

Change in Christian Missionary Attitude Towards Islam: A Case Study of Madras Missionary Conference (1938)

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ABSTRACT

In the first half of the twentieth century, Christian missionaries held several Missionary Conferences, which can be considered as one of the major developments in Christian missionary history. Interestingly, some of these conferences became known after the name of important cities of the Muslim world, where these conferences were held, such as Cairo conferences (1906), Lucknow conference, (1911), Jerusalem conference (1928), and Madras conference (1938).

The objectives of these conferences were to ponder over different problems in missionary fields and to figure out proper solutions. This article is the study of Madras Missionary Conference (1938) with complete details of its background, proceedings, themes, and resolutions. In this conference Christian missionaries started to re-evaluate and change previous aggressive and polemical missionary attitude towards other religions particularly Islam. The reason behind this move were political changes which appeared and had great impact on Christian missionary enterprise like, World War I, the rise of nationalism and communism and the revival of other religions which resulted in the decline of western political dominance. So at the time of Madras conference (1938) the Christian mission was in a critical situation due to inward and outward crises, which compelled Christian missionaries to change their missionary strategy and missionary attitude towards other religions particularly Islam, to adjust Christian mission with the new emerging political situation. In this regard Christian mission moved from polemical and controversial approach towards realization of values in non-Christian religions. Later on, this approach developed into the Christian dialogue with other religions in the second half of twentieth century.

BACKGROUND OF THE CONFERENCE: THE JERUSALEM MISSIONARY CONFERENCE (1928)

The Madras Missionary Conference was held in (Tambaram) Madras, in 1938. To understand the historical background of Madras Conference, it is necessary to refer to the International Missionary Conference of Jerusalem 1928, because this conference had great significance and impact on Christian missionary thinking of that period, especially regarding the Christian approach towards other religions.

It is a historical fact that the political situation and colonialism had a great role in the progress of Christian mission. At the time of General Missionary Conference Lucknow 1911 and the Edinburgh conference 1910, political circumstances were completely in favor of Christian missionaries. They were confident to accomplish

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the task of evangelization of the world in that generation. However, the following years were full of change and witnessed various disturbances that affected missionary activities on large scale. The foremost factor, which interrupted the progress of Christian missionaries, was World War I and its aftermaths, which resulted in different kinds of crises. Furthermore, the emergence of communism as the result of Russian revolution and the rise of nationalism imposed further restrictions on Christian mission in the first half of the 20th century.

Apart from these political difficulties there were also some intellectual challenges to the Christian mission. Secularism gave rise to the liberal theology among Christians and a great increase was seen in the Biblical criticism¹. These tremendous changes greatly affected the Christian missionary enterprise. By that time the Christian missionaries had lost their confidence in imposing their Christian belief on the followers of other faiths².

The Jerusalem Conference (1938) was held to rethink missionary enterprise amid the changing world situation. The issue of "Establishment of Secularism in the World" dominated the discussions of the conference. The participants considered it to be a great threat to Christianity. It is important to note that hitherto religions like Islam were considered an obstacle in the way of evangelization. Now, in the changed political scenario it was not feasible for Christian missionaries to treat non-Christian religions negatively. So, the Christian missionaries started to re-evaluate previous missionary attitude toward other religions. In this regard the participants of the Jerusalem Conference realized the value in other religions and further emphasized the Christians to join the followers of other faiths to avert the threat of secularism. Although some participants showed their concern over the liberal and exclusive approach in the recognition of value in other faiths but at the end the message of the Jerusalem Conference was unanimously accepted by the participants of the conference³. In sum, a comprehensive change had taken place in the Jerusalem Conference (1928) regarding Christian attitude toward other religions. This new Christian missionary understanding of non-Christian religions has been documented in the report of Laymen's foreign missions inquiry entitled the "Re thinking Mission".⁴

According to Stephen Neill due to the impact of the Jerusalem conference, a change occurred in missionary direction. Now the mission's focus shifted from conversion to philanthropic services like education and health care. He further concluded that "evangelism was no longer in the center of the picture, and no more was heard of the evangelization of the world in this generation".⁵

A commission was established after the Jerusalem conference under the leadership of W. E. Hocking, who travelled to Asia and Africa to observe the Christian missionary enterprise and recommend suitable approaches towards other religions. The commission published a report in which the point of view was inclusive, liberal, and completely different from earlier missionaries.

