



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

The international missionary council

Citation for published version:

Stanley, B 2022, 'The international missionary council: A centennial retrospect and reflection', *International Review of Mission*, vol. 111, no. 2, pp. 268-284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12432>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/irom.12432](https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12432)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

International Review of Mission

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



The International Missionary Council

A Centennial Retrospect and Reflection

Brian Stanley

Brian Stanley is professor of World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh.

Abstract

This article reflects on the 40-year history of the International Missionary Council (IMC) from its formation at Lake Mohonk in 1921 to its integration within the World Council of Churches at the WCC's 3rd Assembly in New Delhi in 1961. It does so by analyzing the explicit or implicit answers that were given within IMC circles to three fundamental theological questions. The first question is: What is the theological basis and justification for the Christian mission to all of humanity? A second question came to be regarded by the first IMC secretary, J. H. Oldham, as of primary importance: What is a Christian view of race and racial justice? A third question lay at the heart of the changing relationship between the IMC and the WCC: To what extent does the mission of the church require its visible unity? In investigating the various answers to these questions given within IMC meetings between 1921 and 1961, the article also pursues a fourth question: What answers did non-Western church and mission leaders give to these three questions, and were their answers heard by the white Europeans and Americans who directed the IMC throughout its history? The article pays particular attention to the Jerusalem meeting in March–April 1928 and the debates supporting and opposing integration within the WCC at what was technically the first assembly of the IMC in Ghana in December 1957–January 1958.

Keywords

International Missionary Council, Jerusalem, J. H. Oldham, race, Ghana, mission and unity, integration, World Council of Churches

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

October 2021 marked the centenary of the formation of the International Missionary Council (IMC) at Lake Mohonk, New York, USA. If it had not been for COVID-19, this event would have been commemorated last year. William Richey Hogg's history of the IMC, *Ecumenical Foundations*, published in 1952, remains the only substantial work on the Council's history and obviously covers only the first 30 years.¹ Hogg's book has recently been complemented by excellent shorter appraisals of IMC history by Kenneth R. Ross and Dana L. Robert.² A short article such as this must necessarily be highly selective and needs to be read alongside the existing treatments by Hogg, Ross, and Robert. My intention is to explore the significance for churches and mission agencies today of a body whose formal history lasted for only 40 years, ending with the integration of the IMC into the World Council of Churches at the WCC's 3rd Assembly in New Delhi in 1961. I shall identify three questions arising from the historical record that are of continuing relevance. They are theological questions, and I am a historian, not a theologian. I shall not offer my own answers to the questions; I will simply indicate how and why they arose in IMC history in the way that they did.

First, examining the history of the IMC confronts us with a fundamental question: What is the theological basis and justification for the Christian mission to all of humanity? A second question is more specific, but no less urgent: What is a Christian view of race and racial justice? A third question lies at the heart of the changing relationship between the IMC and the WCC: To what extent does the mission of the church require its visible unity? As we consider the answers to those questions given at various points between 1921 and 1961, we cannot escape a fourth question. It is always present, either explicitly or implicitly, in the archival sources that document the 40 years of IMC history: What answers did non-Western church and mission leaders give to these three questions, and were their answers heard by the white Europeans and Americans who directed the IMC throughout its history?

In discussing the first two questions, I shall pay particular attention to the Jerusalem meeting in March–April 1928 (generally neglected by historians), while the third will

¹ William Richey Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the International Missionary Council and Its Nineteenth-Century Background* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952).

² Kenneth R. Ross, "The International Missionary Council between 1910 and 1921," in *A History of the Desire for Christian Unity: Ecumenism in the Churches (19th–21st Century)*, vol. 1, *Dawn of Ecumenism*, ed. Alberto Melloni and Luca Ferracci (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2021), 722–43; and Dana L. Robert, "Cooperation, Christian Fellowship, and Transnational Networking: The Birth of the International Missionary Council," in *Together in the Mission of God: Jubilee Reflections on the International Missionary Council*, ed. Risto Jukko (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2022), 3–29.

require us to examine the debates at what was technically the first assembly of the IMC, held in Ghana in December 1957–January 1958.³

What Is the Theological Basis and Justification for the Christian Mission to All of Humanity?

