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# A Rabbi and Twelve-Hundred Missionaries Walk into a Conference: Philo-Semitism and Anti-Semitism at Edinburgh, 1910

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George Faithful

**A Rabbi and Twelve-Hundred Missionaries Walk into a Conference:  
Philo-Semitism and Anti-Semitism at Edinburgh, 1910**

Had a rabbi attended the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, that rabbi's ambivalence may have been equaled only by that of the delegates. This presentation will demonstrate how the conference's first commission report expressed both philo- and anti-Semitism, affirming the value of the world's Jewish population while portraying it as a threat. This juxtaposition reveals the conference as ahead of its time, in some regards, and an event rooted in the values of its time, in others.

Alan Levenson has defined philo-Semitism broadly to denote any movement or person that is pro-Jewish. William and Hilary Rubenstein have divided Anglophone philo-Semitism between 1840 and 1939 into progressive, Christian, Zionist, and elitist sub-groups; Edinburgh conference delegates included a significant number of each of these overlapping groups. Sander Gilman, Kristin Bluemel, and others have shown that, because it often derives from stereotypes, philo-Semitism tends to mask and to perpetuate anti-Semitism, defined here as attitudes ranging from ambivalence and indifference to an outright hatred of Jews.<sup>1</sup> Philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism were both dynamic forces during the era of the Edinburgh conference. Exploring the degree to which philo-Semitism was an expression of anti-Semitism at the conference will be one of the primary purposes of this presentation.

The early 20<sup>th</sup>-century saw the Great Migration of Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe into Germany and, in many cases, on to the United States via England. Germany's

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<sup>1</sup> In *Antisemitism and Philosemitism in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries: Representing Jews, Jewishness, and Modern Culture*, Phyllis Lassner and Lara Trubowitz e.d.s (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008).

Protestant establishment had sought homogeneity since the days of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, in which he attempted to minimize Catholic influence; the influx of unassimilated Jewish immigrants motivated both secular anti-Semites and Christian missionaries, who were more effective in meeting the immigrants' physical needs than in converting them. England had long been tolerant of its small Jewish population, evidenced by the ascendance of Benjamin Disraeli to the seat of Prime Minister in 1867, but England did not retain many of the new migrants. The United States received the bulk of Jewish immigration out of Europe, and saw both a corresponding increase in the number of both Christian Zionists and a variety of anti-Semites, from Northeastern elitists to Midwestern populists. In this context of change, equivocal support, and occasional hostility toward Jews, the Edinburgh conference drew delegates from throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada.<sup>2</sup>

When the twelve-hundred missionaries, pastors, and civic leaders arrived at Edinburgh in June 1910, there was only time to formally present one commission report, "Carrying the Gospel to All the World." It alone of the conference documents addressed Jews and Judaism directly. Like the other commission reports, it represented a spectrum of positions considered normative by the conference leadership. Because a committee wrote this document, it betrays the differing emphases and perspectives of its multiple authors.

According to the report, there had been some progress in Christian missions to the Jews. Unlike workers among other ethnic groups, missionaries to this "remarkable race"

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<sup>2</sup> Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870-1914* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975); Christopher M. Clark, *The Politics of Conversion: Missionary Protestantism and the Jews in Prussia 1728-1941* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Robert Allen, *Arnold Frank of Hamburg* (London: J. Clarke, 1960); Lloyd O. Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England, 1870-1914* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2001).; Donald M. Lewis, *The Origins of Christian Zionism: Lord Shaftesbury and Evangelical Support for a Jewish Homeland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Yaakov Ariel, *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865-1945* (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson, 1991); David A. Gerber, e.d., *Anti-Semitism in American History* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

could not use baptism statistics as a measure of success because their focus was on evangelization, rather than on the incorporation of converts into the life of local church bodies, and because those who eventually did convert often did so far from the place where missionaries first reached them. Citing no sources, the commissioners noted that more Jews had become “secret believers” than had openly professed their faith. The success of the Jewish mission was assumed, with the understanding that all missions undertaken in faith would be effective.<sup>3</sup>

The report did not mention the fact that recent converts represented a miniscule percentage of the world’s total Jewish population, even though the commission’s own statistics amply demonstrated this. While it would eventually address the moral and numerical failure of the Jewish missions in one of its later sections, the report initially dwelt on the missions’ successes in making Christ known, even when he was not received, and in establishing hospitals and schools to meet the Jewish community’s non-spiritual needs.<sup>4</sup>

The commissioners realized that the missions’ biggest adversary was not the leadership of the Jewish community, but rather anti-Semitism. They recognized that even Anglophone Christians, whom they would have otherwise viewed as the harbingers of civilization, could unjustly hate people simply for being Jewish. However, it was one thing to condemn prejudice and another to unconditionally accept its victims. In the same breath that the commission chastised anti-Semites, it cast Christian missions as the cure-all for the ills

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<sup>3</sup> World Missionary Conference 1910, *Report of Commission 1: Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 268, 273.

