

2012

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Benjamin L. Hartley

*George Fox University*, [bhartley@georgefox.edu](mailto:bhartley@georgefox.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

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# “That They All Might Be One”: John R. Mott’s Contributions to Methodism, Interreligious Dialogue, and Racial Reconciliation

Benjamin L. Hartley

## *Abstract*

An extraordinary organizer and leader, Methodist layman John R. Mott (1865–1955) was influential in the establishment and growth of many different world-wide Christian organizations in the early twentieth century. He was even asked to serve as ambassador to China by President Woodrow Wilson—a position he declined. For his work in organizing people and resources for world peace Mott was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946. This article focuses on Mott’s efforts at ecumenism for the sake of Christian mission by analyzing three dimensions of Mott’s work: Mott’s Methodism, his efforts in global interreligious dialogue, and work in racial reconciliation efforts at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. His work in relation to these three themes is traced throughout his life in order to highlight the development of his ideas and activism as he interacted with many different ecumenical organizations and world Christian leaders. The article illustrates the tensions and inconsistencies that emerged in Mott’s thinking and ecumenical practice as he sought to emphasize unity for the sake of mission in the many different facets of his work.



## Introduction

Nobel laureate John R. Mott (1865–1955) was the most significant Methodist leader in the shaping of world Christian movements during the first half of the twentieth century, but today many of his accomplishments are relatively unknown outside the circles of Methodist historians and missiologists. The recent anniversary of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference stressed his role as chairperson of that meeting. Indeed, Mott's clear gifts as a meeting chairperson and organizer have sometimes caused him to be caricatured as a kind of "structural engineer," "general," or "architect" who systematically marshaled resources and people for the sake of the world mission enterprise.<sup>1</sup> C. Howard Hopkins' meticulously detailed 800-page biography of Mott has helped to support this image of Mott. Mott did play a prominent role in a dizzying array of international organizations including the World's Student Christian Federation, the YMCA, the International Missionary Council, and the Student Volunteer Movement—as well as a somewhat ambiguous role in the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry that produced the controversial report *Re-thinking Missions*.<sup>2</sup> Mott's popularity as revivalist and mentor in student circles around the world caused one colleague to describe Mott as the "most widely known figure in the academic life of five continents" in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> But his administrative talents and popularity are only part of the story.

In the decades after Edinburgh 1910, Mott faced a number of major challenges that tested the strength and versatility of the world mission movement. These included two world wars; migration and refugee movements directly and indirectly resulting from those wars; the fundamentalist/modernist controversy; the rise of many international organizing efforts; changing ideas

<sup>1</sup> The term "structural engineer" was used to describe Mott by President Van Dusen of Union Theological Seminary. See M. Craig Barnes, "A Conversionist in a Pluralist World" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1992), 49. The term "architect" was utilized by Galen Fisher, *John R. Mott: Architect of Cooperation* (New York: Association Press, 1952). The term "general" is used in Basil Matthews, *John R. Mott: World Citizen* (New York: Association Press, 1934).

<sup>2</sup> Mott helped to finance the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry through his relationship with John D. Rockefeller, but he was not a member of it and did not support its findings in subsequent publications. Laymen's Foreign Mission Inquiry, Commission of Appraisal, William Ernest Hocking, chair, *Re-thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932).

<sup>3</sup> Clarence Shedd, cited in Roger D. Woods, "The World of Thought of John R. Mott" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1965), 2.

about interreligious engagement and a Christian theology of religions; inter-racial conflict in the U.S. and abroad; changing ideas about race stemming, in part, from the new discipline of anthropology; and finally, nationalist movements and the decline of colonial confidence around the world.<sup>4</sup> A better understanding of how Mott navigated these world Christian struggles is instructive for world Christian leaders today who face a similar set of challenges.

John R. Mott understood himself as one who promoted unity for the sake of Christian mission around the world.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I investigate how Mott sought to bring this to fruition. As I have already noted, one of the ways he did this was through a monumental effort to establish ecumenical institutions around the world which remain to this day. Mott's work in establishing these institutions has been well-chronicled by Hopkins and other scholars and need not be rehearsed here. Instead, I focus on three interrelated themes in Mott's life—his relationship to Methodism, interreligious dialogue, and the problem of racism—in order to elucidate the challenges and tensions involved in Mott's ecumenical task. In contrast to Mott's biographers who have tended to downplay Mott's Methodism in order to highlight his ecumenical spirit, I argue that Mott's commitment to Methodism sheds light on his ecumenical impulse rather than detracts from it.<sup>6</sup> While not wholly determinative, Mott's upbringing in and continued commitment to Methodism was influential in how he engaged persons of other faiths and how he thought about and acted on the problem of racism. In the second part of this article I examine the unity Mott sought with persons of other faiths as he attempted to articulate a theological outlook toward other religions to which he was increasingly exposed. Finally, I

<sup>4</sup> Federal Council of Churches, *The Problem of Colonies: Material for Study by the Churches of America* (New York: Department of International Justice and Goodwill, Federal Council of Churches, 1938). A marked copy of this book is among Mott's personal papers, which are held in the Day Missions Library, Yale University Divinity School, New Haven, CT: RG 45, Box 208, Folder 3306. Hereafter JRM papers.

<sup>5</sup> Mott noted that Christian unity was not "an end in itself, but 'that the world might believe.'" John R. Mott, *Addresses and Papers of John R. Mott*, 6 vols. (New York: Association Press, 1946–1947), 1:241. Hereafter Mott, *Addresses and Papers*.

<sup>6</sup> Writing in the heyday of the ecumenical movement, Roger Woods' 1965 dissertation downplayed Mott's Methodist identity the most among scholars. See Woods, "The World of Thought of John R. Mott," 9–10, 25. The tendency to downplay Mott's Methodism also is visible in the Hopkins biography although less so in the shorter works about Mott that Hopkins penned. See C. Howard Hopkins, "The Legacy of John R. Mott," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 5/2 (April 1981): 70–73; C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865–1955: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

will describe how Mott engaged the problem of racism and sought racial reconciliation in the U.S. and around the world. Mott's work to counter racism in the U.S. and elsewhere occurred belatedly (by his own admission) and cautiously but was nonetheless an important dimension of his efforts to promote Christian unity for the sake of mission.<sup>7</sup>

### *Mott's Methodism*

Mott's involvement with world Methodism began at the tender age of five in his hometown of Postville, Iowa.<sup>8</sup> In 1870 the Mott family was hosting the renowned Methodist preacher/missionary (and soon-to-be bishop) William Taylor. Upon meeting Taylor, the young Mott asked in an audible whisper, "Is that God?" While quickly learning that William Taylor was not divine, Mott still followed in Taylor's footsteps around the world as a Methodist layman, evangelist, and ecumenist.

