

Unit 2: New century problems and possibilities

New century problems

During the last two months of 1899, the Revd W.J. Hocking, vicar of All Saints' Church, Tufnell Park London, invited a series of eminent Anglican clergy to speak on what they considered to be the most pressing issues facing the Church and the nation at the dawn of the new century. The seven topics covered give an interesting insight into what was then one of the most influential parts of the Church of England. The speakers were all associated with the leftward leaning Christian Social Union. They were socially engaged, and rather high church. The topics were 'The Empire' (Brooke Foss Westcott); 'The State' (Henry Scott Holland); 'The Municipality' (Charles Gore); 'Overcrowding and Housing' (Arthur Chandler); 'The Temperance Question' (Samuel Barnett); 'The Rural Problem' (Thomas Fry); and 'Trade Unionism' (Alfred Leslie Lilley). The series concluded with Percy Dearmer describing the work of the Christian Social Union itself. Hocking edited these lectures as *The Church and New Century Problems* (1900). He declared in the Preface that 'it is the theology of the incarnation that makes us care about drains, and our love for Sacraments that impels us to love the body and flesh and blood.'

Reading the lectures one hundred years later, it is the authors' passing asides, rather more than their central arguments, that seem the most suggestive of turn-of-the-century attitudes. For example, one speaker suggested that the moral tone of London should be a beacon to the rest of the Empire, because the heart of the Empire was Britain, and the heart of Britain was London. Another commented that it was the pride of the Londoner to know that goods were cheaper there than anywhere else. One observed that prostitution was a problem caused by immoral women luring young men into the ways of sin. Another wondered how people whose moral fibre had been sapped by drink could be trusted to deal with India and the colonies. These clergy regarded tackling the English sense of superiority as a major pastoral challenge. It seemed that people had become self-satisfied with their membership of the greatest nation on earth; they were reluctant to acknowledge that Britain still had its failings. The clergy who contributed to *The Church and New Century Problems* expected that the Church (and they meant the Church of England) would take the lead in rectifying the social problems that they discussed so fully. They did not appear to anticipate that within a few years the state would be playing a much more active role. Almost within a decade, David Lloyd George, formerly a Welsh radical firebrand but by then a (still radical) Chancellor of the Exchequer, had raised income tax and introduced the old age pension. It was the start of the welfare state. The contribution of the Christian Social Union, which Dearmer had described rather charmingly in 1899 as 'an informal committee of the English Church upon social questions' was beginning to look somewhat marginal.



Image of South Wales miners on their way from a pit-head prayer meeting

Due to the prevalence of Nonconformity and the nature of its history and culture, the situation in Wales was (again) rather different. Since the 1880s – the federal University of Wales had been established in 1893 to encompass the colleges of Aberystwyth (1872), Bangor (1883) and Cardiff (1884) and create a specifically national institution – Wales was being transformed by rapid and heavy industrialization, encroaching social variation and an opening up to wider intellectual norms. For the first time in its modern history a burgeoning if still fairly modest middle class was emerging, not only in Wales itself but among the large exile communities of London and Liverpool. Chapel attendance and Nonconformist worship was overwhelmingly popular and still the religious norm, but a younger generation of university educated ministers were imbibing the unfamiliar disciplines of biblical criticism and Idealist thought. Henry Jones (1852-1952), Bangor's first professor of philosophy and later Edward Caird's successor in the University of Glasgow, had introduced Hegelian Idealism to Wales which, synthesized with chapel religion, rapidly challenged the older Calvinist faith. Whereas Welsh Nonconformity had become the people's creed due to the startling effectiveness of the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival, it had become even more pervasive through the many local revivals of the early Victorian era. By the Edwardian period, alas, biblical criticism on the one hand and the 'new theology' on the other, were undermining older certainties. Whereas Calvinism had emphasised human sinfulness, the divine transcendence and Christianity as a supernatural religion of personal redemption, the new liberalism majored on human goodness, potential and perfectibility, God's immanence within the world and Christian faith as a much more this-worldly creed. The younger theologians of Nonconformity – John Morgan Jones, Thomas Rees, D. Miall Edwards who were soon to reach positions of influence as teachers in the theological schools – had drunk deeply of the latest German thought, and did much to create a new liberal norm. This chimed in perfectly with the 'social gospel' which gained a ready hearing among the working men of both the North Wales quarries and the mines and steel mills of the south. (Robert Pope, *Seeking God's Kingdom: The Nonconformist Social Gospel in Wales 1906-39* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press).