This question, like the third and, arguably the second, is emphatically theological in nature. However, the IMC, as the offspring of the 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, was established on the basis that it would avoid all theological questions that might divide its members. The source of this limitation was a peculiarly English problem. In 1908, J. H. Oldham had had to provide assurances to the leaders of the Anglo-Catholic party in the Church of England that the Edinburgh conference would not debate or pass any resolution on matters of faith and order.⁴ The IMC in its turn had written a minute into its founding constitution: “No decision shall be sought from the Council, and no statement shall be issued by it on any matter involving an ecclesiastical or doctrinal question, on which the members of the Council or the bodies constituting the Council may differ among themselves.”⁵

Did this restriction limit the IMC’s ability to respond to a changing theological climate? Oldham, the first secretary of the IMC, certainly kept an anxious eye on potential infringements of the clause that prohibited theological controversy. In January 1927, he wrote a letter to the American Presbyterian mission leader Robert E. Speer, who, with William Temple, then bishop of Manchester, had been charged with preparing the documentation for the Jerusalem meeting on the topic of Christianity’s relationship to other faiths and ideologies. Oldham had been at a lunch in New York at which Speer referred to the “wide-spread hesitation even in missionary circles, as to whether we have in the Christian religion something absolutely unique and central.” Oldham’s letter agrees with Speer that “uncertainty at this point cuts the nerve of missionary endeavour” and that the Jerusalem meeting should address the issue. He continued:

The greatest service the Jerusalem meeting can do will be to do something to clear up these perplexities and uncertainties in the minds of those at home and in the younger generation [*sic*] in the

³ The constitution of the IMC was revised at Willingen in 1952 to provide for an assembly every four years. See Margaret Sinclair, “The Christian Mission at This Hour: The Ghana Assembly of the IMC,” *International Review of Missions* 47:186 (April 1958), 138.

⁴ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, : Eerdmans, 2009), 51, 277–81.

⁵ Minute 39, *Minutes of the International Missionary Council, Lake Mohonk, New York, U.S.A., October 1–6, 1921* (London: The International Missionary Council, 1921), 40, https://archive.org/details/minutesofinterna0000inte_g0k2/page/40/mode/2up.

indigenous churches, whose conviction is less clear and strong than one would wish. For myself I shall feel that the meeting in Jerusalem shall have missed its main purpose unless it issues in some fresh and convincing statement of the transcendent glory and richness of what we have in Christ. This will have to be of course not in terms of theological definition, which are the concerns of the Conference on Faith and Order, and lie outside the province of the International Missionary Council, but in terms of the interpretation of spiritual experience.⁶

Although Oldham went on to urge a generous approach to the insights of other faiths, it is clear that he, like Speer, adhered to a theology of what Konrad Raiser has termed “Christocentric universalism,” namely a conviction that Christian mission is grounded in the unique lordship of Jesus Christ over all humanity.⁷ Both Oldham and Speer supposed this belief to be weakening both among mission supporters in the West and, more particularly, among younger leaders in the non-Western churches. Yet, Oldham hesitated to articulate a Christological case for Christian uniqueness on the grounds that this was a Faith and Order matter and beyond the scope of the IMC constitution. Instead, he offered an anthropocentric approach, proposing “interpretation of spiritual experience” as the basis of his claim for the unique transcendence of Christ.

The first volume of the published papers of the Jerusalem meeting was devoted to a topic which could hardly be more theological. Titled *The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems of Thought and Life*, and edited by Speer, it is the longest of the seven volumes. There were 338 pages devoted to the preliminary papers circulated in advance, covering the relationship of Christianity to the world’s religions (though omitting both Judaism and what were then termed “animistic religions”) and to the emergence of “secular civilization.” There followed 75 pages recording the discussion in the plenary sessions of the Council, 60 pages of additional papers prepared at the Council’s request, and finally the 17 pages of the statement issued by the Council.⁸ What emerges clearly from this weighty volume is the extent and vigour of theological argument among the delegates about how Christianity relates to “Non-Christian Systems of Thought and Life.” Some, notably the German Lutheran Julius Richter,

⁶ J. H. Oldham to R. E. Speer, 30 January 1927, Correspondence: International Missionary Council. Jerusalem, 1927–1928, Robert Elliott Speer Manuscript Collection; Series II: Correspondence; Box 37, File 37:9, https://archive.org/details/correspondencein00unse_19/page/n1/mode/2up.

⁷ See Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 41–47. For a full statement of Oldham’s Christocentric theology of mission, see Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J. H. Oldham* (Edinburgh and Geneva: T&T Clark and WCC Publications, 1999), 252.

⁸ International Missionary Council, *The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems of Thought and Life: Report of the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1928).

expressed concern about syncretism and stressed the absolute uniqueness of the Christian revelation.⁹ Others had a different point of view. The American Quaker Rufus Jones, for example, called for Christians to welcome joyously “all freshly discovered truth as from God” and advocated for “a profound re-interpretation of Christianity to meet the new seekers in a new age.”¹⁰

The Council statement on the subject, written by Speer and Temple, attempted to bridge the gap by combining emphatic affirmations of the status of Jesus as the Saviour of the world with declarations that the light of Christ is to be found in some measure in non-Christian persons or systems. They issued an invitation to followers of other religions “to join with us in the study of Jesus Christ as He stands before us in the Scriptures.”¹¹ It paid homage to Oldham’s concern that the IMC should not trespass on Faith and Order territory by borrowing verbatim the definition of the gospel agreed by the conference on Faith and Order held at Lausanne in 1927 and making this the core of the Council’s statement defining the content of the Christian message.¹² Remarkably, Oldham was not present in Jerusalem, choosing instead to accept an invitation from the British government to go to East Africa on behalf of a Royal Commission investigating the possibility of closer union between British colonial territories there.¹³ In the absence of its senior secretary, the IMC quietly forgot the directive in minute 39.

