

## **Hundred years of Christian-Muslim Relations: Mission to Interfaith Relations**

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In this paper, the phrase 'Christian-Muslim' is understood as being part of the broader academic and activist notion of 'interfaith'. The terms, 'interfaith' and 'intercultural', are being used interchangeably but the focus here will not be on the reflections of local religion/culture on Christianity or the history of or efforts at the development of a culturally sensitive Christianity nor on the academic and pluralist theology but on the development of the idea of relations or exchanges (which to many can be/are a source of intercultural/interfaith theologies of religion).

The phrases, 'Interfaith' and 'Christian-Muslim' are used often as terms denoting an actual example or potential state of 'relations' and are seen by many to be a positive strand of development in Christian thinking from 'confrontation' to 'understanding, reconciliation-peace and collaborative action' for common human good. In Christian theology these may represent movements from stark 'dualism' (people are saved apart from their religion through Christ and his Church) to 'qualified pluralism' (religions play a significant and positive part in human salvation in Jesus Christ) to 'absolute pluralism' (religions have a central role in God's single plan of salvation). Clearly, whilst the first two theological positions do fall within what might be described as Christian Mission Theology, the last position transcends any notion of particularity (see Dupuis 2001). The traditional ways of thinking and approaching Islam (and other faiths) as was also supremely endorsed by Edinburgh 1910 however continue not least in many churches and among many Christians.

The idea of interfaith/Christian-Muslim relations is not new. Cragg, in his lecture in Oxford (2009) argued that academic centres even in the 30s subscribed to a theologically neutral approach to religions. This to him contrasted with the religious and theological approaches which tended to be absolutist. In 'the post-colonial' and the 'post-western Christian' context, this relational approach has gradually been growing out of academia. This has not replaced the traditional mission but reflects the priorities of peace and collaborative action for common human good. Edinburgh 1910's section on 'Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World' serves as a fair summary of the traditional approach.

Our focus here is not on traditional mission or theologies of religions on their own but on the evolution of thinking among Christians from traditional mission to interfaith relations since Edinburgh 1910.

### **Mission to the 'Non-Christian World': Edinburgh 1910**

W.H.T. Gairdner account of Edinburgh 1910 was published for the 'World Missionary Conference' in 1910 (Gairdner 1910). It's interpretation of the conference is based primarily on an over 300 pages report which was a result of a two year long process leading up to the conference. Gairdner's work is accessible and is generally reliable not only because it was published in the year of the conference but also because it was published for the conference. The interpretation given it therefore most closely dovetails with the official position. Chapter VII of this work deals with faiths other than Christianity (Gairdner 1910:68-92).

Christian Missions are founded on biblical-theological and historical foundations. Edinburgh 1910 represented a renewal of a long-held goal the foundations of which were seen to be biblical and yet it was seen as something 'largely unfulfilled'. Every age believes it is standing on the cusp of history, uniquely positioned to make a mark on history itself in fulfilling aspirations of the ages. Unsurprisingly, the conference saw itself as being in a unique point of history to 'make Christ known' to the world. The world was carefully segmented in to different regional, geographical, racial, religious etc. type. The most fundamental division was that of the Christian and Non-Christian world. The centre of the Christian world was still acknowledged to be Europe and the 'Non-Christian world' was out there, largely the two-thirds world or the global South. The main purpose of the conference was seen to be to 'scientifically' investigate the faiths in their present contexts and the 'problems' they pose. The study was not to understand or learn from them or to relate with them but to make 'the Gospel known' and thereby fulfill the command of Jesus Christ in St. Matthew's Gospel.

To be fair, Gairdner's synopsis of the report does capture the emerging realization of the fact that: Firstly, although, the centre of Christianity was still the historic European and North American regions, the so-called 'Christian world' was facing internal challenges in the form of luxury and materialism. The belief was that the future of the mission to the 'Non-Christian' world was dependent on the health and earnestness of the 'Churches of Christendom' (Gairdner 1910:87-88). The centre of gravity of Christianity and the true measure of 'the pure faith of Christianity' was still believed to be in the West. The 'conquest' of the 'Non-Christian world' was seen to be necessary and the Western Church was seen to be the prime mover of this process. There was nothing of the sort of vigorous support for the idea that the 'centre of gravity of Christianity' was already tilting toward 'the South' as it has been in recent times in the writings of Buhlmann (1978) and Walls (2002: 118). There is however some interest in the increasingly significant role being played by the churches of 'the mission-field': 'Evangelization of the world...is not chiefly a European and American enterprise, but an Asiatic or African enterprise. Therefore our hearts have been filled with hopefulness and confidence as we have studied the reports from all over the world showing the growing evangelistic and missionary spirit in the Church in the Mission-field.' (Gairdner 1910:84)

The acknowledgement of the continuing centre role of the European and American Churches and the significance for evangelization of the 'Non-Christian World' in 'the South' by the 'Church in the Mission-field' (in the South) led to the call for churches to be engaged in 'united planning and concerted efforts' (Gairdner 1910: 83).

