

*“Towards 2010: Centenary of Edinburgh 1910”*

*Commission IV*

*The Missionary Message in Relation to the Non-Christian Religions*

Commission Four stated its aim as being “to study the problems involved in the presentation of Christianity to the minds of the non-Christian peoples.” It was chaired by two Presbyterians: the Rev Professor David Cairns of Aberdeen served as convener, and the Rev Dr Robert Speer of the Presbyterian Church in the USA as the vice-chair. Cairns was a leading Scottish theologian: he lost faith while studying divinity in Edinburgh, retrieved it through a sojourn in Germany and the poetry of William Wordsworth, was ordained a minister of the United Presbyterian Church, and taught a liberal theology with a strong commitment to overseas mission. Speer, if less a theologian, was a distinguished missions’ administrator, both in the PCUSA and later the International Missionary Council that continued the work of the Edinburgh 1910 Conference. Their 18-person Commission included a cluster of professors and mission secretaries from the UK (7), the US (4), Germany (4), Holland (1) and Ireland (1). With a single exception they were male, Caucasian to a person, Protestant/Evangelical by confession, and mostly ordained clergy.

In preparing their Report the Commissioners drew on the written submissions of 125 missionaries “in the field”. Each of these responded to an eleven point questionnaire that inquired into their assessments of the moral, intellectual, and social differences and points of contact between Christianity and other religions, as these had bearing on the missionary communication of the Gospel. The 280-page Report comprised a summary of the responses, divided into chapters that dealt with the “Animistic Religions” of the Bantu peoples of Africa and the tribal peoples of India and the Pacific; the Chinese Religions – Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism; the religions of Japan – Shinto, and more Confucianism and Buddhism; Islam; Hinduism; and a final excursus on the Baha’i faith. Embracing a wide range of missionary opinion, the report is a rich deposit of Protestant Christian thinking about other religions in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Introducing the Commission’s report to the Conference plenary, Professor Cairns reflected on the theological challenge that this mass of missionary correspondence represented: “Does the evidence not disclose,” he asked, “that we are face to face today with a new and formidable situation which is too great for our traditional thoughts about God?...Something very vast, something very formidable, something very full of wonder and promise is there, if we have the eyes to see it...But inevitably the question arises, Whether the Church has within itself the forces to meet this great emergency? Is it equal to the providential calling?...Are we ready for it? Do we not need the broadening and deepening of all our conceptions of the Living God, the deepening and liberating of all our thoughts of what He has done for us in Christ, of what by His Providence and His Spirit He is ready to do for us today?” The force with which Cairns pressed these questions reflects the inquiring nature of his own theology, and of his leadership of the Commission, and led him to affirm: “For us this can only mean a new discovery of God in Christ.”

The Report was fully debated in the Conference plenary, and in published form includes verbatim transcripts of some of the speeches from the floor. A broad consensus emerged that Robert Speer summarised in his concluding remarks in four points.

Firstly, Speer emphasised that “we are all agreed that Christianity is the final and absolute religion.” But his point was less dogmatic than dialectic. “Just because we hold so firmly to the finality and the absoluteness of the Christian faith, we dare go further than any other religion dare go, in laying down our goods for comparison with any other goods in the world.” Confidence in the Gospel’s truth, he argued, should be mirrored in a missionary confidence to explore the faith of other religions, secure in the principle that “it is not what truth a man holds, but what truth holds the man that matters.”

This brought Speer to his second point: “The question before us is not whether we believe that Christianity is the final and absolute religion, but how we are going to get the world to believe it.” The missionary responsibility is not primarily that of proving, but communicating the Gospel’s truth.

Rebutting the criticism that the Commission considered only the highest ideals of other religions, at the expense of criticising their less estimable aspects, he emphasised that “we should do as we would be done by. We thought it best to compare the best in each pagan religion with the best in Christianity.”

Speer’s third point was a further elaboration of the first: while Christianity is the true faith, “no one believes we have the whole Christian truth.” To put it another way: “How is it possible for us, in a small fragment of the long corporate experience of humanity, to claim that we have gathered all the truth of the inexhaustible religion into our own personal comprehension and experience?” The challenge of communicating the Gospel to the highest ideals of other religions – to the “minds” of their best representatives – brings the missionary to a deeper understanding of the truth of Christian faith itself: “We discover...truths in Christianity which we had not discerned before, or truths in a glory, a magnitude, that we had not previously imagined.” Speer discerned a providential role in other religions for the missionary communication of the Gospel: “As we bring our faith over against them, we shall not bring back into our own faith what was not in our own faith before, but we shall discern what we had not discovered was there before.” He thus concluded the Report as follows: “Our appeal has been not that we should seek in the non-Christian religions for truths that are not in Christianity, but that we should seek in Christ the truth which we have not yet known.”

Speer’s last point draws out the significance of the Report for the home churches: “We need an immense deepening and quickening of Christian life at home.” While he did not elaborate this point, he anticipated the findings of the Commissions on the Home Church and Missionary Preparation.

The key principle in the Report’s theological approach to non-Christian religions was the theology of the Word/*Logos*. As some of the Church Fathers likened the divine *Logos* to a “schoolmaster” (*paidagogos*: *Galatians* 3:24f) leading pagans to Christ, so the Commissioners discerned positive values in non-Christian religions. In some sense these values were deemed to prepare their devotees for the Gospel. Confucianism, one missionary was quoted as suggesting, may be seen as “a divine preparation of the Chinese for Christianity, as the Decalogue furnished a divine preparation for the Jews”; another, that Hinduism is “a means being used by the Divine Wisdom to lead men to see their need of the truth, while its (i.e. Hinduism’s) truths are in anticipation of, and a step toward the realisation of the higher truth revealed by and in Christ.” Although the term “fulfilment theology” was nowhere used in the Report, Jesus’ words in *Matthew* 5:17 are frequently cited: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” Analogically, the Report suggested that “Christ has not come to destroy Hinduism but to transfigure it.” But the Christological focus remained clear throughout the Report: “In Christ all is gathered up and rendered effective. Out of Christ all fails.”

One of the architects of fulfilment theology, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century English missionary in India, Thomas Slater, is quoted more extensively than any other missionary in the sections of the Report dealing with Hinduism. “The Gospel of Christ”, he wrote, “enlightens the conscience (of Hinduism) to its great need, and is a message of salvation” that “reveals the hidden craving of the human heart to possess a humanised God, which can only be satisfied in Christ.” In terms of missionary method, such human yearning provides “a starting point to lead the people up to Christ’s revelation...This is the type of work that India needs imperatively...and it can only be done by men (*sic*) of intellectual keenness, of spiritual power, and above all of a sympathy that can recognise and appreciate the view point of the other.”

The Scottish missionary in India, John Nicol Farquhar, who – unlike Slater – was present in Edinburgh 1910, went on to popularise “fulfilment theology” in his classic work that presented the Gospel as *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913). It remained the dominant missionary theology of other religions for the next quarter century until it was challenged, and largely replaced, by the “discontinuity theology” of Hendrik Kraemer’s “Biblical realism” at the 1938 World Missionary Conference at Tambaram, India.

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