It was during his college years at Cornell (1885–1888) when Mott's lifelong commitment to Methodism and the holiness movement became well-established. He was a faithful member of a Methodist Episcopal Church in Ithaca, attended class meetings regularly, and read writings on "entire sanctification" that were staples of the holiness movement of his day. These included Smith's *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, Murray's *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, *The Guide to Holiness* magazine, and Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* — a book Mott reported reading eight times while strolling along the winding paths of Cornell's scenic campus. Mott had a "second blessing" experience of sanctification while in college and actively encouraged others to desire such an experience as well. Mott wrote letters home filled with holiness enthusiasm for what

<sup>7</sup> I will not discuss Mott's contributions to the 1910 Edinburgh conference at great length since this event in Mott's life has been discussed in recent works by several scholars—most notably in Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). For a thoughtful analysis of the plasticity of the term "race" in this period and how it influenced biblical interpretation see Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15–16. For Mott's self-criticism on his delayed engagement with race see Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865–1955*, 418.

<sup>8</sup> There is contemporary resonance between my themes of race and interreligious dialogue and the recent history of Mott's hometown. Postville, Iowa, made the news in recent years as a place of unplanned and grassroots interreligious dialogue when Orthodox Jews moved to this small prairie town to open up a kosher slaughterhouse. It was also the site of the largest federal immigration raid in U.S. history in 2008.

he was discovering. In one letter, written at the age of 21, he enthusiastically described how his class leader at church had entrusted a meeting to him that he "turned into a consecration meeting," which was something he had stressed in conversation with the young members of the group for some time.

I am glad to say that a goodly number are being led up this high and *safe* ground. How much need there is of [the second blessing] in the Church! How many stop simply with their conversion experience and do not press on up the heights of Christian Perfection! They repeat but do not grow; that is they give themselves to the Lord to keep and then take themselves back again and try to keep themselves and so on they keep this up. Consequently their lives are full of worry, not trust. I am working on Hattie and Clare [Mott's sisters] in this same line. Hattie is much further along than Clare but still she has not learned this lesson of perfect trust in Christ—she worries and reasons too much—make[s] her religion too hard work.<sup>9</sup>

Mott's enthusiasm for entire sanctification was matched by a growing intellectual interest in the work of the Holy Spirit while in college. For a five-month period Mott did an exhaustive study of passages in the Bible that mentioned the Holy Spirit and weekly discussed these passages with his roommate and other close friends at Cornell—a group clearly reminiscent of John and Charles Wesley's Oxford Holy Club. The ease in which Mott spoke about the Holy Spirit began here and had ramifications throughout his life, including how Mott directed many large ecumenical meetings. Historians have noted that Mott had an affinity for turning meetings of the Student Volunteer Movement and other gatherings into consecration meetings and that this tendency may have helped Mott to hold together organizations which contained persons with many divergent views.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> JRM papers, RG 45, Box 103, letter to his parents, 22 June 1886 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>10</sup> A Pentecostal scholar has recently noted that Commission 1 of the Edinburgh meetings, which Mott led, was one of the few instances where a stress on the Holy Spirit's power over carefully constructed human plans was evident. John R. Mott, *Report of Commission 1: Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1910), 351. See Gary B. McGee, *Miracles, Missions, and American Pentecostalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 88–89. On Mott's tendency to turn Student Volunteer Movement meetings into consecration meetings see Stephen Parker, *The Kingdom of Character: The Student Volunteer Movement for Missions, 1886–1926* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 20–21. Craig Barnes has argued similarly noting that "It is possible that Mott was far

Mott's theological explorations of pneumatology and sanctification helped shape his desire to transcend differences and promote unity among various theological "camps." Mott's writings on the Holy Spirit and entire sanctification usually did not venture into the nuances of this doctrine as it took somewhat different shape in the more Reformed Keswick meetings and among the Wesleyans.<sup>11</sup> The former were skeptical toward any hope of eradicating sin while the Wesleyans—most notably Daniel Steele—maintained a belief that this was possible. Mott drew from both of these theological streams. Mott admired Dwight L. Moody throughout his life and clearly resonated with much of Moody's Keswick holiness teachings. In a 1902 address in Shanghai on the importance of being filled with the Holy Spirit, Mott mentions Moody's ideas about the Holy Spirit repeatedly.<sup>12</sup> A few years later, in a 1908 address, Mott expressed a more particular Wesleyan view of sanctification that included the belief in the eradication of sin. In this address Mott spoke of the "emancipation from the power of sin and the *washing away of sin stains*" that "multitudes of conscientious men" have experienced.<sup>13</sup>

Mott's Wesleyan outlook doubtless contributed to his enthusiasm toward what would later be called the development of the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century. In 1908 he marveled about various movements of the Spirit which had taken place in Wales, southwest China, Korea, and India. (Interestingly, the Azusa street revival is looked over in this instance.) He contrasted these revivals taking place around the world and noted that "those who philosophize skeptically regarding the reality and efficacy of the Atonement

more successful than earlier missionary societies at cooperative endeavors precisely because his organizations remained so deeply rooted in the spirit and language of revivalism." Barnes, "A Conversionist in a Pluralist World," 42.

<sup>11</sup> Mott also did not enter into the fray of debate over questions about holiness which was occurring in the 1890s among the theologians of his denomination as churches began to split off from Methodism to form such groups as the Church of the Nazarene, the Metropolitan Church Association, and eventually Pentecostal denominations. See William Kostlevy, *Holy Jumpers: Evangelicals and Radicals in Progressive Era America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Benjamin L. Hartley, *Evangelicals at a Crossroads: Revivalism and Social Reform in Boston, 1860–1910* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2011), 138–39. James Mudge's book criticizing instantaneous sanctification produced a vibrant debate with those who disagreed. See, for example, Daniel Steele, *A Defense of Christian Perfection, or, a Criticism of Dr. James Mudge's Growth in Holiness toward Perfection* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1896).

<sup>12</sup> Woods even argues that Mott had an identical view to Moody concerning the Holy Spirit.

<sup>13</sup> Mott, *Addresses and Papers*, 6:187–95 (emphasis added).

will find little to support their views" in the revival songs heard at these revivals.<sup>14</sup> Mott's love of the Quaker and Eastern Orthodox traditions was, in many respects, also a function of his interest in these denominations' pneumatological and mystical dimensions.<sup>15</sup> More than any other denominations, Mott possessed a lifelong admiration of these two traditions alongside his own Methodism.

Mott's interests in the traditional Methodist emphases on holiness were not greatly affected by the new developments in Methodist theology—represented most prominently by Borden Parker Bowne's school of Personalism at Boston University.<sup>16</sup> Mott struggled with theological issues to some extent in college, but his dislike for philosophical speculation kept him from remaining in a "crisis of faith" for very long. For example, he once confessed that he contemplated a "Unitarian position," but by the end of his college years was strident in his criticism of classmates who were in the YMCA and held this position. In a comment about the new YMCA building being erected on Cornell's campus, he wrote to his mother "how important" it was that it be "dedicated with no uncertain sound and action to Jesus Christ and not to the Unknown God! I mean by the Unknown God—the God of the [word "Unitarian" is crossed out in the original letter] ethical culture and salvation by works

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 259.

