

**Towards 2010: Centenary of Edinburgh 1910**  
**Commission VII**  
**“Missions and Governments”**

**David Kerr, University of Lund, Sweden**

“Missions and Governments” – the title of Commission VII – denotes the relationship between missions and the governments under which they operated: indigenous national governments, European colonial governments, and “native chieftainships”. Within the concern for church-state relations, the Commission was specifically interested in “the contact of the expanding (i.e. among “non-Christian peoples”) Church with Governments which, for the first time, have to take account of Christianity both as a destructive and constructive power, contending for a law and loyalty different from, and higher than, those recognised by any State.”

The task was entrusted to a 21-man (not a woman among them) Commission, 10 of whose members were British, 6 US-Americans, 3 Germans, 1 Norwegian and 1 Canadian. Arthur James Balfour – Scottish politician, cabinet minister, and educationalist – who presided over the Edinburgh 1910 Conference, served as Commission Chairman.

The Commission Report runs to 121 pages – considerably shorter than the other commission reports – but includes a longer (nearly 40 pages) summary of the plenary discussion, as well as 20 pages of appendices. This reflects the way the Commission dealt with the challenge facing it. How to elaborate and apply general principles from situations of mission-government relations that differed widely from one part of the world to another? In line with the general policy of the 1910 Conference, it opted for an empirical approach.

Part One, “A Survey of Existing Conditions in Various Mission Field”, examines relationships between missions and governments in Japan, China, India, the Dutch East Indies, “Mohammedan Lands”, Mid Africa and Southern Africa, with additional contributions from missionaries in all these regions in the plenary discussion. Part 2 extrapolates “Principles and Findings”, and applies them to a range of problems that recur in mission-government relations across the regions. The colonial ethos of the Report reflects the nature of the times, and the fact that the Part 1 was drafted entirely by the British commissioners. Part 2, by contrast, is the work of the entire Commission, and succeeds in articulating principles that criticise aspects of colonialism and, at least to an extent, transcend the colonial mentality.

The Report classifies the survey evidence on a graduating scale of where it perceived societies to stand in relation to “civilisation”, the latter being defined relative to the missionary task itself. Thus, Japan was deemed the most civilized of “mission fields”, since its government had established “such internal order and toleration that problems of missionary policy, *in relation to government* (original italics), have ceased to exist in any acute form.” At the lowest end of the scale was “the absolutely independent savage chief.” Between the two stood governments that were “of higher civilisation and independent” (e.g. Persia, China and Turkey), “of low civilisation, under Christian rule or influence” (e.g. the African Protectorates), and “of higher civilisation, under Christian rule and influence” (e.g. India and Egypt.)

Irrespective of where governments were perceived to stand on this scale of civilised administration, it was agreed that missionary policy should be based on the New Testament principle, “give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt.22:21; Mk.12:7; Lk.20:25). Respect for civil authority, regardless of religious identity, was deemed essential, provided civil authority obeyed its God-given mandate of caring for the welfare of the people. This included, as the Report tirelessly reiterates, the rights of indigenous Christian communities, and of the missionaries themselves, at least on par with other “domiciled aliens” residing in a state, as determined by treaty or international law. The

Report emphasises, however, that Christians have a higher loyalty to God. Christianity is “a revolutionary moral force” that desires the “spiritual and personal transformation” of every human society. In order to protect this Christian obligation, the Report considers it essential that missions should scrupulously avoid “the identification of the Christian faith either with the aggression of Foreign Powers or with the spirit of lawlessness.”

The Report recommends a policy of missionary obedience to “settled government”, and cautions against missionary participation in “political agitation.” At the same time it speaks with approval of situations where missionaries become “the champion of the people” among whom they live. This may be in missionary support of local cultures and languages, or advocacy of social change, or criticism of civil governments that are responsible for, or permit, “gross oppression and injustice”, or sympathy with the “awakened social and political aspirations” of the people. The Report accepts that tension may therefore occur between missions and governments.

To guide the missions in such situations, the Report recommends the following principles: (1) missionaries are legally subjects of their own governments, unless they choose to naturalise, and are therefore bound by such treaties as exist between their national government and the government of the country in which they serve; (2) indigenous Christians are, in terms of civil status, subjects of their own governments; (3) the relationship between missionaries and indigenous Christians is therefore “purely religious”, and does not legally permit missionaries to “interfere in the general administration of the country;” (4) every independent state has the right to make its own laws, and is not answerable to any other state except in terms of international law or special treaties; (5) the spiritual obligation under which missionaries work does not confer any civil or legal rights upon them; (6) in other than exceptional circumstances, such action as missionaries undertake to apply their spiritual and moral teaching in society at large must be within the framework of the national law; and if, in exceptional circumstances, they act outside the law, they also place themselves outwith its protection; (7) missions should deal with governments in a conciliatory and reasonable manner; (8) where missions feel morally or spiritually obliged to make representation to governments, they should do so in the spirit of St Paul’s teaching: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” (Phil.2:4)

Under these same principles the Report considers several “general questions” arising from its survey of existing conditions: e.g. appeal to civil authority, and compensation of missions. Especially in situations where governments restrict missionary work, the Report recommends that (a) contact with civil authority should be entrusted to a senior missionary, preferably acting on behalf of a joint missionary council – the institution of the Dutch Missions Consul being sympathetically described in Part 1 of the Report; and (b) on the Pauline distinction between what is expedient and what is lawful (1 Cor.10:23), missions should be willing to forego their legal rights where such sacrifice may benefit the indigenous Christian community. This is the principle on which the Report concludes: “We would emphasise that Christian teaching inculcates respect for civil authorities...and would affirm the reasonableness of granting to (indigenous) Christians all the protection, rights and privileges of loyal and law-abiding citizens.”