

John R. Mott as an Ecumenical Leader. What was Mott's Vision?

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The 1910 Edinburgh mission conference took place on the watershed of two eras: behind lay the 'golden' mission era of the nineteenth century with its successful results, while ahead opened up a future with unprecedented opportunities. The chairman of the conference, John R. Mott expressed the atmosphere of the conference by speaking about 'providential' preparations for mission in the following words:

“Why has God made the whole world known and accessible to our generation? Why has He provided us with such wonderful agencies? Not that the forces of evil might utilize them [...]. Such vast preparations must have been made to further some mighty and beneficent purpose. Every one of these wonderful facilities has been intended primary to serve as a handmaid to the sublime enterprise of extending and building up the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in all the world. The hand of God in opening door after door among the nations of mankind, in unlocking the secrets of nature and in bringing to light invention after invention, is beckoning the Church of our day to larger achievements.” (The Student Volunteer, 127-129)

For the first time in history the whole world was open for the Gospel. No wonder Edinburgh 1910 ended on a triumphalist note. Mott described the end of the conference as the beginning of the world conquest. With hindsight, it is easy to criticise the limitations and one-sidedness of Edinburgh, but the conference succeeded in leaving a valuable legacy, the vision of global mission and global church, where the Gospel has spread as far as the ends of the earth and each nation is able to bring its own contribution to a deeper understanding of faith.

Two key persons of Edinburgh 1910

Two key persons, Mott as chairman and Joseph H. Oldham as an organising secretary, bore the main responsibility for the conference and its preparations. Mott and Oldham shared many similar elements in their spiritual background, as they both came from the Student Christian Movement and the Young Men's Christian Association. An American evangelist, Dwight L. Moody played an important role in their youth. Oldham experienced conversion at the evangelistic meeting of Moody in Oxford and Mott participated in Moody's student summer conferences at Northfield, as well as in the famous 1886 Mount Hermon Conference, in which one hundred volunteers pledged themselves to leave for missionary work. Oldham was born of Scottish parents in India. He also worked for three years in India in the service of the Young Men's Christian Association. Later he studied at Oxford and Germany under the tutelage of Gustav Warneck.

The important step in Oldham's life was the move to Edinburgh in 1901, where his purpose was to prepare himself for the ministry of the United Free Church. In spite of good theological training and responsibility for many tasks in the church he never applied for ordination. According to Kathleen Bliss Oldham, he started a movement for missiological study in Edinburgh and in some other Scottish cities. Hundreds of study groups were registered. Oldham's successful missiological teaching in Scotland was one reason for the call to become an organising secretary of the Edinburgh conference. (Kathleen Bliss, J.H. Oldham 1874-1969. Mission Legacies 1994. 570-579)

Mott and Oldham as co-workers completed each other well. Mott was a charismatic leader, whose person reflected authority and strength. Mott has been described as a statesman, who felt to be at home among kings, presidents, diplomats and other influential persons. Rhetorically, he was one of the brilliant speakers of the ecumenical movement focusing on the grounds of faith, and sparking listeners interested in mission. Oldham for his part often stepped aside and remained in the background, although he was the real architect of many ecumenical meetings. Firstly, his contribution to the ecumenical movement became evident especially thorough planning and preparations of conferences. Oldham became famous for his skilful organisational ability in providing a model of how to plan and carefully prepare ecumenical conferences. Secondly, Oldham was a deep thinker who understood the significance of theological discussion. *The International Review of Mission* founded by Oldham in 1912 is a good example of his far-reaching influence. Whereas all ecumenical questions and problems were for Mott mainly matters of good-will and loyalty, Oldham sharply criticised this view and defended the value of the Faith and Order work in a letter to Mott:

“The divergences go very deep and can be transcended not merely by goodwill but by very fundamental and prolonged rethinking of the existing position. The difference between fundamentalists and modernists is almost a difference of two quite distinct religions. I do not think that the problems can be resolved purely as a matter of cooperation.” (Oldham’s letter to Mott 29.11.1935)

Mott’s language and style

However, both Oldham and Mott were theologically bridge-builders and preferred to avoid defining their theological position exactly. Therefore they succeeded in allowing enough room for different theologies and in creating a tolerant atmosphere. As a consequence for instance, representatives of revival evangelicalism and the Social Gospel might participate in cooperation. But Oldham’s letter demonstrates the problems, which were caused by Mott’s attitude towards theological questions. Mott failed to understand or at least he underestimated the meaning of theological divergences. This problem concerned in part Mott’s language and style.