A good part of Gairdner's review of the report to the conference however actually deals with clearly re-mapping the 'Mission-field' in 'the South'. What is interesting is that this re-mapping is done along geographical, racial and religious line. This is where Islam get defined as a priority area for Christian mission. In terms of geography, certain 'neglected' mission fields also called the 'unoccupied fields' were specifically named such as Mongolia and strangely, India! Specific countries were named as the priority areas; as for example, in Africa, particular emphasis was paid to the 'problem of Islam' in Africa. Islam was seen as a problem both because of its resistance to the Gospel but also because it was inhibiting Christian work in the borderlands. Islam was seen both as an object of an impossibly difficult mission and a competitor. In the case of the borderland

'heathens' Islam was seen as winning the battle in being ahead of Christianity in 'Islamizing' the 'heathens' (Gaidner 1910: 73). Colonial policy of favouring Muslims/Islam in terms of political power, especially in Nigerian and Congo regions was seen to be another serious problem for mission work. Contrary to popular belief about Missions being facilitated by colonialism, the Edinburgh report suggested that it was in fact working against Christian mission interest. This was because, it was believed that the presence of the colonial authority was removing the 'natural barriers of resistance' and since Islam was being favoured in colonial political patronage here it had, from the report's perspective, an 'absolutely free Play'. The challenge to Christianity was, according to the report, that there was no competing force to neutralize the influence of Islam in this region. This 'problem of Islam' was being exacerbated by the internal Islamic political and religious movements such as the Sanussi which started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was influenced by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Wahhabi movement. The pro-Islamic colonial policy coupled with the resurgent Islam in Africa was seen as the bane of the Church, an 'impossibility which only mountain-moving faith could remove' (Gaidner 1910:74). The mood was sensational: 'unless the present drift is reversed, we shall probably before long *see Islam assuming the attitude of the heaven-sent uniter and vindicator of the African race*, reaping most of the harvest sown by the Ethiopianism of to-day (italics in the original) (Gaidner 1910:74). Some of the recommendations for this to happen can seem rather simplistic, even laughable. As for example the idea proposed by a participant that in Nigeria the dominant Hausa clan be won for Christ with the establishment of a force consisting of forty workers and focusing primarily on education to 'stem the tide of Islam'! (Gaidner 1910: 73) A call was raised therefore for all Christians to 'unite in 'facing the common problem of Islam!' all over colonial Africa (Gaidner 1910: 73).

Outside Africa, it is not clear from the report if Edinburgh 1910 was entirely aware of the far greater presence of and significance of Islam in the Indian subcontinent or the Far East. When speaking of India or the Far East, the conference seems to have had either, the Indian and the great 'yellow' races or, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Shintoism in mind. They were certainly aware of the presence of Islam in this region but just did not think this was as significant as the African and more importantly the Middle Eastern Islam. The report therefore speaks of the great 'Problem of Islam' especially in terms of the Middle East. The West seems to have had a special interest in the Middle East and is not simply limited to faiths. Subconsciously, the West has never lost its sense of loss of a thriving Christian presence before the advent of Islam. Crusades were, among other things, an attempt to regain this lost world. The Middle East is an abiding reminder of this loss and a latent force that can potentially overrun the world again with disastrous consequences for Christianity's missionary potential and its very survival. The lands, peoples and religions in the east and west of the Middle East are no challenge. The real problem is 'that great, central, unsympathetic, alien and hostile wedge [Islam]' (Middle Eastern Islam). If the world were to be thought of as a 'seamless robe', the Middle East was like a tear in the middle isolating the 'Catholic Church' on the two halves of it (Gaidner 1910:75).

For this reason, the conference made a special appeal to focus on this region. The strategy seems at best quite general and at worst almost humorous. Thus, for example, it suggested that the existing centres of Christian presence and activity needed

strengthening and new ones established. The plan was in line with the old Western commercial tactic of founding mission centres like ‘trading posts’ along the coast of Arabia. This had worked spectacularly in India. Mughals never thought much of these posts but these very posts became a start of a power that would replace them in the subcontinent. So far so good; but then it was suggested, by no mean a person than Zwemer, that the purpose of the advance of Christianity thus was to ‘try the effect of a mission to Mecca and Medina’! (Gairdner 1910:75)

In the conference itself no specific references were made to Indian Muslims. When a reference to India was made it was still a ‘jewel in the crown’. Most people even rulers have limited memory of history. The ‘sepoy mutiny’ (war of independence) was in part religious in nature. The exile of the last Mughal to Burma was symbolic of the full British victory over Islamic India and the formal start of the Raj. By the time of the Edinburgh conference, Muslims in India were more numerous than in the Middle East (still are) but they were subjects of ‘the great civilizing force’ of the Raj. They were not a problem like the ‘other’ Muslims. Simplistic though their solutions for mission were, they demonstrate to us a greater sense of confidence and reach under the Raj. Thus, when they speak of one missionary for every 25000 (a supposedly ‘scientific’ and ‘prayerful’ calculation), they were not thinking of placing them on the margins of India – i.e. on the coasts but in the very heartland. The strategies here (Gairdner 1910:76) were in line with the tested 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary methods of John Wilson <sup>1</sup> and Alexander Duff,<sup>2</sup> education!. In speaking of the so-called ‘storm-centres’ of interest, India as an undifferentiated whole was seen to be *a* focus of ‘the ecumenical crusade’; the others being ‘the Yellow Farther East’ and ‘Islam’ (Middle East and Africa) (Gairdner 1910:72).

