

**Changing Contexts, Shifting Perspectives:
Adventures in Christian-Muslim Encounters since 1910**
Guli E. Francis-Dehqani, "Towards Edinburgh 2010", 30th April 2005

The Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference (WMC) has been hailed as the most significant missionary event of the 20th century. Delegates, participants and observers were acutely aware they were involved in something momentous, and many historians now acknowledge the importance of the WMC's legacy for developing missiological theories and praxis. Edinburgh was the first international conference of its kind, breaking new ground in emphasis and aims. Unlike anything that had gone before it wasn't an opportunity for mutual missionary back scratching or mustering enthusiasm and recruiting workers through highly charged, emotive speeches. This was a *working* conference, for exploring theological and practical aspects of missionary work.¹ A large number of views were shared, through questionnaires sent to selected missionaries prior to conference² and through discussion sessions at conference generated by the eight reports or commission papers.

Amongst the topics covered by the commission papers, it was generally accepted that the most remarkable was that of Commission IV, "The missionary message in relation to the non-Christian religions".³ Comparative Religion was a recognised discipline but was usually considered part of the academic domain and somewhat anti Christian. By contrast this report marks the first attempt to collect data on world religions from so wide a field, and to analyze missionary attitudes towards these religions from a Christian, or rather evangelical, perspective.

PART I

I'd like to spend the first part of this paper describing and analyzing the report before considering in the second section some of the issues which arise for us today. And throughout, my attention will primarily be focused on matters relating to the relationship between Christianity and Islam.

¹ See William Temple Gairdner (1910), "*Edinburgh 1910*": *An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference*. Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, pp 12-14.

² History has not recorded the reasons behind why certain missionaries were selected to respond to the questionnaires though individuals were certainly hand picked by the organisers.

³ See, for example, Gairdner, *op. cit.*, p 134.

The Report of Commission IV

The report of Commission IV and the ensuing discussion formed a kind of bridge between the two halves of the WMC. The first three papers dealt with the people and religions amongst whom the missionaries worked, whilst the last four were concerned chiefly with the missionary Societies that had oversight of the work. Between these sat Commission IV, shifting focus from one broad agenda to the other. According to one delegate,

In discussing the Missionary Message in *relation to non-Christian religions*, the Conference was brought back to the world-survey with which is started, but this time from the standpoint of the spiritual attitude of the races and nations previously surveyed. While the discussion of the *Missionary Message* raised vital issues, which led forward to the consideration of the spiritual attitude of the Christian community at the home-base itself.⁴

From its significant position then, the report presented views arising from missionary experience and reflected on how these might impact on churches at home.

In response to the questionnaire, which included 11 questions, an unprecedented 200 answers were received from the field, many of considerable length and importance.⁵ Themes included the perceived religious value of other faiths; moral, social and intellectual hindrances in the way of conversion to Christianity; conversely, any points of contact with Christianity; attitudes to be adopted by Christians towards other religions; and the influence of contact with other religions on the missionary's faith.⁶ Results were examined and evaluated by a committee, Chaired by Professor David Cairns. In addition to an introduction and conclusion, the report was divided into five sections based on religions amongst whom the responding missionaries worked. These were the Animistic religions, Chinese, and Japanese religions, Islam and Hinduism.

The WMC was an enormous organisational success. But the reason why we still look back at the conference today is because it represents a significant body of information

⁴ Ibid., p 134.

⁵ Ibid., p 134-5.

⁶ For a full list of the questions see *World Missionary Conference (1910), The Report of Commission IV: The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions*, Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, p 2.

based on immense grass roots experience and thoughtful theological reflection - all at a critical time in the history of missions the British Empire and western civilisation generally.

Missionaries were among the earliest westerners to have sustained contact with people of other faiths. At a time when East and West were still little known to one another they had unprecedented levels of contact with indigenous populations. They formed friendships, developed relationships sometimes lasting many years. Among the most reliable social commentators, they were influential in providing the West with a more authentic account of a hitherto unknown and exotic East. For these reasons alone the report of Commission IV may be regarded as ground breaking and deserves to be taken seriously.

Others have gone even further arguing that at a time when inter-religious understanding had barely begun, Edinburgh represented the laying of foundations for a more open, sympathetic future - sowing the seeds for a positive theology of religions. Studies such as Kenneth Cracknell's *Justice, Courtesy and Love* argue that despite mistakes and the lack of consensus, the dialogical approach to other religions, usually considered an invention of the 1970s, existed in embryonic form as early as 1910.⁷ Negative approaches regarding other religions as distortions or imperfect responses to Christianity were present but Cracknell says these were in a minority.⁸ Overall he's convinced that current Christian attempts at serious inter-religious dialogue aren't a modern phenomenon but a fulfilment of the beliefs of our forebears which somehow got buried in the intervening years.

The special case of Islam

Cracknell's case is, I believe, based largely on an undermining of what I call the Islamic factor. Closer inspection reveals a weakness in his argument. First, his thesis is damaged by the conspicuous virtual silence, for the first two-hundred pages of his book, on attitudes towards Islam. Secondly, the positive trend he formulates through

⁷ Kenneth Cracknell (1995), *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846-1914*. London: Epworth Press.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 227-31.

examining the questionnaires was, in fact, virtually irrelevant with regard to Islam and Muslim contexts.

