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The Legacy of John R. Mott

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THE LEGACY OF
JOHN R. MOTT

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THE LEGACY OF JOHN R. MOTT

by

Martha Lund Smalley

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THE LEGACY OF JOHN R. MOTT

Among the more important manuscript and archival collections held at the Yale Divinity School Library are the personal papers of John R. Mott and records of various organizations which Mott founded or led. The library holds more than five hundred linear feet of manuscript material related to Mott and these organizations. This exhibit seeks to shed light upon Mott as an individual and upon some of the early ecumenical organizations which were his legacy.

Rising from rural mid-western origins to close association with prominent business, government and religious leaders, John R. Mott was a hero of his time, a symbol for American optimism. Mott's well-documented climb to prominence, his changing and unchanging foci and values, and the abrupt fading of his reputation in the years since his death provide valuable insights into the workings of American society.

Mott was born on May 25, 1865 in upstate New York. Later that year his family moved to Postville, Iowa, where his father was first a farmer and later a lumber dealer. Mott's higher education was pursued at Upper Iowa University and Cornell University. He was granted an honorary M.A. from Yale in 1899 and lectured at the Divinity School on various occasions. A co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946, Mott also received numerous honorary doctorates.

During his career Mott was officially honored by the governments of the United States of America, France, Italy, Japan, Poland, Greece, Jerusalem, Siam, Sweden, China, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Hungary, Estonia, Portugal and Finland.

While few individuals in our time are cognizant of John R. Mott's reputation and achievements, he was a widely acclaimed phenomenon in his own era. Friend of presidents and philanthropists, administrator, evangelist, and architect of Christian unity, Mott traveled over two million miles as an "ambassador for Christ." Kenneth Scott Latourette, eminent historian of Christianity, evaluated Mott's contribution as follows:

Combining simple faith issuing from a complete commitment to Christ with a commanding
platform presence, world-wide vision, skill in discerning and enlisting young men of ability, and the capacity to win the confidence of men of affairs, and reaching out across ecclesiastical barriers in the effort to unite Christians of many traditions in the endeavor to win all mankind to the faith, Mott became one of the outstanding leaders in the entire history of Christianity.

Mott came from a Methodist background but was not strongly tied to a particular denomination. His first conversion experience, at thirteen years of age, was in response to the preaching of a Quaker evangelist who was also a Y.M.C.A. secretary. While at college, Mott experienced a second conversion and dedicated his life’s work to God’s kingdom, striving for "total consecration."

American evangelist Dwight L. Moody was an important influence in Mott’s life.

Mott’s renown as a religious leader led to his involvement in American diplomatic affairs, particularly during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. In 1916, he was a member of the commission assigned to negotiate a settlement with Mexico.

In 1917, Mott participated in a special diplomatic mission to Russia headed by Senator Elihu Root. The Root Mission was sent by Wilson to confirm American support of the new Russian Provisional Government and to encourage Russia’s continuing war effort. Mott’s special commission was to cultivate relations with religious leaders in Russia. His notes are a valuable source of information on religious and political developments in Russia during this period.
Mott was a crucial link in the intercontinental flow of ideas and events during his lifetime, participating in hundreds of conferences and meetings throughout the world. Extensive documentation of these meetings available in Mott's papers provides a valuable resource for studying the development of the younger churches.

Among the many administrative posts held by Mott were the following:

**Executive Secretary**
Y.M.C.A. Student Department

**Chairman of the Executive Committee**
Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions

**General Secretary and Chairman**
World's Student Christian Federation

**Founder**
Foreign Missions Conference of North America

**Chairman**
World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910

**Foreign Secretary and General Secretary**
International Committee of the Y.M.C.A.

**General Secretary**
National Council of the Y.M.C.A. of the United States

**Chairman**
National War Work Council of the Y.M.C.A.

**Chairman**
International Missionary Council

**Chairman**
Institute of Social and Religious Research

**Honorary President**
World Council of Churches

The Yale Divinity Library holds official archives of a number of organizations which Mott founded or led, including those of the World Student Christian Federation, Y.M.C.A. Student Division, and Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions.