### **Mission Paradigm in Change**

It is not surprising that Edinburgh 1910 identified the ‘storm-centres’ for mission to be in the global South. It did acknowledged challenges of ‘luxury’ and ‘materialism’ in the West but continued to be optimistic about the central role to be played by Europe and North America in world mission. ‘Mission world’ was supposed to be vast and out there. This world was still simplistically divided into the Christian and ‘Non-Christian’ worlds. The notion of the ‘Christian Church’ however, transcended this generalized division. Although, the church was mainly located in ‘the Christian World’, it was also present in many parts of the ‘Non-Christian’ world (although, many areas remained ‘unoccupied’ and needed to be part of the new strategic mission).

This acknowledgement of the presence of the church in the ‘Non-Christian world’ assumed the church to be a distinct entity untouched by cultures. There was therefore a lack of serious interest in things to do with interfaith or intercultural. Not many seemed to question the idea of Mission simply as fulfilling the Great commission or a lack of recognition of possible continuities or interfaces between religions. Three forms of Fulfillment ideas however were proposed, though largely within academic theology: First

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<sup>1</sup> Early John Wilson is also known for his polemical approach to religions which involved refuting religious beliefs in public debates (and then often printed). See O’Hanlon 2002: 65. A PhD work on Wilson being completed through OCMS/Wales by R. Gabriel argues that Wilson gradually changed his methods from overt polemics to more sophisticated method of education as a means for change.

<sup>2</sup> See Venn 1970: 85-125 on Duff

assumed an essence of religion (such as Otto's *numinous*) seeing underlying linkages between religions. Critical theorist and historian would understandably not take this seriously as they would assume ideas are historically formed and conditioned. Second form supposed that Christianity fulfilled aspirations in other religious traditions. Perhaps this was the form that came closest to the Protestant Fulfillment theology. The third form was idealistic like the first. It supposed all religion to be part of a subtle process of dialectical development towards 'the Cosmic Christ.' (See Whaling 548-49).

Protestant Fulfillment theology which would just be making its appearance in informal discussions at this point seemed confined to academic discourse (see Farquhar 1913; Hedges 2001; Sharpe 1965). The great followers of Jesus Christ like Sunder Singh and N.V. Tilak 'experimented' with Christian life and thinking that seemed quite at home with their mother religion and culture. They seemed to assume their traditional faith was both linked spiritually and was fulfilled in Christ. They were critical of the missionary enterprise, the foreignness of the institutional Church and generally their antithetical and polemical mission methods that had not much regard for other religious traditions and cultures.

Early Christianity was missionary but it was lived and practiced on the margins. It was often persecuted and was characterized by powerlessness. Growth in numbers despite suffering was affirming and would have been an important source of hope and a proof of its truth. Christendom changed Christianity beyond recognition. As power became part of the equation, ideals of self-sacrifice and suffering became dogmatized as ideal to celebrate but not necessarily to participate in. Power and the new sense of self encouraged martial attitude and practices. Actual, verbal or written Crusades and polemics against Islam (indeed all religions) became commonplace.

The institutional church, Christian states and Missionaries aside, even the great Orientalists have been accused of seeking to undermine other religions and civilizations and serving Christendom? We know that the Orientalist discourse was varied and was not always engaged in the service of Christendom. Western missionary movements have been accused of legitimizing colonial ideology and 'piggy-backing it to spread Christianity without seriously engaging with faiths. To be fair, missionaries were a product of their time and there are many significant examples of missionary critique of colonialism (Bartolome de las Casas in South America) and colonial antipathy to missionaries and missions (Serampore Trio in India). Political power and religious patronage do however collaborate more often than not. Colonial enterprise did contribute to a sense of separateness, superiority and temporal-spiritual power over others. Its effects on Mission thinking therefore cannot be denied. It was all part of a general sense of God being on the side of Christianity and, thus, traditional mission was not seen as arrogant, grandiose or self-absorbed. It was natural and normal.

*Why is this changing?* The world wars showed the underlying hatred human beings were capable of. In the subcontinent, the partition showed another face of human capacity for violence. As millions migrated across the new nations states thousands were butchered on both sides of the border. The violence between Hindus and Muslims (others too) has continued sporadically since independence. Contemporary image of Islam has suffered much from its association with violent Jihad and 'belligerence'. This image is in stark contrast to the Meccan and prophetic phase of Muhammad (see Cragg 2009). In

such a context, fundamentalist and confrontational versions of faith including traditional missionary Christianity might seem to be quite irrelevant, even dangerous.

The experience of political freedom and the re-discovery of ancient texts and their translations not only brought the great religious traditions and their wisdom back to the surface (for others to see and appreciate) but it also accorded greater degree of confidence, identity and self-respect to the adherents. The increasing reduction in the dependence of non-western Christianity on the West, its contact, awareness and appreciation of the richness of these traditions encourages the rise of contextual theologies. This also encourages greater efforts at exchange and relations.

