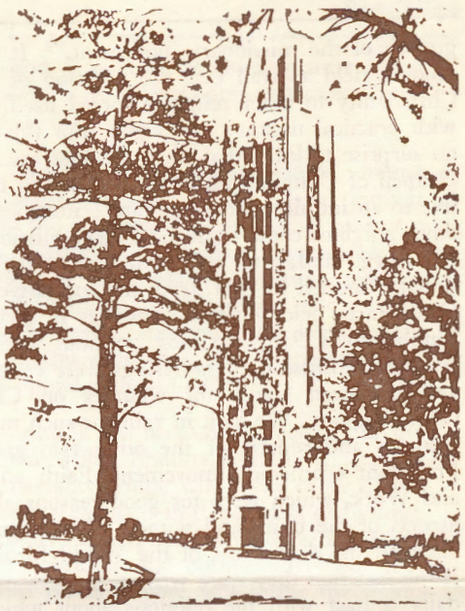
RELIGION

The Journal of Kansas School of Religion at The University of Kansas

Volume 11, No. 1, October, 1973



Dr. Woelfel is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion. He researched the following article while on sabbatical leave during the 1972-73 academic year. He was assisted in his research by a travel grant from the American Philosophical Society.

Borderland Christianity: Critical Reason and the Christian Vision of Love is the title of Dr. Woelfel's most recent book on Christianity and humanism, being published this fall by Abingdon Press.

THE FIRST ECUMENICAL PROTESTANT DISCUSSION OF OTHER RELIGIONS: SOME UNEXPECTED FINDINGS

James W. Woelfel

Among my research interests during the past year I have examined interpretations of the relationship between Christianity and other religions expressed in the official preparatory studies and reports of the great Protestant ecumenical conferences which dealt with the subject between the World Missionary Conferences held in Edinburgh in 1910 and in Tambaram, India, in 1938. The research arose out of my general philosophical interest in the problems of comparative religions, and my special theological interest in what has been said about the matter in twentieth-century Christian discussion. I undertook the study with the assumption that I would very probably find definite trends in Protestant ecumenical thinking on other religions as I followed its progress through the first half of the century: from an initial evangelical exclusivism at the beginning of the century, through a liberal "assimilative" phase in the 'twenties, to a "Barthian" or neo-orthodox exclusivistic reaction in the 'thirties. In other words, I tentatively surmised that ecumenical attitudes towards non-Christian religions roughly followed prevailing theological trends. My assumptions were sharply modified, in a surprising and refreshing way, by an examination of the data. The conclusions of my work reveal a much more healthily complex picture from beginning to end.

I limited myself to Protestantism simply to keep my work clearly defined and encompassable. Roman Catholic and Orthodox discussion of other religions during the present century, especially the former, offers a rich and important field for plowing along the same lines. With its tradition of natural theology and its genius for cultural assimilation, Roman Catholicism has long tended to be less ambivalent than Protestantism about making positive contact with other religions. A comparative study between Protestant and Roman Catholic approaches to other religions in the twentieth century would be quite illuminating.

In this paper I want to focus on the preparatory studies and conclusions of the first World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910, which the church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette describes as "the birthplace of the modern eumenical movement."[1] As the first official Protestant gathering to achieve world ecumenical status, Edinburgh 1910 stands at the head of the list of a series of conferences which comprise the milestones of modern ecumenical history. The study papers and conclusions of Edinburgh 1910 are illuminating as a model of the generally unexpected findings which my research revealed concerning ecumenical Protestant attitudes towards other religions. They are uniquely interesting because Edinburgh 1910 was, as Latourette says, the birthplace of modern Protestant ecumenism. What I expected to find in these turn-of-the-century conference documents was a strongly traditional Protestant approach to other religions: missionary zeal for the conversion of non-Christians coupled with a fair degree of at least residual ignorance and intolerance of their beliefs. What I found was the former but not the latter. The documents are surprisingly enlightened about the faith and life of other religions and universally understanding and compassionate in their approach. Most of the missionaries from whom the information was gathered actively sought points of contact with the non-Christian religions in their areas, and in one or two cases quite specific experiments along these lines were under way. The Edinburgh 1910 documents reveal that the Protestant missionary movement, contrary to the general impression, was by the beginning of the twentieth century undergoing a revolution in the direction of theological sophistication and intercultural understanding.