There are a few exceptions, notably William Shedd, an American Presbyterian in Persia, and Anna Smith of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society in Bangalore. But Cracknell himself admits that Smith, in particular, was unusual in acknowledging truths in Islam from which Christians could learn, even discerning the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Muslim Community and faith tradition.⁹ Notably, whilst her questionnaire is remarkably positive, like most of the few *women* respondents, in the report itself she remains unquoted. Generally, both in the questionnaires and final report the most negative views are from missionaries working among Muslims.¹⁰ Moreover, though they represent a minority opinion their significance cannot be minimised. For of the respondents, only a small proportion were from Muslim lands, so it's hardly surprising that their views are in a minority. In all, only twenty were in Muslim countries and a further fifty in regions where Islam existed, though their work was chiefly among other religions. Had more responses come from Islamic areas, the negative views might well have increased in proportion.

Just as one might assume that Cracknell has ignored the significance of Islam, he presents a section entitled "The special case of Islam".¹¹ In it he outlines why the positive trends in evolving missionary thought didn't impact upon those in Muslim lands. Most crucially, Islam hadn't appeared before Christianity and, as a later revelation, had knowingly rejected Christian truths, claiming a higher place for Muhammad than Jesus. It couldn't therefore be regarded as a nascent tradition, which could be fulfilled through Christian transformation.

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Persia was represented at Edinburgh by two senior missionaries, Walter Rice and William St. Clair Tisdall. Not only are their questionnaires typical of other missionaries in Muslim lands, but Cracknell considers them amongst the most emphatic in calling for Islam's displacement.¹² Tisdall was

⁹ Ibid., p 219.

¹⁰ Ibid., p 231.

¹¹ Ibid., pp 231-6.

¹² Ibid., p 236.

certainly known as a fierce critic and author on Islamic matters.¹³ His uncompromising and dogmatic attitude underpinned a wholly negative understanding of the essence of Islam. He maintained that the missionary, whilst recognising “the truths that he [sic.] finds hidden and buried under masses of error”, still “endeavours to cleanse the jewel from the mire into which it has fallen”.¹⁴ Yet despite Tisdall’s impassioned questionnaire and acclaim as a writer, he was noticeably under-used by Commission IV, whose report included a surprisingly positive slant on Islam for which his insights were presumably unhelpful.

Maybe it was the Commission’s eagerness to be as generous as possible that resulted in the section on Islam being somewhat shorter than those allocated to each of the other religions.¹⁵ This despite the prevalent view that Islam represented “Eastern theism [at] its mightiest”, and was of “greater intrinsic interest” because of its greater “religious and philosophical importance”.¹⁶ Nonetheless, despite the Commission’s generous, albeit succinct, tone Tisdall’s views weren’t far off those of many colleagues in other Muslim contexts.

Other than the later revelation of Islam already mentioned there might also be other reasons for this. To begin with, sections in the report dealing with points of contact between Christianity and other religions generally provided a platform for positive comment. In the case of Islam, however, similarities were seen as a deformation of earlier Christian ideals, thus becoming “a hindrance to, rather than a preparation for, the acceptance of Christianity”.¹⁷

In addition, both religions included a strong missionary incentive and shared a history of antagonism and misunderstanding. Such factors heightened the sense of rivalry, increasing the threat each felt from the other. According to the report, of all the religions

¹³ His writings include, *The Sources of Islam: A Persian Treatise*. Tr. & abridged by William Muir. Edinburgh: T & T Clark (1901); *The Religion of the Crescent*. London: SPCK (rev. 1910); *Christianity and Other Faiths*. London: SPCK (1912).

¹⁴ Quoted in Cracknell, op. cit., p 236.

¹⁵ In the introduction to the report the Animistic religions and the religions of Japan are allocated 2.5 pages each, whilst the Chinese religions are given 3 pages. 1 page is dedicated to Hinduism whilst Islam only receives the attention of one brief paragraph. In the actual chapters on the different religions Islam is dealt with more briefly than any of the others with the exception of the Animistic religions. Moreover, it is 15 pages shorter than the Japanese religions and 24 pages shorter than Hinduism.

¹⁶ Gairdner, op. cit., p 147.

¹⁷ Commission IV Report, op. cit., p 142.

“Islam offers the most bitter opposition to, and provokes the most severe condemnation of, Christian missionaries.”¹⁸ In short, Islam which in some regions of the world had either partly supplanted or partly subjected Christianity issued a much more direct challenge to the missionaries. Compared with some other religions (especially Hinduism), contact with Islam had no influence on the faith of missionaries and caused little theological unrest.¹⁹ Concurrently, it provided the greatest source of anxiety for strategic evangelical aspirations, making the missionaries more defensive. According to the report, “The Christian missionary to Islam must not only commend, but also defend his Gospel.”²⁰

Evangelicalism, orientalism and missionary confidence

Apart from issues arising from the Islamic factor, there are other aspects of Commission IV that, from our perspective, might represent short comings. Whilst these arise from the contemporary context, nonetheless, they should be recognised and acknowledged. I’d like to comment on two issues in particular. The first is what I call the restrictions of evangelical language and the second, of oriental assumptions.