In the majority world, freedom from colonialism furthered the resurgence (some of it extremist) of indigenous and historical religions and cultures. Christianity too is firmly rooted in many of these contexts and is widely understood to be more populous here than in Europe. This encounter of Christianity with other living forms of the same faith and other living faiths can create isolationistic tendencies in some but it can also create a form of Christianity that is knowingly or unknowingly taking the shape of the local culture. Thus, both in terms of culture and theology, one can speak of this sort of Christianity as authentically African, Indian, Chinese, and Korean as it reflects greater sensitivity to and continuity with the local cultures. In post-colonial India although, 'religious studies' have not become widespread in secular academies, it has now become possible to study Christianity and Islam not simply as part of other 'hard scientific' disciplines such as social science, history and politics but on its own terms as Christianity and Islam (Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism continue to be taught as part of philosophy). Although, mission theology/missiology continues to be popular in seminary contexts, changes are taking place even here towards more intercultural and interfaith relations direction.

In Europe, secularization led to modernity which in turn has contributed to the increasing reduction of religion (Davie 2002). One expected that the same would happen elsewhere in the world such as in Africa and Asia where the post-colonial state, in varying degrees, were aspiring to change their economic and political destinies. Modernity does seem to have become quite commonplace in these regions, even secularism in places like Turkey, India and Kenya. This has not however led to the marginalization of religion as it did in Europe. America too followed a different trajectory than Europe and hence, this led to Davie's idea that Europe was an exceptional case in that secular and modern ideas do not necessarily lead to the reduction of the influence of religion. Even in contexts such as the United Kingdom where the Anglican Church has been closely identified with the state, and where displays of any single religion in state schools (for example) are not considered appropriate. It is true that here the state's association with the church has more to do with 'traditional forms' yet, religion here has not been abandoned. Most white people see themselves as Christian and people of other faiths such as Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism etc. are as alive as ever. As a multi-religious society, Britain too has seen its own share of violent religious conflicts as also France, Netherlands and Spain on the continent.

Works by the scholars such as Smart contributes to the realization that Christianity is after all a historical religion like any other with characteristic dimensions common to all. Such approaches enable people of faiths or no faiths to speak of religions without necessarily having to take sides or offer judgments (Smart 1998). Cragg has argued this

point too but instead of relying on 'descriptive phenomenology', he recommends the use of 'philosophy' in place of 'religious or theological' discourse. His reason for this is that religious and theological discourse tends to be 'absolute'; the adherents feel the need to defend its tenets as timeless and exclusive truths and when taken to extremes, can lead to conflicts, physical Jihad or Holy Wars. Philosophy helps to maintain neutrality (Cragg 2009).

Globalization is also a force to reckon with. The world is becoming smaller and people of faiths are increasing moving across the world and changing demographics. Never before has the world needed a more concerted effort at building a common future of humanity on this tiny globe. Peace, environmental concerns, and common human good are not simply seen as the tasks of 'Nation States' but of the 'United Nations' transcending regional, religious and ideological boundaries. Increasingly, the people of faiths are being asked for their contributions to these goals. Human survival and the survival of the planet depend on everyone making their contribution. Faith Based initiatives in areas of development and environment for instance are being increasingly recognized world over, not least efforts where multi-faith and interfaith work is making a difference in situations of poverty, natural disasters and political or religious crises.

### **Interfaith/Christian-Muslim Relations**

#### *Broader Debate*

Hardt and Negri (2001) published a book titled *Empire* which has generated considerable discussion. This new Empire is not inspired or legitimized by religion (e.g. Byzantine, Mughals, and Ottomans etc.) or ideology (Communist) and yet is more widespread in its reach and effects than any others in the past. It seems quite able to function relatively freely across the nation states and seems relatively free of political constraints as a sovereign power in its own right. This is significant in a world also seeing a resurgence of religion and culture in many parts. The idea of 'interculture' is consequently a new watchword for banking and world business (as is evident from the HSBC advertisements). The ability of the new empire to operate across nations may be a cue for religious people and theologians to take in to account religious and cultural plurality in their vision for humanity. This may involve appreciating that Christians in the south have theologies too and other religions too have their theologies. In this world of diversity, social praxis can perhaps provide a way of inter-connecting people and their theologies expressly for the sake of a more critical goal: Peace.

Skepticism about traditional missions with its dualistic suppositions comes from academies traditionally considered strongholds of Christian theology (Wijsen and Nissen, eds. 2002). The main argument has been to replace missions with liberation theology, intercultural/religious theology and faith inspired development. This probably explains why some academic faculties have ceased to have chairs in Missiology. Missiology as a discipline continues however in some faculties but largely in seminaries. In seminaries of free colonies however, there is a renewed re-conception about whether mission should become 'dialogue' (see Monte & Lang 1998) or 'interfaith/cultural relations' and mission theology/missiology should become intercultural theology. Dupuis' argument in his 'Christian theology of religious pluralism' about mission being dialogue is an example of this transition in post-colonial/post (western) Christian Christianity (see Dupuis 1996).

In Western academies Christian theology is often twinned with 'Religious Studies'. This means that religions are studied on their own terms and not anymore through the glasses of Christian Theology. Theology is thus gradually losing its traditional position of privilege. This is roughly the same in Germany where some chairs combine Mission (Christian Theology) with the Study of Religions (as in Heidelberg) whereas in others Mission and Theology have given way completely to 'Intercultural Theology' and the 'Study of Religion' (e.g. in Salzburg).