<sup>15</sup>Two years after college Mott reports attending a Quaker meeting which he describes in a very detailed and heartfelt manner: "It is a Holy Ghost religion. They believe in the Spirit in you, around You, over you; consequently He manifests Himself in their midst. Never have I been more conscious of His presence than in that meeting." JRM papers, RG 45, Box 104, Folder 1810, letter to his parents, 14 March 1890. Mott's interest in Eastern Orthodoxy came somewhat later in his life, but also revealed Mott's attention to the Holy Spirit's work. In a foreword to a book on Eastern Orthodoxy Mott described the "essential purpose" of Orthodox worship as "not merely education and moral influence but rather to unite the worshipper with the supernatural world, with God. 'Through it the splendor of eternity breaks into the reality of today and bears the faithful with it aloft into the sphere of the invisible and eternal.'" Stefan Zankov, cited in Mott, *Addresses and Papers*, 6:396–404.

<sup>16</sup>Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transitions in American Methodism* (New York: University Press of America, 1983). Howard Glen Spann's dissertation on theological conservatism in American Methodism in the twentieth century provides a helpful context for Mott's own views which were more consistent with popular Methodist opinion than the outlook of Methodism's intellectuals after WWI. Howard Glen Spann, "Evangelicals in Modern American Methodism: Theological Conservatives in the "Great Deep" of the Church, 1900–1980" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1995).



alone class of students, many of whom I regret to say are influential in our Association."<sup>17</sup>

Mott's avoidance of philosophical speculation continued in his relationships outside of Methodism and beyond his college years as well. Near the end of his life, in 1945, Mott even appears exasperated over the doctrinal and philosophical disputes for the way they had impeded his efforts at Christian unity.

Questions of faith and order, or of doctrine and polity, or of creedal and ecclesiastical differences often hinder the freest and finest development of fruitful co-operation. We think at once of the fundamentalist and modernist controversies, or of the Anglo-Catholic versus the evangelical disputes, or of the sacramentarian and non-sacramentarian differences of view and conviction. This explains why certain Churches, missions, and missionary societies have withdrawn from or failed to enter national Christian councils and other cooperative movements. The effort has been to unite on a doctrinal basis, rather than on the basis of a common loyalty to Christ and participation in a common service.<sup>18</sup>

Mott's frustration with doctrinal disputes and relentless seeking after common ground across denominations as well as within Methodism appears to have strengthened his commitment to church institutions rather than diminish his devotion to them.

Mott's commitment to Methodism was clear to established and new leaders in the Methodist Episcopal Church throughout his life. A full decade prior to Mott's leadership of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, at the age of thirty-four, Mott was invited by Bishop James Thoburn to consider an appointment as one of three "mission secretaries" for the Methodist Episcopal Church's Board of Missions. (Mott's friend, Robert Speer, had recently been placed in a similar position for the Presbyterians.) Mott turned down Thoburn's offer, but only after consulting with "a few prominent men in our Church" who pointed out that Mott could serve Methodism better through his current leadership in other organizations.<sup>19</sup> Mott built friendships with Asian Methodist church leaders during his lifetime and had an instrumental role in the development of over thirty national councils of churches around the world. Persons like Lilavati

<sup>17</sup>JRM papers, RG 45, Box 104, Folder 1807, letter to his mother, 14 March 1888.

<sup>18</sup>"Cooperation and the World Mission (1945)," in Mott, *Addresses and Papers*, 6:471.

<sup>19</sup>JRM papers, RG 45, Box 91, Folder 1609, James Thoburn correspondence, 25 August 1899.

Singh of India, D. T. Niles of Sri Lanka, Yoitsu Honda of Japan, and Yun Chi Ho of Korea were all important Methodist leaders whom Mott encouraged to varying degrees.

Mott's involvement with Methodist mission was especially prominent in later years as a then-famous world Christian statesman. Mott's collected papers contain notes from speeches given at over twenty international, national, regional, and local Methodist meetings as well as extensive correspondence with Methodist bishops and other denominational officials.<sup>20</sup> Some of Mott's presentations were plenary speeches while others were speeches made before denominational Board members of a number of different organizations.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the most important address he gave before a Methodist audience was his speech and subsequent chairmanship of legislative sessions concerning the Committee on Missions during the 1939 Uniting Conference that brought together the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Methodist Protestant Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church. Mott effectively presided over contentious meetings to merge the three denominations' mission boards. The "final winning plea" stressed that

we are summoned not only to what I call the united front, and a great advance [in missions], but we are summoned, I think, as never before, to great acts of trust; first, trust in what we have called her unerring guiding principles that I maintain have never led an organization or a Christian into a blind alley; also, great acts of trust in one another.<sup>22</sup>

After the Uniting Conference, Mott was asked to write the first denominational study book on missions. His *Methodists United for Action* is typical of Mott's writing for its optimism even in the face of the gathering storm of World War II. Over a decade later, in 1951, Mott again helped to steer the Methodists toward a greater measure of unity when he sat next to Bishop Ivan Lee Holt who "again and again" asked his advice during the Eighth Methodist Ecumenical Conference, the place where the World Methodist Council was established.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bishop Bromley Oxnam and Mott, for example, exchanged over forty letters with one another between 1939 and 1954.

<sup>21</sup> Most of these notes can be found in JRM papers, RG 45, Box 125, Folder 2050.

<sup>22</sup> "John R. Mott Stood as a Tower," *North Carolina Christian Advocate* clipping, 18 May 1939, JRM papers, RG 45, Box 142, Folder 2340.

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, *John R. Mott*, 9.

Mott's Methodist upbringing and continued commitment gave him the theology of an activist who had little patience for the nuances of theological speculation—an impatience that he shared with John Wesley and Francis Asbury. Ecclesiology was no mere afterthought for Mott, however. Early on he possessed an understanding of the church that held revivalism close to the center. Mott's love of Methodist revivalism and the power of the Holy Spirit were key to his success in drawing people together and for keeping divisive individuals and ideas at bay.<sup>24</sup> The devotion and commitment Mott expressed toward the Methodist Episcopal Church (and Methodist Church after 1939) expanded throughout his life to include other ecclesial institutions. In contrast to contemporaries like E. Stanley Jones who tended to downplay the importance of the institutional church, Mott's ecclesiological assertions are rather conservative by comparison. Mott, after all, was an institution-builder. He not only presided at the International Missionary Council Tambaram Conference in 1938 which upheld a strong emphasis on the importance of the Church, but also, in one of his last publications, *The Larger Evangelism*, Mott explicitly stated that the "great objective" of evangelism "must always be kept in mind, namely, the planting and developing in all non-Christian lands of self-supporting, self-directing, and self-propagating churches."<sup>25</sup> Mott's ecclesiology came from a heart nurtured in Methodist holiness revivalism and was worked out in the complex settings of ecclesial and ecumenical gatherings.

Mott's childhood and college immersion in Methodism and the holiness movement bequeathed to him an ongoing focus on the role of the Holy Spirit throughout his life as he worked to promote Christian unity in the midst of the theological debates of the early twentieth century. To be sure, Mott's understanding of the church expanded considerably as he grew in knowledge of other denominations, but his passion and institutional commitment to the Methodist Episcopal Church that he had as a college student not only persisted

<sup>24</sup>Parker, *Kingdom of Character*, 20–21.