The main points of the report were as follows:

- Christian missionaries have to observe the best in other religions.
- The aim of missionary activities should not be conversion or to establish Christian monopoly over other religions but to cooperate with them.

This new liberal approach towards non-Christian religions provoked reaction among conservative Christians under the influence of Christian theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) who rejected liberalism in all shapes⁶.

The above discussion shows that before the Madras conference Christian mission was in a critical situation due to inward and outward crises and the conditions were unfavorable for Christian mission. The reason behind this scenario was the rise of nationalism as a reactionary force against colonialism; growing opposition to Christianity, decrease in missionary finances due to the decline of the West, and other restrictions upon Christian missionaries.

Apart from these difficulties and opposition, there were great differences among Christians themselves on the missionary approach and attitude towards other religions. So need for a new gathering was felt to consider new strategies in the changed situation.

PROCEEDINGS THEMES AND RESOLUTIONS OF (TAMBARAM) MADRAS CONFERENCE

“THE PROCEEDINGS OF MADRAS CONFERENCE”

The third International Missionary Conference was convened in Tambaram town, which is located 16 miles away from Madras, India. This conference was held from 12 to 29 December at Madras Christian College. In this conference, 471 missionaries participated from 69 countries. The Conference authorities provided equal right of participation to Younger churches in Madras conference. J. R. Mott was the Chairman of this conference.

The central theme of the conference was the church itself, particularly the upgrading of the younger churches and the problems faced by them. The conference stressed that nothing is more important for the progress of Christian missionary movement than the consolidation of the church itself⁷. The important topics of the Madras conference were the following:

- The church, its nature and functions.
- The faith by which the church live.
- The witness of the church in relation to non-Christian religions.
- The economic basis of the church.
- Church and international order.
- The church and the state⁸.

Before the conference, preparatory literature was produced and later on distributed among the participants. In this regard, two books were most important and notable. The first book was *The Economical Basis of the Church* by J. Merle Davis. He discussed in his book the economical problems of the younger churches and suggested for their solutions. The second book was *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* written by the historian HendrickKreamer. He wrote this book on the request of the committee of the Madras conference. The main issue discussed by the writer was the Christian approach toward non-Christian religions and how to reaffirm Christian mission in the changing world. Hendrickkreamer and his book had immense impact on Madras conference⁹.

He tried in this book to respond to the liberal approach of Jerusalem Conference and to reaffirm the Christian mission. Due to his impact on this conference, some Christian writers have considered Madras conference as Hendrickkreamer's conference. The exclusive assumption of HendrickKreamer regarding Christianity provoked reaction among scholars like the former principal of Madras Christian College A. G. Hogg. He criticized Hendrickkreamer and rejected his exclusive assumptions¹⁰.

Another important preliminary work prepared for the Madras Conference was the inquiry conducted by Near East Christian Council on the subject of evangelization of Muslim world. Henry H. Riggs compiled this report. This report basically focused on two fundamental questions regarding Christian mission to Muslims:

- (1) What are the difficulties that make the evangelization of the Muslims unfruitful in comparison to other people?
- (2) Which missionary approach and attitude towards Muslims produce better results?

As regard the first question, it was concluded that there were two great hindrances in conversion of Muslims to Christianity:

First, certain Christian teachings are unacceptable for Muslims. Second, Muslim solidarity and brotherhood safeguarded them from conversion to Christianity.

Regarding the question of suitable attitude and approach towards Muslims, the inquiry report recommended the following suggestions: Christians working among Muslims should adopt a sympathetic approach towards Muslims and present Christian message in an acceptable manner to impress Muslims. The report further put forward the following recommendations:

- (a) Doctrinal debates should be avoided because they provoked the Muslims to reject Christianity.

- (b) Christian believers should remain integrated in their former social and political group to avoid difficulty and resistance from native people. In this regard, the report suggested substitute for baptism¹¹.