What contribution did the non-Western delegates in Jerusalem make to the theological debates that so preoccupied the meeting? Of the 231 delegates, 52 were from the so-called younger churches, a notable improvement on their meagre representation at the Edinburgh conference in 1910.¹⁴ India, China, Japan, and Korea were well represented by Indigenous delegates: the rest of Asia, less so. In contrast to 1910, Latin America was given representation, including three national Christian delegates from Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. The only African countries to be represented by an indigenous person were Egypt (two delegates), Uganda, South Africa, and Madagascar (one each); none of them was given a public

⁹ Ibid., 353–54.

¹⁰ Ibid., 303, 311.

¹¹ Ibid., 488–91; Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, 248.

¹² International Missionary Council, *The Christian Life and Message*, 481–83; see also H. N. Bate, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 3–21, 1927* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1928), 220–21.

¹³ Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, 238, 260–63.

¹⁴ Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, 245.

role.¹⁵ No Indigenous Christian was invited to prepare a preliminary paper for the conference, and only three were invited to deliver one of the main addresses: Cheng Jingyi and Yu Rizhang from China, and S. K. Datta from India. Moreover, their addresses were silent on the issue preoccupying so many of the Western delegates – that is, the basis of Christian uniqueness. Cheng Jingyi, general secretary of the National Christian Council of China, who was of conservative evangelical background, delivered a sermon calling for a new vision of God and God's kingdom; Christian uniqueness was only implicit in what he said. Yu Rizhang (David Yui), chair of the same council, and S. K. Datta were both leaders of their national YMCA movements. Datta especially was a vocal critic of Western missions. Their addresses reflected the current preoccupation of the YMCAs in China and India: their priority was to enable a predominantly Western audience to understand the growth of radical nationalist sentiment in their respective countries.¹⁶

For many of its Western leaders in the aftermath of the First World War, the embryonic ecumenical movement was an affirmation of the supra-national allegiance of all Christian people; in a world so recently torn apart by conflict between nations, the unique lordship of Christ must transcend all other claims to loyalty. In contrast, for Asian delegates such as Yu Rizhang and Datta, a Christian version of nationalism was not the problem but rather the solution to the dilemma of Christianity appearing to be so irredeemably Western. At the Jerusalem meeting, William Temple delivered an evening address in which he asserted that “it was better for China to have many denominations, all international, than a united Chinese Church which was national only.” He observed afterward that this had provoked the disagreement of “the intensely Nationalist Easterns.” Wei Zhoumin (Francis Wei), vice-president of Central China Christian University,¹⁷ had collared Temple and his friend the Christian socialist and economic historian R. H. Tawney to insist that “they must have national unity, whether they had international connections or not.” This remark elicited from Tawney, who was notorious for his sharp tongue, the response that “All you Orientals

¹⁵ International Missionary Council, *Addresses and Other Records*, vol. 8: *Report of the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council, March 24th – April 8th, 1928* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 205–16. There was, in addition, an African American Baptist YMCA missionary, Max Yergan, who represented the “native” section of the Student Christian Association of South Africa; on Yergan, see David Henry Anthony, *Max Yergan: Race Man, Internationalist, Cold Warrior* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ International Missionary Council, *Addresses and Other Records*, 46–106. On Yu Rizhang, see John Barwick, “Yu Rizhang,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, <http://bdcconline.net/en/stories/you-rizhang>. On Datta's criticisms of missions, see Datta to Oldham, 21 April 1920; Oldham to Datta, 26 May 1920; and Oldham to H. C. Priest, 25 October 1921. (Refs. 2.1 and 5.1, J. H. Oldham Correspondence, Centre for Special Collections, University of Edinburgh Main Library.)

¹⁷ On Wei Zhoumin, see Peter Tze Ming Ng, “Wei Zhuomin,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, <http://bdcconline.net/en/stories/wei-zhuomin>.

seem determined to go the European way to hell.” Temple added in a letter to his wife: “It is horribly true.”¹⁸ Although we should note Richey Hogg’s judgment that the Jerusalem 1928 meeting “marked the beginning of a new era in relations between churches of ‘sending’ and of ‘receiving’ countries,”¹⁹ voices from the younger churches were in fact only rarely heard and not always understood.