<sup>25</sup>John R. Mott, *The Larger Evangelism* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944), 81–82. Dana L. Robert and Douglas D. Tzan have recently argued to the contrary that "while Mott was instrumental in the early ecumenical movement, this legacy should not be seen to be indicative of a strong ecclesiological focus of mission." Mott's lifelong commitment to Methodism, his remarks about the three-self church being the end of evangelism, and even his love for the hymn "The Church's One Foundation" must all be kept in mind in evaluating Mott's ecclesiological focus. Dana L. Robert and Douglas D. Tzan, "Traditions and Transitions in Mission Thought," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* edited by William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 431–48.

but grew in strength. As a young man he felt responsible for "a church in many places yielding to worldliness and losing the *old spiritual fire of Fletcher, Wesley, and Whitefield*. It shows a church 'at ease in Zion.'"<sup>26</sup> As an old man, when working to unify Methodist mission boards and inaugurate the World Methodist Council, Mott continued to prod his church to not remain at ease, but to move forward in unity for mission.

### *Mott and World Religions*

Mott may have tried to avoid doctrinal controversy for the sake of unity in mission, but he still was quite engaged in the missiological debates of his day, one of the most prominent of which was the debate over a theology of religions. Mott's interest in interreligious dialogue throughout his life was an attempt to achieve a measure of unity with people of other faiths even while maintaining a strong belief in evangelism. Theology of religions was an important part of the discussions not only at the 1910 Edinburgh gathering but also at the International Missionary Council meetings in Jerusalem in 1928 and Tambaram in 1938.<sup>27</sup> Mott was chairman at all of these large meetings and numerous smaller gatherings where this topic was also discussed. Conversations Mott had with missionaries as well as representatives of other faiths at these meetings were very influential in shaping Mott's view of other faiths, but the official statements from these conferences, while valuable, are not as illustrative of Mott's own view toward other religions or his involvement in interreligious engagement as other aspects of his life's work.

Mott's involvement with other world religions and the early development of his Christian attitude toward them began during his junior year (1886–1887) at Cornell. While no doubt helped along by some academic study of other religions, the precipitating event for Mott's greater involvement with

<sup>26</sup>JRM papers, RG 45, Box 103, Folder 1803, letter to his parents, 7 February 1886 (emphasis in original).

<sup>27</sup>The extent to which Tambaram argued over Kraemer's *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* is a matter of some debate. See Ludwig Frieder, "Tambaram. Zwischen Kolonialismuskritik und Kirchenkampf. Interaktionen Westafrikanischer, Indischer und Europäischer Christen während der Weltmissionskonferenz 1938" (Habilitationsschrift, Munich, 1999), 281–91. The preceding year, in 1937, a most overlooked conference also took place in Oxford on the interrelationships of theology and social ethics. See Graeme Smith, *Oxford 1937: The Universal Christian Council for Life and Work Conference* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004).

multi-faith concerns came from meeting Pandita Ramabai, a recent Hindu convert to Christianity.<sup>28</sup> At this time, Pandita Ramabai was especially concerned to maintain a high degree of religious neutrality as she prepared to return to India to help Hindu child widows.<sup>29</sup> Ramabai's desire for neutrality despite her recent conversion to Christianity may have served as a model for interreligious engagement for the young Mott. Along with a small group of friends, Mott formed the first "Religious Union" at Cornell, a gathering of students from a variety of faiths. Mott also helped to organize a Pandita Ramabai circle to help raise financial support for Ramabai. He admired Ramabai for the rest of his life and doubtless followed her developing understanding of Christianity as she moved from an Anglo-Catholic outlook toward a greater affinity for the holiness movement.<sup>30</sup> The "Religious Union" and "Ramabai circle" were followed by many other efforts at organization-building for the sake of interreligious understanding and cooperative action.<sup>31</sup>

The importance of an irenic style of engagement with other religions and engagement rooted in acts of Christian service which was modeled by Pandita Ramabai was reinforced in a tragic way a few years later in Mott's life. At the age of thirty, Mott traveled to Istanbul to organize Christian and Muslim students

<sup>28</sup>Ramabai converted to Christianity in Britain in 1883. Mott's biographer Basil Matthews incorrectly noted that Ramabai was still a Hindu at the time of meeting Mott at Cornell in late 1886 or early 1887. Matthews, *John R. Mott*, 264. Matthews also notes that one of Mott's professors, George Lincoln Burr, a historian of the medieval period, was especially influential in Mott's "tolerant attitude toward other faiths." Only eight years older than Mott, Burr would have been a new Cornell faculty member during Mott's senior year.

<sup>29</sup>Ramabai's religious neutrality was not universally appreciated by supporters in the United States. Many wished that she would be engaged in a more explicitly Christian missionary endeavor. She eventually did embrace a greater stress upon the importance of religious conversion to Christianity after hearing the preaching of Presbyterian revivalist George F. Pentecost in 1892. Edith Blumhofer, "From India's Coral Strand": Pandita Ramabai and U.S. Support for Foreign Mission," in *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in North American Cultural History*, edited by Daniel H. Bays and Grant Wacker (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup>At the age of seventy Mott listed Ramabai as one of several persons with whom he would have liked to have spent more time in conversation. JRM Papers, RG 45 Box 119, Folder 1963, notes from seventieth birthday celebration.

<sup>31</sup>For a study of Ramabai's connections to the holiness movement see Howard A. Snyder, "Holiness Heritage: The Case of Pandita Ramabai," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40/2 (2005): 33–36. A total of seventy-seven Ramabai circles were formed as fundraising and prayer groups for her work with orphans in India.

at Robert College, something with which he had previous experience at Cornell. While in Istanbul, a violent riot occurred between Muslims and Christians that caused the death or imprisonment of hundreds of Armenian Christians. Known as the Hamidian massacre, it resulted in the deaths of thousands of Armenian Christians in the subsequent months. Mott reports these events in a letter home, but does not express how it impacted him.<sup>32</sup> It surely would have been his first experience of violence on a city-wide scale and doubtless would have impressed upon him the importance of interreligious dialogue for the sake of peace and at least a measure of unity.

Mott's experience in Istanbul in October of 1895 likely taught him of the complexity of interreligious relations and religious conflict around the world. It may also have predisposed Mott to be especially interested in Islam in his writings throughout his life. In his 1939 mission study text *Methodists United for Action*, Mott writes at greater length about "the Muslim world" than any other geographical region. Mott's friendship with W. H. T. Gairdner, a missionary to the Muslim world for over thirty years, also may have strengthened Mott's ongoing interest in mission work among Muslims.<sup>33</sup> In 1944, nearly fifty years after Mott's first visit to Istanbul, Mott again weighed in on the missionary situation in that city. After hearing that the administration of Robert College was allowing the school to move in a more secular direction, Mott wrote back to missionary Edgar Yolland expressing his desire that Robert College "not fail in the years before us to be true to their pronouncedly Christian foundation and tradition."<sup>34</sup>

Mott steered a middle-course in his theology of religions but never backed off of a commitment to world evangelism. Nor did he stop seeing the importance of dialogue. The following quotation from 1913, when Mott was in his late 40s, is the most detailed statement from Mott concerning his theological

<sup>32</sup> See Matthews, *John R. Mott*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> See JRM papers, RG 45, Box 32, Folder 596, for extensive correspondence between Gairdner and Mott. The degree of emotional warmth present in these letters is uncharacteristic of Mott's extensive correspondence.