Hollenweger is credited with having renamed 'mission' as 'intercultural theology'. This renaming is intended to reflect the actual international (rather than western Christian) character of Christianity today. It acknowledges the need for Christian theology to actually allow the inputs from diverse Christian backgrounds and cultures where Christianity today flourishes. It also means that Christian theology needs to seriously engage with the real questions and issues from these contexts as sources for theological reflections. Hollenweger's concerns stemmed from his engagements with students from the majority world who were required to rehash Western theology (he called it 'mono-cultural imperialism'). Much of this theology was said to be simply irrelevant or ill suited for non-Western contexts (Hollenweger 1989 & 1984).

But, Intercultural theology is more complex than this as Kuster and Grayson have argued. It involves three aspects of a single process of development: 'Missiology' looks at how Christianity takes form in different cultures and although this may be the case, it is not necessarily concerned with providing missionaries with a substance for mission. It is concerned with the 'first contact'. 'Ecumenics' is concerned with intra-Christian and inter-faith relations at the early stages following the contact. These may be characterized by 'conflict'. 'Comparative religions' is concerned with genuine 'exchange' between religions (see more Kuster 2003 and Grayson 2007 & 2009). This process involving Contact, Conflict and Exchange not just describes how Christianity encounters another religion-culture and is 'emplanted' but also how this can serve as the model and source of intercultural theology (Geertz 1973).

Clearly, therefore, intercultural theology is understood to be an umbrella term denoting 'inter-confessional, intercultural and inter-religious' engagements (see also Wiksen 2001). It is today understood to be an important task for Christians belonging to the Ecumenical Association for Third World Theologians. These are men and women of faith rooted in their cultures but also exposed to Western academies. They recognize the narrowness of a mono-cultural theology, which is often blind to or inimical to local cultures and subcultures (see Fahlbusch 2008).

### *Christian-Muslim Relations*

This is the broader context for Christian-Muslim relations. The shared history of Christians and Muslims shows that it does not matter who is politically or culturally dominant, Muslims or Christians, perhaps with some exceptions in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, conflict and confrontation has been a norm (Goddard 2000). The principle of 'exchange' has rarely been explored.

In the early Arab Middle East, which experienced the Muslim conquest and was integrated within the expanding Muslim rule, only Muslims had full rights. This may have partly contributed to the decline of Eastern Christianity. Their migrations, even today (e.g. in Turkey and Iraq) are perhaps a sign of the continuing conflicts (most of it

avoidable, as in Iraq). Both religions have been guilty of taking their notion of truth and reality to extremes and in hating the other enough wage wars.

Perhaps there is something for modern Christians and Muslims to learn from the 9<sup>th</sup> century dialogues. Beaumont's work on Christology shows how Christians presented 'Christ for Muslims' in what he called 'the most creative period of Christian-Muslim dialogue' (9<sup>th</sup> century) (Beaumont 2005). What is interesting is that he compares it with the 20 century dialogue which follows similar trajectory and this is where his significance contribution lies. Christians believed there were continuities between the two faiths. Islam already had the Christ and their task was to build on this pre-understanding. In such an open and honest context even the seemingly intractable problems of Jesus' divinity and crucifixion could be explained and people were civil enough to hear them speak. They may eventually reject it but not before they had properly heard them.

The comparative framework for Beaumont's study was intended to serve as a model for dialogue. According to him, what characterized Christians from these periods was their ability to listen to Muslims and their objections and take their 'concerns seriously'. There was genuine commitment to engaging with them and although, they might eventually reject Christian claims, Christian commitment to continue fostering this relationship and creative exchange held promise. This sort of friendly persistence was precisely what Jesus intended in 'the Parable of the Sower' in Mark 4. Jesus spoke creatively in parables not to confuse people and prevent them from understanding but to secure understanding. The question of acceptance was for the listener to choose. Some thinkers go a step further in seeking to understand and secure understanding of their respective faiths in the spirit of friendship and service. Apostolov (2004), for example, in his 'Christian-Muslim frontiers' searches for an interface between Christianity and Islam from the new perspective of intercultural theology. The key notions in this approach are 'interface' or the 'zone of contact' where theologies intersect.

The idea of 'interface' or the 'zone of contact' or 'exchange' (rather than conflict) is interesting. It conceives of religions as representing, as it were, different circles. Much of these circles are unique to the religions they represent; i.e. the greater space in these stands on its own may owe to the unique trajectories they have traversed in their political, social, cultural and economic history. There appear however, between these circles, 'zones of contact' or 'interfaces' which too may owe to historical contacts between them, natural osmosis of ideas and possibly also the common operations of a just and loving God, the creator of all beings and the spirit of Christ. In terms of the idea of exchange through such zones of contact, we have the example of W.C. Smith who purposefully worked hard to emphasize 'interfaith' and particularly Christianity's relations with Islam. To him it did not mean sacrificing religious distinctive – that was the greater part of religious identities anyway (Ipgrave 2002). Traditional approach, according to Smith assumed Islam and Christianity to be two distinct religions and civilizations (thus representing them as separate circles). It is not surprising therefore that confrontation and conflict have characterized their history. Their relationship as a result is still largely understood and constructed in terms of clash rather than cooperation and acceptance (see Huntington 1998). Smith's call therefore, was for 'a new mental map'. Here the 'operative metaphor' was 'relations' the object of which was not simply 'understanding' the other and securing their understanding of another's faith but to lead to genuine relations expressed in and through a common theology ('world

theology')(Smith 1981). This theology would be dynamic and developmental. It would be based on the premise that truth was a 'humane' and 'not an objective' concept. It was not contained in 'beliefs or doctrines' but was 'a function of the inner person.' If the nature of truth was concrete and not abstract then it was something that grew in human engagement with it (see Netland 2001).