How the theme of defining the mission of Christianity played out at Tambaram in 1938 is better known. I shall not attempt to recapitulate the familiar story of the debate between Hendrik Kraemer and his critics, such as A. G. Hogg. However, it is important to note that non-Western speakers at Tambaram were found on both sides of the debate. Bishop V. S. Azariah of Dornakal allied himself with Kraemer by affirming the church as the “divinely appointed instrument of evangelism to the world”; as Jesus was sent to save “men” [*sic*], so “the Church exists to save men too.”²⁰ On the other side were the members of the “Rethinking Group” from Madras (Chennai). Pandipeddi Chenchiah and Vengal Chakkerai objected to Kraemer’s exclusivism, not so much on theoretical grounds as because in the Indian context, it seemed to result in an absolute institutional separation of the church from the leaders of Indian society. Instead, they proposed a theology of the kingdom of God in which the Holy Spirit was at work within the fabric of the nation.²¹ The divergence reflected their respective ministries and caste backgrounds. Bishop Azariah was a Nadar, a person of low caste and made his reputation as an evangelist to low-caste Indian villagers. For him, Christianity was about the offer of salvation to those on the social margins who knew they needed saving. Chenchiah and Chakkerai came from wealthy high-caste backgrounds and were anxious to narrow the gap between Hindu social elites and the church.

During the first two decades of the Council’s existence, therefore, our first question provoked varying responses: both ringing affirmations of the unique salvific lordship of Christ and, from leading members of the Asian Christian elite, an implication that

¹⁸ F. A. Iremonger, *William Temple Archbishop of Canterbury: His Life and Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 395–96; that Temple’s wife was the recipient of the letter seems reasonable on the basis of page 392. For Tawney’s sharp tongue, see M. M. Postan, “D. M. Joslin, 1925–1970,” in *R. H. Tawney’s Commonplace Book*, ed. J. M. Winter and D. M. Joslin, *Economic History Review*, Supplement 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), x.

¹⁹ Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, 253.

²⁰ International Missionary Council, *Evangelism: International Missionary Council Meeting at Tambaram, Madras, December 12th to 29th* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 33.

²¹ Sebastian C. H. Kim, “The Kingdom of God versus the Church: The Debate at the International Missionary Council, Tambaram, 1938,” in *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity: Global Processes and Local Identities*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu and Alaine Low (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 131–47.

it was the wrong question or not the most pressing question to ask. Theology and political context were, as always, inextricably connected. The answers given to our second question suggest a broadly similar conclusion.

What Is a Christian View of Race and Racial Justice?

At Lake Mohonk, the infant IMC had asked its officers to “undertake a study of the questions involved in racial relationships as they relate to missionary work.”²² Earlier in 1921, Oldham had visited African American Christian communities and colleges in the United States, and caught from them a sense of the urgency of pursuing racial justice.²³ He took up the challenge and in 1924 published his study, *Christianity and the Race Problem*. Some parts of this book have not stood the test of time well. Oldham regarded the fact of differences of “civilization” and “attainment” between races as scientifically proven but was agnostic over how far these differences were innate rather than environmental.²⁴ Nevertheless, the primary thrust of his book was to emphasize the fundamental unity of humanity and the calling of the church to demonstrate in its own life and worship that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free. Whatever “natural differences” may exist, they lose their significance in the oneness of the body of Christ. “Take away this unity in Christ,” he warned, “and the heart falls out of Christianity.”²⁵ For Oldham, race was indeed a theological issue, and he must be given credit for its prominence at Jerusalem in 1928.

Although Oldham was absent from the Jerusalem meeting, his influence can be discerned in that the fourth volume of the published record of the meeting was entirely devoted to the topic *The Christian Mission in the Light of Race Conflict*. The titles of the four precirculated papers are revealing: “The Negro in the United States of America”; “Agencies for Interracial Co-operation in the United States”; “Relations between the White and Black Races in South Africa”; and “Relations between the Occidental and Oriental Peoples on the Pacific Coast of North America.”²⁶ In contrast with the 1910 Edinburgh conference, the race question in the United States was treated as falling within the remit of Christian mission. No longer was mission defined simply as a geographical movement conveying the gospel from Western Christendom to non-Western “heathendom.” Yet, what is striking is the lack

²² *Minutes of the International Missionary Council*, 1921, 56, https://archive.org/details/minutesofinterna0000inte_g0k2/page/56/mode/2up.

²³ Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, 175–76, 202.

²⁴ J. H. Oldham, *Christianity and the Race Problem* (London: SCM Press, 1924), 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

²⁶ International Missionary Council, *The Christian Mission in the Light of Race Conflict*, vol. 4: *Report of the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council*, v–vi.

of any paper dealing with the question of race in relation to colonialism. Race relations in South Africa, like those in the United States, were identified as an exceptional problem demanding Christian attention, but there was no mention of other parts of Africa, such as Kenya, Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), or Malawi (then Nyasaland), where white settlers occupied disproportionate economic and political power. In discussion of the subject in sessions of the Council, there were occasional mentions of other parts of the world, though few appear in the published record. Professor Jorge Bocobo, from the Evangelical Union of the Philippines, spoke of the demands of American capitalists for more land for rubber cultivation, which were supported by the American colonial government, making the Philippines “one of the sorest spots of the world.”²⁷ Harold Grimshaw, an economist employed by the League of Nations at its International Labour Office in Geneva, alluded to the destructive impact of white people on what he termed the “primitive peoples” of the Pacific.²⁸ The Council statement did rather better, highlighting “three grave problems which still escape the salutary check of the international conscience”: the relations between peoples of a metropolitan state and those of its colonies and dependencies; the “virtual hegemony exercised by one people over another as a result of the establishment of financial and economic control”; and “the acquisition of special privileges, of which the leading example is extra-territoriality.”²⁹

