“Edinburgh 1910” is remembered as the conference that set the course of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement. Its delegates spanned the theological spectrum of the non–Roman Catholic Western missionary enterprise. Catholic Anglicans and those who would soon be known as fundamentalists sat together in apparent harmony. But this united front had been created only after a period of intense controversy in the preparations for the conference. The arguments rehearsed in this controversy raised fundamental questions of enduring relevance: Is there any theological validity to concepts such as “Christendom” or “the Christian world,” and, conversely, “the non-Christian world”? What are the goals of Christian mission when it is conducted within a traditionally Christian society? Most fundamental of all, how do we define Christian identity? Just what is a Christian?

The Edinburgh conference was originally designated as the Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference (the first two being in London in 1888 and New York in 1900). It would be “ecumenical” in the sense that it would include the whole human race in its scope and discuss “problems of supreme moment for the missionary future of the world.”1 The first of the eight preparatory commissions set up in July 1908 originally bore the title “Carrying the Gospel to all the World.”2 In September 1908 the title of the conference itself was changed to “World Missionary Conference, 1910” to avoid any misunderstanding arising from the fact that “the word ‘Ecumenical’ has acquired a technical meaning”—in other words, its modern meaning, associated with the very movement for church unity to which Edinburgh gave birth.3

### Statistics: the Source of the Controversy

Formally, therefore, Edinburgh 1910 was originally summoned to discuss how the Gospel could be proclaimed to the whole world. In reality its scope was limited from the outset by a decision that representation should be confined to “Societies and Boards administering funds and sending out missionaries for the propagation of the Gospel among non-Christian peoples.” In the case of societies that worked in part in “professedly Christian countries,” only that portion of their income “expended on work among non-Christians” could be counted.4 In September 1908 the first (American) meeting of Commission I, entrusted with the topic “Carrying the Gospel to All the World,” accordingly ruled that its subcommittee on statistics should exclude “missionary work carried on on the Continent of Europe, with the exception of the Turkish Empire and southeastern Europe.”5 Even before the geographic scope of the conference became a bone of contention, the principle had been conceded that most of Europe should be excluded from its purview as being “Christian” territory. In practice, therefore, the conference was not to be about mission to the world but about mission from “Christendom” to “heathendom.” There was no dispute that the two worlds could be differentiated on a territorial basis: the issue was where to draw the boundary.

On February 3, 1909, the British section of Commission I, known as the British Advisory Council, considered a letter from the American chairman of the commission, John R. Mott, to the British vice-chairman, George Robson.6 At the meeting Bishop H. H. Montgomery, secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, asked a question regarding the brief that the commission had given to James S. Dennis’s subcommittee on statistical survey, maps, and charts. Mott had written that Dennis would compile statistics on the same basis as for the New York Conference of 1900, which included South America, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey as Protestant mission fields.7 Montgomery asked the meeting “whether missions of Protestant bodies among Roman and Greek Churchmen were to be considered as coming within the province of the Conference, as Foreign Missions.” No clear answer was forthcoming. Montgomery sent a memorandum of the meeting to Randall Davidson, archbishop of Canterbury, to Edward Talbot, bishop of Southwark, and probably also to Charles Gore, bishop of Birmingham.

The central question facing the commission, Montgomery noted, was how “to define ‘Christendom’, in order to settle from all the countries where to get statistics of foreign Missions, ‘foreign’ meaning outside Christendom. . . . Again the definition of the word ‘foreign’ is not yet settled. Some of us feel that the word ought not to exist in the Church of God.”8 His concern had been triggered by a statement that “Roman Catholics were semi-Christians who had to be evangelized” and a reference to the archbishop’s Mission to the Assyrian Christians as “a Mission to non-Christians.” Montgomery’s memorandum urged that missions to existing Christian communions should be put into a separate category and called “Missions of Help.” Unless this were done, he anticipated the need for a minority report or even the withdrawal of the Anglican representatives.9 His covering note formally asked whether the archbishop considered his Assyrian Mission to be a foreign mission and to non-Christians, though he had informed the meeting that Davidson’s answer would be that it was “a Mission of Help to a Christian Church.”10