The former General Secretary of the WCC, Willem Visser’t Hooft, has reminded us that Mott’s texts and speeches were full of superlatives and overstatements:

“Nearly every conference is the best, the biggest, the most creative etc. Now I know very well that this is the Mott- language and the Mott-style. In the WSCF we used to make jokes about it. But we accepted it because we saw behind those words the man, the Christian. We admired and loved him in spite of this baroque triumphalist appearance.” (Visser’t Hooft in a letter to Raymond P. Morris 6.7.1979)

Unofficial spokesman of American society

In order to understand rightly Mott’s global vision and also to respect it, we must see Mott’s thinking in context. His thoughts reflected many values and attitudes of American society and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. This pragmatic approach prevented him from seeing the limits of Western culture. This problem especially concerned the relation between American culture and the Christian faith, for Christianity and American democracy belonged together in his thought. Defending and expanding American democracy was almost

the same as fighting for Christianity. Mott attempted to remain neutral in politics, but in practice became an unofficial spokesman of American society because of his close connections with American policy and economy.

When the world situation became more and more acute in the years leading up to the First World War, Mott found himself during Wilson's presidency drawn into the foreign politics of his country, although he declined several of the assignments offered to him, for example, the post of ambassador to China. Mott's friendship and loyalty to President Wilson were important to Mott as he was building networks of mission. After hearing the news of President Wilson declaring war on Germany, Mott interrupted his journey in the middle of the day to send a telegram to the President promising the entire Y.M.C.A. of his country to the service of the President. After making this promise Mott worked hard over the next few days to win the official support of the leadership of the movement to his actions. The United States had to win the war so "that the world might be made safe for democracy". He had an idealistic view of American goals for the war, as well as of the methods to be used for attaining them. He considered the army to be "the cleanest and most united" in the world.

During the war Mott attempted to ensure the safety of missionaries from various countries on an impartial basis and to guarantee the future of world mission. However, his neutrality was also compromised through participation in the visit of an American political delegation to Russia. At Wilson's request, Mott took part in the so-called 'Good Will Mission' that visited Russia in 1917 and aimed at strengthening the relationship between the United States and Russia. During that visit to Moscow, Mott spoke in public about two democracies that had found each other and were now fighting together for world peace. In his opinion the motives of these two countries were pure. A strong love for the Russian people as well as an uncritical admiration for Russia in public pronouncements made during the world wars further encumbered his thought ideologically. In spite of his rash statements, Mott cannot however be seen as a 'defector' to world mission, as many German scholars have claimed. All available material shows that during the hostilities Mott was deeply concerned about the welfare of the whole ecumenical mission after the disruption of unity caused by the war.

Mott's views on American democracy and ideals manifest themselves most clearly in his doctrine of Christianisation, according to which the entire world has to be rendered more humane and to be subjected to Christ's dominion. He believed optimistically that a brighter future lay ahead for the whole of humankind in spite of temporary setbacks. It is here that Mott's high opinion of American society and democracy are at their most accentuated. The future of humankind to a large extent depends on the actions of American society. In Mott's view, the ultimate goal, the coming of God's kingdom, is inextricably interlinked with the future development of this world.