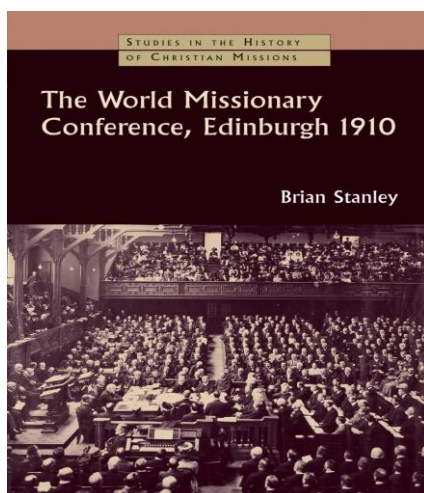
cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, pp. 1-46 for an overview of the situation of Christianity 1900-14; Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp.5-40 for the corresponding picture in Wales.

Ecumenical beginnings

Adrian Hastings's anecdote about F.B. Meyer and Edward Talbot is a good starting point for discussing the growth of ecumenism in the twentieth century. In 1899 a Baptist minister in south London, F.B. Meyer, wrote to ask the Anglican Bishop of Southwark, Edward Talbot, if it would be

possible for Talbot to look in, as a 'noble act of catholicity', on the centenary celebration of his Sunday school, which catered for more than 4000 Southwark children. Talbot replied that it would be quite impossible, 'a matter of clear principle', as to show any regard for a Baptist Sunday school would be to countenance 'the breach of unity which is so colossal an evil'. Hastings remarks that 'as we progress through the twentieth century and witness Anglican bishops slowly giving up the Talbot position and adopting the Meyer view of catholicity and then, still more recently, Roman Catholic bishops beginning to do the same, it is well to remember where we start; with the devout, learned, apparently inflexible Bishop Talbot, the Baptist Sunday schools of Southwark and that matter of "clear principle"'. (Hastings, *History of English Christianity* p.86).

The path to ecumenism was to be initially through the missionary movement. It is usually argued that ecumenism was the unintentional by-product of the missionary movement. The birth of ecumenism owed much to two developments: the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. SCM was an interdenominational organisation which was founded in the 1890s, and reached its greatest period of influence in the 1920s. Of the 50,000 students in any form of higher education in pre-1914 Britain, about 10,000 were members of SCM. In the years before the National Union of Students, it was the only nationwide student organisation. For this reason, and because it had no denominational frontiers, SCM came to assume a quite extraordinary importance. All this was a far cry from its early days, when it had been known first as the Inter-University Christian Union, and then as the British College Christian Union, and had been very strictly evangelical in ethos, concerned mainly with persuading its members to volunteer for overseas missionary service. Later on, however, it broadened its base to include Anglo-Catholics, and those with no fixed religious convictions who were interested in finding out more. Thus it showed that it was an organisation willing to embrace those of differing opinions.



Book cover depicting the Edinburgh Missionary Conference 1911

After the First World War, the concerns of SCM were to range over the League of Nations, Irish and Indian nationalism, wages, housing and unemployment. But SCM's non-denominational social gospel was regarded as a false gospel by many conservative evangelicals, for whom overseas mission, without any necessary reference to the political context, was still regarded as the priority. Hastings argues that the ecumenical future of Britain was decisively forged within SCM. It was a co-operative effort, largely a lay effort and quite as much Free Church and Scottish as Anglican. Many of those who became leaders of the Churches in the mid-twentieth century - William Paton, William Temple, David Cairns, Donald Fraser - were strongly motivated by their membership of SCM and gradually carried its ethos into the heart of all the major non-Roman Catholic churches in Britain. (For its

history see Robin Boyd, *The Witness of the Student Christian Movement: Church Ahead of the Church* (2007)).