<sup>34</sup> JRM papers, RG 45, Box 110, Folder 1780, letter to Edgar Yolland, 13 October 1944. The academic study of Christian missionary writings about Muslims after WWI has expanded considerably in recent years. One key figure in this era is Samuel Zwemer whom Mott saw as both an asset and a liability and noted in correspondence with W. H. T. Gairdner that he needed to address many colleagues' concerns about Zwemer in Europe and elsewhere. For Mott's views toward mission to Muslims after World War I see the two chapters he wrote in John R. Mott, ed., *The Moslem World of To-Day* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925).

outlook toward people of other faiths. It was from an address given before the Wesleyan Methodists of Great Britain suggesting that perhaps Mott felt he could be most candid when speaking among persons in his own tradition.

I hold no narrow view with reference to these non-Christian religions. I studied them patiently as an undergraduate. I attended the Parliament of Religions. I count among my friends followers of all of them. . . . Yet I must say in simple accuracy, in the light of my studies of the present-day working of these religions, that the followers of them, without the help of the living Christ, are literally without hope. . . . I am not talking about the hereafter—I have my own views as to that—but of this present life. These people, I repeat, weighing my words, without the knowledge of the Living Christ are literally without hope in this present life. I may go further, and say that everyone has the right to know about Jesus Christ and His mission to men. Therefore, on ordinary grounds of square dealing, still more on the grounds of the Golden Rule, it is sinful for us to assume that if Christ be necessary for us—and the man that doubts that needs to give more time to thinking—these other people can do without Him. Let us not forget this cry of despair. It summons us to a great expansion of vital Christianity.<sup>35</sup>

In this excerpt Mott claimed to have studied other religious faiths “patiently” while in college, but the depth of reading by Mott about other religions based on the notes he took from books on the subject rarely went beyond those focused on presenting an apologetic defense of Christianity.<sup>36</sup> Nor in Mott’s collected papers does he ever get more explicit about his views about the eternal destiny of people of other faiths “in the hereafter.”<sup>37</sup>

Mott’s attitude toward other faiths, as one might expect, grew more appreciative over time, but his commitment to evangelism never wavered. In

<sup>35</sup>JRM papers, RG 45, Box 142, Folder 2338. Quotation is from “The Challenge of the Centenary,” pamphlet published by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, no. 4 (1913): 12–13.

<sup>36</sup>Mott’s collected papers contain several files on other religions which together contain over one hundred typewritten pages of notes from books he read on the subject of Christianity’s relation to other faiths. Most of the books Mott reviewed were published between the 1880s and 1910 although the date when Mott read these many books is not discernible from the evidence at hand.

<sup>37</sup>On this Mott appears to have a similar view to that of John Wesley. For a discussion of John Wesley’s view on this see Alan Race and Paul M. Hedges, *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

1902, at the age of thirty-seven and after his visit to the Parliament of World's Religions, Mott could still be quite negative in his assessment of other faiths. In his notes for an address Mott describes the "dwarfing, deadening influence of great systems of religion such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism."<sup>38</sup> In later years Mott admired the scholarly contribution of YMCA colleague J. N. Farquhar who advocated for a "fulfillment theory" stance toward other world religions. Mott's theology of religions never resolved the tension between appreciation of other faiths and an evangelistic zeal for conversion. The tension may have even increased as Mott grew older. Mott continued to make strident appeals for an evangelistic advance that would "turn back the tides of Muhammadanism and of other non-Christian faiths."<sup>39</sup> Yet Mott praised new approaches toward world religions which were more irenic in their tone than in previous years. In this regard, Mott was illustrative of a trend among many other missionaries in the 1920s toward a more appreciative stance vis-à-vis other religions and Islam in particular.<sup>40</sup>

Mott may have hoped that a new synthesis on a theology of religions would emerge through the Laymen's Foreign Mission Inquiry (LFMI) in the early 1930s. Joseph Oldham, a longtime friend of Mott's, was also looking for a new rallying point for world mission at this time and worked hard to bring together leading theologians to explore missiological issues.<sup>41</sup> By the late 1920s Mott had already spent many hours with student groups as they debated more inclusive language about Christian commitment for YMCA members. Mott helped raise support for the LFMI and urged the wider Christian community to take its findings seriously. In commenting about the LFMI, Mott noted that earlier experiences had taught him that questions about core Christian beliefs result in a firmer resolve concerning those beliefs. Clearly, the LFMI questioned core Christian beliefs—especially in its theology of religions which viewed, among

<sup>38</sup>JRM papers, RG 45, Box 125, Folder 2050.

<sup>39</sup>JRM papers, RG 45, Box 102, Folder 2338, "Challenge of the Centenary." Similarly enthusiastic calls for evangelism among Muslims appears in Mott's 1939 text, *Methodists United for Action*, 111. See also the extensive correspondence between J. N. Farquhar and Mott in JRM papers, RG 45, Box 29, Folder 522. On Farquhar's scholarly contribution and his relationship to Mott see Eric J. Sharpe, *Not to Destroy but to Fulfill: The Contribution of J. N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before 1914* (Uppsala: Gleerup, 1965).

<sup>40</sup>Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 298.

<sup>41</sup>For a discussion of Oldham's efforts in this regard see Smith, *Oxford 1937*.



other things, church planting as a “temporary function” of Christian mission.<sup>42</sup> Mott probably believed its more unorthodox proposals would be weighed but ultimately set aside. A veteran of ecumenical dialogue at dozens of large conferences, Mott was patient with processes such as these.<sup>43</sup> He may have even been favorably disposed toward the chairman of the LFMI, William Ernest Hocking, who was also a Midwest Methodist with a background in the holiness movement and someone who could speak warmly about his Christian experience.<sup>44</sup>

At the close of the LFMI process in November of 1932, Mott even put forth a veiled criticism of the process. “It may not be, probably is not, as authentic a lead on some subjects as that afforded by the Jerusalem Meeting of 1928, but considering the limitations under which the commission did their work, we may with confidence commend their findings to the serious attention of our constituencies.”<sup>45</sup> Upon the release of the LFMI report, what Mott saw as most beneficial was not really the report itself but the discussions which he hoped it would prompt “to center the gaze of multitudes upon the Christ himself—the One other than all the rest—other than the ancient sages and holy men of Hinduism, other than Buddha and Mohammed, other than Moses and St. Paul, other than Gandhi and Kagawa—the Central Figure of the Ages and the Eternities, the Redeemer and Divine Lord, the Fountainhead of Vitality.”<sup>46</sup> The evidence from Mott’s writings after the LFMI shows that if he at one time agreed with the *Rethinking Missions* report, he had clearly returned to an earlier position that kept in tension perhaps a tentative universalism alongside an urgent

<sup>42</sup>Laymen’s Foreign Mission Inquiry, *Re-thinking Missions*, 28.

<sup>43</sup>Mott, *Addresses and Papers*, 6:324.

<sup>44</sup>For a review of Hocking’s philosophical theology see Leroy Rouser, *Within Human Experience: The Philosophy of William Ernest Hocking* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 282. It does not appear that Mott developed a friendship with Hocking (as he did with Hendrik Kraemer whose position is often juxtaposed with Hocking’s). Kraemer wrote Mott a number of times between 1932 and 1945. Several of these express sentiments of friendship and appreciation for one another’s work. JRM Papers, RG 45, Box 47, Folder 878, letter from Kraemer to Mott, 13 June 1945.