The World Student Christian Federation was created in 1895 to fulfill its founders' vision of an international student-Christian movement which could encourage and coordinate the work of existing national student Christian movements, as well as stimulate the formation of unified student movements in countries where they did not exist. Advances in transportation and communication at the end of the nineteenth century made realization of this vision feasible for the first time. The work of the Federation was carried out through conferences and committee meetings, publications, exchanges of literature, and visits to national movements by its secretaries and agents.
The formation of the W.S.C.F. was a radical step toward ecumenical cooperation at a time when no other worldwide, non-Roman Catholic Christian agency based on independent national organizations existed. From its purely Protestant origins, it expanded its membership in 1911 to include Orthodox Christians. The Federation served as a training ground for many individuals who later became prominent in the worldwide life of the Church, including Bishop Azariah of India, Bishop Honda of Japan, T.Z. Koo of China, Nathan Söderblom of Sweden, J.H. Oldham and William Temple of Great Britain and Willem A. Visser 't Hooft of Switzerland.

In its early years, the W.S.C.F. focused its energies on the formation and stabilization of national student movements, calling students to the Christian faith and the evangelization of the world. The First World War and its aftermath changed the emphases of the Federation as social problems, international relations, and the issues of pacifism and war came to the foreground.

In 1920, the W.S.C.F. founded European Student Relief, a vast program of social service to thousands of students which lasted for five years.

At the High Leigh conference of the W.S.C.F. in 1924, men and women from thirty-five different nations were represented. The growing pains of the Federation were evident as tensions surfaced regarding administrative and theological issues. The leadership of the Federation sought to make these tensions a strength of the organization, rather than a liability. As J.H. Oldham expressed it:

The Federation has realized that the fullness of life is found in the tension between opposites, and that when two opposite but complementary principles claim our allegiance, what is needed is not to surrender one of them or to adopt some feeble and half-hearted compromise, but to hold fast to both and follow each as far as it will carry us. If the Federation is able to keep a firm grasp on this great truth, it will be able to render a service of which the world is in urgent need.
Mott served as executive secretary of the Y.M.C.A. Student Department from 1890 to 1915. The early years of the Department, following its creation in 1877, were characterized by an emphasis on personal religion - evangelism, prayer meetings, and Bible study, complemented by "neighborhood work" in jails, rescue missions and other social agencies, and devotion to the missionary cause.

The Student Y.M.C.A. reflected the changing tone of religion in America during the first two decades of the twentieth century as, under the leadership of John R. Mott, the Department assimilated social gospel doctrines well before its parent organization. Y.M.C.A. evangelism began to drift away from emphasis on individual conversion and take on a stronger ethical tone, particularly in the social evangelism campaigns of Raymond Robins and John L. Childs. From 1908 on, the trend in Bible study was away from content study and toward the view of Bible study as a means to illuminate contemporary problems.

Summer student conferences were an important *modus operandi* of the Student Y.M.C.A. Attendance at such conferences was a formative experience for generations of college students in the United States. The 1886 "summer school for Bible study" directed by Dwight L. Moody in Northfield, Massachusetts also led to the formation of the Student Volunteer Movement for Missions, which served as the missionary arm of the Student Y.M.C.A.

From its formation in 1888, the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions sought to educate college and university students in North America about the Protestant missionary enterprise, inspire them to respond to the missionary impulse, and direct them to appropriate denominational or independent sending agencies for missionary service overseas.

The extensive archives of the Student Volunteer Movement, in conjunction with related personal papers of its leaders at the Yale Divinity School Library, provide valuable perspective on issues confronting American Protestantism and are particularly useful as a window on college and university student life in North America during the period 1886 to 1950. The changing fortunes of the Student Volunteer Movement provide vivid illustration of trends in American religious life during the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

The early years of the Student Volunteer Movement reflected the spirit of pre-War American culture, a spirit of idealistic activism with an orientation toward business and enterprise. In later years, economic turmoil, urbanization, issues of liberalism versus fundamentalism, and other potentially disruptive issues lying beneath the assured façade of pre-War American Protestantism had their effect on the development and eventual demise of the Student Volunteer Movement.