Without SCM, the great Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, which is generally regarded as the real start of the modern ecumenical transformation of Christendom, would not have taken place in the form in which it did take place. SCM leaders played a crucial role in lobbying Anglo-Catholics, and also lobbying Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in order to persuade them to take part. Without the presence of these people, it would have become little more than a gathering of Evangelical missionary leaders. The origins of the Conference go back to 1900, when an Ecumenical Missionary Conference was held at New York. In 1906, it was decided that a second world conference should be held, but that it would be idle to hold such a gathering without the enthusiastic support of SCM. SCM agreed to lend not only their support, but also a member of staff, J.H. Oldham, who became secretary of the Edinburgh Conference, and one of the driving forces behind it. SCM agreed to cooperate on two conditions. First, that the conference must be genuinely world wide. Second, that it must be the climax of a long period of preparatory study of missionary problems. It must, therefore, be a gathering of thoroughly informed people, and not the sort of gathering where a handful of experts made speeches to a largely ignorant audience.

The Conference was held in Edinburgh for a week in June 1910. It was attended by 1,200 delegates from all over the world, all of whom solemnly promised to read the eight volumes of preparatory papers before they arrived. They belonged to every kind of Christian allegiance, except the Roman, and they represented more than 160 different missionary boards or societies. The conference began with messages of support from the King, Theodore Roosevelt and from the German Colonial Office. Then Archbishop Randall Davidson made a rousing opening speech, now seemingly unmindful of the fact that he had dithered over whether he should attend, and had had to be persuaded by J.H. Oldham. 'The evangelization of the world in this generation' had been the slogan of SCM since 1896, and it was widely quoted at the Edinburgh Conference. What emerged at the Conference was the conviction that with one gigantic, concerted push, it would be possible to convert the whole world to Christianity. This must have been the first and last time in the twentieth century that mainstream Church leaders had been persuaded about the feasibility of this objective. The Edinburgh Conference did not attempt to engage with the claims of any of the other world religions, nor did it ask what the gospel in the twentieth century should actually be. The mood of the Conference was self-assured. The delegates seemed unconscious of the gathering storm in European politics, and in the Far East. They took for granted the steady continuance of a free and relatively stable world. In the event, the Great War, and the subsequent rise of totalitarianism, had a severely dislocating effect on attempts at world mission. The slogan 'the evangelization of the world in this generation' was quietly dropped in 1918.

The true significance of the Edinburgh Conference is not therefore to be found in its impact on world missionary endeavour. Its real achievement was in its contribution to the ecumenical movement, which it helped to spawn almost by accident. At the Conference, and subsequently, non-Roman Catholic Christians made the discovery that they could work together on many issues, and that they did share a common agenda. Despite its relatively embryonic development, ecumenism grew strong enough to withstand the maelstrom of the war, and to emerge, relatively unscathed, in 1920. The ecumenical movement gave birth to a range of new movements and institutions, which tended to operate alongside the Churches rather than within them. These included 'Faith and Order', 'Life and Work' and the International Missionary Council. In Britain, all these movements were kept alive by, more than anyone else, the young men and increasingly also young women, who owed much of their spiritual formation to the Student Christian Movement.

Cf. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 86-99.

Further Reading

- Robin Boyd, *The Witness of the Student Christian Movement: Church Ahead of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2007).
- Keith A. Francis, 'Ecumenism or Distinctiveness? Seventh-Day Adventist Attitudes to the World Missionary Conference of 1910' in R.N. Swanson (ed.), *Unity and Diversity in the Church: Studies in Church History* 32 (1996).
- G.I.T. Machin, *Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) chapter 1.
- E.R. Norman, *Church and Society in England 1770-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976) chapter 6.
- Robert Pope, *Building Jerusalem: Nonconformity, Labour and the Social Question in Wales 1906-39* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998).
- Robert Pope, *Seeking God's Kingdom: The Nonconformist Social Gospel in Wales 1906-1939* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).
- Ruth Rouse & Stephen C. Neill, (eds) *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948* (London: SPCK, 1967).
- Brian M Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference: Edinburgh 1911* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
- Andrew F. Walls, 'Missions and the Demographic Transformation of the Church' in idem, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (2002). The article examines the Edinburgh Missionary Conference as a step on the road from Christendom to World Christianity.