The WMC took place at the height of British Empire. A pre First World War confidence still sustained British culture, influencing the whole of western civilisation and permeating the mood of evangelical Christianity.²¹ The phrase “the evangelisation of the world in this generation” originating in America, was widely used in missionary circles.²² It both reflected and gave birth to a scintillating optimism, epitomising the missionary mood around Edinburgh. Americans were perhaps rather more ardent in

¹⁸ Ibid., p 122.

¹⁹ Ibid., p 153.

²⁰ Ibid., p 138.

²¹ Despite its shrinking authority, evangelicalism - which had its roots in eighteenth century revivalism – was still a significant and influential element at the time of the WMC. By 1900 it had been largely hijacked by the upper middle-classes, even becoming an avenue for upward social mobility and in the process it lost a certain amount of its incisiveness and spontaneity. Thus, the second evangelical awakening of 1860, considered by many to have begun in the States before arriving in England, marked a new phase of organised evangelism far removed from the unprompted nature of early revivals. Notwithstanding major changes, evangelicalism's primary characteristics (conversionism, activism, biblicism, crucicentrism) remained in tact, and its influence remained alive, providing a milieu in which the missionary societies continued flourishing. For an excellent account of the history of evangelicalism see, David Bebbington (1989), *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Routledge.

²² The American mission theorist and promoter Arthur T. Pierson is credited with formulating the phrase which was later adopted by the Student Volunteer Movement in 1889..

their zeal with Continental Europeans in particular, displaying a little more caution. According to David Bosch, the German theologian and missiologist Martin Kähler had reservations about aspects of the WMC. Kähler felt that, especially through the influence of its chairman, the American John Mott, conference was “structured largely on guidelines provided by North American assumptions”.²³ At any rate, it was a spirit of optimism and confidence that prevailed at Edinburgh, representing the zenith of missionary enthusiasm and pragmatism.

The evangelicalism that sustained the spirit of Edinburgh was based on a tradition of social action rooted in an individualistic spirituality dependant on personal salvation as the panacea for the ills of society. In simple terms conversion was regarded as the ultimate solution for all social problems. This provided the theory of pure evangelism that under girded all missionary activities. In reality the theory was tempered as experience increasing showed the need for a more practical application of Christianity through reliance on medical and educational work as well as the building up of relationships. Nevertheless, the theory of pure evangelism remained in place, continuing to infuse the language and provide justification for missionary efforts.²⁴ Temple Gairdner, for example, in his account of the WMC wrote, “the purely *theological* parts of Christianity are at once the most effective, the most easily grasped, and the most quickly fruitful”.²⁵ So whilst the nature of missionary work was shifting to incorporate a more complex understanding of mission, a new theological language wasn’t yet in place to express the changing experience. Missionaries continued to rely on old familiar linguistic structures provided by a particular evangelical vocabulary that confidently promoted Christian superiority and called for repentance and conversion as the path to social improvement.

Alongside this *religious* theme ran a central concept underlying the British Empire, that the transfer of values and ideas was always from West to East. Again, in practice, the reality was often more flexible. Missionaries and other westerners found the current

²³ David Bosch (1991), *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, p 336; see also pp 337-8 for more on Mott’s influence over the spirit of Edinburgh.

²⁴ For more on my views about the growing strain between the theory of pure evangelism and the practical experience of missionaries see Guli Francis-Dehqani (2000), *Religious Feminism in an Age of Empire: CMS Women Missionaries in Iran, 1869-1934*. CCSRG, University of Bristol, especially pp 143-8; also available under the same title as a University of Bristol PhD Thesis, 1999.

²⁵ Gairdner, op. cit., p 140. This was in a section on the Animistic religions.

could run two ways as their own outlook and experience also changed. But once more the reality did not dislodge the philosophy of western superiority that upheld the notion of Empire. According to Edward Said these opposites coexisted surprisingly easily as generally accepted views about Islam were held alongside more personal experiences of it.²⁶ Said argues for a distinction between the “particular” on one hand - whereby westerners could relate warmly to individual Muslims - and the “general” on the other – whereby condemnation of Islam continued, often through unqualified generalisations based on theological and social suppositions.

So, whilst experience was changing slowly, theories and the language they nourished remained resilient. The orientalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries regarded the East as essentially other and adhered to notions of western superiority in all areas of life. Evangelicalism provided the religious justification and extended the logic into the missionary arena through self-assured expressions of Christian superiority; exacerbated in the case of Islam by factors I outlined earlier.

