

# World Missionary Conference, 1910

*(To consider Missionary Problems in relation to the Non-Christian World)*

## THE HISTORY AND RECORDS OF THE CONFERENCE

TOGETHER WITH  
ADDRESSES DELIVERED AT THE  
EVENING MEETINGS

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## MEDIÆVAL MISSIONS IN THEIR BEARING ON MODERN MISSIONS

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*Address delivered in the Assembly Hall on Thursday  
Evening, 16th June*

BRETHREN in Christ, Mediæval Missions, or in particular the missions of the earlier mediæval times, have, I venture to say, a great deal to teach us in matters of method, and in other respects as well. At the same time it must be recognised that there is no systematic account of the missions that were undertaken in those days, so far as I know, and therefore our information on the subject has to be collected here and there in small pieces, and gathered very largely from incidents in the lives of the great saints, and, to a very limited extent, from other historical documents. I propose to take, first of all, a few of the more obvious points, and deal with them very shortly—they will hardly need comment—and then to pass on later to one or two points selected for further discussion.

First of all, then, we see much in the record of the missionary effort of the early mediæval times which is exceedingly familiar to us in the present day. We see the preacher going forth to preach, itinerating about from village to village. Again, practically every one of the great missionaries of whom we read had the policy, quite deliberately adopted and most thoroughly carried out, of selecting here and there the most promising boys, that they might be taken off to be educated so as to form the

labourers of the new generation. We may even see, I think, without being too fanciful, the beginning of industrial missions, when we see Wilfrid in Sussex teaching a very desolate and starving people, and setting them to work by teaching them to fish, which, up to then, they had been unable to do. Again, we may note the extraordinarily rapid development of the autonomous and indigenous Church. There was no hesitation, difficulty or delay, such as we have so constantly presented to us to-day. Take a single instance. As soon as St. Augustine had gone to France, within a very short time after his landing in England, and had come back a consecrated Bishop, there was, from the very first, an *Ecclesia Anglicana*: *i.e.* within a few months of the landing of the first missionaries. There was no difficulty about it at all. His instructions from the Home Base at Rome were conceived in an exceedingly liberal and enlightened spirit, which is perhaps well worthy of commendation to men of our own days. Further, when we get a brother missionary coming from the north—Aidan from another Home Base—there is the same liberality and freedom, and, as a result, there is again growing up, not another body, but the same *Ecclesia Anglicana*. The two simply formed into one, becoming part of the Church of the country. It is well worthy of our serious consideration. I take another point which I must mention, but only just mention. As topics have to be selected it seemed to me that was not so appropriate to our discussion as some others, but yet it is one that cannot be ignored or forgotten. I mean the supreme value of monastic institutions as evangelistic agencies in the whole of the Mediæval Missions. They were all built upon the monastic principle: and again, I think, that is a thing which has to be laid to heart.

Further, the questions of organisation and Church polity need some consideration. It is not a topic which we can well take up to-night; but it is important for us to draw from these mediæval precedents whatever we can, and there is an immense deal of value awaiting any one who can study out the bearing of Church organisation and polity upon the science of missions. We are at present engaged in

missionary work, partly in conflict with great world religions, and partly in contact with religions of a very much lower type. Now the Mediæval Church, except in one instance, did not touch or come into contact with any great world religion, until it came into conflict rather late in the day with Islam; and then its dealings were more military than missionary. The single exception to this is the conflict in Persia and the East with Zoroastrianism. The early part of this conflict lies outside our period, but the later part of it lies well within, and therefore may well be considered. This later part, the missionary zeal of the Syriac-speaking Church, is largely unrecorded. We only know very dimly the way in which they bore right across into China, but the methods are to us unknown. We know little but the mere fact of it. Still, there is something to pause over, something, I think too, of immense importance. These two great world religions came into conflict. We can sum up, I think, the result in one sentence. First of all, the Persian dualism contaminated the Christian faith, and split the Church as an organisation into fragments: but, secondly, when purified and unified, the result was an immense strengthening of the grip which the Church as a whole had upon its Christian organisation and faith. Both these points and the result are, I think, worthy of our attention to-night. It is well that we should dwell upon the really serious contamination and splitting which resulted from the conflict between Christianity and that world religion. It involved an immense disorder, not only in faith, but in practice. But from all that the Church emerged all the stronger, purified in its faith and solidly entrenched in its position. For we must never forget, in viewing the unity of the Mediæval Church, that it possessed that unity and unquestioned sway over the Christianised world, not because it had inherited it from the past, but because it had proved itself to be the only form of Christian organisation which was fit to survive, the other divisions being unfit to survive. And its dogmatic force was the only power that could bring the contaminated faith into reconciliation at last with the great Nicene faith.

