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Literary Insight into Mission Leading Up to the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910



Candis Berends

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Evangelical Missiological Society Monograph Series

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Historical Context of the WMC

> But then that is what Englishmen are, adventurers to the backbone; and all our magnificent muster-roll of colonies, each of which will in time become a great nation, testify to the extraordinary value of the spirit of adventure which at first sight looks like a mild form of lunacy.
>
> —H. Rider Haggard, *Allan Quatermain*

This chapter commences the investigation into the first sub-question *What is the WMC's import within the missiological history of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries?* by surveying the historical context leading into the WMC. Beginning with the significance of King George V's message to the WMC, the discussion highlights the challenges to empire, then summarizes the historical relationship between empire and mission, explores several of the nationalistic movements burgeoning in the late nineteenth century, and finally examines British-specific historical realities significant to British culture in the years prior to the WMC. The British-specific historical realities include the Second Boer War, the Anglican-Nonconformist relationship, and the British missionary enterprise. Overall, studying the lead-up to the WMC uncovers the socio-cultural-political forces weighing upon the assembled delegates and in particular the indigenous speakers as they participated in the meta-text of the WMC.

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The Heft of King George V's "Presence"

1910 was a monumental year not only for the history of mission as manifested by the WMC, but also for the WMC's opening figurehead, King George V. Besides being the year of coronation for the British king, 1910 followed recent years of challenges to global empires and the idea of empire itself. Irish republicanism intensified its campaign for self-government, and the Second Boer War prompted British fears of the decline of the empire. Nationalistic forces mounted revolutions against both the Ottoman Empire and the Qing Dynasty. Japan wrought a stunning defeat against a Western empire in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. And George V's own first cousin, Tsar Nicholas II, weathered a populist uprising during the Russian Revolution of 1905.

Even though the empire King George V inherited in 1910 had just experienced a flourishing century which colored school-maps red with territory for Great Britain,[1] there was every possibility that Britain's high imperial era had approached its zenith and was facing the descendant side of the summit. Just as the understanding of the word "ecumenical" was in flux at the time of the WMC, so too the understanding of empire was being shaken by questions and challenges politically, socially, and culturally.[2] John R. Mott and other organizers of the WMC recognized that global nationalistic movements were challenging the idea of empire.[3] WMC delegate W. H. T. Gairdner recorded that both monarchists and republicans alike sang the British national anthem at the WMC, indicating the presence of mixed opinions toward empire among the missionaries themselves.[4] For some, empire was an imposed force of life as well as an object of waning significance; for others, empire was a foundational force of life as well as an object of admiration and perhaps even ascendancy (as in Japan's case).

In viewing the WMC as a meta-text, the visual representation of global missionary delegates standing *en masse* to hear the British king's message offers a picture of sizeable symbolic meaning. Though physically absent, the king's "presence" through his words still garnered the power to induce a show of respect among a gathered multitude of subjects and

1. Jackson, *British Empire*, 5.
2. Jackson records, "The European empires rose and fell together." *British Empire*, 71.
3. Race, "Guest Editorial," 4.
4. Gairdner, *Echoes of Edinburgh*, 39.

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nonsubjects alike. To Gairdner, significantly, the king's opening message to the WMC served an important historic and symbolic purpose by paralleling the emperor's role of opening ancient ecumenical councils.[5] Taking King George V as a representative of both cultural Britishness and empire at the time of the WMC,[6] this chapter examines the history of European empires relative to missional interests because the king's message to the WMC's delegates depicted this relationship.

History of European Empires Relative to Missional Interests

Because Gairdner claimed a historical connection between the WMC and the ancient ecumenical councils when the king effectively opened the conference with his message, it is helpful to review the historical relationship between imperial heads of state and missionary movements which delegates like Gairdner felt they were experiencing as they stood to attention within the Assembly Hall. For the roughly four centuries preceding the WMC, what the contemporaries of European empires would have called "civilizing" involved imposing different types of infrastructures upon subject nations that would facilitate easier governance and smoother pathways for economic gains. Economic exploitation melded with a race theory that both enabled and justified imperialism by using terms such as "barbaric" and "savage."[7] Not too distant from this imperial sense of trusteeship[8] were missionaries who believed that Christianizing and civilizing were twin forces destined to benefit nations far from Europe.[9] A brief rundown of

5. Gairdner, 38. Fellow WMC delegate Nelson Bitton also likened the conference to the "great Church Councils of the past." Bitton, "Report of the Proceedings," 531.
6. Lauren O'Hagan argues that during the Great Exhibition of 1851 advertisers learned the British monarch embodied national identity and consequently used the monarch and the success of the expanding empire to sell ideologies of Britain in their products. "Advertising and Marketing," 73.
7. Brantlinger, "Imperialism," 736, 738.
8. Gairdner notes the "fundamental principle, to 'rule for the benefit of the ruled.'" *Echoes of Edinburgh*, 7. See also Gunson, "Missionary Interest," 309.
9. As one example, CMS missionary Claud Field writes, "Grim and uncompromising, the mountains of Afghanistan rise abruptly from the Peshawar plain to bar the expansion of civilization and Christianity." *With the Afghans*, 77. Likewise, Charles Clayton Morrison lauds William J. Bryan's WMC speech which held that mission's highest demonstration of character was found in "educating the inferior people of the world." Morrison, "World Missionary Conference." See also Brantlinger, "Imperialism," 736; Walls, "British," 63.