<sup>45</sup>Quotation is from an address made by Mott at the end of the LFMI process, 19 November 1932. Mott, *Addresses and Papers*, 6:323. Mott’s high praise of the Jerusalem 1928 meeting is a striking contrast to Stephen Neill’s subsequent assessment of the event as “the nadir of the modern missionary movement.” Stephen Neill, *The Unfinished Task* (London: Edinburgh House, 1957), 151.

<sup>46</sup>Mott, *Addresses and Papers*, 6:323–24. The LFMI report certainly prompted a good deal of discussion in denominational mission agencies. For a rather representative response of denominational officials to the LFMI see John A. Mackay, “The Theology of the Laymen’s Foreign Missions Inquiry,” *International Review of Mission* (1933): 174–88.

appeal for evangelism.<sup>47</sup> He never elaborated upon the findings of the LFMI in subsequent writings—even in publications where one would have expected at least some comment about the LFMI, such as in Mott's 1939 text *Five Decades and a Forward View*.<sup>48</sup>

Of all Mott's experiences of interreligious engagement, his work on behalf of the European Student Relief after World War I and his interviews with Gandhi in the late 1930s stand as most representative of his mature contribution to interreligious engagement. The European Student Relief organization was the relief arm of the World Student Christian Federation that Mott had been instrumental in founding in the 1890s. The ESR was led by Ruth Rouse, a leader of WSCF in Britain, but had significant involvement from John R. Mott—especially in the promotion of fundraising. In an article introducing the ESR to the WSCF, Mott noted the carefulness of the new organization with regard to persons of other faiths:

[The purpose of the ESR is] not to be a bait to attract men to religious exercises to win them away from their traditional faith. It is, however, the profound prayer and expectation of all the Federation leaders that this Christ-like ministry will be the means of breaking down the suspicion, cynicism, and agnosticism of many troubled hearts. The whole work will be surcharged with concern and love for human persons. While the needs of the body for food and raiment, and of the mind for books and instruments may receive first attention, that will not fully express the purpose of the Federation, for in the words of our constitution itself, that is nothing less than to further all "efforts on behalf [of] the welfare of students in body, mind, and *spirit* which are in harmony with the Christian purpose."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Mott's writings after 1932 are remarkably similar to what he said prior to the LFMI. This is especially evident in Mott's 1944 work *The Larger Evangelism*. Mott's position on theology of religions closely resembled that of Edmund Soper, a Methodist mission professor at Garrett Biblical Institute. See Edmund Soper, *The Religions of Mankind* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1921), 15. Soper's position on theology of religions did not change appreciably in the 1938 edition of this text.

<sup>48</sup>This lack of substantive engagement with the LFMI has not been adequately taken into account by previous scholars of Mott's work. Biographer C. Howard Hopkins, for example, claims that Mott "doubtless held most of the forward-looking positions taken by the report." Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865–1955*, 603.

<sup>49</sup>John R. Mott, "Editorial," *The Student World* 14/1 (January 1921): 5 (emphasis in original).

Mott knew that the ESR needed to be careful in its religious assertions, but he also seemed to signal to his Christian readers (by italicizing *spirit*) that the ESR was not wholly secular. The ESR was involved in over forty countries and extended into parts of the Near East in the 1920s – especially Turkey, which was embroiled in Muslim/Christian conflict in such places as Smyrna (Izmir). Mott was also a leader of the National War Work Council of the United States (for which he received the Distinguished Service Medal) and was involved on the Board of the Near East Relief, which was less oriented toward student involvement but nonetheless sought to assist victims of the Armenian genocide after WWI.

In addition to the work of serving both Jews and Christians in tense situations in decimated cities like Vienna in the wake of WWI, the ESR also was responsible for what is likely the first instance of what one would today call “short-term mission trips.” Leaders speculated that the European Student Relief would be more aptly named the Everywhere Student Relief and that from the very inception of the ESR students were learning about one another’s contexts through summer trips and correspondence all over the world.<sup>50</sup>

Today the students in Buenos Aires, Argentina, know more of Saratov, Brno and Zagreb than they did of Rio four years ago. Far New Zealand specialized on relief to most distant Tomsk and has obtained at least a glimpse of the Russian problem both in Siberia and amongst the refugees. Students in Java can tell you the racial divisions in the universities of Latvia and Estonia. Negro students in South Africa can give you points on the university situation in Prussia. . . .<sup>51</sup>

The ESR was clearly an organization that Mott and others saw as a place for students to overcome barriers of race and religion, but they had other hopes and dreams for the organization as well. European Student Relief leader Ruth Rouse, who was in frequent conversation with Mott, “cherished a vision of a striking International Evangelization Campaign, where international groups of leaders would start evangelistic campaigns in countries that

<sup>50</sup>For a discussion of internationalism in the early twentieth century mission experience see Dana L. Robert, “The First Globalization: The Internationalization of the Protestant Foreign Missionary Movement Between the World Wars,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26/2 (2002): 50–54, 56–60, 62–66.

<sup>51</sup>Ruth Rouse, *Rebuilding Europe: The Student Chapter in Post-war Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1925), 53.

had received relief."<sup>52</sup> Rouse saw that many students were introduced to the WSCF through relief and that an evangelistic campaign would be a way for them to understand what it was about more fully. But Rouse struggled with this. At one conference in Parad, Hungary, in 1923 she reflected upon the tension she felt between interreligious sensitivity and her desire for "a more direct witness":

It would have been so easy then to pass over to an open presentation of Christ as Lord and Saviour that last night, so easy to go on to prayer. But honour seemed to forbid. They were so ready. In a talk I gave in the middle of the conference on "Secrets of ESR Success," I preached Faith as the Victory, and the meaning of the Cross as strongly as ever I have done, though veiled in a parable. None seemed stumbled and they were very responsive. But one longs for a more direct witness.<sup>53</sup>

It is not clear what Mott made of these plans, but in light of their close working relationship at this time one could surmise that he and Rouse were of one mind on such matters or that Rouse was pushing Mott in this direction.<sup>54</sup>

Mott demonstrated his ongoing desire to promote evangelistic campaigns even when they were deemed rather offensive by other religious leaders. This was precisely what happened when Mott and Gandhi met for conversation in 1938 and 1939. Mott respected Gandhi a great deal, but they disagreed on the matter of Christians seeking converts through the mass movements of persons to Christianity then taking place in India. Gandhi desired Christians to follow Christ without seeking converts or establishing new churches, as he thought this made for a tenser political situation in India. Indeed, Gandhi's position on this matter would have been affirmed by the lead author of *Re-thinking Missions*, William Ernest Hocking.<sup>55</sup> Mott clearly opposed it. Mott was fully aware of the mass movements to Christianity that took place in India during the years prior to his conversation with Gandhi. The Institute for Social and Religious Research, with which Mott was associated, provided funding for

<sup>52</sup>Ruth Franzen, *Ruth Rouse among Students: Global, Missiological, and Ecumenical Perspectives* (Uppsala, Sweden: Studia Missionalia Svecana, 2008), 333.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 334.

