

A CASE OF THOROUGH PREPARATION: D.S.Cairns, Commission IV and the missionaries' returns.

One of the many areas in which Edinburgh 1910, its reports and documentation can still make an important contribution to the reflection of the world's church is on issues of inter-faith and inter-religious relationships. As early as 1908, Joe (J.H.) Oldham made the wise choice of putting the section on 'The missionary message and its relation to non-Christian religions' in the hands of D.S.Cairns, by then professor of dogmatic and apologetic theology at the United Free Church College (Christ's College) in Aberdeen, a post to which he had been appointed in 1907. In the words of Eric Sharpe, Cairns was a 'fine all round theologian', who had studied in Marburg as well as in Scotland, and who had reached his mature Christian understanding not without intellectual struggles, an aspect perhaps revealed in his widely read work The Faith that rebels, which haddled the problems posed by the miraculous in the New Testament some years after Edinburgh 1910. Cairns sent questionnaires to missionaries serving in the field and it was their returns which provided the essential background data out of which he constructed his own digest for Commission IV at the assembly; his questions included such issues as: what supposed points of contact existed between the non-Christian religion and Christianity; the attitudes which preachers should adopt in differing religious contexts; and what was held to constitute the greatest points of appeal in the Christian gospel to those of other faiths (1). Typescripts copies of these returns were made, one set of which remained at Christ's College, Aberdeen. Here the concentration will be on the three volumes of returns from India from those working in 'Hindu' contexts (modern study reminds us that this category is itself one imposed by western study on Indian religion) and the one volume of returns from those working in Muslim contexts (2). These responses coming as they do from missionaries of long and deep experience in their fields, provide a fascinating point of entry into inter-religious contexts in the early twentieth century.

Mission and Trinitarian understanding

What to some may be a surprising aspect was the emphasis that a number of respondents placed on the Trinity, long before the writings of Karl Barth or Lesslie Newbigin had reasserted its importance for theology and for mission. Two missionaries of great stature working among Muslims, W.H. Temple Gairdner (who wrote the widely read one volume account of Edinburgh 1910 in the same year) and S.M. Zwemer, both made eloquent pleas for the reinstatement of Trinitarian understanding in mission. Gairdner's advocacy found its way into Cairns' digest, to make the Trinity both theologically and religiously central. For Temple Gairdner, Islam 'forces the Christian Church to find the Trinity in our heart; and it forces us to find the Trinity in the heart of God. The Christian who preaches the Trinity must know the secret of the Trinitarian life' (3). Hindu contexts also yielded similar pleas: writing from South India, W.H. Campbell wrote that the Trinitarian emphasis was 'essential' to counteract Indian monism and that against such a background it was 'a necessity for faith' (4). Equally, Edwin Greaves, who was working in the Hindu 'capital' of Varanasi (Benares) had come to regard the Trinity as 'vital', 'full of warmth and

power' and 'philosophically absolutely necessary' (5). Gairdner recognised the metaphysical element but urged that spiritual and ethical aspects of Trinitarian religion be stressed by preference. S.M. Zwemer, who spent 38 years in Arabia and Egypt before becoming a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1929, found in the Trinity and the Atonement 'the heart of Christianity' (6).

The Appeal of Christian faith

Questioned on the points of special appeal to those of other faiths in the presentation of Christianity, Cairns' respondents repeatedly emphasised the portrait of Jesus in the gospels and the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. This was as true of C.F. Andrews, Gandhi's friend who became the most widely known missionary figure in India of his time, as of the theologically contrasting figure of A.G. Hogg. Andrews wrote that 'the pure ideal picture of Jesus Christ in the Gospels is to the educated Hindu...the greatest of all attractions to the faith'; and for A.G. Hogg 'by far the strongest power of appeal is that which resides in the personality and life of Jesus' (7). Hindu converts wrote in the same vein: Canon Nihal Singh wrote that 'the unsullied life of our Lord and his self denial and the conquest of self on the cross are the elements which appeal most...Matthew 5 and the teaching of our Lord made an especial appeal to me when I was a Hindu' (8). R.C. Sircar, another Hindu convert, also noted the drawing power of the Sermon on the Mount: he made the additional and interesting comment that both the tolerance of His Hinduism and the exclusiveness of Christianity had played their part but it was the reading of the Sermon on the Mount that had led him to receiving Christ (9). W.E.S. Holland also bore witness to the appeal to his Indian hearers of Christ's ~~patience~~ gentleness and meekness, along with the Sermon on the Mount and especially the Beatitudes (10). Altogether it was not Christianity but Christ that appealed to the Indian (11). What was true in India was also the case in Persia (Iran) for S.G. Wilson among Muslims. A missionary of some thirty years experience, then writing as principal of a theological college, he wrote also that 'the greatest power of appeal (is)...the character of Jesus Christ, his gentleness, his humility, purity, love and self-sacrifice, and with this the precepts of brotherly love' (12), while J.C. Young, of the Keith Falconer mission in Aden, also among Muslims, wrote 'the sinlessness of Jesus: I would assuredly put first, then his tender, loving sympathy for sinners' (13).

