistic-Latin civilization they were acutely aware of the incredibly long cultural history of China, a highly developed civilization, and potentially outdoing the West in the future – but pre-Christian.

In a longer passage Stanley discusses in detail which missionary society did or did not list delegates from the indigenous churches. Some seem to have been of the opinion that the churches were not able to send apt representatives, others just decided that such delegates would have to come entirely at the expense of the indigenous churches and did not consider reducing the number of their other delegates (102-107). Against the background of this, the number of eighteen delegates

²² World Missionary Conference. Report of Commission VIII, 196. Stanley, World Missionary Conference, 108.

²³ Stanley, World Missionary Conference, 109.

from the South and Far East underline the importance given to the East which I exemplified for China.

Stanley goes on to discuss how far the voices of the younger churches which were given an audience were really heard at Edinburgh. He concludes that some of the delegates and the public were taken by the more picturesque appearances of the Asians than by what they said, but that for others these appearances helped to hear what they said (96).

However, Robert E. Speer, a well-known missionary and writer of the time and a representative of the conference leaders, did obviously not hear. Given his conclusion of the conference, the answer to the question in how far the delegates have listened to the representatives of the younger churches seems to be negative. Referring to all the contributions – and more would have to be said about others from India, Japan and Korea – Speer concludes:

"For the present, if there are any grounds for anxiety, it is not because the native Churches are making innovations, for all of their innovations of doctrines or of polity are reproductions of incidents in the Church history of the West, but because they have as yet contributed nothing new to our understanding of the truth of God in Christ. It is evident that to such an end Christianity must lay deeper and wider hold upon the national and racial life of Asia."²⁴

I think I am not overdoing it, but Speer's statement sounds to me as if he was saying: the West still had a lot to impact on Asia before Asian Christians would bring something new to World Christianity.

We may ask how representative the voices of these well-educated Asian delegates have been for the mind of the native churches, however, in hindsight it is evident that much of the new that Christianity has brought was already voiced in the arena of the Edinburgh assembly.

²⁴ Quoted from Stanley, World Missionary Conference, 130.