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European empires demonstrates the historical weightiness of the relationship between imperialism and the mission endeavor which contributed to the atmosphere at the WMC.

The sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, unsurprisingly, reveal European empires preoccupied with "discovery" and settlement. Andrew F. Walls refers to this phenomenon as the Great European Migration, crediting the European, imperial movement to create new nations as the background that shaped Christianity for the next four and a half centuries.[10] Likewise, Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist couple the start of global Christianity in the modern era with the imperial conquest of the Americas, and they note that as empires shifted and expanded over these crucial centuries, Christianity mirrored such foundational change, too, through the rebranching instigated by the reformation movements.[11] As Portugal and Spain expanded their empires through maritime campaigns of the sixteenth century, missionaries followed. The Portuguese and Spanish imperial-missional relationships were at times contentious, such as when missionaries criticized their compatriots for hindering their Christian witness, and at times cooperative, such as St. Francis Xavier's example of traveling under the mandate of the Portuguese king.[12] In the same century, British missionaries pointed toward the Americas enjoyed a measure of royal patronage as King Edward VI's government officially aligned Christianity with the interests of "British discoverers."[13] King Frederick IV of Denmark, meanwhile, approved the establishment of missionaries concomitant with Danish efforts to settle Greenland as well as commissioned an official cohort of missionaries for Tranquebar, South India in the eighteenth century;[14] his son King Christian VI likewise continued the close imperial-missionary relationship by inviting Count Zinzendorf (the noted Moravian missionary supporter) to his coronation.[15] The close relationship extended through three generations as

10. Walls, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers*, "Remergence of World Christianity," EBSCOhost eBook.
11. Irvin and Sunquist, *Modern Christianity from 1454 to 1800*, "1454–1600: Two Major Transformations," EBSCOhost eBook.
12. Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 127; Gunson, "Missionary Interest," 297.
13. Gunson, "Missionary Interest," 297.
14. WMC, *History and Records of the Conference*, 221; Field, *Heroes of Missionary Enterprise*, 51; Stock, *Short Handbook of Missions*, 67.
15. It was at the king's coronation wherein Count Zinzendorf met converted Christians from Greenland and the West Indies, prompting Zinzendorf to augment missionary numbers to those areas. Mulholland, "Moravians, Puritans," 223–24.

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Frederick IV's grandson King Frederick V expressly wished that Moravian missionaries settle in the Nicobar Islands, and his government at Tranquebar decided that a missionary must serve as Danish Resident (a type of presidency) over the islands.[16] While missionaries enjoyed imperial support within different contexts and times, there are, however, instances of missionaries encouraging anti-imperial endeavors among local communities as the centuries passed.[17]

As the discussion moves closer in centuries to the WMC, likewise it is helpful to focus the conversation geographically upon Great Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Porter points to the fifty years between the 1790s and 1840s as a period in which the relationship between British missionaries and their government was one of "mutual suspicion and wariness."[18] Contributing to the tension was the conflict resulting from the British East India Company's operations at the turn of the nineteenth century. Although the Company's official charter included a "pious clause" that necessitated the support of clergy for the growing British population in India, Company chaplains such as Claudius Buchanan argued that the clergy also served the purpose of spreading Christianity among the Indian population. An uprising of the Company's Indian troops in 1806 exacerbated the tension. The Company's Court of Directors decided the deeper cause of the uprising was the Indian troops' fear of forcible conversion to Christianity, sparking fierce political debate over missionary activity aligned with official support in India.[19] Exemplifying the effects of the political debate, CMS missionary to Peshawar, Claud Field, writes of Calcutta in 1812, "The English Government at that time was extremely distrustful of missionaries, and ordered the Judsons to leave at a few days' notice."[20] In relative terms, however, this period of disharmony was short-lived. Walls notes that by the time of the high imperial era, British missionaries, firstly, viewed the empire as a foundational force of life, and, secondly, experienced a sharp uptake of volunteers from 1880 to 1900.[21] Pertinent to this study of the WMC in 1910, King George V represented a history of

16. Field, *Heroes of Missionary Enterprise*, 256, 262.
17. Ranger, "Christianity, Capitalism and Empire," 68.
18. Porter, "Church History," 563.
19. Sweetman, "Empire and Mission," 13–14.
20. Field, *Heroes of Missionary Enterprise*, 198.
21. Walls, "British," 60.

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