The Jerusalem statement contained numerous references to race without ever defining what it was. It declared the missionary enterprise to be “an instrument of God” for planting the church among all races and asserted that the church had “in its power to be the most creative force for world-wide inter-racial unity.”³⁰ In two places, the statement utilized the biblical theology of race that the Anglo-Catholic bishop Charles Gore had expounded in the 1910 Edinburgh meeting, and there is little doubt that its wording came from William Temple, whose social theology was deeply indebted to Gore.³¹ Implicitly referring to the vision of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21:24–26, the statement affirmed that “the different peoples are created by God to bring each its peculiar gift to the City, so that all may enhance its glory by the rich diversities of their varying contributions.”³² Following Gore’s example from

²⁷ Ibid., 223.

²⁸ Ibid., 224–25. On Grimshaw, see Sue Donnelly, “Grimshaw International Relations Club,” *London School of Economics and Political Science* (blog), 2 May 2014, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory/2014/05/02/grimshaw-international-relations-club>.

²⁹ International Missionary Council, *Christian Mission in the Light of Race Conflict*, 242.

³⁰ Ibid., 245.

³¹ Iremonger, *William Temple*, 332, 488.

³² Ibid., 237–38. For Gore’s use of the same theme at Edinburgh, see Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 193–96.

1910, the peoples (*ethne*) of Revelation 21 were styled as “races,” and the statement looked forward to the fulfilment of the prayer of Christ “that they may all be one” in an eschaton when all peoples or races would “bring their glory into the City of God.”³³ In 1928, as in 1910, it was the category of race, not culture, which was employed by Christian progressives as a theoretical device to validate the rightful place of non-European expressions of the Christian faith within the one world church.

The attempt of the Jerusalem meeting to address the race problem by reference to a Christian vision of unity in diversity is appealing, but the attempt was flawed. In 1928, as in our own day, the most frequent references to race were to peoples of African descent. Their continuing oppression, whether in South Africa or in the USA, took place in a society segregated by colour in which race seemed a self-evident category. But the Jerusalem meeting also applied racial language to the rapid influx of Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the Pacific coast of North America. The precirculated paper on this subject, written by Galen Fisher, close associate of John R. Mott and director of the Institute of Social and Religious Research, referred to these Chinese and Japanese immigrants as “Orientals” and “an immigrant race.” Fisher did not hesitate to enumerate some of the supposed weaknesses of the race in order to “throw into relief the difficulties with which both Oriental and white promoters of goodwill must contend.”³⁴ The Japanese and Chinese delegates would not have welcomed such obliteration of their national identities by the blanket category of “Oriental,” though no protest from them is recorded. It is hard to imagine the language of “the Oriental race” being employed in any ecumenical forum today. The Jerusalem report noted that the “African” members of the Council (also meaning the African American members) “made a profound impression because of their moderation, humility and wisdom” and implied that the wording of the statement on race owed a debt to their contributions. Yet, an Indigenous African speaker was given only one brief citation in the report: D. D. T. Jabavu, the notable South African educationalist, social gospeller, and politician, had observed that “many professing Christians are not treating black people as being possessed of a full personality.”³⁵

Race is not a biological reality but a social construct that fits some contexts better than others. Race discourse has survived into our own day, but only very selectively. It is still

³³ International Missionary Council, *Christian Mission in the Light of Race Conflict*, 245.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 142, 155, 157; on Fisher and the Institute, see C. H. Hopkins, *John R. Mott 1865–1955: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 603–604.

³⁵ International Missionary Council, *Christian Mission in the Light of Race Conflict*, 227; on Jabavu, see Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, eds., *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 360–62.

common as a defining category of identity among, and in relation to, African, African American, and Afro-Caribbean peoples but is much less frequently employed in Asian, Latin American, or Oceanic contexts. It may be significant that no subsequent IMC meeting made such wide use of the vocabulary of race. The Tambaram meeting said little about race. C. F. Andrews, the Anglican missionary to India, delivered an address on “inter-racial reconciliation,” and the concluding “Message to all Peoples” warned that “race hatred, the ugly parent of persecution, has been set up as a national idol in many a market place and increasingly becomes a household god.”³⁶ However, what Tambaram had in mind was the rising tide of anti-Semitism, especially in Nazi Germany. Race in its wider application did not feature again so prominently in conciliar ecumenical discourse until after the demise of the IMC in 1961, when the civil rights movement in the USA reached its height.

To What Extent Does the Mission of the Church Require Its Visible Unity?

