

## **Dr Alexander McCrea (1880-1963) and Christian mission, especially in relation to people of other faiths**

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Alex McCrea left school at the age of fourteen. Later, he responded to a call to enter the Christian ministry in which he gave much evidence of academic and leadership ability, becoming a tutor in Edgehill College, Belfast, in 1920, where Methodist ministers are trained. In 1924 he was awarded an MA degree at Queen's University, Belfast, for the thesis, 'The New Psychology: its origins and developments'. McCrea became Principal of the College in 1931, the year in which he was editor to the book *Irish Methodism in the Twentieth Century*, to which he contributed a chapter. His book *The Work of Jesus in Christian Thought*, was published in 1939. Victoria University, Toronto, conferred on him a DD in 1947.

### **McCrea and Methodist world mission**

McCrea took a keen interest in Methodist world mission, doing much to promote the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS).<sup>1</sup> He was married to Kate (nee Wolfe), whose sister was a doctor married to Robert ('Ross') Foster, an Irish Methodist minister serving in India (1920-8). McCrea was a key figure in a group of Irish laymen and ministers seeking to encourage greater Irish interest in and support for a series of annual missionary 'Summer School' conferences at Swanwick, England from the 1920s onwards. When, however, it became clear that the number of people attending from Ireland was unlikely to grow significantly, he with others promoted an annual Irish 'Swanwick' conference in Ireland with the encouragement and support of the WMMS staff. The first 'Irish Swanwick', or 'Irish Missionary Summer School', took place in Portrush in 1924, and was reported by McCrea in *The Foreign Field*.<sup>2</sup> Intended mainly for young people, annual schools continued to be held often in boarding schools in different parts of Ireland until the 1970s, when they became victims of 'The Troubles', the disruptive sectarian conflict highly active at the time. Their strength lay mainly in creating mission awareness, leading young people to deeper Christian commitment and challenging them to apply their faith to contemporary issues at home and overseas.

This formed the background to an invitation by Edgar Thompson of the WMMS, requesting McCrea to give a series of addresses at the Swanwick Conference in 1923 on 'The Bible as a missionary book'. This led in turn to an invitation to McCrea to visit churches, schools and colleges mainly in the Gold Coast (Ghana) and Sierra Leone between August and December 1926. Much later, this visit was viewed as a high point in the life of the churches in those countries. Years later, another Irishman, Harry Belshaw, who served in the Gold Coast from 1936 to 1948, noted that many African ministers warmly recalled McCrea's lectures and addresses.<sup>3</sup> Tom Beetham, the Area Secretary for the region, noted even in the 1950s that McCrea's visit was

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<sup>1</sup> This became the Methodist Missionary Society (MMS) after Methodist union in Britain in 1932.

<sup>2</sup> *The Foreign Field*, September 1924, pp. 294-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Irish Christian Advocate*, 26 February 1937, p.3.

viewed as a high point in the life of churches.<sup>4</sup> Against this background, McCrea became one of few Irish authors invited to write a book by the Cargate Press, the publishing arm of the WMMS/MMS. The book, *Why this Waste, Some criticisms of missions considered*, appeared in 1929. Belshaw himself also became a Cargate author.<sup>5</sup>

### McCrea and other faiths

McCrea frequently encouraged Irish Methodists to take an interest in international, interracial, interfaith and other mission-related topics.<sup>6</sup> At Edgehill among the subjects he taught were comparative religion and church history. Even by the mid-1950s he was still productive, publishing a series of articles on other faiths and cults including Judaism, Islam - which he referred to as 'Mohammedanism' - Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christian Science, the Mormons, Theosophy and Spiritism (sic).<sup>7</sup>

Not unaware of the dangers of what became known as the 'fulfilment school' of thought often associated with J.N. Farquhar and others, which gained widespread acceptance before, during and after 'Edinburgh 1910', the world missionary conference, McCrea took a broadly sympathetic view of attractive aspects of other faiths. For example in an article entitled 'Missionary Urgency', he wrote in 1909:

Light has a common source, and if you find a ray in the Brahmin or Buddhist it is a bond between you and him and Christ. We do not ask for a monopoly of truth in Christendom any more than we ask for it in Methodism.<sup>8</sup>