Such confidence inevitably bred a patronising tone both in terms of religious superiority and the critique of social conditions. Missionaries could easily find fault with their adopted societies and in many cases the suffering and problems they encountered did justify negative commentary. However, where these societies were Islamic, Commission IV was particularly quick to draw a correlation between religion and the social or moral problems. To be sure, the report does acknowledge that

We must in fairness distinguish between moral defects which are due to “the natural corruption of the human heart” and those which can be directly traced to the doctrines or practices presented in the Koran and by tradition. As regards the first class of moral offences we must not hold Islam itself directly responsible for them, but we are, nevertheless, entitled to ask the question whether the religion offers .. such restraints on sin ... as will effectively counteract ... natural sinful tendencies.²⁷

The report then goes on to talk of widespread “divorce between morality and religion” in Islam, of “total lack of appreciation of the nature of sin”, and of the moral example

²⁶ Edward Said (1987), *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin (1995 reprint), pp 95-103.

²⁷ The Report of Commission IV, op. cit., p 133.

of Mohammad as being “no inspiration to holiness”.²⁸ This stance was further exacerbated by the lack of a self-critical spirit within evangelical Christianity. By stark contrast, the evils of western Christendom or Victorian Britain are blamed not on religion but only on “nominal Christians”.²⁹

The constraints of evangelical and imperial ideologies heightened by lack of Christian self-criticism heavily influenced the missionary agenda in 1910. Analysis of the Muslim situation in Commission IV was based on an understanding of the natural link between a false religion and its resulting social degradation. By extension, embracing Christianity was the solution and the means of breaking the destructive cycle. In an uncomplicated way the WMC accentuated the belief that conversion would establish necessary theological structures from which would flow alleviation of Islam’s social problems. This was based on fundamental religious and orientalist tenets. Evangelicalism promoting the salvation of individuals as the basis of social improvement; orientalism giving credence to the notion that missionaries were requisite catalysts in bringing about the transformation. By proclaiming the gospel message they could guide people from darkness to light, thereby, passing on to the East, in the words of John Mott, the “marvelous orderings of Providence” from which the West had benefited during the nineteenth century.³⁰

The contradictions of Edinburgh 1910

Undoubtedly, the overall mood of Edinburgh *was* refreshingly positive, certainly compared with previous missionary conferences. There was a desire to find new and better ways of contact with other religions. Many wrote warmly about personal encounters and friendships, revealing the desire for better relationships and greater understanding. Whilst employing a confidently expectant tone, the general working principle of the WMC was of courtesy towards others and a recognition of the need to move forward carefully. There was a desire to see the best in others but always alongside a certain belief that Christianity is “the absolute best of all”.³¹ Indeed,

²⁸ Ibid., p 133-4.

²⁹ Ibid., p 134.

³⁰ John Mott (1902), *The Evangelization of the World in this Generation*. London: SVM (first published 1900), p 106.

³¹ Gairdner, op. cit., p 138.

according to the report, it was this very confidence that allowed generosity to be shown.³² And moreover the motivation for better relations was essentially to help find ways of communicating the Christian message more effectively and appropriately.³³

Nonetheless, appreciative expressions and acknowledgement that truths could be found in other faiths make it possible to argue that Edinburgh did provide the early stages for a positive theology of religions. What I've tried to show, however, is that both the Commission IV report and the analysis of theologians such as Cracknell, fail to grasp seriously enough the conservative views proffered by missionaries working in Muslim environments. Whilst it is possible, then, to regard Edinburgh as a watershed in the history of Christian mission, this cannot be interpreted as a true reflection of the situation in many Muslim regions.³⁴ And overall, despite "quite 'progressive' debates in some of [the commissions], the conference generally reflected a traditional conservative approach to mission, linking the proclamation of the 'gospel to the heathens' with the spread of Western civilisation."³⁵

PART II

This brings us to the second part of my paper where I look more closely at the legacy of the WMC and particularly of Commission IV, and consider how attitudes have developed both with regard to orientalist assumptions about East-West relations and also about interfaith concerns especially between Christianity and Islam.

Changing perspectives on mission

Even the most casual perusal of the ten missionary conferences that have followed Edinburgh shows developments in mission practice and theory in areas such as

³² The Report of Commission IV, op. cit., p 268.

³³ See, in particular, *ibid.*, pp 269-70 and 324-6.

³⁴ This seems especially true of areas within CMS jurisdiction. The prevalent anti-Islamic stance adopted by many CMS missionaries may partly have resulted from the "influence of some powerful (domineering is a better word) personalities within the CMS (Robert Stirling in Jerusalem, William Miller in Nigeria and Tisdall in Iran to name but three) who had fixed negative views on Islam"... "By contrast with several other missionary societies, CMS was one of the least forward looking with "the general attitude of the ... General Secretary Eugene Stock set[ting] the tone at this period". (Views shared with me by Kenneth Cracknell in email correspondence on 18th & 19th November 1996).

³⁵ World Council of Churches web site, <http://www.mission2005.org/Edinburgh.563.0.html>

ecumenism, relations between eastern and western churches, and Christian approaches to other religions or interfaith dialogue.

By 1928 when the WMC met in Jerusalem the world was a very different place as was the mood at conference. Christian confidence, at least in Europe, had been severely jolted by the First World War, profoundly challenging the ideal of western civilisation as an embodiment of the gospel. The advent of communism had undermined the dream of evangelising the world in one generation. There was much greater recognition that secularism was the great opponent of mission and that other religions may even be allies in helping develop a better world. Tensions continued between Americans and Europeans, and no consensus was reached in discussing the two major questions by now familiar within missionary circles: the relationship between Christianity and other religions, and the link between pure evangelism and social action.