The following morning Montgomery was granted an audience with the archbishop. As anticipated, Davidson took the view that the Assyrian mission was a “Mission of Help,” not one of conversion. In reporting this response to Robson, Montgomery voiced anxiety over the larger question of the designation to be applied to “Missions of other Churches to other Christians, such as Roman Catholics and Greek Churchmen.”11 The wording of his letter led Robson and J. H. Oldham (the conference secretary) to suppose that Anglo-Catholic concerns could be met, provided that a distinction was made in the statistics between mission work among non-Christians and that among Roman Catholics and the Eastern churches.12 Robson wrote to James Dennis requesting that such a distinction be made and received a cable in reply indicating “that the discrimination we desire in the statistics would be made.” Robson accordingly reassured Montgomery that the conference statistics would adhere to this principle.13

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The Anglo-Catholic Ultimatum

The Anglo-Catholic bishops, however, were not to be satisfied merely by the separate tabulation of Protestant missions aimed at other Christian populations. Oldham now received letters from Talbot and Gore protesting against the intention to include in the conference statistical atlas statistics of Protestant missions working among Catholic, Orthodox, or Oriental Christian populations. Unless such an intention were revoked, it was clear that all Anglo-Catholic participation would be forfeited, and the hope that this conference could be the first to claim the full endorsement of the Church of England would be dashed.14 Talbot informed Oldham that he, Gore, and Montgomery were agreed that any departure from the principle that the conference was concerned solely “with Christian efforts to communicate the Gospel to non-Christians” would “lead to the entire secession from the Conference of a large section of members of the Church of England, and very probably of others with them.”15

In response Oldham assured Talbot that “any mission work which is immediately and predominantly directed towards Christian communities will be excluded from the returns.”16 He told Mott that the issue, though “of considerable moment,” was not “really serious” and that the bishops were “unnecessarily scared.” Perhaps they would be content with the exclusion of missions directed at Catholic populations in Europe and would accept his suggestion that the Christianity of Latin America was “to a large extent . . . merely nominal.”17 But Oldham’s anxiety deepened when Gore wrote a second letter demanding that all missions to Catholic populations should be excluded and suspending his chairmanship of Commission III, Education in Relation to the Christianisation of National Life.18 Influenced by Gore’s ominous words that his “friends among Churchmen will be very much ‘awake’ and alert on this subject,” Oldham warned Mott that they faced the probable resignation of twenty leading members of the commissions, with the result that “the Church of England, so far as its real authorities are concerned, will be out of the conference.”19 Oldham attempted to reassure Gore that “all work that aims at the conversion of persons from one form of Christianity to the other is necessarily excluded from the purview of the Conference.”20 Gore’s reply gave Oldham a month to obtain from the subcommittee on statistics a guarantee that their statistics would conform to the desired principle.21 Gore kept his resignation from Commission III in abeyance but declined to resume his role as chairman, pending full satisfaction on this issue. Oldham warned Mott bleakly of potential disaster. Fearing that the membership of the commissions would be decimated, and Commission III wrecked entirely, Oldham brought forward his existing plans for a visit to America.

Narrowing the Conference Agenda

The seriousness of the situation was quickly grasped by Arthur Brown, the Presbyterian chairman of the American Executive, who convened an emergency meeting of the New York members of the Executive and Commission I. All agreed that the success of the conference was more important than the scope of its statistics, and that a signal must be given to Oldham pending a full meeting of the Executive and consultation with Mott (then in Moscow) as chairman of Commission I. It was resolved that Brown should send Oldham a cable: “New York members Executive and Statistical Committee personally willing to conform to judgment of British Executive on Statistics Conf Com III.”22

Armed with this cable, Oldham met in turn Talbot, Gore, and Montgomery. The generous response from New York “helped matters enormously.” He found all three bishops “extraordinarily cordial and friendly.” Oldham informed Mott that the way was now clear for an ecumenical missionary conference supported fully by the Church of England as a national church, provided that two essential points were scrupulously observed: the exclusion of all reference to work among Roman Catholics or other Christians, and that “no surrender of conscientious conviction” be demanded of any participant in the conference.23 With the stakes as high as they were, there was little doubt that Oldham would receive the backing he wanted from the British Executive Committee. On March 25 it resolved unanimously that the statistics of the conference should relate only to work among non-Christians.24