The IMC had been formed in 1921 to embody the conviction, powerfully voiced in Edinburgh in 1910, that the mission to the world that Christ had entrusted to the church could not afford the luxury of fragmentation on national and denominational lines. Its rationale was to promote closer cooperation between mission agencies and between those agencies and the national representative councils of churches which evolved from their work. The original membership of the Council thus comprised national cooperative bodies representing Protestant foreign missions from Western countries, plus the National Missionary Council of India, Burma, and Ceylon and two national branches of the Edinburgh Continuation Committee, established in China and Japan.³⁷ Just as representation at the Edinburgh conference was not ecclesial in character, membership of the Council to which it eventually gave rise was not on an ecclesial basis either.

As the national missionary councils formed after 1910 evolved into national Christian councils, and as these became more numerous, the nature and status of IMC membership began to shift. By the Willingen meeting in 1952, it included 17 national Christian councils (or similarly entitled bodies) from Brazil, Burma, Ceylon, China, the Congo, India, Japan, Korea, Malaya, Mexico, Indonesia, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the River Plate Confederation, Thailand, South Africa, and West Pakistan. In addition, there was the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America (formed in 1913) and the Near East

³⁶ International Missionary Council, *Addresses and Other Records*, vol. 7: *International Missionary Council Meeting at Tambaram, Madras, December 12th to 29th, 1938* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 92–99.

³⁷ Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, 206.

Christian Council (1929). Nonetheless, some of these councils were still represented in part or even in whole by Western missionaries.³⁸ Furthermore, large parts of the world where the church was growing significantly, such as the Caribbean and much of sub-Saharan Africa, had no official representation at all. Eleven additional delegates at Willingen were from national councils of churches not in membership with the IMC; of these, eight were missionaries.³⁹ Of the 187 persons present at Willingen, by my count, only 37, or 20 percent, were non-Western nationals. Of the secretariat of the IMC, only one of the six in 1952 was not a Westerner – the Indian Lutheran Rajah Manikam, who had assumed office as East Asia secretary of both the IMC and the WCC in April 1951.⁴⁰

These statistics help us to understand the growing sense in the ecumenical movement that the IMC was no longer an adequate forum for corporate reflection on the world mission of the churches. Even before the WCC was formed at the assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, one of the senior secretaries of the IMC, Norman Goodall, had floated the idea that the IMC should be renamed “The Missionary Council of the World Council of Churches.”⁴¹ While this was not adopted, after Amsterdam, the IMC was formally declared to be “in association with” the WCC, and vice versa. In 1954, Goodall was made secretary of a joint committee of the two bodies; part of the brief of the committee was to consider the possibility of full integration.⁴² The growing influence of *missio Dei* theology added a strong theoretical impetus to the convergence of the older body with the new one. The Willingen statement grounded Christian mission in the unity of the triune God, affirmed that “there is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world,” and insisted that “division in the church distorts its witness, frustrates its mission, and contradicts its own nature.”⁴³ The inescapable implication was that the WCC was a

³⁸ The National Christian Council of China was unable to send a delegate. The River Plate Confederation comprised Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay. (*Minutes of the Enlarged Meeting and of the Committee of the International Missionary Council, Willingen, Germany, July 5th to 12th, 1952*, 3–5, 8, <https://archive.org/details/minutesofenlarg0000inte/page/n5/mode/2up>.) See also Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, 378–80.

³⁹ There were also three Indigenous delegates from “countries not otherwise represented”: Colombia, El Salvador, and Formosa (Taiwan). *Minutes of the Enlarged Meeting*, <https://archive.org/details/minutesofenlarg0000inte/page/n5/mode/2up>.

⁴⁰ Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, 327.

⁴¹ Norman Goodall, *Second Fiddle: Recollections and Reflections* (London: SPCK, 1979), 102.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴³ Norman Goodall, ed., *Missions under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952; with Statements Issued by the Meeting* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1952), 189, 190, 193.

body with mission high on its agenda, and this placed in doubt the rationale for the continuance of the IMC as a separate body.

By December 1957, when the IMC gathered at Achimota in newly independent Ghana, the momentum toward integration was unstoppable. However, we should pause to take note of the identities and arguments of those who opposed the move. Historians have paid most attention to Canon Max A. C. Warren, general secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), who was perhaps the most prescient of all Western missionary leaders at the time. In a 30-minute address to the assembly on 3 January 1958, Warren conceded that integration now looked inevitable and readily agreed that mission and unity belonged together in the eschatological purposes of God.⁴⁴ He maintained, however, that both the witness of history (Warren studied history at Cambridge) and the evidence of current experience disproved the claim that mission could not be promoted without unity. Warren referred to a recent conversation he had had with CMS missionaries at Ibadan in Nigeria, who told him of the rapid expansion throughout the country of what he termed “the Pentecostal sects.” Although the missionaries disagreed with “much that was being said and done” by the Pentecostals, “the fact remained that they were bringing men and women out of paganism to Christ,” and in that they rejoiced.⁴⁵ Warren was perhaps misrepresenting the arguments of the supporters of integration – did they ever claim that mission could not be promoted *at all* without unity? But he was pointing toward a reality that is far more obvious today than it was in 1957: namely, that the church in Africa, not to speak of the experience on other continents, was *both* growing rapidly *and* becoming increasingly diverse, even disunited, in institutional terms. Africa, which had been seriously underrepresented in the IMC from the beginning, was now highlighting the truism that the membership of neither the IMC nor the WCC was co-extensive with the body of Christ, even in its Protestant manifestations.