The issues of correct strategy and fund-raising also led to many problems. Mott's global thinking is illustrated by one detail in his office in New York. Under the glass plate on his desk, Mott had inserted a map of the world. The map lying open on his desk reminded him of the truly global nature and goals of his world. In Mott's opinion, Churches must urgently choose "a truly adequate missionary policy and strategy" in order to be able to fulfil the missionary task. Missionary strategy must aim at freeing all latent forces of Christianity and organising sufficient financial support for mission. Mott regarded fund-raising as one of the most important tasks of mission: "Blessed are the money-raisers, for in heaven they shall stand next to the martyrs." (Mott, Addresses and Papers VI, 88)

Mott's successful fund-raising campaigns made several major missionary projects possible, and enabled dozens of Christian centres to be built in Asia and Africa. In principle, he

emphasised the financial responsibility of all Christians in missionary work and never underestimated the value of regular donations, however small. Nevertheless, in his work this principle became overshadowed by his massive campaigns.

Unfortunately, Mott did not always acknowledge his dependence on many leading businessmen, who also often wanted influence on the nature of mission. Perhaps the best example is the sensation around the report called *Re-thinking Missions*. John D. Rockefeller Jr. was willing to support mission on the condition that the message, methods and goals were to be modernised. For this purpose he financed a research project called the 'Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry' in 1931-32. This project was useful in collecting a considerable amount of valuable research material, but the final report of the chairman, William Ernest Hocking, caused a sensation. Hocking's report calls in question the whole basis of Christian mission and puts Christianity on a par with other religions. The report represented clear religious relativism. This report raised a stormy debate in the ecumenical movement, some of whom blamed Mott and the International Missionary Council for diluting the message of mission. Theologically Mott was unable to agree with this one-sided report, but his dependence on Rockefeller's patronage prevented him from criticising it in public. While Rockefeller vehemently defended Hocking's views, Mott tried to take a diplomatic stance and act as a referee and in this way save the reputation of the International Missionary Council.

Mott's Special Legacy

The ideological and cultural encumbrances mentioned above make up a reminder that John R. Mott, the powerhouse of the early days of the ecumenical movement, was a child of his time, and like us, bound to many of the fashions and prejudices of his time. But his global vision encompassed much of permanent value, in addition to the points mentioned at the start of this article. With hindsight, it is of course deeply offensive that only 17 representatives from outside western countries participated in the 1910 Edinburgh Mission conference. But the historical development lagged hopelessly behind. Nevertheless, Mott foresaw the global future by scrutinising churches on all his world travels to find local Christian leaders, who could bring their own churches and peoples to enrich the worldwide Christian community. Mott's leadership was expressed in identifying such people and persuading them to participate in global ecumenical cooperation.

In Mott's time there was barely an inkling of what context of faith, might signify. Mott's proclamation can be criticised for its optimistic, even in places naive style. However, in surveying Mott's broad literary output, one feature stands out as a foreshadowing of the discovery of context. His written works and speeches are full of encouraging examples and descriptions of how people in different parts of the world had discovered and experienced faith in Christ. He was genuinely delighted by the contribution of each person's culture to the understanding of Christian faith.

Mott's great vision is expressed in the title of one of his books *The Evangelization of the World in this Generation* (New York 1900). This motto, developed by Arthur Pierson and popularised by Mott, characterised missiological discussion at the start of the last century. Gustav Warneck severely criticised the motto for its superficial eschatology. Because of Warneck's criticisms, the Edinburgh Missionary Conference dared not to employ it as a motto, but it still had an influence behind the scenes as a description of the sentiments of the participants. Mott rejected Warneck's criticisms and insisted that Christians of every age should carry the responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of their own time.

“It means to give all men an adequate opportunity to know Jesus Christ as their Saviour and to become his real disciples. This involves such a distribution of missionary agencies as will make the knowledge of the Gospel accessible to all men.”
(p.3)

The heart of Mott’s proclamation was Jesus Christ and his saving work. Among his favourite theological concepts was the description of Jesus as King. One of the most inspiring experiences of Mott’s life occurred during his participation in the 1889 student summer conferences at Northfield, when out of the blue a telegram arrived from Kyoto, Japan, with the message: “Making Jesus Christ King. Five Hundred Students”. This message from the student meeting held in Japan was for Mott an inspirational sign of the Gospel spreading to all the world. In spite of many setbacks in the history of mission, the vision of the universal and global nature of Christian faith is becoming in the course of time ever more fully realised in practice.