McCrea's position on other faiths was delicately balanced between an appreciative view of elements within them and the belief that their followers should be exposed to the revelation of God in Christ:

We are not prepared to state that every man who has not heard of Christ is eternally lost. The teaching of Christ most unmistakably represents judgment as based on opportunity, and nowhere did He more faithfully declare this than to the scribes and Pharisees of his own day. 'I say unto you that many shall come from the East and West and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast forth into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'<sup>9</sup> Heathen fidelity to the light from nature and conscience is more excellent than Jewish or Christian indifference to a more perfect standard... Peter, who all his days tended to be a conservative theologian and to side with the Jewish party, was

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<sup>4</sup> See Beetham's confidential report of the visit, November 1951, p. 21. Beetham however, mis-spelt McCrea's name.

<sup>5</sup> His book, *Facing the Future in West Africa*, was published in 1951.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, McCrea's article on interfaith and interracial marriage, *Irish Christian Advocate*, 29 August, 1924.

<sup>7</sup> *Irish Christian Advocate*, for example, 2 and 23 July 1954.

<sup>8</sup> *The Christian Advocate*, 19 March 1909, pp. 136-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Matthew* 8. 11-12.

bold to say in the house of Cornelius, ‘Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is acceptable to Him.’<sup>10</sup> There have been in all nations devout souls who responded to the Divine influence, who followed the gleam, and who came, as the late Dean Farrar said, to know much of Christianity without Christ... To declare that all who die without hearing of Christ are eternally lost, is to go beyond the teaching of Christ and His apostles, is to contradict our own sense of equity, and is to leave Christianity open to the charge that God has signally failed in bringing these myriads into existence only to be lost.<sup>11</sup>

It was however imperative for McCrea that Christians witness to Christ as ‘the true light that gives light to every man.’<sup>12</sup> This perhaps more than any other was a favoured text among those influenced by the ‘fulfilment’ approach.

In his book published by the Cargate Press McCrea argued:

If rich veins of divine truth exist in other systems, it will not dishonour Christ to recognise them... Our business first is to find out the mind of Christ to all religious beliefs that arose apart from immediate knowledge of Himself... We find Him stressing the fact that good has already existed before He came. ‘My Father worketh hitherto,’<sup>13</sup> and it would be strange if there was nothing good in all the Father’s work before He came. Much in teaching and conduct (Jesus) could take for granted (and) accordingly He calls Himself the Fulfiller.<sup>14</sup> Anything, anywhere that Jesus found worthy of God, He preserved and cherished... He looked out upon a world not decaying... but upon a world needing a Redeemer. Anything good in anyone was always proof that God had not left Himself without witness... Jesus rejoices over the sincerity, kindness, faith and love found, to some degree, in many heathen hearts.<sup>15</sup>

Later in the volume, McCrea emphasised:

Instead of ignoring or despising or regarding as only wicked the religious beliefs of non-Christian peoples, the Christian’s, and particularly the Christian missionary’s task is to understand them... When an African or Indian who never heard of Jesus prays even to a fetich (sic), God does not leave his soul unvisited. The hunger revealed in such acts, the faith in the spiritual world beyond, the confidence that the unseen powers are able to visit and help him, all give the missionary a starting point... The charge of contempt for other religions, a contempt that undoubtedly characterised the pages of earlier Christian

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 10. 34.

<sup>11</sup> *The Christian Advocate*, 19 March 1909, p. 136.

<sup>12</sup> John 1, v. 9.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Think not’, said Jesus, ‘that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them’ (John 5.17).

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 5.17.