Whether we agree with this extent of the idea of relations and a kind of pluralistic theology it engenders needs discussion. One might suggest however that there are historical and methodological problem in thinking of Islam and Christianity as being two distinct circles. We know there is a continuing effort on the part of the Christian minorities to create a place for themselves as equals in Arab-Islamic states. Common culture and history are powerful means in this process (see Pacini 1998). In the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century period Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire lived under Islamic law. There was no sense of necessary conflict between them. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conflicts between Muslims and Christians in the empire became commonplace and to a large extent continue until today in modern Turkey (Masters 2001). One would not far wrong in asserting that much of the current Muslim use of biblical material and vice versa remains explicitly negative and polemical. In one of my recent studies I highlight two passages from Isaiah and Deuteronomy that are used by Muslims for their assumed connection with the earliest call narratives in Surat 96 and 74 (see Singh 2008). My argument was that the parallel narrative exposition of the Qur'anic passages in canonical traditions and the earliest *Sirat* suggests a relational narrative/theology, not a polemical one; this narrative/theology involves the issue of Muhammad's identity as a prophet like Moses. Thus, addressing the issue of Muhammad's prophetic identity, early on, was inextricably linked to the Jewish and Christian traditions of Moses. A change from a relational to a polemical approach owed partially to the early post-Meccan developments in Islam and may be explained, at least partly, as a later "rereading" of an earlier tradition. There was therefore an element of deliberation and pre-meditation in seeking a distinct identity or an identity forged in opposition to things that otherwise might have actual relations. Conflicts and reasons for these thus evolved and were encouraged.

Perhaps Coptic Christianity in Egypt and Ethiopia serves as a good example of intentional disjunction and separation (see Hasan 2003). Indeed Coptic Christianity is a brave survivor in a context dominated by Islam. Its marginalization in Egypt does not make for a pleasant spectacle. However, one of the contemporary responses to this has been a reaffirmation of a distinct identity that is rooted in an ancient culture that does not have another living parallel. This identity serves to assert their unique discourse on Egyptian-ness and Coptic Christian identity that is not shared by Egyptian Islam. Separateness is emphasized in order to inspire revival of a distinct identity and communal pride. This sort of recollection or coming together does have its advantages in a context of overt discrimination and outright hostility but only for a time. It almost seems like Coptic Christianity is reliving a period of first 'contact' and 'conflict'. What it needs to further its relevance in Egypt will require an immense sense of faith to transcend to the level of 'cooperation' and 'exchange' with Islam.

The way of seeing Christianity and Islam in absolute circles may have been fine in an age of political conflicts of the Western Christianity with the East, but we like to think we live in a different world today. We have the benefits of hindsight. We know the crusades and the World wars (and in our own age), the Iraq war were not necessary

conflicts, they were made to happen. They owe to certain ideological positions sometimes religiously legitimized. They could all have been avoided. Today, majority of the Christians live in the East where Christianity is also growing. Christianity can no longer be equated with the West. The great ideologically conflicting axes of the West and Islam cannot be simplistically equated with Christianity versus Islam. This way of thinking has serious consequences for the ancient Christian minorities living in 'Islamic' lands and generally for Christians and Muslims in Africa and Asia alike. In these regions, Christians live with Muslims and are often part of the same cultural and civilizational 'circles'. There is often a greater degree of overlap between them and Muslim neighbours than between them and Western Christians. Our emphasis therefore, needs to shift to relations something that Bennett (2008) persuasively argues as he searches for bases for peace and justice and reconciliation.

*Christian-Muslim Relations: Cases*  
Henry Martyn Institute (HMI)

Following Edinburgh 1910, in 1926, the National Christian Council (NCC) (later to become NCCI) formed a committee to explore the possibility of establishing a centre dedicated for 'work among Moslems'. Subhan (1972), a former director, in his story of HMI tells us that HMI was the product of this process. Since NCC was involved, it was clear that it would share the prevailing traditional Edinburgh 1910 position in respect to Christian mission among Muslims. From 1930-38, it was located in Lahore but later moved to Mussoorie (1938-40) (present state of UA), Aligarh (1940-62) (present state of UP), Jabalpur (1962-66) (MP), Lucknow (1966-71) (UP) and then Hyderabad (1971-present) (AP).