Ten years later in Tambaram once more the world was threatened by war. In this heightened atmosphere growing liberalism clashed with conservative elements within the missionary movement. The significant breakthrough was that delegates from younger churches were for the first time in a majority and mission was seen much more in terms of co-operation between the whole church rather than as a western or northern responsibility. In terms of Christianity's relationship with other faiths, conference defended the ultimate truth of Christianity but advocated a listening and dialogical approach in practice.

At the fourth international conference in 1947 the world was again preoccupied with post war reconstruction and delegates recognised the need to rebuild countries and work towards better relations between people generally.

By 1952 when missionaries met in Willingen, Germany even the Americans were facing up to the church's impotence in the face of China closing its doors to missionary activity. Growing hostility was expressed towards missionaries from various quarters and this led to what Max Warren called an "orgy of self-criticism".³⁶ Perhaps we

³⁶ Max Warren quoted in Wolfgang Gunther and Guillermo Cook (1997), "World Missionary Conferences" in Karl Muller et al [eds.], *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis; pp 502-9.

shouldn't be surprised that out of this somber atmosphere came perhaps the most lasting, if not significant, declaration upon mission theology. Namely, that mission should primarily be seen not as the work of the church but as participation with God's will, expressed in the phrase *missio Dei*. [Emphasis on the church's central role, evident since Edinburgh, was replaced by "an enlarged perspective that allowed an interpretation of world events as determining factors for mission."³⁷]

In 1958 the conference met in Achimota. Whilst some evangelicals dissented the majority accepted a proposal for greater co-operation between mission and church by uniting the International Missionary Conference with the World Council of Churches. By Mexico-City in 1963 the two bodies were integrated and, with delegates from Orthodox churches and Roman Catholic observers also present, conference could more properly be called ecumenical. Significantly, there was no longer a sense that western delegates were taking advice from younger churches about the most effective missionary methods. Rather, churches from around the world were encouraging each other to participate in the *missio Dei*. With secularisation as a major force in the world this conference also provided a positive affirmation of social action as a form of missionary expression.

At Bangkok in 1973, under the growing influence of liberation theology, the issue of world poverty was central. Delegates struggled with situations of exploitation and injustice expressed also in relations between churches. Never before had the rich western churches found themselves so much under the critical lime light, facing accusations of complicity with institutional injustice. As for relationships with other faiths, conference advocated dialogue to help establish foundations for a more humane world. In a significant theological shift, Bangkok became famous for its holistic approach to salvation, encompassing both spiritual and socio-political aspects without favouring one over the other. At Melbourne in 1980 churches were pressed even more decisively towards solidarity with the poor and radical aspects of social justice posed a serious challenge to traditional views of mission.

³⁷ WCC web site, <http://www.mission2005.org/Willingen.559.0.html>

Some began to feel that after years of focusing on individual conversion the pendulum had swung to the other extreme with an equally one sided emphasis on the social and political involvement of mission. The conference at San Antonio in 1989 was eager to correct that impression. The consensus reached was that

We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot put any limit to God's saving power. There is a tension between these affirmations which we acknowledge and cannot resolve.³⁸

In fact, this tension existed from the time of Edinburgh, yet it had never been so explicitly acknowledged. This was a crucial step for the missionary movement as it emphasised the "fullness of the gospel" in terms of "the living tension" between "spiritual and material needs, between prayer and action, between evangelism and social responsibility, between dialogue and witness, between power and vulnerability, between local and universal aspects."³⁹

The last missionary conference of the twentieth century and the most recent took place in 1996. Amongst various other themes arising out of contemporary preoccupations the issues discussed were proselytism, syncretism, the oppressive imposition of Christianity upon subject peoples and religious pluralism.

This survey of missionary conferences shows how changing perspectives have led to the emergence of a more complex view of church and mission. In relation to other faiths and issues of social responsibility in particular there's been an *articulation* of the underlying tension between loyalty to Christianity and commitment to working towards a safer, more peaceful world. The context has changed and with it missionary language and motivation has shifted emphasis. In essence, though, the tension now explicitly acknowledged is one that's been present since Edinburgh and probably before.

The significance of the different world we live in

The world, however, was a very different place in 1910 than it is now. Better transport and communication, new insights in psychology, and socio-political changes have led to

³⁸ WCC web site, http://www.mission2005.org/San_Antonio.565.0.html

³⁹ Quoted in Gunther and Cook, *op. cit.*, p 507.

different priorities. The way in which we understand our selves and our relationship to others is more complex and multilayered. At Edinburgh these issues weren't understood, nor could missionaries have imagined the degree of influence future political divisions would have between East and West, Islam and Christianity.⁴⁰

For centuries the relationship between Muslims and Christians has been characterised by conflict, theological, ideological, political and military.⁴¹ Any constructive elements have been in a minority, often buried in the writing of history. The balance of power and self-confidence has shifted at various times between the two but generally the relationship has been blighted by suspicion and rivalry.