Mission and the relationship to other faiths

When questioned about the approach to other faiths, a number of those working among Muslims emphasised the importance of not attacking Islam (14). Nevertheless, in something of a contrast to those working in Hindu settings, missionaries to Islam wrote negatively of it for the most part. One missionary conceded that its heavy theocentricity had caused him to emulate this in a Christian context but a sympathetic, life-long student of Islam like Temple Gairdner, respected by Muslims for his engagement with them, wrote of a prevalent formalism and an absence of spirituality: he had found this 'but how rare' (15). He could not accept talk of Islam as a preparatio evangelica: rather it was a religion which self-confessedly saw itself as superseding Christianity towards its destruction. It was a negative assessment echoed by two experienced missionaries from Northern Nigeria, Dr. W.R. Miller and T.E. Alvarez. They regarded points of contact as

superficial only, a danger which W.A. Shedd, the able American missionary who served in Iran also discerned (16). In Hindu contexts, by contrast, there were those who were prepared to see Hindu religion as a preparatio, notable among them J.N. Farquhar, and a Hindu convert like Francis Kingsbury could also share this position: Jesus was not 'destroyer' but 'fulfiller', though Kingsbury conceded that there were 'teachings and practices which should be severely and fearlessly condemned' (17). N.C. Mukerjee also held that points of agreement outweighed the points of contrast (18). Two Anglican bishops, Henry Whitehead (Madras) and R.S. Copleston (Calcutta) adopted a position of 'Yes and No': points of contact and points of divergence were to be equally stressed (18).

It was left to A.G. Hogg to take issue with fulfilment ideas and much of his return found its way into Cairns's digest for the assembly (19). Hogg wrote of arriving in India with a vague theism as his position, well prepared to surrender 'alleged facts of the New Testament narratives - even the resurrection itself' provided that the 'general impression' of 'Jesus' personality was not affected'. He wrote: 'I had not long been in India when a radical change began to be effected in the tendency of my thinking'. The Hindu context brought home two things to Hogg: first, the stress on God as active will, self-expressed in history and supremely in Jesus Christ; second, the need 'to break root and branch' with 'the conception of human merit' over against Hindu teaching on karma worked out in terms of desert. Hogg repudiated fulfilment ideas because 'Christian doctrines are not the fulfilment of Hindu doctrines': Hindu yearning, if satisfied by Christ, does so because 'the Hindu awareness has been thrown out of equilibrium by Christian influence' but this is in a 'consciousness' which typically does not recognise the religious problem to which the gospel is addressed, although 'under favourable conditions' such a person may be made to feel the issue. Any fulfilment description 'obscures the fact that it fulfils by, at least partially, destroying' (19).

Pluralist contexts and missionary stances

In the religious pluralism of our own time, the reflections of long serving cross-cultural figures like these respondents are worthy of recall. Mission which arises from and lives out Trinitarian life, which continues to lay great stress on the attraction of Jesus Christ and the life which he exemplified, and one which in inter-religious debate expresses both the 'Yes' and the 'No', with a genuine sympathy and ability to enter into diversity combined with rigorous criticism in the light of the gospel to discern where Yes or No should preponderate in each case, would be true to the spirit of Edinburgh 1910 and the insights of Commission IV. We should still neither dismiss the reality to which alternative traditions point nor too easily overlook distortions in favour of superficial acceptance. A modern prayer makes a fitting conclusion to these insights of 1908-10: 'Guide us, O Holy Spirit, in our meeting with men and women of other faiths. May we never, through weak accommodation to the views of others, be unfaithful to the gospel and never through arrogant superiority fail to learn the truth of their vision of

and never, through arrogant assumption of superiority, fail to learn their vision of God who is the God of all.

NOTES

- (1) Edinburgh Report volume IV, p.2; for the preparation by Oldham for the commissions see K. Clements, Faith on the Frontier, pp.74-80
- (2) Copies of the typescripts can also be found at the Yale Divinity School in the archives of the Day Missions Library; See E.J. Sharpe, Not to Destroy but to Fulfil: the contribution of J.N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before 1914 pp.275-297 on Cairns, Hogg and Commission IV, where p.278 note 5 refers also to the Missionary Research Library, New York for ^{the} material. In what follows 'E' refers to the Edinburgh Report and 'A' to the transcripts to Cairns at Aberdeen.
- (3) E, IV, pp.153f.; cf. p.135
- (4) A, India I, no.133, p.17
- (5) A, India I, no.166, p.13
- (6) A, Islam, no.283, p.314: see arts. in Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions ed. G.H. Anderson by Alan Neely on Zwemer and Kenneth Cragg on Gairdner: Gairdner worked in Cairo for nearly thirty years (1899-1928); hereafter BDCM.
- (7) A, India I, no.176, p.53. For arts. on Andrews and Hogg see BDCM by E.J. Sharpe and by the same writer Mission Legacies ed. G.H. Anderson pp.316-323 (Andrews), and pp.330-8 (Hogg); D.O'Connor, Gospel, Raj and Swaraj: the missionary years of C.F. Andrews 1910-1914
- (8) A, India III, no.211, p.10
- (9) A, India III, no.234, p.42; cf S.K. Rudra no.261, p.4 for similar views.
- (10) A, India III, no.177, p.4
- (11) A, India III, no.251, p.7
- (12) A, Islam, no.342, p.275; BDCM, p.743 ^{on} shows Wilson as a ~~Princeton~~ ^{Muslims.} graduate admired by/
- (13) A, Islam, no.282, p.296; BDCM, pp.355-6 for Kenneth Cragg on Keith-Falconer, founder of this mission.
- (14) A, Islam, no.258, p.5 (Harman Barnum); no.259, p.10 (James Cantine)
- (15) A, Islam, no.237, p.21 (van Ess); no.263, p.24, ~~3004~~; no.300, pp.101, 107 (Gairdner).
- (16) A, Islam, no.272, pp.157 f.
- (17) A, India II, no.287, p.4
- (18) A, India I, no.235, pp.5-6; II, no.209, p.11
- (19) A, India II, no.176, p.14

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