In the first three decades of HMI's existence it continued this early position both in terms of its essential ideology and practice (D'Souza 1998:8). HMI was conceived as a 'school' (later changed to 'Institute') of 'Islamic Studies'. This reflected the 'scientific' angle of Edinburgh 1910 towards: India, 'Yellow race' and Islam (see Gairdner 1910:76). Research and study was therefore one of three main tasks of the 'school'; other task being preparing Christians for work among Muslims and the writing of gospel literature for use among Muslims (Isaiah 1980: 651-53). In line with Edinburgh 1910 and underlying the 'scientific' exterior, there was the fundamental belief in the 'Crescent faith' (Islam) being a 'problem', which could not be entirely overcome but could be 'neutralized' (see Gairdner 1910:73). Interestingly, 'the Tambaram debate' that took place in 1938 did not change or affect HMI in this phase. Kraemer's work outlining his position on religions (and Hinduism) was one of the main contexts for debate at this conference. Kraemer's brief was to write a preparatory material for discussion on the question of 'christian approach to non-christian religions'. Ariarajah speaks of the responses from Chenchiah and Chakkarai which were then published as *Rethinking Christianity in India* where they questioned Kraemer. Kraemer's response was published in *The Authority of the Faith* (Ariarajah 1991:69). The fundamental problem (from Indian perspective) with Kraemer's position was that he saw no 'continuity' or compatibility between Christianity and religions (Hinduism in particular).<sup>3</sup> Despite appreciating the historical nature of Christianity as a religion he distinguished it from others as the 'bearer of revelation'. He rejected the notion of Fulfillment and emphasized 'discontinuity'. In this context the task

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<sup>3</sup> See Kraemer's details of Kraemer's position on religions including Islam in Kraemer 2002

of mission was not to look for continuities but to focus on how to make the Gospel as a radically 'new/true news' relevant (Ariarajah 1991:70). Kraemer, a firm believer in 'realism', unabashedly saw Christian mission as 'the third redeeming factor' after 'western oriental science' and 'colonialism' (Kraemer 2002; repri.). It is clear from this work that he was responding to the growing interest in and talk of the 'meeting of Christianity and the great non-Christian religions'. He believed this idea of 'meeting' and 'dialogue' was too fuzzy and unhelpful. He was interested in establishing the clear line between the Christianity and other faiths. As the 'universally valid' and bearer of revelation, Christianity was the 'normative standard of truth'. This to him removes the fuzziness in the fashionable use of the ideas of dialogue, encounter and meeting (Kraemer 2002; repri.).

The 1960 began, D'Souza argues, a new focus in the work of HMI, 'dialogue' (14). This phase saw a promising start of real contact between Christians and Muslims as is evidenced from the first joint seminar of Christians and Muslims organized by HMI in 1965 at the NCC offices in Nagpur. It was a four-day consultation between nine Christians and nine Muslims focusing on both aspects of 'faith' and 'works'. We do not know what this consultation really led up to in terms of clear outcomes on the question of faith and works. What is significant is not that any agreement towards a joint statement was reached but that such a meeting took place. One of the concrete outcomes however was the organization of a series of seminars on the 'relational' theme of 'Islam and Christianity'. Both Muslims and Christians saw this as a sign of changing relationship and respectful attitude (see D'Souza 1998:16). D'Souza, quoting from Subhan, notes that dialogues like these were seen as evidence of a positive movement from 'polemics', 'debates' and 'controversy' to 'inter-faith fraternization and a better religious understanding' (see Subhan 1972:12 and D'Souza 1998:17). The goals of conversion and discipleship were seen to be consistent with this positive, respectful and honest approach.

The 1980's began a new phase in HMI's evolution. Largely in the light of the dangerously incendiary communal context particularly involving Muslims and Hindus in India, the idea of peace and reconciliation were considered and later adopted as the goal of mission (see D'Souza 1998:24-31). On the ground, this led to not just interfaith academic studies but also interfaith living (journeys), joint work during and in the aftermaths of Hindu-Muslim communal violence (*aman-shanti* forum). Today, this focus continues and besides these HMI is also involved in joint development work in the violence prone areas of Hyderabad. HMI has a permanent presence in these locations where it works closely with both Hindus and Muslims. The ideological/theological under-shoring for this sort of work was provided by what was called the 'Constructural Theology of Reconciliation' (D'Souza 1998:29) an approach interfaith theology which closely reflected the reality of interfaith work and staffing. This was called 'Construal' as is being figured out through actual action process and remains incomplete.

### The Burnley Project

Another actual working of Christian-Muslim relations comes from the South Asian (Muslim) dominated region of Lancaster, UK. It shows how a respectful exchange between Christians and Muslims can work to promote 'religious cohesion' in a region of the UK that is hopelessly divided in socio-religious terms and has also witnessed actual communal conflicts in 2001 (see Holden 2009).

