Stephen Bevans, S.V.D.

The Edinburgh 1910 Centennial: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Most U.S. Catholics probably know little or nothing about the great missionary conference that took place in Edinburgh, Scotland, in June 1910. It certainly was not a Catholic event, and there were no Catholics present. And yet “Edinburgh 1910,” as it is called, was a pivotal event in the history of Christianity in the twentieth century and may have even had influence on one of the main purposes of Vatican II: Christian unity.

While the Conference was explicitly about the church’s missionary activity, one of its most enduring legacies is its place in the history of the ecumenical movement. That movement has its direct roots in Edinburgh 1910 and from it emerged the World Council of Churches in 1948. In 1910 the Edinburgh Conference was an authentic sign of the times. Its centennial celebration in 2010 may well be a sign of the times for our own day.

Looking Back

There had been missionary conferences before, and some had more delegates present. None, however, had been prepared as carefully as had the meeting in Edinburgh. For several years before, under the direction of the Conference’s organizers, the American John R. Mott and the Scot J. H. Oldham had shepherded the production of eight study volumes, and each of the 1,216 delegates had been provided with copies well beforehand. The topics of these volumes included reflections on preaching the Gospel in the non-Christian world, the question of non-Christian religions, the issue of education, and a study of the need for Christian unity.

By today’s standards the makeup of the delegates was overwhelmingly male, and missionaries from the West were far in the majority. In fact, there were only nineteen representatives from what the conference referred to (somewhat patronizingly) as the “younger churches”: four from India; four from Japan; three from China; and one each from Korea, Burma, Turkey, and Ghana. There were many delegates from the United States, including—interestingly—several African Americans, among whom were several women. There were no representatives from Latin America in order to avoid the touchy issue of Protestants attempting to convert Catholics to what they considered authentic Christianity.

The atmosphere, nonetheless, was electric. The newly-established American magazine The Christian Century reported, “Everyone

Stephen Bevans, S.V.D., is the Louis J. Luzbetak, S.V.D. Professor of Mission and Culture at Catholic Theological Union at Chicago. His latest book, An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective, was published in 2009 by Orbis Press.
feels the presence in the conference of a power not ourselves, deeper than our own devices, which is making for a triumphant advance of Christianity abroad. And not less are the delegates thrilled by the sense that the conference foreshadows a new era for the church at home” (Morrison).

As mentioned above, there were no Catholics present. However, American delegate Silas McBee read a lengthy letter of greeting from Bishop Geremia Bonomelli, Catholic bishop of Cremona, Italy, addressing the issue of Christian unity. What is intriguing for history—and how Edinburgh 1910 might have influenced Vatican II—is that Bonomelli had as his secretary a young priest named Angelo Roncalli. Who knows the influence that this pioneer of Catholic ecumenism had on his protégé, the future pope.

On the one hand, then, Edinburgh 1910 was amazingly forward looking. It recognized clearly that only by working together did the churches have a future. At the end of the conference a “Continuation Committee” was formed and out of it emerged the two movements of “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work”—the merger of which in 1948 resulted in the formation of the World Council of Churches. On the other hand, historians look at Edinburgh 1910 as a conference that marks the high-water mark of the amazing missionary movement that emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century and flourished under the movement of European colonialism and nineteenth-century optimism. Only four years later any optimism would be shattered and colonialism would be mortally wounded as Europe tore itself apart in the Great War.

The last hundred years have seen a revolution in the way the church engages in mission. It recognizes now that rather than it having a mission, the Mission—God’s Mission—has a church. Whereas mission a hundred years ago was conceived as sending countries (in Europe, North America) sending and receiving countries (in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania) receiving, now mission is “from everywhere to everywhere” as one writer put it. Mission might also be across the street or down the block. As scholars have pointed out in the last several decades, we now live in a “world church” and in a church where the “center of gravity” has shifted to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Mission used to be conceived of as the powerful (West) helping the impoverished or developing “rest.” Now mission is thought of in terms of equality and dialogue, even vulnerability. As we look forward in celebrating the centennial of Edinburgh 1910, much has changed.

Looking Forward

Part of the centennial celebration will take part in Edinburgh from June 2 to 6, when 250 invited delegates will convene to remember and reflect on how the 1910 conference has been and will continue to be a “springboard for mission,” as the subtitle by a current book by Kenneth Ross describes it. But there will also be celebrations throughout the world, as a sign of the radically changed situation of our world and of the task of mission. There will be a meeting of Evangelical Christians in Cape Town, South Africa, a meeting of scholars to commemorate the centennial at Boston University, and a conference in Melbourne, Australia—just to name a few of many conferences and celebrations. In almost all these gatherings the presence of Catholics, Orthodox, and Pentecostals is being greatly encouraged.

Like the World Missionary Conference a century ago, there are being produced a number of study documents. These documents are around nine basic themes, through which run seven “transversal themes.” Some of the nine themes are the same as those of Edinburgh 1910. For example, other reli-
gious ways are being studied, as is the question of Christian unity. But other themes are slightly or greatly different: “Mission and Postmodernities” will reflect on postcolonialism, economic structures, internationalism, and information technology. There is also a study document on the complex relation between mission and power and one on the missiological dimension of theological education. “Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts,” will include subtopics such as urbanization, migration, poverty, and the world of blogs and the internet, and there will be a document as well on mission spirituality. Through all these documents run themes of women and mission, youth and mission, reconciliation and healing, Bible and mission, contextualization, subaltern voices, and ecology.


References