John R. Mott had a continuing role as platform speaker at the Student Volunteer Movement quadrennial conventions through great sea changes of American religious life.
The library also holds valuable documentation of one of Mott's less successful involvements, the Interchurch World Movement. The Interchurch World Movement was begun in 1918 as a grand crusade to unite all the benevolent and missionary agencies of American Protestantism in a massive campaign for money and revival. As Sydney Ahlstrom wrote:

Included in its scope were every phase of church work, domestic and foreign....A lavish prospectus, expensive offices, and elaborate promotional plans featured the movement's launching. Work went ahead to analyze worldwide needs, to inaugurate a broad educational program, to instruct the churches in wise planning and management of these vast responsibilities, to recruit personnel, and above all, by united efforts and modern methods, to raise astronomic sums of money.... (A Religious History of the American People, Vol. 2, p. 383)

The Interchurch World Movement fell apart in 1920, a victim of its enormous overhead and of the changing religious scene in America. Mott had never been completely comfortable with the extreme business orientation of the Movement and was quick to disassociate himself from it when the probability of its demise became apparent.
Mott was eighty-three years old by the time the World Council of Churches was formally constituted in Amsterdam on August 23, 1948. Despite his advanced age, he played an important role in the formation of the Council and served as its first honorary president.

The World Council of Churches represented the fusion of two earlier movements of which Mott had been a part: "Life and Work" and "Faith and Order." The Universal Christian Council on Life and Work focused on the relation of the Christian faith to society, politics, and economics. The goal of the "Faith and Order" movement was to bring about the reunion of the Christian churches. Mott was Vice-president of the "Life and Work" Conference at Oxford in 1937 and Chairman of the "Faith and Order" Conference at Edinburgh in the same year.

Theologians such as Gustav Aulen, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich prepared study papers in anticipation of the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches.

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MOTT'S WEB

John R. Mott was intercontinental connection personified. He crisscrossed the globe in an unprecedented way, logging an average of 30,000 to 40,000 miles of travel per year during the height of his long career as missionary statesman and ecumenical leader. He organized and conducted countless meetings across the globe in his roles of leadership in the Student Volunteer Movement, World Student Christian Federation, Edinburgh Continuation Committee, International Missionary Council, and YMCA. The events of Mott's life have been very well documented by a large number of biographers. But, having organized Mott's personal papers some years ago, and having thereby gained an unedited impression of his work and personality, I have long been intrigued by the nearly universal acclaim which he inspired. Mott was a hero and a legend in his own time, a highly influential figure in the development of the modern missions movement. What were the sources of his power and influence?

One of Mott's protégés, Willem Visser 't Hooft, had an admiring but slightly ambivalent attitude toward his mentor. Visser 't Hooft, longtime general secretary of the World Council of Churches, was descended from prominent Dutch families of lawyers and politicians. When he was drawn, not to a career in law, but rather to student Christian work, it is understandable that his parents had mixed feelings about the man who had influenced him in that direction. In his Memoirs, Visser 't Hooft relates:

During one of [Mott's] visits to Holland I presented my parents to him. My mother said to him smilingly that he was like a spider and that no one who had been caught in his web could get out of it again. There was truth in that remark. I had indeed been caught in the web which he had spun - and I never did get out of it.

The image of John R. Mott as spider resonates. Everyone has marveled at the speed and skill with which a spider spins its intricate web. A spider does not rely upon a preexisting set of connections to make its way, but generates its own web through painstaking, persistent effort. The spider is singleminded, spinning its web with a distinct purpose in mind. The spider is resilient and adaptable, changing the size and shape of its web depending upon the circumstances. A spider's web may be more or less symmetrical or strong, depending on the points being connected. A spider's creation is ephemeral, and always being made anew. It is the unique substance of a spider's web which makes its design possible.

Over the course of his long career, Mott was spinning a web through painstaking and persistent effort. As no person before him, Mott facilitated connections between students and church leaders, between organizations and denominations, laypeople and clergy, Orthodox prelates and Protestant evangelicals, Asians and Westerners, Americans and Europeans, conservatives and liberals. There was

a singlemindedness behind Mott's web. In an interview with C. Howard Hopkins, Fred Field Goodsell said:

Mott is a man who knows how to bring people together in cooperative arrangements.... He had one great aim - he wanted to lift up Jesus Christ and let men be his followers... With this singleminded purpose as his driving force, Mott seemed to adapt his web to varying circumstances. This was a man who could be good friends with people as diverse in viewpoint as J. Hudson Taylor, Sherwood Eddy and John D. Rockefeller. Mott's web was more or less effective depending upon the parties he was striving to connect. Mott's web became very shaky indeed during World War I, an episode to which I will return.

Lest we become too entangled in spider imagery, let us consider Mott's formative years and look at what people and influences gave him the desire and the resources to serve as an important intercontinental link at a crucial time.