After the communal conflicts of 2001 Building Bridges Burnley (BBB) was constituted by the Burnley Lane Fellowship of churches. These were a not part of mainstream Anglican but rather fellowships of 'Trinitarian Christians'. BBB invited the Muslims leaders who were on their own part seeking to bring things under control after the violence. This initiative received much enthusiastic participation in due course from mainstream denominations such as the Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans and Free Churches. Along with the Muslim groups, BBB evolved over a two-year period and was formally registered as a charity. The impact of BBB was broadened through their networking with likeminded charities and organization across the religious divide. It began with addressing the tension following the conflict but this initial task gradually broadened with the institutionalization of BBB and the transfer of its offices to a local mosque. This was not only the first interfaith organization but the first one to be housed in a mosque where people of all faiths were freely welcome. Funds poured in both from Islamic as well church based groups. Among its activities was an initiative called the *Bridge* project. Its task was to work with children as young as 8-13 who were understood to be vulnerable to extremist influences. Another group within BBB looked after the affairs of the interfaith work, which included a series of Christian-Muslim seminars, church and mosque visits, interfaith parties etc. The *New Schools Working Group* jointly oversaw faith-based activities in Six Schools in town. Special emphasis was laid on certain groups of the youth most vulnerable to social alienation. Young people were involved in community activities such as sports, drama, and outdoor activities. Over time not only primary schools but also secondary became involved in the BBB. Holden notes: 'What had begun as a largely reactive partnership in the months following the disturbances had become a proactive one within a 4-year period. The organization had gained recognition for its work at local, regional and national levels and had received visits from [other] interfaith groups....' (Holden 2009:184/Appendix 1)

The question of cohesion was significant in such a charged and mutually exclusive multi-faith/culture context. Communities used to isolation and absolute difference, have been the 'breeding ground' of terrorist sympathizers and homegrown South Asian terrorists as the London bombings amply demonstrate. In such contexts, obviously, the idea that faith can somehow be allowed to remain a private matter, simply will not work. Politicians and have shown how serious it is to engage the people of other faiths at the level of ideas (Muslims in this case) and in joint work out of 'political necessity' (Holden 2009:viii). This is the pragmatic goal of the state and its public representatives. The project shows, Christian and Muslims may have different goals when it comes to essentials of faith and ideas but this difference is not going to prevent them from engaging with each other at any level. Holden's work is a serious piece of social-action research. It shows, based on actual empirical evidence by working together and engaging with each other, that they are responsible for what happens to faith communities. They can choose to remain separatist and suffer its consequences or choose to engage and thereby promote reconciliation and wellbeing even in a context to segregation and conflict. This was called the *The Burnley Project*.

Holden, as a sociologist, partially borrows from theology of religion discourse four typologies of 'religious attitude': religious inclusivists, religious exclusivists, secular integrationists and secular aversionist. Secular and religious people strangely demonstrate not too dissimilar preferences. There are people in both camps who support or oppose

engagement. Religious people open to interfaith relations/action are wary of proselytisation (especially if it is a hidden as the real motive for engagement) not of open and honest conversations on faith (including differences). Many of them are wary too of infringing on 'worship' aspects of faith which obviously are deemed to be an inside matter. Otherwise most on both side of the divide are most happy to engage. The attitudes may be wide-ranging and complex but it is the lack of willingness and initiatives to actually make engagement that is responsible for segregation and conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was not to argue for the validity of one approach over the other but rather to present a survey of the idea of 'interfaith relations' with reference to traditional mission since Edinburgh 1910.

'Traditional mission' and 'relations' approaches seem to follow different paradigms. They are however not necessarily different and there need not be any competition between them.

Believers across Christianity and Islam rightly hold to truth being independent of the observer. Traditionally, however, many Christians and most Muslims have held a rather naive position on how this truth is revealed and received. They have assumed truth to remain unaffected by this process of descent and reception. They have also assumed that somehow our historical and contextual location does not shape truth as we perceive it. This results in a religious or theological discourse which tends to be absolute and exclusivist. In interfaith contexts this position translates into rigid and polarized positions respecting the truth and its ownership. Relations between people of faiths (also between people from within the same faith) in such encounters are often characterized by conflict or disjunction.

A qualified variant of this position would adopt a more realistic and critical approach to the process of revelation and its apprehension. It would query human capacity to receive truth without affecting its apprehension by means of their location in history and culture. This is not a terrible thing to acknowledge. It is instead humbling. This attitude has the potential for believers to be in a better position to acknowledge continuities between faiths than those sure of possessing truth as it is. Furthermore, the descriptions of what is received through theologies too are shaped by history and context of the theologian. This does not mean that the truth itself is relative. This means however, that theologies need to be understood as provisional statements on truth and in need of ongoing review in different periods and contexts.

The metaphor of religions being circles was reviewed. One can imagine each circle to contain diversity within and representing the different intra-religious/cultural theologies. Whilst one can expect a continuing exchange and dialogue within each circle, the extent to which different religions will intersect with each other, these intersections can be a source of potentially valuable interfaith theologies. This process will not affect the uniqueness of religions since the greater parts of each religion would seem to be free of interfaces. Scholarly studies of contact between Christianity with other cultures/religions shows (as we pointed out) there to be three levels: first contact, conflict and exchange. A review of the Christian-Muslim contacts over the ages and particularly in the last 100 years show conflict to be a primary effect. Conflict is not necessarily negative. It is part of the story though, not the complete story, as the examples of Burnley

project and HMI showed. Sustained and deliberate efforts at contact for common good and peace need not result in conflict. Conflict in the tripartite story of interfaith contact is therefore, neither necessary nor inevitable.

The outcomes of conflict and exchange depend on the goals one nurtures and the belief about truth one subscribes to.

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