<sup>54</sup>See *ibid.*, 165, 245, 261 for a discussion of the mutual influence Rouse and Mott had on one another.

<sup>55</sup>Hocking's *logos* Christology maintained a hope that an "unbound" Christ would be found by adherents of various religions from within their own traditions rather than brought from the outside. Rouner, *Within Human Experience*, 282.

researching this movement and the Methodist Board of Foreign Missions actively promoted the published volume of the study *Christian Mass Movements in India* by J. W. Pickett, a future Methodist bishop.<sup>56</sup>

Mott's encouragement of multi-faith dialogue through institution-building made a number of contributions. His organizational gifts promoted considerable intercultural exchange and understanding among Christian students—some of whom went to locations where there were people of other faiths who many American students had never encountered. His work also created venues for peace-building among students across political and religious lines of division, activities that contributed to Mott receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946. His work in interreligious dialogue, however, was also something that he clearly viewed as part of his very early calling as a young college student filled with the Holy Spirit and an earnest desire to see others come to faith in Christ. Mott did not deny this in conversations with a famous religious leader like Gandhi or in his many conversations with students of other faiths.

Mott maintained a pastoral concern toward students even late in life after he had stopped doing much of his work among young adults:

I beg of you to hold on to everything in your own faith which reason, conscience, and experience show you to be the truth; but do not let that keep you from entering upon an ever deepening acquaintance with Christ, who made the stupendous claim, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."<sup>57</sup>

A sense of evangelistic urgency never really left Mott. At the end of his life, in the last meeting he attended in Evanston in 1954, he asked that people remember him not as a diplomat, missionary statesman, or Nobel Peace Prize winner, but as an evangelist.

### *The Problem of Race*

Mott's interest in unity for the sake of mission led him to act in sometimes inconsistent ways around the issue of racial reconciliation. On the one hand, Mott worked hard to empower non-white leaders in the United States and around the world. At the same time, Mott's desire for Christian unity occasionally (and

<sup>56</sup>See Arthur Gene McPhee, "Pickett's Fire: The Life, Contribution, Thought, and Legacy of J. Waskom Pickett, Methodist Missionary to India" (Ph.D. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2001), 384, 409

<sup>57</sup>Matthews, *John R. Mott*, 267.

tragically) caused him to not challenge segregationist practices and attitudes. Just as Mott demonstrated patience in deliberating a theology of religions, so too did he believe that racial reconciliation was a process that was best brought about gradually.

It is difficult to assess writings about race from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for a number of reasons. In the early twentieth century authors' use of the language of race sometimes was closer to the way contemporaries often speak about cultural differences. A more relativistic understanding of cultural differences was also just beginning to emerge in the American context with the scholarship of Franz Boaz, "father" of American anthropology who addressed the topic of race extensively in his writings and strongly opposed an evolutionary perspective on culture and a "scientific racism" common among his forbears. At the turn of the nineteenth century, missionaries were frequently less racist than other educated persons at this time because of their theological beliefs concerning the unity of humanity, its sinfulness, and its universal need for redemption. To be sure, missionaries could be quite paternalistic in their attitudes toward persons of different cultures. Missionaries' paternalism was based on their belief that the Gospel had improved Western society, whereas other cultures had not yet experienced the benefits of the Gospel. More secular persons' embrace of "scientific racism" led to a belief far more damaging than missionaries' paternalism; they believed, for example, in an inferiority of Africans that was fixed in the gene pool itself and thus less amenable to change resulting from exposure to the Christian Gospel.<sup>58</sup> These contrasting ideas were part and parcel of John Mott's intellectual context during his youth and young adulthood and help to explain the contrasting ideas and initiatives Mott and his contemporaries sometimes espoused.

There was very little in Mott's college experience which could be considered consciousness-raising on issues of race, except to the extent that organizing a circle of support for Pandita Ramabai represented a growing awareness of other cultures and the problem of caste in India.<sup>59</sup> It is likely that Mott did not have many encounters in his childhood and youth with persons of other races

<sup>58</sup>Jon Bonk, "All Things to All People—The Missionary as a Racist-Imperialist, 1860–1918," *Missiology: An International Review*, 8/3 (July, 1980): 302.

<sup>59</sup>As part of Mott's debate team experience at Upper Iowa University he once debated in opposition to a Chinese immigration restriction bill. As part of his Cornell education, Mott once visited (with engineering students from Cornell) industrial centers in Pennsylvania where he encountered the problems of labor and, perhaps, race. Matthews, *John R. Mott*, 21, 67.

because of where he grew up (Iowa) and where he attended college (upstate New York). The first recorded encounter with African American worship occurred for Mott in 1890 at the age of twenty-five. In a letter home to his parents he described attending an evening worship service at a black church and fills the letter with a vivid description of what occurred there to convey to his parents (who likely also had limited experiences of racial diversity) the sense of wide-eyed wonder their son was experiencing in his travels with the YMCA.

Last Sunday night I went to hear a colored preacher at one of the Negro Baptist churches. He preached on Jonah. What a sermon! It was as much as I could do to keep sober. I could not, when he came to his climax where he brought down the chariot of Elijah for the colored race. He described how it would run from station to station; how they would have to jump in quick or get left; how when they got up to heaven they would go first to one room and put on "them golden slippers," then into another and put on "de crown," then rush up "de rack" and take down "de harp." At this point he got so excited that he strode across the platform as though he were about to jump in the chariot himself. The colored audience were [*sic*] swinging to and fro—groaning and shouting. It was great.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, Mott was no mere detached spectator of African American worship as he was unable to "keep sober" and joined the congregation enthusiastically in their response to the preacher. However, for the next fifteen years there is no indication that Mott grew in his awareness of the challenges faced by African Americans during the era of Jim Crow. This exposure to African American worship, however, may have sparked Mott's interest in the African continent. Later in 1890 Mott read Henry Morton Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* shortly after it was released. Basil Matthews described Stanley's book as instrumental in stirring within Mott a growing Christian concern for the whole world.<sup>61</sup>

Mott's first world trip in 1895–1897 exposed him to the potential for world Christian fellowship as he spoke in over 140 universities and helped to establish national Christian student movements across lines of race, language, and culture. Although marked by many successes, late in 1895 Mott also experienced the ugliness of racial and religious conflict in Turkey (discussed previously). He experienced something similar in South Africa in 1906 where, at Lovedale College, the Dutch Christian students were separate from the black

<sup>60</sup>JRM papers, RG 45, Box 104, Folder 1810, letter to his mother, 30 March 1890.

<sup>61</sup>Matthews, *John R. Mott*, 97.

students. World Student Christian Federation colleague Ruth Rouse was instrumental in provoking Mott to pay more attention to the world problem of racism that they had witnessed together in South Africa in 1906.<sup>62</sup>

Certainly, there was no shortage of reminders about racism at this time in Mott's life. At a Nashville gathering of the Student Volunteer Movement in 1906 city officials prohibited black student representatives from joining white colleagues on the main floor of the conference's meeting space, in spite of African American YMCA leader William Alphaeus Hunton's efforts to change the convention center's policy in this regard. Behind-the-scenes protests from white SVM organizers were also ineffective.<sup>63</sup> In a revealing example of Mott's generally cautious conservatism, Mott did not speak about this problem from the platform nor is there evidence that he reflected upon it afterwards.<sup>64</sup> The convention continued as a segregated event.