The significance of this for us is obvious, but immensely

important. We also have now to come, and shall have increasingly to come, into conflict with world religions. Let us weigh well the probability that it will bring with it these same difficulties, that it will bring with it necessarily a great contamination of the faith. It is a formulated dogmatic faith that has survived the attacks, not semi-Christian or imperfect statements of faith. It is that alone that can come through these impending conflicts and survive. Similarly, amid the immense variety of organisation which already exists, and which will perhaps be increased in its variety before we are done, only those organisations will be able to survive which really stand the test of this tremendous impact. Therefore, I can see that nothing which I can say to this Conference is more important than this. We must be well warned beforehand that it is only the most comprehensive and yet most dogmatic faith that can ever emerge from such a conflict as is lying before us, and it is only the most closely knit organisation—closely knit and yet leaving plenty of room for elasticity—which can ever possibly survive the various conflicts which will arise as we come more and more to grips with the Eastern religions. But at the end of it all our confidence is this, that those who come through will come through immensely strengthened, united, and enriched, and that our whole Western Christianity, now perhaps too exclusively ethical, and too brutally practical, will be balanced as the result of this great conflict by Oriental conceptions, predominantly mystical, and more deeply theological in the strict sense of that term.

I turn now to the other branch of our subject, which, after all, has most bearing upon the Mediæval Missions; for nearly throughout their whole course they were face to face with the lower type, with all sorts of religions, which I should roughly class under the title animistic. We will confine ourselves to four questions which emerge in this conflict. I will not presume to do more than raise the questions, leaving it to your greater wisdoms to answer them.

First, let us take this point, the mediæval mind saw no element of good at all in Paganism. It said frankly that it was the work of devils. The consequence of that

was that the missionary, wherever he went, was extraordinarily and uncompromisingly aggressive. The typical act, as you well know, of a missionary hero is that he goes and destroys a temple, or cuts down an idol, or in some way shocks the Pagan conscience. We see it, for example, when Boniface goes and deliberately cuts down the sacred oak at Geismar, and Willibrord profanes the holy island of Heligoland. He profaned the sacred stream by baptizing three people in it, and slaying the sacred animals. He wanted to put the greatest affront he could upon this devilish superstition. We are told in our Fourth Report that this method is no longer admissible. We are told that it only shocks the heathen; that he does not anticipate possibly that the missionary himself who does these aggressive acts will be any the worse off, but that they will inevitably recoil upon himself—a very great difference of view, you will see, from the mediæval idea. But in this connection we may well remind ourselves that there are instances to the contrary. It was Coifi, the high priest of Northumbria, who himself mounted a horse, which was forbidden to him, took a spear, which was equally forbidden to him, and rode off to the great temple at Godmanham, and there profaned it himself. Clearly, then, it was in accordance with the newly enlightened conscience of that time that such a thing could be done. This aggressive policy then commended itself. I ask then the question: may not this precedent have its value still? The policy, at any rate in the Mediæval Church, was quite deliberate and quite uniform. It is all the more remarkable, because, as you may remember, that was not the policy which was adopted towards the temples in Rome itself. In Rome itself the heathen temples were preserved—cautiously, carefully, and decently preserved,—nor was it until the middle of the sixth century that there was any conversion made of a heathen temple into a Christian Church. It was not then the policy of Rome to break down temples. This was a position quite deliberately taken up by those who undertook it, and we may add at the same time that it was successful. We are told that it may shock the Pagan conscience. But may it not be possible

that the perverted Pagan conscience needs such a shock, and that if we do not give it such a shock they may think we are tolerating it, and misjudge our consideration? I do not mean that there is to be no policy of conciliation—far from it. Everywhere there was a policy of concession, there were the things which they adopted, and the things which came to hand and were incorporated. Our Christmas itself is one of them; the wedding ring is one of them. Such accommodations with heathen practice were made in large matters, sometimes even on great test occasions. You will remember, perhaps, that wonderful scene at which Patrick made his quite deliberate attack in a friendly way on the Pagan ceremony of the sacred fire. On the day on which the king had collected all his people in his own castle, when every other fire was out, the astonished people looked across the plain and saw a light. It was Patrick's. In great agitation the wise men said, "That light must be extinguished to-night, or it never will be extinguished at all," and to do the task the king, and two Druids, and eight chariots went to interview Patrick. As you may imagine, the result was not the extinguishing of the light. On the contrary, Patrick came back the next day to Tara and there proclaimed Christ, and there made it clear that he had come to give a healthy and harmless equivalent for that custom. We have similarly a double duty of aggression and conciliation to-day before us.