Mott’s response was less predictable. Although convinced of “the essential non-Christian character of whole sections of the nominally Roman Catholic parts of Latin America,” he was willing to concede that the conference should concentrate its forces on what all could agree were non-Christian fields. His principal anxiety was of defections from the ranks at the other (American) end of the ecclesiastical spectrum. He advised Oldham to avoid giving the American leaders when he met them in New York “the impression that the whole British Committee and Continental leaders have made up their minds finally on the subject.” “Even if this is true,” counseled Mott, it would not do to say so.25

While offering this advice to Oldham, Mott was instructing his trusted lieutenant, Hans P. Andersen, “to cultivate Oldham very thoroughly while he is in America.” Andersen was given instructions to confer with Arthur Brown and with each American member of Commission I before Oldham got to them; Oldham must not be permitted to see any of the members on his own, and Andersen was to act in meetings attended by Oldham as Mott’s appointed representative and report to him.26 Mott did not yet trust Oldham to reach conclusions that were in harmony with his own priorities, which were shaped primarily by the interests of the American YMCA. Mott was unwilling to abandon those parts of the globe that had caused the controversy: “the admittedly non-Christian part of the population” in Latin America, the Levant, and Russia must remain part of the investigations of his commission. The statistical controversy was for him only one expression of a broader divergence that set some of the British and Continental members of the commission apart from the activist concerns of the American half of the commission.27

Andersen warned Mott that it would not be easy to reach an agreement, since “the underlying assumptions on the part of Anglicans in Great Britain and the assumptions underlying our thinking have been so different that we have not understood each other.” One of the embarrassments facing the Americans was how to square the title of Commission I with the more limited scope of investigation now envisaged for it. Andersen made a suggestion that proved to be pivotal for the conference: “In reality it is not a Commission on Carrying the Gospel to All the World but a Commission on Carrying the Gospel to the Non-Christian World. It would help us very materially if the title of...
this Commission could be changed so as to avoid the implication that countries occupied by Roman Catholic and Eastern Churches are not to be considered in contemplating carrying the Gospel to all the world. . . . We could then clearly indicate that the scope of the Conference is limited and that the title ‘World Missionary Conference’ does not have reference to the field but to the participants.”

**Oldham’s Diplomatic Mission to New York**

Oldham arrived in New York on April 4, 1909, and on the 7th met with the American Executive Committee and the American members of Commission I. He stated the British view that the scope of the statistics must conform to the basis of the conference, warned that any other position would result in the withdrawal of the Anglicans, and expressed great appreciation for the spirit shown by the American brethren in their cable. In response, members of Commission I expressed their willingness to confine their statistical inquiries to the conference basis, but Harlan P. Beach and Charles Watson, acting chairman of the commission in Mott’s absence, proceeded to expound the “very serious” practical obstacles that this principle raised. Egypt, for example, had a million Copts living among about 15 million Muslims—did it fall in the Christian or the non-Christian world? In Turkey, the students of the Syrian Protestant College included Muslims as well as Oriental Christians. The British principle required that the former should be included in the returns but the latter excluded. Beach, on behalf of Commission I, proposed that where mission work was almost entirely among Roman or Eastern Christians, it should be excluded and reserved for a later, unofficial volume, but where the two classes of work were intermingled, full statistics should be given without attempting separation. It seems likely that this last proposal was opposed by Oldham as being inadequate to meet the Anglican case. “Much discussion” then ensued. Some, such as Thomas Barbour, foreign secretary of the American Baptist Missionary Union, found the prospective exclusion of much of their mission work hard to swallow but felt that no other course was possible. Robert E. Speer, who was firmly in favor of making the desired concession, put forward a resolution expressing full acceptance of the British position. With some modification, it was eventually adopted. Speer, Beach, and Oldham were appointed as a subcommittee to consider and report on the atlas and proposed unofficial statistical volume.

On April 8 the meeting reconvened. American concerns focused on two practical questions. One was how to explain to the American Christian public a substantial restriction in the scope of the conference, involving the elimination of substantial tracts of the American Protestant mission field. The other was the enormous amount of statistical work that Dennis and Beach had devoted to the statistics and the atlas, which must now be done all over again in a way that overcame the dilemma of how to define the boundary between the Christian and non-Christian worlds. To ameliorate the first difficulty, it was agreed to recommend to the British Executive Committee the adoption of Andersen’s suggestion that the title of the commission be amended to “Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World.” The response to the second problem was twofold. First, the meeting endorsed the proposal of the subcommittee on statistics that the Americans should be granted the right to issue their own comprehensive statistical volume after the conference. Second, a motion was passed to the effect that “it is the judgment of the American Executive Committee that the statistical and atlas work of Commission I be geographical and that the British representatives present be asked to secure the judgment of the American and British members of Commission I as to whether the countries in which missions for both Christians and non-Christians are combined should be included or excluded and, if possible, a definite statement of the territory which should be excluded.”