Andrew Walls has described the way in which the expanding frontier and expanding cities in the nineteenth century conditioned the whole climate of American Christian thinking. Born in upstate New York in 1865 and moving to Iowa as a child, John Mott grew up in the crucible of American evangelical culture. Many of the phrases used to describe American Christianity of the era would seem tailor-made for Mott as well: "vigorous expansionism; readiness of invention; a willingness to make the fullest use of contemporary technology, finance, organization and business methods; ... an approach to theology, evangelism, and church life in terms of addressing problems and finding solutions."

Mott came from a Methodist background and was nurtured on periodicals such as the Guide to Holiness. He was not, however, strongly tied to a particular denomination. His first conversion experience when thirteen years of age was in response to the preaching of a Quaker-evangelist who was also a YMCA secretary. While at college, Mott experienced a second conversion and dedicated his life's work to God's kingdom, striving for "total consecration." At this time of decision, Mott was strongly influenced by J.E.K. Studd of the Cambridge Seven. Studd's life, in turn, had been strongly influenced by American evangelist Dwight L. Moody, key figure in the evangelical impulses seething back and forth across the Atlantic during this era. It is hard to overemphasize the impact of D.L. Moody on Mott. After his first experience at Moody's Mount Hermon conference for students in Northfield, Massachusetts, in 1886, Mott wrote:

[Moody] is unquestionably the mightiest man of this day in Christian faith and practice. He knows his Bible; he knows his God; he knows human nature. He has infinite tact and consecrated

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3 Transcript of interview in the John R. Mott Papers, Record Group No. 45, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library, Box 217 Folder 3425.


4 Walls in Carpenter and Shenk, p. 18.
common sense. He keeps his hand on the pulse of the meetings and does not let them go to sleep. In spite of all this he does not make himself prominent, for he holds up Christ so clearly that you forget all about Moody. His humility is marvelous, but the secret of his power is fervency of spirit.5

The role model that Mott found in Moody during his formative years continued to be his guiding light, in a simple and direct way, throughout his life. Kenneth Scott Latourette wrote in his centennial appraisal of Mott:

To understand Mott we must remember that he was of the generation which responded to Moody and to many of whom Moody personified what they most deeply believed. Like thousands, Moody believed in the transformation of individuals by Christ, in the efforts of these individuals to fight collective ills, and had a simple, unquestioning, yet profound faith in the gospel and the fellowship of all Christians in seeking to attain these objectives. Mott appealed effectively to men and women who shared these convictions.6

An important part of the mix of Anglo-Ámericán evangelicalism in the late nineteenth century was the Keswick movement.7 Shortly after his first Mount Hermon experience with Moody, Mott ordered a subscription to the Keswick periodical Divine Life and International Expositor. Almost immediately, Keswick phrases and ideas appeared in Mott's talks before fellow students.8 During Mott's first trip to Europe, the summer of 1891, he attended the Keswick Convention. There he encountered firsthand the Convention's methods of promoting practical holiness and its motto "All One in Christ Jesus." There were many elements in the Keswick tradition which would have appealed to Mott. It was nondenominational. It did not have strict creedal requirements for membership. It encouraged the putting aside of theological and ecclesiastical differences. It laid stress upon the power of faith to claim promised blessings. It engendered strong support for foreign mission activity as an ideal path for Christian endeavor.

The Moody and Sánkéy revivals of 1874 had been a crucial contribution to the "Higher Life" movement in Britain and essential background to the Keswick Convention. The seed was planted and grew; Moody, visiting the Keswick Convention for the first time in 1892, was impressed with the fruit. J.C. Pollock has written that prior to Moody's exposure to Keswick, the Northfield gatherings were an informal rather haphazard blend of Mildmay, and the "Christian Convention" which ended each Moody and Sánkéy campaign and a devotional convocation. When he discovered Keswick, its progressive teaching, concentration on the spiritual need of the individual Christian, its context of unity and service, Moody, who always grasped for Northfield


7Hopkins, p. 33.
and America any good thing to strengthen the churches, began to organize an import.  

In 1893 the Student Volunteers of Great Britain held their first camp at Keswick immediately before the Convention. Donald Fraser wrote that "the Convention created in our colleges the atmosphere which made the Student Movement possible." Many prominent British and European mission leaders such as J. H. Oldham, Donald Fraser and Baron Paul Nicolay counted their experiences at Keswick as decisive.

