

FIVE REASONS AGAINST JOHN MOTT'S CONCEPTION ABOUT MISSION

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ABSTRACT:

IN THIS RESEARCH, BASED ON THE WORKS OF JOHN R. MOTT – IMPORTANT THEOLOGIAN FROM THE PROTESTANT SPACE OF THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES – BUT ALSO BASED ON OTHER PUBLICATIONS (DEDICATED TO TOPICS LIKE THE 1ST WORLD MISSIONARY CONFERENCE HELD IN EDINBURGH IN 1910), THE AUTHOR TRIES TO PRESENT THE VISION ABOUT MISSION OF THE AFOREMENTIONED WRITER AND TO OFFER FIVE REASONS THAT DEMONSTRATE WHY HIS OPINION WAS NOT POSSIBLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION. BECAUSE OF THE RELEVANCE OF HIS WORK AND OF HIS PERSONALITY, MOTT'S IDEAS (LATER HE WILL RECEIVE ALSO A NOBEL PRIZE FOR THEM), WILL CONSTITUTE THE LEITMOTIV OF THE NAMED EVENT, FIRST FROM A BIG SERIES. THEREFORE, PRESENTING HIS VISION, IT IS FIRSTLY AN ATTEMPT TO BRING AGAIN INTO THE ATTENTION OF READERS HIS LIFE AND ACTIVITY, WHILE OFFERING 5 REASONS THAT PROVE WHY HIS VISION WAS WRONG. THIS RESEARCH REPRESENTS A WAY TO REALIZE A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HIS WORKS BUT ALSO A POSSIBILITY TO OFFER ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON HIS APPROACH.

KEY WORDS: EDINBURGH CONFERENCE, 1910, YMCA, EVANGELIZATION, MISSION.

INTRODUCTION

Important personality of his time, who had a huge contribution in the organisation of 1st Mission Conference from Edinburgh (1910)² and of its editorial outcomes³, missionary and artisan

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² For more information about his contribution there, see also: David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross (eds.), *Edinburgh 2010*, (Regnum Edinburg Centenary Series 34), (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2009); Kenneth R. Ross, "Edinburgh 1910: Scottish roots and contemporary challenges," *Theology in Scotland*, 17 (2010): 5-21.

³ Oplihant Anderson, Ferrier Oplihant (eds.), *World Mission Conference, 1910. Report of the Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to all the non-Christian World, with supplement: Presentation and discussion of the report in the conference on 15th June 1819*, (New York, Chicago, Toronto, Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910); Oplihant Anderson, Ferrier Oplihant (eds.), *World Mission Conference, 1910. Report of the Commission II. The Church in the mission field. With supplement, presentation and discussion of the report in the conference on 16th June 1910*, (New York, Chicago, Toronto, Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910); Oplihant

of ecumenism, but also theologian⁴, often quoted and refereed to until today⁵ and in the same time, holder of a Nobel Prize, John Mott presented in his writings, an interesting vision on ecumenism and mission. His ideas about mission as apostleship, the evangelisation of the world "in this generation"⁶, which should not be regarded as an end in itself, about the missionaries societies and their work and s. o., were certainly viewable and constituted starting points for important initiatives. But, despite of their importance, his ideas were in that moment to utopic and this was what/that constituted the main reason why some of them were not realisable. Knowing the importance of the ideas, life and activity of the aforementioned theologian and writer, we will try here to emphasize his ideas and to offer also a few reasons that show why ~~its~~ his missionary conception, which constituted one of the leitmotivs of the 1st World Mission Conference from Edinburg (1910), was not totally right.

Anderson, Ferrier Oplihant (eds.), *World Mission Conference, 1910. Report of the Commission III. Education in Relation to Christianisation of National life. With Supplement: presentation and discussion of the report in the conference on 17th June 1910 together with the discussion on Christian literature*, (New York, Chicago, Toronto, Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910); Oplihant Anderson, Ferrier Oplihant (eds.), *World Mission Conference, 1910. Report of the Commission IV: The missionary message in relation to non-Christian religions. With Supplement: presentation and discussion of the report in the conference on 18th June 1910*, (New York, Chicago, Toronto, Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910); Oplihant Anderson, Ferrier Oplihant (eds.), *World Mission Conference, 1910. Report of the Commission V: The training of teachers. With Supplement: presentation and discussion of the report in the conference on 22th June 1910*, (New York, Chicago, Toronto, Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910); Oplihant Anderson, Ferrier Oplihant (eds.), *World Mission Conference, 1910. Report of the Commission VI: The home base of missions. With Supplement: presentation and discussion of the report in the conference on 23rd June 1910*, (New York, Chicago, Toronto, Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910); Oplihant Anderson, Ferrier Oplihant (eds.), *World Mission Conference, 1910. Report of the Commission VII: Missions and Governments. With Supplement: presentation and discussion of the report in the conference on 20th June 1910*, (New York, Chicago, Toronto, Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910); Oplihant Anderson, Ferrier Oplihant (eds.), *World Mission Conference, 1910. Report of the Commission VIII: Cooperation and Promotion of Univty. With Supplement: presentation and discussion of the report in the conference on 21st June 1910*, (New York, Chicago, Toronto, Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910); W. H. T. Gairdner (ed.), *"Edinburgh 1910". An account and interpretation of the World Missionary Conference*, (Edinburgh, London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910).