The Americans had accepted reluctantly the Anglican definition of what constituted legitimate evangelistic endeavor but now threw it back to the British for detailed application on the basis of specifically territorial lines of division. They also presented Oldham with a list of questions to be submitted to the British Advisory Council, the two most crucial of which were:

- What percentage of Christians, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, or of Oriental churches, shall be deemed sufficient to change the country from the non-Christian to the Christian class?
- Shall Persia, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt, where the ultimate aim of the boards at work is to reach non-Christians, have all their statistics included?

**Drawing the Frontiers**

On May 4 the British Advisory Council of Commission I gathered in London to hear Oldham report on his visit to New York. The proposals to change the title of Commission I and permit the American members to compile their own unofficial statistical survey were endorsed. Consideration was given to the questions raised by the Americans. Missions to Jews were to be included, but tabulated separately, as were statistics of Catholic and Orthodox missions. In the cases of the Turkish Empire, Persia, and Egypt, a compromise of strange logic was reached. Statistics of all Protestant missionaries and their institutions in these territories were to be included “in view of the direct bearing of the work in these countries upon the Mohammedan population” and “as indicating the agencies and forces which are influencing, and in a measure are directed to effect the ultimate conversion of the non-Christian populations.” Yet all statistics of the Protestant church members converted through the agency of these same missionaries were to be omitted, on the grounds that these Christians were primarily proselytes from the ancient Oriental churches. This compromise originated in a proposal from Eugene Stock of the Church Missionary Society “that in the Near East the living agents who were there for Mahommedan work should be included, but that the whole of their congregations drawn from other Christian bodies should be deleted.” If Stock had meant to include only those missionaries who were specifically engaged in Muslim work, his proposal had some logical basis, but the decision to include all foreign missionaries but exclude all their converts was anomalous. All Protestant work in Latin America was to be excluded from the statistics, except for missions among the aboriginal tribes and “non-Christian immigrants.” Missions among African-American people in North
and South America and the West Indies were excluded on the grounds that these peoples now formed part of Christendom, though work among Asian immigrants to the Caribbean was included. Protestant missions working in Madagascar, Portuguese Africa, and Portuguese India, territories that were predominantly or even overwhelmingly Catholic in their missionary complexion, were included, presumably on the grounds that they were deemed insufficiently Christianized to be part of Christendom. No answer was apparently given to the American question about what percentage of the population had to be Christian for a country to be counted in Christendom, but it seems that the percentage was deemed high enough in, for example, Brazil, but too low in Goa.38

Montgomery, an invited observer at this meeting, produced a memorandum that he sent to Davidson and other Anglican leaders, indicating that they could be quite happy with the outcome. The memorandum makes clear that the Anglican position was in fact less sympathetic to the rigidly territorial definition of Christendom that was emerging than might be imagined. Catholic Anglican leaders did not wish to see North and South America classified without differentiation as falling within Christendom. The British, with Montgomery’s full support, had urged the Americans to include in the statistics home missionary activity within the United States directed toward Native Americans, Asian immigrants, and the indigenous peoples of Alaska. The American committees, however, had “begged us not to press this point. They . . . had given way to us so much, that they asked us to give way to them in this matter.” The reason for their resistance, Montgomery explained, was the organizational gulf within American Protestantism between denominational church structures and the autonomous foreign missionary societies. It was “impossible” for foreign missionary societies to approach home missionary societies (which were by 1910 mostly church departments of home mission) for statistics of evangelistic work among non-Christians.39 An additional factor not mentioned by Montgomery was the reluctance of the American statisticians to make distinctions in the data on the basis of theological judgments on which sections within a given population were, or were not, Christian. Confronted by the Anglican insistence that, if Christian mission were indeed to be equated with evangelism, then only enterprises directed at non-Christian populations could be denominated as mission, the Americans had fallen back on what seemed the only possible course, namely, to adopt a crudely geographic division between the Christian and non-Christian worlds.