The leaders of the American Student Movement, Mott, Robert Speer, Robert Wilder, and Luther Wishard visited Keswick regularly during this period and inspired British students with their vision of "the evangelization of the world in this generation." In 1894, Mott spoke six times at the Keswick Student Conference. Plans for the formation of the World Student Christian Federation were made at Keswick in 1895. The Keswick traffic was two-way across the Atlantic as, for example, representatives of the Keswick movement addressed the North American Student Volunteer Movement convention in Toronto in 1902.

Mott contributed to the Keswick experience, but he also gained from the encounter as he experienced first hand the power of a gathering devoted to "practical holiness." The warm evangelism of his role model Moody was present in a disciplined and international form at Keswick. Through the Keswick connection, Mott made contact with other individuals who became role models and sources of inspiration, including James Hudson Taylor and Andrew Murray.

John Mott and Hudson Taylor went their separate and very different ways in fulfilling God's call, but Mott's respect for Taylor was longstanding and it would seem that their relationship was not just superficial or pro forma. A letter from Taylor in the Mott Papers at Yale indicates that Mott had sent to Taylor for comment the manuscript of his book The Evangelization of the World in this Generation. Taylor makes specific comments, mainly positive, but questions the scriptural correctness of one sentence in the manuscript. There is no letter of reply from Mott, but the final draft of the book provides clear evidence that Mott took Taylor's criticism to heart and altered the suspect sentence.

It may seem curious that so strong an advocate of faith missions as Taylor and so skilled a practitioner of business methods as Mott could seek and value each other's friendship. The relationship between Mott and Taylor seems to point to a spiritual fervency and evangelical viewpoint which were dominant factors in Mott's dealings with individuals throughout the world.

These attributes present themselves again in Mott's relationship with the saintly South African Andrew Murray. Murray was a protagonist of the Keswick way and a prolific writer. Both he and Mott had been at Keswick in 1895 and directly thereafter Murray went to speak at Moody's Northfield

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*Pollock, p. 115.
conference. It was a high point in Mott's life when he met Murray and collaborated with him at a conference in South Africa in 1906. As in the case of Taylor, there is evidence in correspondence available in the Mott Papers that Andrew Murray viewed Mott as a compatriot in the things of the Spirit. In a remarkable letter written near the end of his life, Murray refers to Mott's "oft-repeated call as to the need of intercessors" and draws up plans for an "All Prayer Union for All Saints." The first point in his plan: "Pray for all saints - Think of men as the Body of Christ. Think of their different nationalities, their different circumstances, their different spiritual condition. Think of their one great need, the power of the Holy Spirit..."10

The intense and personal quality of religious experience which Mott learned from his mother, from Moody, and from Keswick remained with him throughout his life. In his biography, C. Howard Hopkins documents in detail the continuing importance of the higher spiritual life to Mott, his lifelong participation in Quiet Day and prayer circles, his devotional reading and the morning watch. Hopkins reports that Mott's secretary William Stewart "was aware that his chief was constantly referring his work to his Heavenly Father," to the extent of occasionally asking his secretary to join in prayer that God might bless a letter just dictated."11 Letters exchanged between Mott and his wife Leila clearly demonstrate Mott's preoccupation with the spiritual welfare of his children.

C. Howard Hopkins conducted many interviews with former colleagues of Mott while preparing his biography. Transcripts of these interviews are housed with Mott's papers at the Yale Divinity Library. The interviews are revealing and consistent in portraying Mott's evangelical bent and intense personal piety. Hanns Lilje of Germany, for example, said of Mott that "he maintained that revivalistic element which stresses personal experience."12 Lilje elaborated in an article translated for Hopkins:

Mott's importance derives out of two sources. The one -without any doubt- is to be seen in the fact that Mott has arisen out of the revival movement of the late 19th century... Mott's way to think and to speak, his theological conceptions flew out of this "réservoir." It has to be stated that the best things he had said have come out of this theological world; the importance of prayer life, the morning watch, the unbroken turn to the scriptures etc.13

The majority of the interviews conducted by Hopkins were complimentary to Mott, but not everyone viewed Mott as God's nearly perfect gift to humankind. Among the more acerbic interviewees was Frank Willis, who worked at the British YMCA headquarters. Yet even Willis tells a revealing story about a young colleague, Richard Welch, who was offered the opportunity to serve as Mott's private secretary during one of Mott's tours of Europe. To make a long story short, Welch did not want to accept

10Mott Papers, Box 60 Folder 1122.