⁴ Author of important theological works like: John R. Mott, *Addresses and Papers of John R. Mott.*, vol. 1-6, (New York: Association Press, 1946-1947); John R. Mott, *Confronting Young Men with the Living Christ*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923); John Mott, *The Future Leadership of the Church*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909); John R. Mott, *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest: The Universities and Colleges as Related to the Progress of Christianity*, (London: Nisbet, 1897); John R. Mott, *The Present World Situation*, (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1914); John R. Mott, *Leadership of the Constructive Forces of the World*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1931); John R. Mott, *Liberating the Lay Forces of Christianity*, (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1932); John R. Mott, *The Present-Day Summons to the World Mission of Christianity*, (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1932); John R. Mott, *Cooperation and the World Mission*, (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1935); John R. Mott, *The Larger Evangelism: The Sam P. Jones Lectures at Emory University, 1944*, (London: Lutterworth, 1944).

⁵ For more information about his biography, see also: <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/l-m/mott-john-r-1865-1955/>, accessed 12. 12. 2017;

https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1946/mott-bio.html, accessed 12. 12. 2017; Howard C. Hopkinks, "The Legacy of John R. Mott," in *International Bulletin*, 4 (1981): 70-73.

⁶ Norman E. Thomas (ed.), *Classic texts in mission and world Christianity*, (Maryknoll, N.Y : Orbis Books, 1995), p. 74. Cf. John R. Mott, *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation*.

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Viewed from the perspective of nowadays man, however, most of them may seem incomplete or out-dated. Moreover, his aim is not realistic for several reasons. We will therefore try to emphasize here five of them:

1. Over-evaluation of the missionary capacity of churches and missionary societies

Aware of the missionary enthusiasm of churches' societies of his time, he speaks about the evangelization of the entire world in that period, as an important target: "it is obviously must be done while they are living". Moreover, he is emphasizing the fact that the church "has unexampled opportunity to evangelize the world", and it has the necessary resources (in his time, there was existing 537 foreign missionary and auxiliaries societies).⁷ But, he omits the fact that regarding the missionary needs of his time, all this meant very little.

2. Over-evaluation of the importance of policy for missionary work

In the chapter dedicated to the opportunities and resources, he shows that "the influence and protection of Christian governments it is an immense help to the work of missions". Apparently, he is right. But, if we take a look in the history of the mission and missionary societies from that time⁸, we will find that, in most of the situations, colonial empires were encouraging only the mission of their own confessions and missionary societies, or, they were not interested of this topic. Sometimes, they have even tried to hijack the mission from its true meaning, putting it at the service of their economic interests.

3. The truncated understanding of the meaning of the mission and the omission of its fundamental ideal

John Mott speaks in one place about the fact that "evangelization of the world in this generation should not be regarded as an end in itself,"⁹ and he show that "such evangelisation must be followed by the baptism of converts, by their organization into churches, by building them up in knowledge, faith and character and by enlisting and training them for service."¹⁰ Although his ideas are, from this point of view interesting, useful and pragmatically oriented, he omits the real purpose of the mission: the Salvation of the faithfuls and spreading of Salvation message. Or, this should be the starting point of his approach. Without thinking at this aspect and noticing the leitmotiv of the mission, each tentative to speak about the mission or to do mission is, from the beginning, failed.

⁷ Cf. James S. Dennis, "Centennial Statistics", a paper prepared for the Ecumenical Conference on Foreign Missions, (New York: 1900), 17-18.

⁸ An interesting approach can be founded there: Alexis Lekpea Dea, *Evangélisation et pratique holistique de conversion en Afrique. L'union des Eglises Évangéliques Services et Œuvres de Cote d'Ivoire 1927/1982*, col. "Ethics Thèses", Tome 14ième, (Geneve: Globaletics.net, 2015).

⁹ Norman E. Thomas (ed.), *Classic texts in mission and world Christianity*, 75.

¹⁰ Norman E. Thomas (ed.), *Classic texts in mission and world Christianity*, p. 75. Cf. N. A. Nissiotis, "Interpreting Orthodoxy", in *The Ecumenical Review*, 14 (1961): 23.

4. Overestimation of the importance of time in the act of mission

One of the main points of his writings is the idea of the "evangelization of the world in this generation."¹¹ Probably marked by apocalyptic tension similar to that of the apostolic and post-apostolic period, he sees the mission not only as an important act of church's life, that must be done, but also as a fact that must be realised as soon as possible. It is, however, well-known that the truly durable results of a well-done action are noticeable over time, not immediately, and that to succeed, an approach must be well planned, and its goals must be pursued with consistency, not done in a hurry. Therefore, the way in which he presents this aspect rather leaves the impression of a vision marked by childish, superficial enthusiasm, and not of a rigorously drawn plan, as appropriate.

5. Underestimation of his own cultural and spiritual context

In the aforementioned topic of his work, John R. Mott is also speaking about the fact that "if Christianity were to die out in Europe and America, it would abide in purity as a missionary power in its new homes and would live on through centuries."¹² His assumption starts from the interesting idea of Providence that God's care about world's fate. But, in the same time, it seems that the author is disregarding the spiritual valences and resources of the two continents and is supra-evaluating the other lands, where Christianity was hardly born. On the other side, reading carefully his works, one can find that he also, like any man of his time, sometimes disregards indigenous culture, which is also reflected in his conception of mission and missionary activity.

3. CONCLUSION

As we could see from the lecture of some of John R. Mott's ideas – although, we must add that he is marked by the cultural patterns of his time – we realize that he develops a bold and innovative vision about the mission, providing principles that are still used in the work of this field. But, despite of that, because of his idealism and of his superficial evaluation of some aspects and some other aspects he emphasizes there, we are forced to conclude that his vision is unfortunately one not completely realistic.

¹¹ Norman E. Thomas (ed.), *Classic texts in mission and world Christianity*, p. 76. Cf. John R. Mott, *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation*.

¹² Norman E. Thomas (ed.), *Classic texts in mission and world Christianity*, 75.

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