Missionary Basis of Ecumenism

Latourette made a universally-accepted observation when he wrote: "The ecumenical movement was in large part the out-

growth of the missionary movement."[2] It was in the foreign mission field as well that the question of the relationship of Christianity to other religions forced itself upon the churches with practical urgency and vigor. For this reason it comes as no surprise to learn that until the first assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, virtually all the documents relative to an inquiry into Protestant ecumenical attitudes towards other religions come from the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh and, after the formation of the International Missionary Council in 1921, from the successive World Missionary Conferences held under its auspices in Jerusalem (1928) and Tambaram (1938). Almost without exception, only these ecumenical missionary gatherings were centrally occupied with and produced significant volumes on Christianity *vis-à-vis* other religions. We look in vain for such material in the study volumes and reports of the other two great streams of the Protestant ecumenical movement, Faith and Order and Life and Work, which were for good reasons absorbed with other aspects of the unity and witness of the church. Of particular value in the documents of the World Missionary Conferences is the fact that they were written by persons living in intimate daily contact with the religions about which they wrote and faced quite concretely with the issue of the relationship between Christianity and other religions.

Christ and Non-Western Religions in Tension

The question I have put to the data has been basically a simple one: Do the documents emphasize more the *continuity* or the *discontinuity* between Christianity and other religions? This is the classic distinction made in dealing with the issue, and I take it as sufficiently familiar and well established to require no detailed justification. The issue whether Christ is primarily the fulfillment or the crisis of man's religions (as well as of his ideas and cultures), the consummation of their imperfect longings and revelations or their radical reversal, is a basic one which runs through Christian history from the New Testament to the present. The tension and conflict is sometimes symbolized by the figures of Clement and Tertullian, those two roughly contemporary (late second and early third centuries) and very different Fathers of the Church. A Christian Platonist, Clement sought to "baptize" the best of Greek thought and religion as part of God's preparation of man for Christ; while the North African Latin Christian Tertullian famously objected, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" On Clement's side have been such thinkers as John Scotus Erigena, Thomas Aquinas, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Paul Tillich; on Tertullian's side Martin Luther, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth.

With the remarkable flowering of foreign missions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, after centuries of fairly complete Christian isolation from other religions (with the notable exception of its sister religions Judaism and Islam), the conflict of emphasis has been played out in very direct and urgent terms somewhat reminiscent of the first centuries of Christian existence. Generally speaking, we may say that the "continuity" side:

—emphasizes Christ as fulfillment of the best in the non-Christian religions;

—tends to interpret the other religions at their best and to see them as expressions, however imperfect, of the universal revelatory activity of God;

—accordingly seeks as many "points of contact" as possible;

—preserves as much of the other religions' ideas and even practices as possible in preaching and among converts;

—encourages dialogue and listening as well as talking on the part of Christianity.

The "discontinuity" side:

—tends to see Christ more as the judgment or crisis of man's religions;

—is more impressed by the radical difference between Christian faith and life and that of the other religions, and less confident about the ability to discern the revealing activity of God in the latter;

—is correspondingly more cautious about "points of contact" and adapting other religions' ideas and practices to Christianity;

—is inclined to judge the other religions more in terms of the standard of their actual practice than of the highest reaches of their ideas;

—emphasizes the need for the convert from other religions to break sharply with his past;

—tends to emphasize Christianity's role as a "healthy iconoclast" rather than as a dialogical partner.

It goes without saying—and I cannot overstress this—that in categorizing Christian attitudes towards other religions in this way I am referring only to *emphases* or *tendencies,* not to mutually exclusive positions.

Areas of fundamental agreement between the two emphases in twentieth-century Protestant ecumenical writings must be stressed alongside their differences. For example, we find complete unity of emphasis on two matters: (1) the necessity for the foreign missionary to gain all the knowledge and sympathetic understanding he can of the teachings and life of the religion or religions with which he is in contact; and (2) the obligation of the missionary, as a matter of love, to treat these other religions, their ideas, practices, and adherents, with respect and compassion. These two themes are consistent in the official literature from Edinburgh 1910 to Tambaram 1938. The older missionary characterization of the non-Christian religions as nothing but "paganism" and idolatry, without truth or light or morality, and therefore not in need of intrinsic understanding or respect, had vanished forever by 1910 at least among the missionary leadership of the "main-stream" Protestant groups.

Missionary Attitudes Disclosed

Unlike the preparatory volumes for Jerusalem and Tambaram, the working report for the first World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, *The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions,* was not a group of individual essays but rather the condensed results of a questionnaire addressed to a large number of missionaries representing most Protestant denominations throughout the world.[3] The committee which sifted through the large mass of material appears to have done a conscientious job of presenting agreements and disagreements fairly. The report is divided into the following headings: animism, Chinese religions, Japanese religions, Islam, and Hinduism. Chinese religions include Confucianism, Taoism, and Mahayana Buddhism; Japanese religions include Shinto, Confucianism, and Mahayana Buddhism. The notable omission is the Theravada Buddhism of Southeast Asia. I shall merely summarize the findings on animism or primitive religions and on Hinduism, considered by many to be the richest and most complex of the major religions, by way of exemplifying what are consistent characteristics of the missionary attitudes surveyed.