11Hopkins, p. 283.

12Mott Papers, Box 218 Folder 3427.

13Mott Papers, Box 218, Folder 3427.
the opportunity, indicating to Willis that he just did not like Mott. "Why not?", Willis inquired and Welch replied "Well, I've heard him speak once or twice - I think the man's an egoist." At length Willis convinced Welch to take a chance and go with Mott. Upon his return, Welch reported back to Willis: "Thank God, you persuaded me to go - the stature of the man, his spirituality, his personal humility and his relationships with a chap like me... I know I have been with a great man and a great Christian." 

Evidence of Mott's spiritual focus is very clear in the many speeches he gave before conference audiences. One example will suffice. In his analysis of the ecumenical movement in Africa, Gabriel Setiloane has pointed to John R. Mott's visit to South Africa in 1906 as a crucial turning point. "Mott addressed the Student Missionary Conference at Cape Town's Huguenot Hall. Students and churchmen destined to become leaders of their different groups, societies and churches heard Mott vividly express his life's devotion to Christian unity and co-operation. His name was to become a legend in South African mission circles." Considering the impact which this Conference had on the future of church life in South Africa, it is interesting to note the strongly evangelistic tenor of speeches given by Mott and by his fellow speaker Andrew Murray. Mott proclaimed: "If the delegates of this Convention yield themselves absolutely to the sway of the ascended and living Christ, He will release in and through us His irresistible energy..." and "No Association can long preserve a strong Christian spirit if it fails to express itself in the work of evangelism. The method of universal application is that of personal or individual work for individuals. From the days of the early Christians until the present time God has richly honored the use of this method." Andrew Murray followed by again drawing attention to "New Testament Christianity, that Pentecostal-religion, in which every convert who yielded himself to the Holy Spirit became a preacher, and that is what God wills us to do..."

The need for men and women to "yield themselves absolutely to the sway of the ascended and living Christ" was an overriding theme throughout Mott's life. His unswerving focus on this ideal provided continuity in all aspects of his work. The personal conversion of individuals, development of student Christian associations and cooperation among church bodies were all of one fabric for Mott. Without denying Mott's skill at arranging and leading meetings, raising funds and making strategic plans for the future, it might be said that the true secret of his power was, as for Moody, a "fervency of spirit" which informed all his relationships. Mott avoided overconcentration on individualistic piety; he did not allow strategic planning or financial matters to break his focus. He avoided embroilment in the fundamentalist vs. modernism debate of his time and steered clear of the Interchurch World Movement when its preoccupation with business methods threatened its collapse. Mott's capacity for drawing together the spheres of prayer and finance was striking. A German associate of Mott's, Dr. Schlingensiepen, wrote to C. Howard Hopkins:

I recall that John Mott mentioned several points which could give us new hope. One of his points

14Mott Papers, Box 218, Folder 3434.

was prayer and the next was money. I was taken aback by hearing those two mentioned so closely together. Somehow it seemed to be a "false theology." But when John Mott expounded his points he put it across to me that we should not distinguish too much between the world of prayer and our daily life.\(^{16}\)

Shortly after Mott’s visit to the Swiss universities in 1911, a perceptive student by the name of Karl Barth wrote:\(^{16}\)

This much was clear to me, the man is unique, not one of the ever-present herd. He knows what he wants, and he wants what he knows.... Firstly, Mott sees in the universities the focal point of mankind’s spiritual life, which is to say, of life in general. Secondly, he thinks of every student as a future leader... Thirdly he asks of the leader...that he be just, and by that means inwardly and morally just. And fourthly he demands that the student be a disciple of Jesus, for it is through communion with Jesus that one becomes an inwardly and morally just person. Mankind - the universities - the student - the person - Jesus. That, I would say, is the way Mott thinks. For us this is all theory. We think about the separate links in this process, and we discuss the rightness and appropriateness of their relationship with 'one another.' All well and good But isn’t it refreshing to meet for once a person for whom reflection and discussion have ceased before they ever got started, for whom the entire series is a whole, not just a theory but a process: For that is what it is. That is Mott’s personality: something happens.\(^{17}\)

