

*“Edinburgh 1910” World Missionary Conference
Commission Three
“Education in Relation to the Christianisation of National Life”*

“The subject of education in missionary work is of special and far-reaching importance. No one, who knows the history of missions, can doubt that missionaries were pioneers of education wherever they went, and it is hardly possible to exaggerate the debt of gratitude which is due to them for their labours in education, nor can it be doubted how important a part education has played in the process of evangelisation. At the same time, education, as pursued under missionary auspices, has exhibited certain weaknesses in its methods, and is exposed to certain perils...” (6).

These are words with which Bishop Gore of Birmingham, Chairman of Commission Three on *Education in Relation to the Christianisation of National Life*, introduced the Commission’s Report – a hefty document that, in its subsequent publication as a book, runs to 383 pages, or 455 with appendices. Framed by an Introduction and Conclusion, it comprises nine chapters: the initial five are regional surveys, summarizing the responses of missionaries in India, China, Japan, Africa and “Muhammedan lands in the Near East” to the Commission’s questionnaire; the final three chapters deal with thematic issues centring upon on training – both industrial and educational – and literature.

Between the two parts of the Report, Chapter Seven, entitled “The Relating of Christian Truth to Indigenous Thought and Feeling”, comprised the heart of the enquiry. In Bishop Gore’s words: “A universal religion, a catholic religion, needs a common message...but a common message comprehended by very different and various peoples and individuals, each with very different gifts, so that 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. So it is, and only so, that the glory and honour of all nations are brought within the light and circle of the Holy City; so it is alone that the real breadth and catholicity of life is brought out” (406).

Bishop Gore was an eloquent editor, and his Commission’s message is as compelling in its relevance today as it was in 1910. He especially recommended the sixth paragraph of the Conclusion of the Report as the lens through which the rest of the Report should be read, and it merits quotation:

In the work of training the native Christian Churches, and in particular those who are to be the leaders of the Churches, the greatest possible care will have to be taken to avoid the risk of denationalising those who are being trained. In particular, we desire to lay the greatest emphasis on the importance of giving religious teaching, not only of the elementary kind, but as far as possible throughout, in the vernacular. We feel certain that those of our witnesses are right who believe that religion can only really be acclimatised in the heart of the natives of any country if it finds expression in their native language – the language of their homes (373).

Set aside sensitivities of “political correctness”, and allow the anachronisms of speech: “native”, “denationalising”, “vernacular”. The fact remains that the Bishop of Birmingham – a city conventionally denigrated as parochial – had a visionary perspective on the world and the Church: not as a European or Western monolith, but – like Birmingham today – a community of peoples and nations, among whom those who respond to the call of Christ Jesus bring to church and society the wealth of their particular social and cultural traditions. “So it is, and only so, that the glory and honour of all nations are brought within the light and circle of the Holy City; so it is alone that the real breadth and catholicity of life is brought out” (406).

How, then, did the Commission understand the nature of Christian education as an expression of Christian mission? The Report gives a three-fold answer.

- Education may be conducted primarily with an *evangelistic* purpose, being viewed either as an attractive force to bring the youth under the influence of Christianity, or as itself as evangelising agency.
- Education may be primarily *edificatory*, in so far as the school has for its object the development of the Christian community through the enlightenment and training of its members.
- Education may be *leavening*, in so far as through it the life of the nation is gradually permeated with the principles of truth (369-370).

Evangelism, edification, leavening – three dynamic characteristics of missionary education.

The first, evangelism, meant disseminating the Gospel. Consistent with the other Commissions of Edinburgh 1910, this was broadly understood in terms of “fulfilment” – i.e. “recognition of the many elements of truth and value in non-Christian systems of religion and ethics,” upon which “the education of the world demands for its highest and best development those elements of truth which are the peculiar contribution of Christianity to the world’s thought and life” (368-9).

The second, edification, denoted “the need of educating Christians to fill positions of usefulness and influence in the community” (374). Preachers and teachers, certainly – but to concentrate on them “disproportionately” is to distort the nature of Christian community and leadership. “Providing for the laity” is equally important: “Only as the Christian community contains a goodly proportion of men and women, trained to support themselves and serve the public good, can it exert its influence on the life of the community at large” (375). It was in this connection that “industrial education” – i.e. “manual training as a factor of general education” (267) – (what we today term “vocational training”) – figured as prominently in the Report as intellectual attainment. The latter was highly valued, but not as an end in itself: “Intellectual attainments are important, but personality, character, leadership go deeper.” In the training of both character and mind the Report emphasised the vital role of women, both as educators and as meriting education – in both respects they equal with men: “In view of the fact that character is largely determined in early years and by the influence of the mother in the home, the education of women acquires a place of first importance” (377).

The third goal of missionary education, leavening, entailed “the philanthropic desire to promote the general welfare of the people.” The Report infers that the Kingdom of God surpasses the realm of the institutional Church, an insight that prefigures current ideas of “regnocentric”, or Kingdom-centred mission. Constructive relationship with government is therefore “the manifest course of wisdom” (372). The Report recognises that “It may even be necessary for a time to put the stress of effort upon things that have to do with economic or educational conditions...always of course keeping in mind the ultimate aim of Christian missions, the full Christianisation of the life of the nation” (370).

Yet the Report concedes nothing to “vague philanthropic aims,” and therefore concludes: “We wish to lay it down that we believe that the primary purpose to be served by the educational work of missionaries is that of the training of the native Church to bear its own proper witness. And inasmuch as the only way in which the native Church can bear its own proper witness, and move forward toward the position of independence and self-government in which it ought to stand, is through native leaders, teachers and officers, we believe that the most important of all ends which missionary education ought to set itself to serve, is that of training those who are to be the spiritual leaders and teachers of their own nation” (371-2).

Prepared by Professor DA Kerr (with page references to *Report of Commission Three: Education in Relation to the Christianisation of National Life*, Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier: no date, Edinburgh & London)