It might be expected that what the turn of the century called "animistic" religions, commonly believed to represent the most primitive level of religious awareness, would exhibit the fewest "points of contact" with Christianity and elicit the least sympathy from missionaries. Such was not the case, however, even in 1910. All the missionaries questioned seemed to agree that "The whole attitude of the missionary should at all

times be marked by sympathy . . . . He will lose nothing, and has everything to gain, by recognizing the good in the religion of the region, in order to take advantage of any points of contact with Christianity, and preparations for it." (20) One correspondent expressed a strong "continuity" point of view which seems to have been quoted as somewhat representative: "The missionary should *rejoice* in every element of truth and goodness that he finds in the religion and in the practice of the people with whom he has to deal, seeing that all truth and all goodness, wheresoever found, come through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, however ignorant a person may be of this source. Every religion exists by virtue of the truth which is in it, *not* by virtue of its falsehood." (20-21) The committee reports that "It is held by the majority [of the missionaries surveyed] that there is a modicum of truth in all religious systems, God not having left Himself without a witness in these peoples." (22)

Differences of emphasis existed among the missionaries as to the practical question of how the "evil and false" elements in animistic religions should be countered—whether simply by the contrast implied by the presentation of the Christian belief and way of life, or by explicitly and firmly condemning these elements—but those who divided on this practical question agreed on the presence of God and good in the native religions. The report adds that a minority of respondents regard "the whole religion of Animism" as "evil and base," (23) but it is clear that this is a decided minority.

When we move from "primitive"—what some nowadays would prefer to call "primal"—religions into the major religious traditions such as Confucianism and Hinduism, with their long history and spiritual-theological sophistication, more sharply critical voices are heard among the missionary respondents. This is understandable, since the other world religions offer a self-conscious and considered spiritual alternative to Christianity. Nevertheless, the dominant note regarding the major religions is a clearly positive one. Of the responses from missionaries in India, the committee reports:

> The replies, one and all, lay emphasis upon the necessity that the missionary to Hindus should possess, and not merely assume a *sympathetic attitude towards India's most ancient religion*. They emphasise, too, the need of prolonged and patient study, in order that sympathy may be based upon knowledge and may not be the child of emotion or imagination. More harm has been done in India than in any other country by missionaries who have lacked the wisdom to appreciate the nobler side of the religion which they have laboured so indefatigably to supplant. (171)

The following response from a missionary emphasizes that Hindu religious life is a genuine search for and response to God. Like most of even the positive statements in the Edinburgh report, the writer's attitude strikes us today as marked by spiritual imperialism. But it should be remembered that this kind of inter-religious appreciation was quite advanced for 1910:

> Below the strange forms and hardly intelligible language, lies life, the spiritual life of human souls, needing God, seeking God, laying hold of God, so far as they have found Him . . . . Crude as its forms of worship may be, abominable as the practices connected with it often are, directly hostile to Christ and Christian truth as its doctrines may appear, yet it is the expression of the highest and divinest in the people's life, the remnant of God's image, the search for the living God . . . . Under favourable conditions of general culture I have met among Hindus and Brahmans as deep, genuine, and spiritual a religious life as is found amongst most Christians[!] . . . . (172)

Other respondents suggest that Christianity should attempt to relate itself to Hinduism much as Christ related himself to Judaism, recognizing the possibilities especially of contact with the sort of piety and theological perspective represented by the *Bhagavad-Gita*. There is a general recognition among the missionaries surveyed in India that Hinduism has a rich and highly sophisticated theological tradition, and some sought to reconcile Christian theism even with the "impersonalism" of the Advaita Vedanta apprehension of God:

> There is no contradiction between the concept of the universal incomprehensible Brahma and the concept of the Universal Personality whose will is the order of the universe. The positive elements in the concept of Brahma are unity, universality, reality, and intelligence; if, within that rather sketchy metaphysical outline, there now appears the universal person whose will forms the moral order of the world, the old idea is in no way disturbed or weakened, but receives the rich moral content necessary for its completion . . . . (182)

Very few sharply "anti-continuity" statements appear in the responses on Hinduism, although there is a general complaint that the higher forms of Hindu thought are totally absent from the "superstitious polytheism" of everyday Hinduism.