Mott was clearly interesting but hard to understand for Barth. Barth went on to influence the ecumenical movement in a "confessional" direction which would have been hard to understand for Mott: Dale Irwin has analyzed the way in which the World Student Christian Federation, an organization founded by Mott in 1895, began with a theology amenable to Mott’s vision but after 1930 felt the impact of the theology of Karl Barth. “The WSCF operated under the spell of Barth’s theology for close to thirty years.... Throughout this period, the Federation found itself struggling to address issues of an historical nature and seemed at times to be an agent of a type of confessionalism that was foreign to John Mott.” Irwin maintains that since the 1960s the WSCF has “returned to Mott’s evangelical challenge to explore new theological perspectives which emerge from an atmosphere of personal interaction or solidarity.”\(^{18}\)

“Process”, “personal interaction”: these are key phrases in trying to analyze how and why John Mott was able to have such impact on the mission and ecumenical movement in his time. Traveling from continent to continent, Mott sought to direct the eyes of all he encountered toward the power of Christ which he had experienced, and he was phenomenally successful in doing so. Returning to our spider

\(^{16}\)Mott Papers, Box 218, Folder 3431.


imagery, it might be said that the web which Mott spun connected many different and nearly contradictory points partly by its strategic design, but largely by the strength of its powerful fabric or substance. The strength of this fabric was a charisma generated from focused spirituality. Those whom Mott encountered experienced this charisma and were led to accept each other and focus on the goal of bringing about God's Kingdom.

Mott was not interested in creeds or in theology, but rather the experience of the Holy Spirit. This focus gave him the freedom to rise above particular forms of Christianity, culture and civilization. Christianity was not tied to the Western creeds and culture of Christendom, but rather could be expressed in indigenous ways by any who had experienced the transforming power of Christ. Mott stated this view succinctly in his book The Present World Situation, published in 1914:

The aim of Christian missions is not the expansion of commerce, not the extension of the sphere of political influence of Western Christian nations, not the spread of Western learning and culture, not the disintegration of the beliefs, worship and practices of non-Christian religions, not even the reproduction in non-Christian lands of the organized forms of Western Christianity. The central and governing aim is the presentation of the living Christ to all men, and doing so in a way among each people or in each nation as will result in domesticating, naturalizing or making truly indigenous pure Christianity among them.  

Mott sincerely believed that his central and governing aim of the "presentation of the living Christ to all men" could smooth over in the end any doctrinal or methodological conflict which might threaten to divide Christians. Some of Mott's colleagues found his lack of interest in theological or doctrinal distinctions to be frustrating. J.H. Oldham said in criticism of Mott: "The difference between fundamentalists and modernists is almost a difference between two quite distinct religions. I do not think that the problems can be resolved purely as a matter of cooperation." Others have questioned whether Mott, so much the embodiment of American values and ideals, was himself able to achieve the goal of "pure Christianity, a Christianity which would not be linked to ideologies or encumbered by nationalism."  

In his study The Dilemma of Christian Mission and American Imperialism in the Thought of John R. Mott, Finnish scholar Risto Ahonen suggests a flaw in the fabric of Mott's web. Ahonen concludes that Mott's uncritical identification with the values and ideals of American society led to contradictory elements in his thought. Reading through Mott's writings and correspondence one would have to agree with Ahonen that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, Mott was thoroughly committed to the idea that


"Christianity and democracy made the United States the hope of the world." Mott’s commitment to democracy and American values on the one hand and his belief in the development of "indigenous pure Christianity" on the other, were potentially at odds.

Ahonen seems to indicate that Mott was uncritical or unselfconscious in recognizing his deep commitment to American ideals. Willem Visser ‘t Hooft in a speech on the occasion of the John Mott Centenary Celebration echoes this idea:

Dr. Mott belonged to a generation - and that is especially true I think in the United States - which you might call the pre-critical generation.... At that time there was something still of an acceptance, a common acceptance of the fact that there was a certain Christian civilization, so that the last part of the Victorian era and the bases of that civilization were not really questioned...."