The effect of two world wars and a fading Empire was significant in changing attitudes. More recently growing numbers of Muslim immigrants to the West and Europe in particular has had a further impact on the relationship between Muslims and Christians. Closer contact between the communities has raised questions about cultural, religious and ethnic identity as each side has tried to identify its own position in relation to the other. In Britain there have been events, such as the Salmon Rushdie affair, which have brought matters into the public sphere. Meanwhile, at grass roots level, especially through the efforts of mainstream churches since the 1970s, Muslims and Christians have ventured out of their trenches and entered tentative discussions.

In the West there's been growing demand for a more public Muslim voice and presence. Concurrently, the Arab and Middle Eastern world has seen a revival of Islamic consciousness through events such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, developments in Egypt and Algeria and the heightening of tensions in Palestine. The intensifying tension between East and West was captured and further amplified in 1993 by the publication of Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*.⁴²

⁴⁰ There was the hint of recognition at Edinburgh about political changes to come, with the report referring to the possible rise of a neo-Islam leading to the awakening of national consciousness (see the Report of Commission IV, op. cit., pp 132 & 150). Delegates were unlikely, however, to have envisaged the extent and significance of the events that lay ahead.

⁴¹ For one example of a helpful and concise history of Christian-Muslim relations of which I make considerable use in the following section see Jorgen Nielsen (2003), "Is there an escape from the history of Christian-Muslim Relations?" in David Thomas (ed.), *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*. London: Melisende, pp 350-61.

⁴² Samuel Huntington published an article in 1993 in *Foreign Affairs* which was later expanded into a book in 1997, entitled, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. Reprinted in 1998, New York: Simon & Schuster.

For the West, largely through the media and political rhetoric, Islam has come to be identified through a series of armed organisations as the new enemy. For the East events in Palestine, the American led liberation of Kuwait and the invasion of Iraq represent the rise of a new imperialism. Far from religion becoming obsolete - as secularism had predicted – it's taken centre stage, a potent factor in unfolding world affairs. There is on one hand a desire to avoid the clash of civilisations envisioned by Huntington. Efforts continue on both sides and at various levels in neighbourhoods, amongst academics and even in centres of power to foster good relations and greater understanding.⁴³ On the other hand, the picture is less optimistic. In a post September 11th world East and West, Muslim and Christian, are more suspicious of one another than ever and the rise of fundamentalism and the power of religious and political propaganda on both sides represents a worrying phenomenon.

Faced with this as our context what is the Christian responsibility in attitudes towards other faiths generally and Islam especially? Of course we still need good theology to underpin our interfaith encounters. But more than ever we're drawn towards a vision in which doctrinal rigidity is loosened in favour of building good relations based on understanding, sympathy, forgiveness and generosity. Even at Edinburgh there was recognition that living and working amongst people of other religions had led some to become less concerned with church rules and dogmatic codes. One delegate representing China, wrote of becoming "less a Churchman and more a Christian"; another expressed the shift not in terms of *changing* doctrines but of "greater hesitancy in fixing the circumference".⁴⁴ A colleague in India was even more ardent that "the essence of the Christian Gospel is not dogma and theology, but a distinct and unique spirit."⁴⁵ Whilst such views were not proffered by any in Muslim regions, even then there was a commitment to finding more appropriate ways of expressing the more difficult Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and Incarnation.⁴⁶

⁴³ ?????????? Refer to David Thomas' academic ventures, Andrew Wingate's Muslim/Christian forum and Michael Igrave's visits to Iran and mention the mushrooming of local interfaith groups.??????????????

⁴⁴ The Report of Commission IV, op. cit., p 70.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p 208.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p 153.

The personal dimension in the struggle towards interfaith dialogue

The problem is that whilst it's relatively easy to recognise the need for a more open approach to interfaith efforts today, even to be genuinely committed, the reality can be more difficult. Sometimes we're called to be generous in the face of suspicion, even hostility. At other times our sense of integrity feels compromised, and we struggle for the right balance between loyalty to our own faith and generosity to another's. I think these aren't simply signs of human weakness but illustrate a struggle to be honest as well as liberal and understanding. And, if *I'm* being honest, this conflict between intellectual commitment to a liberal methodology, constrained by what Kenneth Cragg calls "this impulse to disallow the other"⁴⁷ is something I experience within myself.

I've stood before you today not as a professional interfaith practitioner, if indeed such a thing exists, nor as an academic probing the theological issues. For I'm neither of these. I am, however, the product of two cultures and religions and though a Christian priest Islam also runs through my veins. Born and brought up in Iran, I'm the result of mixed parentage - my father a Muslim convert to Christianity, my mother the daughter and granddaughter of missionaries. Both religions and cultures have shaped me and my interest in the subject before us arises out of a personal struggle in the search for identity, integrity and wholeness. I should, some might think, be an ideal candidate for matters interfaith. Yet I continue to find the adventure challenging and at times difficult.