Warren went on to allude to the “profound suspicions” of the WCC, which could be found especially in the “great tropical belt” of Africa; there, churches that had “only very tenuous links” with either the WCC or the national Christian or mission councils were growing rapidly.⁴⁶ In an article in the *International Review of Missions*, Norman

⁴⁴ Max Warren, *Crowded Canvas: Some Experiences of a Life-Time* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974), 159.

⁴⁵ *Minutes of the Assembly of the International Missionary Council, Ghana, December 28th, 1957, to January 8th, 1958*, Appendix 7, 130–31, <https://archive.org/details/wccmissionconf045>. For an account of Warren’s position on integration that makes use of his travel diaries, see Mark T. B. Laing, *Lesslie Newbigin and the Reinvention of Christian Mission* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012), 94–97.

⁴⁶ *Minutes of the Assembly of the IMC, Ghana*, 131–32.

Goodall attributed such suspicions to the growing influence of conservative evangelical missions from Scandinavia and particularly the United States.⁴⁷ Warren, however, took the view that the fears were not so much theological as rooted in “the profound distrust of mammoth organizations.”⁴⁸ In reality, it is hard to separate the two grounds of concern. Max Warren was a decidedly non-fundamentalist evangelical. As a leader of a voluntary missionary society that in its early years had minimal support from the Anglican hierarchy, he was voicing his own fears and convictions that large ecclesiastical institutions were unlikely to give rise to dynamic initiatives in mission. Like most evangelicals, he was a voluntarist at heart.⁴⁹

When one reviews the speeches delivered during the Council’s debate on integration, a geographical pattern emerges, placing in question Goodall’s view that resistance to the WCC was mainly a Western phenomenon.⁵⁰ Alfred Stanway, Australian Anglican bishop of Central Tanganyika, accurately observed that Asia, in contrast to Africa, “is practically speaking with one voice in favour of integration”; both national Christians and missionaries viewed it as necessary to Christian witness in nations where Christianity was a small minority religion.⁵¹ In contrast, voices from Africa or Latin America were, with one exception, either heavily qualified in their support or opposed on principle. In part, this reflected the slower progress toward devolution made in these continents in comparison with Asia and the preponderance of theologically conservative missionaries. Of the two African speakers to the debate, one – Francis Ibiem from eastern Nigeria – opposed integration, and the other – the South African Methodist minister Z. R. Mahabane, one-time president-general of the African National Congress – was in favour.⁵² Several speakers voiced the fear that integration could provoke conservatives to form a rival African Christian Council. Evidence was supplied from five African nations to the effect that ecumenical cooperation was strong at the local level and was gradually becoming a reality at the national level, but all this could be imperilled if national Christian councils were required

⁴⁷ Norman Goodall, “‘Evangelicals’ and WCC-IMC,” *International Review of Missions* 47:186 (April 1958), 210–15.

⁴⁸ *Minutes of the Assembly of the IMC, Ghana*, 131.

⁴⁹ See Warren, *Crowded Canvas*, 156–60; F. W. Dillistone, *Into All the World: A Biography of Max Warren* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 117–22; Graham Kings, *Christianity Connected: Hindus, Muslims, and the World in the Letters of Max Warren and Roger Hooker* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2002), 102–10.

⁵⁰ Goodall, “‘Evangelicals’ and WCC-IMC,” 213–14.

⁵¹ Bishop Stanway, *Minutes of the Assembly of the IMC, Ghana*, Appendix 7, 148–49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 136–37, 145. On Mahabane, see Elphick and Davenport, *Christianity in South Africa*, 157, 360–61, 363, 367, 384.

to affiliate with the WCC.⁵³ In Africa, only 5 out of 15 national mission councils were affiliated to the IMC.⁵⁴

The voice of African church leaders was thus rarely heard in the assembly, though the missionaries who spoke for African opinion were in no doubt that it was resistant to integration. Latin American church leaders were similarly opposed. The Mexican Methodist Professor Gonzalo Baez-Camarguo informed the assembly that in most of Latin America, Protestants were not prepared to listen to the case for integration. Alfonso Rodriguez of the Cuban Council of Churches warned that “we in Cuba – as in many Latin American countries – will have to pay a very high price” for integration.⁵⁵ The Evangelical Confederation in Brazil would also soon vote against integration.⁵⁶