Anglo-Catholic sensitivities had dictated that the conference must exclude from its scope Protestant activity in contexts where baptized Catholics, Orthodox, or even Protestants (as in the West Indies), represented the majority of the population. Such endeavors could be included only when, as in parts of Latin America, they were directed toward statistically identifiable groups of aborigines or recent immigrants— islands of heathenism within the boundaries of Christendom. Conversely, the conference was permitted to include in its purview Protestant efforts to compete with Catholics or Orthodox for the conversion of non-Christians, even where Protestants were interlopers in a Catholic field. The nature of the American response to the principle contended for by the bishops meant that only missions operating within large territorial units where a majority of the population were baptized were to be excluded; all other conversionist efforts were either legitimated or condoned. Hence Oldham could observe to Denison that the outcome demonstrated how liberal an interpretation the bishops were willing to place on their central principle: they were not going to quibble over any particular application, so long as the principle itself was respected.40

The Cost of the Compromise

Nevertheless, Oldham was left uneasy. As he commented to Mott, it was impossible to avoid giving the impression that all work that was included in the statistics was endorsed, and all that was excluded was discredited. The latter implication was indeed one that the bishops desired to give. Because evangelicals believed passionately in the legitimacy of their work in Latin America, the Caribbean, or indeed Europe, Oldham recognized that its exclusion marked “the one point in which we depart from the fundamental principle of the conference, that we ask from none of those who co-operate any surrender of conviction.”41 Adhering to that fundamental principle so far as High Anglicans were concerned had meant infringing it in relation to evangelicals. Also, the decision to restrict the territorial scope of the conference drew strong criticism in Britain from the leaders of the Baptist and Wesleyan Methodist missionary societies and from the China Inland Mission.

Oldham’s unease may have been exaggerated. Most denominational Protestant mission leaders regarded the limitations imposed by Anglican convictions as a price worth paying, perhaps because they themselves accepted the notion of Christendom. There was little doubt that the Anglo-Catholic case would triumph, because, if Europe and North America were deemed to be within Christendom and hence beyond the scope of mission, how could the same status logically be denied to Latin America? As Oldham commented to Mott, “If you admit work among the Roman Catholics in South America why should we exclude such work in papal Europe?”42

When the British Executive Committee met on June 30, there was no dissent from Oldham’s proposal that, “in order to remove misconception,” a subtitle should be added to the words “World Missionary Conference”: “to consider Missionary Problems in relation to the Non-Christian World.”43 The solution to the controversy opened the way for an approach to be made to the archbishop of Canterbury to participate, though Davidson did not commit himself to addressing the opening session of the conference until April 18, 1910.44 Oldham finally had his prize.

While in Britain the course of the controversy was dictated by the pressures of ecclesiastical politics, in the United States the responses of mission leaders were pragmatic. Few welcomed the conditions imposed by the Anglicans, but most accepted the situation as a regrettable necessity dictated by British peculiarities. Mott regarded the issues at stake as significant mainly for their potentially divisive consequences. In his efforts to avert such consequences, he appeared to vacillate over the issues
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themselves. He could do little to reverse the narrowing of his
global vision for his commission. On May 20, 1909, the American
members of Commission I, meeting in his absence, considered
“with great care” the British responses to the list of questions they
had submitted and accepted them, with only one hesitation with
respect to the black population of Central America and the
Caribbean, whom the Americans felt “have had so much less of
Christian influences than the negroes in the United States as to
justify their classification as non-Christian.” The Americans even
adopted the quixotic British solution on the Levant—including
missionaries but excluding their converts—and applied it to the
Philippines.45

From the standpoint of present-day ecumenical orthodoxy,
the outcome may appear desirable. Edinburgh 1910 implicitly
declared Protestant proselytism of Roman Catholics and, rather
less clearly, of Orthodox and Oriental Christians to be no valid
part of Christian mission. The principle of the unity of
Christendom had been preserved, but at a price that Montgom-
ery regarded as regrettable though still necessary—the division
of humanity into two lines that were not strictly confessional but
primarily geographic. The centuries-old gulf in Western Chris-
tian thinking between territorial Christendom and the so-called
non-Christian world was now wider than ever. From a
misological perspective, the stance taken by the conference was
indesensible in that it had restricted the mission of the church
and, by implication, the mission of God to certain geographically
demarcated portions of humanity. The deleterious consequences
of that restriction are still being played out.

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