<sup>15</sup> Alex McCrea, *Why this Waste? Some Criticisms of Missions considered*, 1929, pp. 42ff.

apologists, is no longer true of modern Christian thinkers, as it is not true of the New Testament.<sup>16</sup>

Recognising truth in other faiths did not mean that Christians were to put their convictions concerning Christ on hold or refuse to share them with others. On the contrary as the opening sentence in the preface to his book in 1929 made clear, McCrea was ‘wholly convinced that there is no message for all mankind save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.’<sup>17</sup> Christians had therefore to be respectful both to Christ and people of other faiths while commending Christ as Saviour and Lord for all. Among Irish missionaries influenced by this approach were Charles Monahan (India, 1893-1940), Fred Rea (Southern Rhodesia/ Zimbabwe, 1937-84) and Elsie Shire in Ceylon (1909-42). Of them, Charles Monahan gave the fullest and most discerning and critical comment on Edinburgh 1910 and the ‘fulfilment school’.<sup>18</sup>

How did the followers of other faiths respond to this approach? Some welcomed what appeared a more positive approach by Christians towards them and acknowledged its potential for dialogue and greater interfaith understanding and co-operation. Others however rejected it, believing that it failed to take their faiths seriously, regarding them as essentially incomplete and un-fulfilling within themselves.

William Abraham, the Irish Methodist theologian based in the USA, faced the dilemma posed for Christians by the existence of other faiths and their followers. Believing that ‘a classical or high Christology mandates...an openness to other religious traditions’, he also called for an engagement in what he viewed as ‘a responsible ministry of evangelism on a worldwide scale.’<sup>19</sup> ‘It is only right’, he argued, ‘that those who have already responded to the light of God... they have received *outside* the gospel, should know the true source of that light’ *in* Christ, and be given ‘access to the full measure of God’s grace and power’ in and through Him<sup>20</sup>

Charles Ranson, another Irishman, a missionary in India (1929-45) who became a major figure on the world church stage declared, ‘I believe, with unwavering conviction, that the one great task given by Christ to his church is to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the Earth and to the end of time.’<sup>21</sup> A remark by a Jewish colleague in the theological faculty at Drew University in the USA, together with Ranson’s response, prompted an encounter directly relevant to this discussion. When his colleague appealed to them in the faculty ‘to show more missionary zeal’, Ranson invited him to explain and justify his exhortation from a *Jewish* point of view. ‘It is the vocation of Judaism *to be*’, commented his colleague, adding that ‘it is the mission of Christianity *to go*: the Church must be faithful to that command.’ Dr. Ranson warmly accepted the rebuke.<sup>22</sup> Jesus Christ is for *all*. The gospel is relevant to life at every

<sup>16</sup> McCrea, op. cit., 1929, pp. 48-9 and 51.

<sup>17</sup> McCrea, op. cit., 1929, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> See especially *The Foreign Field*, no.72, August 1910 pp. 350-2.

<sup>19</sup> William J. Abraham, *The logic of evangelism*, Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 1989, p.212. Abraham is the Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at Perkins School of Theology at the Southern Methodist University, Dallas, USA. The italics in this quote are mine.

<sup>20</sup> W. J. Abraham, op. cit., p. 221. The italics are mine.

<sup>21</sup> Charles W. Ranson, *A Missionary Pilgrimage*, 1988, p.192. Ranson held key positions in ecumenical and mission bodies and was President of the Methodist Church in Ireland (1961-2).

<sup>22</sup> Ranson, op. cit., 1988, pp. 167-8 and 192.

level, whether personal, social, national or international. No further motivation for mission is necessary.

Prior to the devastation of the First World War, mission was frequently associated with concepts of empire and the spread of 'civilisation'. As the new century unfolded, these goals were recognised as wholly inappropriate. In 1930 McCrea strongly affirmed a need for Christians to distance themselves from improper pressures and assumptions when witnessing to Christ:

Since God himself is exquisite courtesy, since even He stands at men's doors and knocks, only the courteous Christian and only the courteous Church and only the courteous nation is (sic) on the side of God has any future. Men are made for freedom, and if a new gospel or civilization cannot be imposed save by violating that freedom, then let the gospel and the civilisation wait. Jesus bases his rejection of the way of coercion on the character of God... Life is in fellowship only, and fellowship and force are poles apart.<sup>23</sup>

Many passages of scripture can be quoted in support of this approach including 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.' Too often Christian witness has been marred by wrong attitudes, un-due pressure, false promises and a great gulf between our words, actions and life-style as Christians.

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<sup>23</sup> McCrea, *The Mind of Christ*, five lectures given at an Irish Methodist Missionary Summer School, 1930, p. 46.