<sup>4</sup> The German co-vice-chair of the first commission report at the Edinburgh Conference expressed hesitation regarding prospective Jewish converts in Palestine: “there was danger that the mission should become to the Jews, who were for the most part poor, a mere opportunity for gain, since joining the Christian Church was likely to secure to the converts an easy life, and to their children, who were eager to be educated, high and lucrative positions[...].” Julius Richter, *A History of Protestant Missions in the Near-East* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910). 393-394.

besetting the Jewish people. As in so many places in the other commission reports, the first report noted that the time was ripe for conversion of non-Christians to the faith.

Despite its relative optimism, the commission proceeded with caution before turning to outright admonition. “Jewish missions are only in their infancy and we cannot conscientiously say that any part of the world field, except perhaps London, is adequately occupied.” By using such terminology as “occupation,” which appeared elsewhere in the report, the commission used militaristic metaphors to bolster the idea of Christendom as Christ’s kingdom on earth. The commission’s caution blossomed into lament: because the Jews had been so neglected and the resources for reaching them so scant, the report suggested that significant human action was needed but that, ultimately, the outcome had been foreordained, exhibiting an Arminian-Calvinist tension evident elsewhere in the report. “Jewish missions are in such a peculiar condition to-day as to demand unusual measures to ensure, under God, their progress.”<sup>5</sup>

Noting that Jesus himself was Jewish in his humanity, the commission boldly exhorted the entire Christian church to undertake the mission to the Jews. Because Christians had treated Jews as unworthy of the offer of salvation or as somehow incapable of receiving it, they now owed their Jewish neighbors significant redress, in addition to renewed efforts at extending the Gospel. Apologies needed to precede apologetics.

The reason that Christians had failed the Jews was a simple lack of faith. The remedy was equally simple: Christians must preach Christ. This back-to-basics approach underlined the idea that there was no fundamental difference between Jewish prospective Christians and others; seen through the eyes of faith, all were of equal worth and equal need. Such one-size-fits-all methodology stood at odds with the stance taken by the first commission’s vice-chair,

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<sup>5</sup> World Missionary Conference 1910, *Report of Commission 1*, 276.

Julius Richter. The German mission historian made his stance clear in his *History of Protestant Missions in the Near-East*, also published in 1910: “As a rule missions among Jews and missions among Gentiles pursue diverse paths. [... So much so] that it is impossible to unite the two kinds of mission work in one place and in the hands of the same people.”<sup>6</sup> This difference between Richter’s individual work and the work of his commission at Edinburgh illuminates the inner dynamics of the commission: even the voice of one of its vice-chairs would not prevail over that of the majority.

After emphasizing the equal status of Jews among the nations of the earth, the report took an unexpected turn, hinting at the plausibility of the world Jewish conspiracy: “The Jews are becoming more and more an integral part of Christian cities, strongly influencing and often even dominating them by their enormous and increasing wealth and by their remarkable intellectual ability.”<sup>7</sup> The report cited this as a basis for motivation to proselytize them, yet it is evident that Christian missionaries readily shared with far less sympathetic Gentiles a perception of the wealth, intelligence, and influence of the Jewish community. Christians had an obligation to reach Jews with the Gospel out of optimism, gratitude, and fear.

In the excerpts from the actual conference discussion included in the report’s appendix, this view becomes even more clear. Reverend Louis Meyer, a Reformed Presbyterian mission board member from New York, asserted “that the Jews scattered throughout the world, multiplying in number and increasing in power and influence in every part of the world, formed a mass of people which would either be a danger to the Christian

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<sup>6</sup> Richter, *History of Protestant Missions in the Near-East*, 391.

<sup>7</sup> World Missionary Conference 1910, *Report of Commission 1*, 278. Cf. Richter, *A History of Protestant Missions in the Near East*, 392: “Only in Palestine are the Jews to-day occupied in farming and fruit-raising[...]. Elsewhere they mostly live huddled together in narrow filthy Ghettos, and, although the majority of them are in an ignorant, superstitious and poverty-stricken condition, certain of their number have ever by their commercial cleverness and by usury amassed princely fortunes.”

Church or would be an influx and an impetus for all activity in the wide missionary field.”<sup>8</sup>

Meyer’s view captures with stark clarity one end of the spectrum: the Jews were a threat.

The report writers seemed to be in agreement that Jewish missions had been neglected. They joined in unison against the prevailing current in the Protestant world, which simply sought to continue centuries of neglect, rather than recognize the ever- pressing need for the Gospel in the Jewish community. In contrast to pure anti-Semites, the commissioners and Jewish missionaries recognized that Jewish people deserved sympathy and help. However, like the anti-Semites of their day, at least some of the commissioners and Christian missionaries to Jews depicted them as an increasingly numerous and powerful group that would pose a significant danger should the missionary enterprise fail.

The World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 was a turning point in Jewish-Christian relations. The authors of the first commission report expressed deep sympathy for Jews and regret at having served them so poorly; today many Christians reject the view that Jews must convert to Christianity, but they should not forget that there was a time when this view was a step toward mutual acceptance. Yet, simultaneously, these same authors voiced their unfounded fears about potential Jewish dominance in society. The members of the first commission may have been philo-Semitic, but they were anti-Semitic as well.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 417.