I alluded earlier to a situation during World War I in which Mott’s web came close to breaking. Richard Piarard has cogently analyzed the rift in the ecumenical movement - which occurred during World War I due to the seizing of German mission properties and the expelling or interning of missionaries by the Allies. John Mott strove to mediate between the German and Allied church leaders in his position as chairman of the Edinburgh Continuation Committee, but could not succeed in stemming the tide of animosity. The Germans suspected that Mott, a close friend of President Woodrow Wilson, was not truly neutral and ought to resign from his position as head of an international, ecumenical body. The final straw came when Mott was chosen by Wilson to participate in a diplomatic mission to Russia. Mott justified his participation in the Russian mission by claiming that it was not a political errand but a "very important opportunity to promote the kingdom of Christ," but the German mission leaders were harsh in their criticism of his actions and called for his resignation as chairman of the Continuation Committee.

The "pure Christianity," unencumbered by nationalism, which Mott preached was elusive during the crunch of a world war, yet Mott seemed to be sincerely unaware of the conflict latent in his involvement in political affairs. In reading through the documentation relating to this incident, one senses the acute frustration felt by the Germans as Mott sought to smooth over the disagreements by appealing to "the power of the spirit of Jesus Christ." A Pastor Beyer wrote:

In the discussions with the missionary leaders and in those with the German Student Christian Alliance, more is involved than mere misunderstandings: In the question of our relation to Mott there is involved an important, far-reaching, fundamental divergence of religious judgment. Therefore, I am not also able to find that we were "always one when we went to the bottom of things." In the very fundamental questions with regard to our conception of the Kingdom of God


23 Mott Papers, Box 218, Folder 3433.

24 Memorandum of John R. Mott with German missionary leaders, Berlin, May 27, 1920, Mott Papers, Box 153.
and our eschatological hope, we achieved very little common understanding. In reality we were really always at one only in the personal recognition of Jesus....But the purpose of our meeting was not merely such Christian fellowship, but the struggle for clarity of thought and for victory on the basis of principle over the differences between us as a result of the questions at issue...25

In Sherwood Eddy’s analysis, John Mott was a statesman and not a prophet.26 In his role as reconciler and mediator, Mott at times sacrificed "the struggle for clarity of thought." Mott was focused on his goal of bringing men and women to Christ. He was not always aware of the cultural baggage he was carrying and he did not always pause to evaluate the ramifications of his actions. Mott spent a large amount of his time cultivating wealthy donors who had the financial resources necessary to fuel the mission and ecumenical movements. His letters to donors are full of glowing renditions of spiritual conquests, but Mott never seems to have been concerned about how the wealth of these Christian donors had been accumulated. Roger Woods notes:

As one reads through Mott’s writings, there is nowhere to be found even a slight criticism of any of the methods of the big-name capitalists in this period... Never did he raise any question of "tainted money", as Washington Gladden had done in 1905, over a gift of $100,000 by John D. Rockefeller to the Congregational Board of Missions. By his abstaining from any strictures whatsoever of the system or the men who ran it, and by his hob-nobbing with men of great wealth, Mott gave an indirect countenance to the business mores of this period.27

So John R. Mott was not perfect. He was something of an egotist; his head could be turned by wealth and fame; he was prone to slick diplomacy in messy situations; he tended to say the same things over and over: Overseas, Mott was often taken to be the embodiment of American culture and imperialistic dominance. Despite all this, Mott was remarkably effective in bringing people together: He was a crucial link in the intercontinental flow of ideas and events during his lifetime. Andrew Walls has noted that John Mott “provided an infrastructure of an international missionary movement. There was no conceivable basis for this in any of the structures that had emerged from the century of European missionary endeavor.”28 Mott had the executive abilities and the access to financial resources necessary to pull off massive conferences and sustain large organizations. Perhaps equally important, Mott had the spiritual integrity to deeply affect the lives of millions of people.

In his article "Call to Evangelism", Johannes Hoekendijk stated that "the call to evangelism is often little else than a call to restore 'Christendom,' the Corpus Christianum, as a solid, well-integrated

25Translation of article in "Mitteilungen", the organ of the German Student Christian Alliance, #238, August 1, 1920, Mott Papers, Box 153, Folder 2549.


cultural complex, directed and dominated by the church. "True evangelism, on the other hand, "sows the seed and in humility lets God give the seed any body which pleases Him." John Mott did not wish to impose a creed of beliefs or traditions upon those he encountered. Viewed in the best light, John Mott was someone who felt a call to evangelism, readied the soil through intensive preparation, sowed the seed of his vision of Christ’s transforming power, and then was prepared to accept what grew from the seed.