On 7 January, the assembly approved a complex resolution to move in principle toward integration by a vote of 58 to 7, with 9 abstentions.⁵⁷ On the next and final day of the assembly, Christian G. Baëta, the Ghanaian Presbyterian minister and academic who acted as chaplain and vice-chairman of the assembly, moved a resolution. He was himself supportive of integration and had not spoken in the debate. He was, however, keenly aware of the reservations that many of his fellow Africans entertained. Dr Baëta moved successfully that the IMC should set up a special inquiry charged with improving the relations between those missions, churches, and Christian councils in Africa that had links to the IMC or WCC and those that had not and should consider the effect on these relations of the future merger of the IMC and WCC.⁵⁸ He subsequently became the last chairman of the IMC, presiding over its integration with the WCC in New Delhi in 1961. The process of integration was not without its casualties: the Congo Protestant Council and the Norwegian Missionary Council resigned their membership before integration took place.⁵⁹ The fact that there were only two resignations owes much to the efforts of Lesslie Newbigin, whom the assembly appointed in his absence as chair of the IMC; in fact,

⁵³ *Minutes of the Assembly of the IMC, Ghana*, Appendix 7, 134–35 (Congo), 145 (Nigeria), 147–48 (Angola and Mozambique), 148–49 (Tanganyika).

⁵⁴ Rev. R. V. de Carle Thompson, in *ibid.*, 134.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 135, 137. Baez-Camarguo later became a strident critic of the WCC; see Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1998), 39.

⁵⁶ Laing, *From Crisis to Creation*, 117–18.

⁵⁷ *Minutes of the Assembly of the IMC, Ghana*, Appendix 7, 35, 85–88.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁹ *Minutes of the Assembly of the International Missionary Council, November 17–18, 1961, and of the First Meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, December 7–8, 1961, at New Delhi*, 8, 12, <https://archive.org/details/newdelhireport0000worl>; Laing, *From Crisis to Creation*, 117–18.

he was soon to become its new general secretary. Newbigin, while a strong supporter of the principle driving integration, had developed firm sympathies with those who worried that integration would lessen missionary zeal. He spent much of his time in 1960–61 visiting church and mission leaders in Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific, not simply because he had no experience of these continents, but also because these were the regions of the global South, where doubts about integration were most serious.⁶⁰

Concluding Reflection

I have sought to demonstrate that three theological questions of abiding relevance to the church and its mission today were woven into the fabric of the IMC throughout its short history, although they were not all equally prominent at every point of that history. The fact that the WCC continues to debate these issues today signals its continuing debt to its elder and now deceased sister.

The IMC was established with the proviso that it should not tread on the toes of Faith and Order, but it rapidly became apparent that deep reflection on the world mission of the church was impossible without theological inquiry. First-order reflection on the central goals and character of Christian mission could not be avoided. The issue of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation provoked impassioned debate in the 1920s and 1930s, as it does now. This was the case even though one side of the argument wished to steer the conversation to other ground: namely, the need for the church to make the Christian voice heard and respected in the religiously diverse arena of political and social argument, especially in Asian societies.

J. H. Oldham conducted a personal campaign to ensure that the IMC kept our second question – the vocation of the church in addressing questions of racial identity and justice – firmly in mind. Ironically, he succeeded best at the Jerusalem conference in 1928, when he was not present. Although Oldham's theological engagement with the central issue of precisely what race is – if it is anything – ultimately disappoints, at least he made the attempt.

Finally, the debate in Achimota in 1957–58 grappled with concerns which remain firmly on the agenda of the WCC today. The IMC was eventually persuaded by the argument that mission should be grounded in ecclesial structures and was best conducted on the basis of visible ecclesial unity. Yet, the debate posed several questions whose answers

⁶⁰ Laing, *From Crisis to Creation*, 110, 112; Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1985), 163; Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 174.

are not self-evident. How important is it that the visible unity of the church should be a reality – not simply at the local level, as most of those who spoke for Africa at the Ghana assembly maintained, but also at the level of national politics, as almost every representative from Asia claimed? Did Max Warren make a valid point when he urged that mission flourished best outside of formal ecclesiastical structures? And how should conciliar ecumenism approach those large and vibrant sectors of the world Christian movement whose mission is conducted without much attention to the WCC, to national ecumenical bodies, or even to the priority of visible unity?

As for our fourth question, about Indigenous voices and the extent to which they were heard, the main conclusion to draw is that those who spoke for the global South in IMC discussions did not always agree among themselves, not even within a single nation such as India, and certainly not if we compare Asia and Africa. A second observation is that Asian voices were given more opportunities to speak than those from other parts of the non-European world. Would the outcome at New Delhi have been any different if other continents had been given as many opportunities? We cannot know. Nevertheless, the three theological questions I have surveyed in this study of IMC history are still very much alive. We owe gratitude to God that the International Missionary Council was not afraid to place them on its agenda, and they remain on ours.