Secondly, *pari passu*, the mediæval missionary struck high. He aimed at the conversion of the king, and through the king, the conversion of the people. This was the usual method in all places outside the Roman Empire. From the day of Gregory the Illuminator, in Armenia, in the third century, and forward, it prevailed. We can dimly see it in the missions to Goths and Slavs; it becomes more clear in all the dealings with the Germanic tribes. It was practically uniform. We see it here in various forms, but always the same thing. Ethelbert of Kent is fairly rapid in his acceptance of the faith himself. He puts no pressure upon his courtiers, but they follow, and his kingdom is converted there and then. Further north, Edwin of Northumbria is

slow to come to any personal conviction of faith. When he does, he leaves it to the leaders to debate at that most wonderful debate which Bede so vividly records, and to make their decision; and it was when the Council had discussed it that the people gave themselves over to the Christian faith. I take these as typical instances. Now, what lay behind those conversions of a king and his kingdom? First, and perhaps very prominent, the wish to come into the line of progress. It was distinctly so near the border of the Empire. Our report tells us that we must not be too much dissatisfied with somewhat insufficient motives. Secondly, there was the wish for deliverance from a bondage to fear, and from rites which they themselves knew to be profitless. Thirdly, there was the desire to secure the immortality that was promised. Fourthly, there was the desire to escape from the hell which the missionary invariably said was the necessary end of every unbeliever. Now the last arose from a presentment of the message that was universal in our period. In the thirteenth century the friars, who went as missionaries to the Tartars, did little else but call on them to surrender on pain of eternal damnation. We may put aside that last motive from our present consideration, but the rest of the motives operate, I think I may say, as strongly as ever to-day. May we not then consider this method more seriously? The method went on continuously. One of the last instances on the historical page is that extraordinarily pathetic appeal of St. Francis to Saladin to finish the trouble of the Crusades by becoming a Christian. We have, I think, to consider the question, secondly, whether this method is not applicable to-day to a certain extent; whether, where civilisation is pressing upon the body of the people, where there is no developed sense of individuality, where the king counts for much, and the people count for relatively little, it is not a right method to deal with the whole mass and to aim simply at dealing with the whole mass.

Thirdly, there was bound up with this the habit of indiscriminate baptism, and almost equally indiscriminate confirmation. That was quite natural in view of the beliefs of

the times, and the absolute essentiality of baptism for salvation. The attendant disadvantages were the low tone of the new Christians, and the immense relapses that almost always followed; but without denying that the revived catechumenate and careful preparation for baptism which now prevails is better in the case where converts are few and individual, it may still be asked whether the opposite method, with all its disadvantages, is not after all justifiable in the case of great mass movements, always supposing that they come into the support of a strong corporate life with discipline and sacraments, definite practice as well as faith. It was by such a process that our own country was Christianised for the most part, and we, at least, are the last people who ought on occasion at any rate to disregard such a hopeful method.

Lastly, wherever the Church went with its full power of faith and ordinances and saintly lives, there arose a group of phenomena which we must consider sympathetically, chiefly miracles and exorcisms. No doubt we should be inclined to adopt a different attitude towards some of the mediæval miracles. We should be inclined to think that some might be put down possibly as the result of fraud, others as the result of simplicity, that others might be perfectly explicable in these more enlightened days. It is well that we should do all that. At the same time, I submit to you that we should also try to clear out of our own minds some of the relics of the nineteenth or even the eighteenth century scepticism: and when we have done that we are in a better position to realise the remaining miracles. Are we not right to expect more of the same sort of manifestation at the present time? We are only working at half power. The kingdom of God comes with power, and when we see how in the old days those signs or wonders were perfectly direct motives for conversion, may we not again believe, in people of the same sort, and in circumstances of a similar sort, that some force may be imparted, and God may give us this wonderful manifestation, so that quite evidently the kingdom of God may be coming in power? Ought not the sick still to be healed? Are there no demoniacs now from whom the man of God

by the finger of God should cast out the devil? That is the question that I ask. It is the only question of these four to which I venture to give an answer, and my answer is an unhesitating Yes. For three reasons. First, I have seen enough even in our own prosaic home work to know that the sick are healed, and that the devils are cast out. Secondly, that though we call these things sometimes miracles, or more rightly signs, and may perhaps wonder if they are possible, we must never forget that beside the miracle of a converted soul such things as these are small; and while we have before our eyes day by day the miracle of God's work in the conversion of a soul, we are surely foolish if we despair about such lesser things. My last reason is that our Lord Himself has promised that these signs shall follow. Far, therefore, from saying that it is preposterous that in this twentieth century we should believe such things, I say it is preposterous if we do not. So we come lastly to see that the Mediæval Missions have to teach us very much of the power of faith. Let us close our meeting therefore with the prayer that the Lord will increase our faith.