In their general conclusions, the committee preparing the Edinburgh report used the situation of the church during the New Testament and Patristic periods as a model for guiding the modern missionary situation: ". . . the whole Apostolic view grew out of the twofold endeavour of those first missionaries of the Church to meet what was deep and true in the other religions [Judaism and Hellenism], and to guard against the perils which arose from the spell which those earlier religions still cast upon the minds of those who had been delivered from them into the larger life of the Gospel." (215) The committee goes on to speak of the universal self-disclosure of God to all peoples as they seek in diverse ways "union with the higher though dimly known spiritual world." (216) They summarize the consensus of the missionaries surveyed by saying: "On all hands the merely iconoclastic attitude is condemned as radically unwise and unjust." (267) Most of the missionaries reported no sense of contradiction between a generous and open attitude towards other religions and a commitment to the absoluteness of Christ.

The Unpredictable Future

Even in this turn-of-the-century maiden ecumenical document the "Clementine" or "continuity" emphasis clearly dominated. This emphasis was continued with growing degrees of sophistication throughout the century in Protestant ecumenical thinking, and to be joined by Roman Catholic and Orthodox efforts. The formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 brought together under one umbrella the three ecumenical streams that had previously worked separately albeit interconnectedly: Faith and Order, Life and Work, and the International Missionary Council. During the 1950's and 1960's the new ecumenical organization (enriched during this period by the membership of Orthodox churches) was led by the pressure of post-war events and developments in theology and church life into directions which were by no means simply a continuation of the pre-war situation. An excellent example is positive appreciation of secularization and making common cause with newer forces of social, political, and economic revolution.

The same post-war period has seen the resurgence of non-Christian religions—particularly Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—and a greater commingling of religions within Western culture itself. It has also seen a radical new humility and openness to dialogue with other religions on the part of ecumenical Christianity. This is in contrast to the period 1910-1948 when, as our model Edinburgh 1910 indicates, the dominant concern was still Christian "missionary endeavor" and encounter with other religions tended to be filtered through that lens. The 1960's and 1970's have witnessed growing ecumenical initiative in organizing living encounters with persons of other faiths. A noted example was the consultation among Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists sponsored by the World Council of Churches at Ajaltoun, Lebanon, in 1970. While still on a very small and isolated scale, Ajaltoun and other similar conferences through the world represent a conscious advance on the pre-war situation, even though such cross-fertilization was by no means unknown in the 1910-1948 period.

The trend in the direction of concrete spiritual-theological dialogue has been matched by the burgeoning of the study of comparative religions, in which regular participation by scholars representing various religious traditions is nowadays considered a *sine qua non*. The Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard is an important institutional symbol of this aspect of growing inter-communication. A striking phenomenon is the small but growing number of religious scholars and spiritual masters who quite literally attempt in some sense to "live" two or more religious traditions, such as Catholics Thomas Merton with Zen Buddhism and Raimundo Panikkar with Hinduism. Those who are involved in the mystical traditions of the great religions have come increasingly to realize the unity amid their diversities and freely share insights and methods. On the offical Roman Catholic level, the Second Vatican Council embodied a deeply appreciative attitude toward the non-Christian religions in its "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" *(Nostra Aetate)*. At most levels ecumenical Christian encounter with other religions has become a total Catholic-Orthodox-Protestant phenomenon.

All this has produced a missionary and an inter-religious situation since the war which is unprecedented (although by no means unanticipated and unprepared for) before 1948. It has been ably documented by Professor Carl F. Hallencreutz in his book *New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths*,[4] and I could do little better than to repeat what he has said on the post-1948 situation. I have been concerned rather to document the pre-1948 period because of its important role in ecumenical Protestantism as sower of seeds which have blossomed rather astonishingly in the last two decades.

Considering the age of the world's religious traditions and their inherently conservative nature, it is remarkable to consider that in less than a hundred years of genuine inter-religious dialogue there has developed the sort of meeting and sharing which is increasingly taking place. To a large degree the various faiths have the course and pressure of world events in the twentieth century to thank for opening these doors, although there have long been those in all traditions who have patiently and hopefully sought such interchange. The future always embodies an element of the unexpected, and it would be foolish confidently to predict a trend in the development of religion. But what may be in the making is not syncretism, but an increasing sharing of basic riches combined with a growing awareness that all the religious traditions are highly imperfect and culture-dominated responses to certain creative visions of the inexhaustible depths of reality and human consciousness.

NOTES

1. In Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, second ed. with revised bibliography, London: SPCK, 1967, p. 362.
2. p. 353.
3. Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910. In quoting from the report I have put the page numbers in parentheses following each quotation.
4. Research Pamphlet No. 18, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1969.

RELIGION

Published quarterly in October, January, April, and July by Kansas School of Religion at The University of Kansas at Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

Editor, Lynn F. Taylor
Associate Editor, Mary Collins, O.S.B.

Subscription 50 cents per year.