My reactions to the practice of interfaith dialogue find their roots in the events experienced by the Anglican Church in Iran since the 1979 Revolution swept through the country.⁴⁸ This small indigenous church which nurtured my early faith came about through the work of CMS in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has throughout its history experienced periods of hardship according to the vicissitudes of socio-political events. However, the last twenty to thirty years has been a time of sustained suffering with the confiscation of institutions and properties, the drastic reduction of numbers, imprisonment and even the loss of life, including that of my own

⁴⁷ Kenneth Cragg (2000), "Editor's Postscript" in Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design of my World: A Pilgrim in Exile*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, p 262.

⁴⁸ For details see Hassan Dehqani-Tafti (1981), *The Hard Awakening*. London: Triangle, SPCK.

brother. The situation as it stands today is no less precarious and the future of the church hangs in the balance.

This brief summary indicates something of the tension I feel in dialogue between the call to Christian generosity and forgiveness in the face of suffering, and the need for justice or at least an acknowledgement of the pain and wrongdoing from the dialoging partner. I believe passionately that the scandal of Christian forgiveness lies precisely in the undemanding nature of its giving. We forgive just as we have been forgiven, not because it's deserved but because forgiveness is a gift received and to be shared. Yet this is one part of a paradox in which Christians are also called to take a stand against injustice.

What all this amounts to is that when I find myself in dialogue with Muslims I feel acutely the need for honesty as well as generosity. In most cases these feelings remain unspoken as my intellectual liberality and sense of Christian duty come to the fore. But at times I have attempted greater honesty by articulating something of the history that blights Christian-Muslim relations for which both sides are to blame. Christianity certainly has much to be ashamed of and say sorry for. Even today in parts of the world Christians cause harm or hurt in the name of religion. Can Muslims then recognise the injustices not only from their past but which are part of their present also. Never yet have I had a public reciprocal response; only defensive resistance or refusal to engage. I'm not suggesting the whole fabric of Islam is faulty or that individuals should take responsibility for the actions of others. Simply, I look for recognition that there is a dark side lurking in the history of all faiths.

Kenneth Cragg, one of the greatest advocates of fostering good relations with Muslims, believes there is an identity crisis going on between an Islam that *can* be accused of causing devastation and another which disavows violence.⁴⁹ In the Persian context, one is represented by recent events, the other by a “vast and storied” culture in all its poetic and architectural beauty.⁵⁰ Cragg writes,

⁴⁹ Cragg, *op. cit.*, p 259.

⁵⁰ Hassan Dehqani-Tafti & Guli Francis-Dehqani (2003), “By Their Fruits Shall You Know Them” in David Thomas (ed.), *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*. London: Melisende, pp 42-55.

The Islam that is indicated in what befell the Church [in Iran] might have stayed its hand by counsels no less claiming its name. Certainly *an* “Islam” was guilty.⁵¹

Without some recognition of this divided reality by Muslims, the path of dialogue is so much more difficult and painful. Many, not least Cragg himself, have written and spoken of the need for generous Christian hospitality and yes, I believe, that is right. Nonetheless, for dialogue to be effective it must in the end be based on *mutual* respect and understanding, *reciprocal* honesty and generosity. Whether it’s weakness or impatience the tension continues within me though I struggle towards securing a more magnanimous spirit.

And the reason I *do* struggle? Because I recognise the need for generosity and forgiveness on a world scale. If I can’t work to make it real in my own experience how can I possibly expect it from our leaders and those in power. Relations between West and East threaten to tear the fabric of our global community apart. Neither side is prepared to relent and the endless round of violence continues in an abhorrent tit for tat so some can save face and flex their political or religious muscles whilst others are caught up in the aggression that daily takes more lives.

Dialogue and witness

So it seems that our context requires us to struggle in order to find a common basis for our shared humanity thereby ending the cycle of violence. Where then does faith fit into the equation and where does our ultimate loyalty lie? Do we foster good relations at any cost, sitting light to the spiritual dimension that sustains and motivates us? Or do we see dialogue as including the sharing of theology and experience as well as the easier, nonetheless important, task of co-operation in social and political programmes.

I’ve tried to demonstrate through my own experience that theology can’t be entirely separated from lived experience. Nevertheless, the question about the right balance between dialogue and witness is also an intellectual one regarding the status of other religions and the extent to which conversion should be part of our motivation, as it certainly was in 1910. There’ve been concerted efforts by academics to set such an

⁵¹ Cragg, *op. cit.* p 260.

intellectual context for dialogue. The most enduring regards people of other faiths within the terms of one of three paradigms: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.⁵²

[Briefly, the controlling logic of exclusivism is that outside Christianity there is no salvation and, however respectfully approached, other religions are always being compared with the one true universal faith. Accordingly, whilst dialogue might be undertaken partly to enhance relations the ultimate aim is to prove Christian superiority and convince the other of the need for conversion. Inclusivism also identifies Christianity as the universal religion representing the highest point of belief. However, it makes certain allowances for other religions arguing that whilst the salvific process can be found within them its full efficacy remains the function of Christianity in which others can find fulfillment. So in dialogue it's possible to recognise some truths in the other, but their expression remains inferior to the Christian vision. Finally according to pluralism there are many different but equally valid ways of reaching the one universal reality; there are multiple paths to salvation and none is superior to the others. The purpose of dialogue is to foster better relations and to learn from one another. These were not recognised categories at the WMC in 1910 but while there are no examples of a pluralist approach, it is possible to discern some inclusivist attitudes (though not towards Muslims) amidst an essentially exclusivist stance.]