For preparation of group reports, the participants were divided into eight sections. Each group comprised 55 persons. Finally, the details and findings of the Madras Conference were published with the title *The World Mission of the Church*.

Another important document of the Madras conference is the seven volumes of *The Madras series*. In this series, we find the discussions and papers presented in Madras conference.

THEMES OF THE CONFERENCE

As mentioned earlier, International Missionary Conference (Tambaram) Madras was an international gathering of Christian missionaries. The conference was held in the context of world changing situations, so the themes of this conference were not confined to a specific religion.

The major issues of Madras Conference were following:

- (a) The growing opposition to Christian mission.
- (b) Establishment of indigenous church in India.
- (c) Christian Mass Movement in India.
- (d) Survey of Indian and Muslim missionary fields.

(a) The Growing Opposition to Christian Mission

One of the important themes of Madras conference was the emerging opposition to the Christian mission in the changing world. As we saw earlier, the chief threat to Christianity which the participants of International Missionary Conference Jerusalem (1928) had noted was “Secularism” but at the International Missionary Conference Madras (1938) the participants considered the rise of “new paganism”¹² and revival of traditional religions a new challenge for Christian mission because they demanded complete loyalty and devotion from their followers.

Other challenges for Christian mission according to the conference report were as follow:

- The Madras conference considered the emergence of nationalism in following three types: Self-expressive, self-satisfied, and self-assertive. It was considered as a great emerging threat to Christianity. To deal with this challenge, the participants of the Madras conference discussed suitable Christian attitude toward nationalism. In fact, the rise of nationalism was in part a reaction against the West, so the nationalistic sentiments compelled Christian missionaries to give Christian mission and church an indigenous cast and get rid of its image of being a western institution.

- The Madras Conference considered the emergence and popularity of communism as another challenge to Christianity. According to the report of Madras conference, communism at that time was impressing people on large scale, especially the youth of society.
- The third perceived opposition to Christianity was the rising scientific skepticism. The reason behind this development was the thrust of scientific method, which demanded, according to many, that all religious beliefs need to be affirmed through scientific examinations and experiments¹³.

(b) Need for the Establishment of Indigenous Church in India

As discussed earlier, out of the central themes of the Madras conference, one was the institution of church from different aspects. In this regard, the important issues discussed were as follow:

- The role of the church in evangelization.
- The indigenous ministry of the church.
- Faith by which the church lives.
- The relation of the church and the state.
- The economic basis of the church¹⁴.

The above mentioned topics show that Madras conference recognized the important place of the church in evangelization and tried to remove the weaknesses of the church and to adjust it to the changing environment.

Apart from these issues, the need for indigenous church was emphasized especially for the younger churches. It is important to note that previously younger churches were under the control of western churches. Now due to the political changes, the rise of nationalism, and the awareness of Eastern people regarding Christianity's foreignness, the issue of indigenous church, independent from western influence, came to the fore in Madras conference.

In this regard, the conference suggested these younger churches to adjust to their native environment and convert the local people to independent self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating indigenous churches¹⁵.

(c) The Mass Movement in India

In India, Christian missionaries at first started their work among high caste Hindus and Muslims. However, by and large they failed to convert them. As a result of this failure Christian missionaries diverted their attention to the low caste Hindus. They found among them less resistance and succeeded to convert them in large groups. This approach is known as Christian Mass Movement in the missionary history of India. The Madras conference also analyzed the impact and results of Mass Movement in the light of inquiry of Bishop J. W. Pickett. He had conducted this inquiry on the request of National Christian Council of India. The conference analyzed merits and demerits of Mass Movement for Christian

mission. It was noted that this movement had little usefulness rather it had created difficulties for Christianity¹⁶.

However, this Movement accelerated the numerical growth of Christian church and played a big role in the expansion of Christianity in India. According to the estimates of J. W. Picket, 85 percent of Indians converted to Christianity because of this Movement. Only in Punjab American Methodist Church increased its membership from virtually nil to 35000 numbers in the span of 30 years. Similar results were achieved by other Christian denominations¹⁷.