Recently these paradigms have been expanded and subcategorised for greater breadth and flexibility.⁵³ Yet increasingly they're unsatisfactory in dealing with the reality of interfaith dialogue. All three models make assumptions about Christianity and other faiths before the process of dialogue has even begun. Exclusivism is patronising in its self-confessed superiority. Pluralism relativises truth, denying either side its own conclusions and "jealousies".⁵⁴ And Inclusivism which for a number of years provided a

⁵² For more on these paradigms see, for example, Alan Race (1983), *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*. London: SCM; and Gavin D'Costa (1986), *Theology and Religious Pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

⁵³ See, for example, Douglas Pratt (2003), "Pluralism and Interreligious Engagement: The Contexts of Dialogue" in David Thomas (ed.), *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*. London: Melisende, pp 404-18.

⁵⁴ "Every religion has its jealousies" was a phrase famously used by John V. Taylor in his 1977 Lambeth Inter-faith Lecture. See Graham Kings (2000), "Mission and the Meeting of Faiths: The Theologies of Max Warren and John V. Taylor" in Kevin Ward & Brian Stanley (eds.), *The Church Mission Society and World Christianity, 1799-1999*. Michigan & Cambridge: Eerdmans, p 308.

helpful middle ground is equally dismissive by ultimately subsuming the other into a Christian framework.

The threefold model now seems too neat and tidy. For dialogue is not just a question of whose salvation, secured where, when and how. It's also about exploring our common humanity and learning about one another. In a pluralist world the foundation for such an approach must be based on relationships not on dogmatic presuppositions. A framework is needed that may not have all the doctrinal intricacies ironed out and which is characterised by "creative tension".⁵⁵ Such a framework would be based on certain principles and would include unresolved internal conflicts.

The principles, based on a foundation of good relationships, might include determination to understand the best of Islam, awareness of common ground alongside honesty regarding our distinctiveness, sensitivity to the wider world perspective as well as the local context, and a desire to share our faith.⁵⁶ The unresolved internal conflict would recognise that dialogue is an uncomfortable space in which to reside, representing an "abiding paradox" which vacillates between commitment to one's own religion and openness to another's, always moving between certainty and doubt, recognising the possibility of change as much for ourselves as our dialoguing partner.⁵⁷

Such an approach has three advantages in particular.⁵⁸ First, it aims to avoid the sentimentality of excessive liberalism whereby truth is relativised and anything goes. Collapsing our differences may seem acceptable from the comfort of our own position, meanwhile, elsewhere Christians suffer persecution. How can a faith be worth dying for in one place if it's hardly worth proclaiming in another? Secondly, it attempts to take both self and the other seriously by acknowledging distinctiveness. Thirdly, it offers a sympathetically critical approach to interfaith dialogue. Self-criticism is certainly an essential feature of Christian dialogue. But it's equally possible, perhaps even necessary, vigorously yet courteously to criticise the other. It's too easy to move from a

⁵⁵ Bosch, op. cit., p 483.

⁵⁶ These principles are based on Colin Chapman's analysis of Kenneth Cragg's ideas. See Colin Chapman (2003), "An Agenda for Dialogue" in David Thomas (ed.), *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*. London: Melisende, p 385.

⁵⁷ Bosch, op. cit., p 483.

⁵⁸ In this section I have drawn on material from Martin Forward (2003), "Is Thine Heart Right, As My Heart is with Thy Heart? A Christian Spiritual Theology for Dialogue with Muslims" in David Thomas (ed.), *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*. London: Melisende, especially pp 380-2.

position whereby Islam is demonised to a typically post colonial, guilt induced appreciation of all it stands for. Rodinson warns against what she calls distorted orientalism which simply classifies Islam in a diametrical manner. Rather than rendering it diabolic it goes to the other extreme and through an "ideological about-face ... practically sanctif[ies] Islam". This European version of "Muslim apologetics", through its refusal to be critical of Islam in any way, loses its analytical edge, becoming little more than indulgence.⁵⁹ There must be no discrimination, vilification or scorn, but there's no obligation to applaud all that is Muslim.

Conclusion

Finally, both dialogue and witness, based on honesty, criticism and generosity, are needed for the life of a religious community to find full expression. This leads to a kind of "reciprocal testimony" in which phases of sensitive witness alternate with respectful listening.⁶⁰ Living with this paradox remains a vision for Christians and one which I believe our faith requires us to struggle with regardless of what we encounter. However, unless it's a shared vision for our partners also we'll not see the full potential of interfaith dialogue blossom in our world.

⁵⁹ Maxime Rodinson (1991), *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, pp 78, 106, 127.

⁶⁰ Ulrich Schoen (1997), "Dialogue" in Karl Muller et al [eds.], *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis; p 109-10.