(d) Survey of Indian and Muslim Missionary fields

One of the important themes of Madras conference was the Christian mission in relation to other religions. In this regard let us first mention their considerations about Hinduism:

The participants of the Madras conference observed that in reaction to Christian mission Hinduism had changed its Indian national character. For the first time in history Hindus tried to present their teachings globally. Furthermore, Indian nationalism strengthened the resurgence of Hinduism.

The participants of the conference observed the changing situation in the Muslim world after the rise of nationalism and abolition of caliphate. On the one hand, and the spread of secularism and materialism among Muslims on the other¹⁸.

In this connection, the Madras Conference appointed a group of 35 missionaries working among Muslims to survey the missionary field of Muslim world and to identify the problems that the missionaries confronted there.

The Madras conference committee for Muslims pointed out the weaknesses and discussed the failure of Christian missionaries in Muslim lands. The committee pointed out that the attitude of Muslims toward Christian mission was largely unresponsive. On the other hand, the committee also highlighted the opportunities in front of missionaries and urged to reaffirm Christian mission to Muslims despite all difficulties and hindrances¹⁹.

It is interesting to note that the Madras conference focused mainly on the Muslims of India. According to the details of the conference proceedings, there were more Muslims in India than any other country of the world. The Muslim population in India was 82 millions. The participants of the Madras conference also discussed the characteristics of Indian Muslims like their strong sense of being a single community, and their devotion to the imposition of Islamic law in certain Indian states²⁰.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE CONFERENCE

Here, recommendations of Madras conference related to our topic will be analyzed one by one:

- The Madras conference recognized the moral value of the non-Christian religions. At the same time, it reaffirmed Christian mission to non-Christians. In this connection, the conference recommended the localization of Christian mission. The conference emphasized that Christianity should be expressed in indigenous forms of literature, institutions, architecture and so on. It further urged that the presentation of Christian mission should be in persuasive manner, not in aggressive style. The reason behind this changed stance was the awakening of the national consciousness among Asians. In this regard, the missionaries observed that presentation of Christianity, as a western religion has no attraction for locals. This led to the recommendation of indigenous Christianity²¹.

The Madras Conference observed the existence of social values in other religions such as the social teachings of Islam. They felt that Christianity lacks such social dimension. Furthermore, several recommendations of the Madras conference were focused on church and society, church and international order, and church and state. Main idea behind these focuses was to bring Christian teachings into practical life of individuals and society²².

- The delegates of the conference recognized the importance of missionary literature for the purpose of evangelization and passed several recommendations in this regard. The conference emphasized the publication of Christian literature and training of missionaries for this purpose. It was also recommended that the publication of literature should be undertaken keeping in view the local culture. Moreover, the conference emphasized that the foreign outlook of missionary literature must be avoided.
- The Conference recommended the production of literature specific for each social group such as educated class, youth, blinds, and children. Journalism was seen as an important approach to non-Christians. It was emphasized that Christian missionaries have to create place for Christianity in the newspapers. The conference also recommended the use of drama, songs, and emerging communication equipment's like radio and cinema for the mission²³.
- The conference reaffirmed the evangelistic purpose behind philanthropic activities like education and health services. It was further proposed that these activities must be controlled directly by missionaries. Apart from the fulltime evangelists in the field, the conference particularly recognized the contribution of students and women and considered their efforts helpful for Christian mission. The conference emphasized that opportunities must be provided to them to work in the field of evangelization²⁴.
- The conference received reports from all over the world about development of Christian unity and cooperation among Christian churches. The conference considered church divisions a big hindrance in the evangelization of non-Christians.

The participants felt the necessity of joint planning and action in missionary enterprise and emphasized the need for cooperation among different Christian denominations. In this regard, Madras conference hailed the achievements in the direction of church union in various parts of the world, particularly in South India²⁵.

Before Madras Conference Delhi Conference had taken place on December 6 to 7 in 1938 for the evangelization of the Muslim world. Madras conference reviewed the implementation of the Delhi Conference agenda.

It was considered that a fruitful approach to Muslim evangelization would be to encourage the people to remain loyal to their social and political environment to which they belong before converting toward Christianity. It was suggested that it would be sufficient if the head of an indigenous Christian mission were a Christian. They also suggested to avoid reaction and gather Muslims gently from their strong social bonds towards Christianity.

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