Mott was unwilling to lead dramatic protests over American racism, but he nonetheless encouraged African American leadership in world Christian organizations. He invited William Alphaeus Hunton to give an address at the 1907 Tokyo convocation of the World Student Christian Federation, and he encouraged Hunton significantly both before and after his address in Tokyo. Mott had great respect for Hunton because he had done for the YMCA in black colleges and universities what Mott had done elsewhere. In reflecting upon Mott's encouragement in his life, Hunton noted that Mott provided "a good outline and many valuable suggestions [in preparing for the Tokyo address]. It will keep me busy all the year in making the investigations necessary to the writing of my paper."<sup>65</sup> In June of 1938, after Hunton's death, Mott wrote the foreword for Hunton's biography and extolled his greatness:

He was a prophet. He lived on the mountains. He was a man of vision. In thought and plan he exercised foresight and moved in large

<sup>62</sup> Franzen, *Ruth Rouse among Students*, 232–33.

<sup>63</sup> Addie W. Hunton, *William Alphaeus Hunton: A Pioneer Prophet of Young Men* (New York: Association Press, 1938), 93–94.

<sup>64</sup> *Students and the Modern Missionary Crusade: Addresses Delivered before the Fifth International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, Nashville, Tennessee, February 28–March 4, 1906* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1906), 39–64.

<sup>65</sup> William Hunton described the Nashville SVM conference as one of the biggest disappointments of his life. Hunton, *William Alphaeus Hunton*, 93, 104.



dimensions. . . . In a day of inflamed race relations he helped to usher in a period of conciliation, good will, and brotherhood.<sup>66</sup>

After the Nashville and Tokyo conferences, race issues remained a top priority for the American students of the World Student Christian Federation. Recruitment of African Americans at black colleges into the WSCF remained strong. At the Oxford gathering of the WSCF in 1909 it was reported that one hundred black colleges in the U.S. were active in the WSCF.<sup>67</sup> The Lake Mohonk, New York, gathering of the WSCF in 1913 was also the first WSCF meeting where there was significant Latin American representation.<sup>68</sup> The WSCF gatherings were important due to the way they introduced students from many different cultures and races to one another and the way they helped train leaders, some of whom went on to serve in national governments around the world.<sup>69</sup>

Mott's cross-cultural exposure through the YMCA, the SVM, and the WSCF prior to Edinburgh 1910 doubtless contributed to the high regard he demonstrated for "the younger churches" discussed in his Commission 1 report.<sup>70</sup> Mott's invitation to V. S. Azariah to not only attend the Edinburgh gathering but to also go on a spiritual retreat with just six other Edinburgh Conference leaders prior to the meeting was a powerful expression of the friendship between Mott and Azariah. A few days later Azariah would trumpet the need for more friendships like this when he criticized missionaries who "promise us thrones in heaven, but will not offer us chairs in your drawing rooms." "You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for *love*. Give us FRIENDS!"<sup>71</sup> He had experienced that friendship with Mott in preceding years and in a spiritual retreat just days before. He was asking for more. William Alphaeus Hunton had asked for the same thing four years earlier at the 1906 segregated Nashville gathering of the SVM. Mott's invitation for Hunton to give an address a year later at the WSCF

<sup>66</sup>Hunton, *William Alphaeus Hunton*, Foreword.

<sup>67</sup>Mott, *Addresses and Papers*, 2:100–103.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>69</sup>H. R. Weber, *Asia and the Ecumenical Movement* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 19–20. The WSCF structure before World War I made it possible for organizations like the European Student Relief to function effectively in situations of conflict because relationships across cultural and racial lines had already been developed.

<sup>70</sup>See Mott, *Report of Commission 1*, 318–43.

<sup>71</sup>Azariah, cited in Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 123–25.

conference in Tokyo was one expression of their friendship that sought to transcend the experience of segregation in the Jim Crow South.<sup>72</sup>

The global WSCF gatherings brought attention to the problem of race on a worldwide scale for many students and church leaders, but the problems in the United States were especially difficult for Mott to handle. Mott's sense of American nationalism tended to see the American experience as exemplary for the rest of the world, even as he also came to see the growing importance of mission efforts of Christians outside North America. At the Atlanta Negro Christian Student Conference of 1914, Mott and others sought to reach a greater number of African American students than had been possible at these previous events. The purpose of this conference was

(1) to give to the present generation of Negro students in the United States a strong spiritual and moral impulse; (2) to study with thoroughness their responsibility for leadership in Christian work at home and abroad, thus bringing them face to face with Christian life callings; (3) to face the responsibility resting upon the Negro Churches of America to help meet the claims and crises of Africa; (4) to consider what light Christian thought may throw on present and future cooperation between the races.<sup>73</sup>

Mott's leadership in coordinating the Atlanta conference of 1914 illustrates how much issues of race were a matter of growing concern for him in the years after 1906. It further shows how racial justice in the U.S. was, for Mott, inextricably tied to the worldwide dimension of the problem and the worldwide need for a solution.<sup>74</sup> This global exposure to the problem of race helped Mott to view African Americans differently and far less prejudicially than many white Americans of his day.

<sup>72</sup>The 1910 Edinburgh Conference also saw the participation of at least six African American representatives, a statistic frequently overlooked by missiologists who rightly lament the lack of representation from the African continent. Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 78. Elsewhere Stanley has criticized Mott's view toward Africans expressed in the Commission I report. See Brian Stanley, "Mission and Human Identity in the Light of Edinburgh 1910," *Mission Studies* 26/1 (2009): 91.

<sup>73</sup>A. M. Trawick, *The New Voice in Race Adjustments: Addresses and Reports Presented at the Negro Christian Student Conference, Atlanta May 14-18, 1914* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement), 1914.

<sup>74</sup>In future years Methodist mission professor Edmund Soper would convene a series of conferences to discuss the worldwide nature of racism. See Edmund Soper, *Racism: A World Issue* (Nashville: Abindgon, 1947).

The proceedings from the Atlanta 1914 conference suggest that the gathering was moderate in its tone, but that segregation was nonetheless condemned by the platform speakers. Interestingly, five of the ten members of the organizing committee for this event were from one of the Methodist denominations in the United States (MEC, MECS, AMEC). The conference itself was far from an exclusively Methodist event even if this high proportion of Methodist participation shows that sometimes it was in Methodist circles that Mott tried out new initiatives. Student participation at this event was entirely comprised of African American representatives mostly from black colleges. Of the 665 persons present only 70 were white. Mott had never been chairperson of a gathering where blacks so overwhelmingly outnumbered whites—a ratio of nearly 10 to 1.

Mott's pronouncements against segregation at the Atlanta 1914 gathering and efforts at promoting leadership development of ethnic minorities in the U.S. and abroad stand in stark contrast with the segregationist policies of President Woodrow Wilson, who was a friend of Mott's from the time when Wilson served as president of Princeton University. Wilson's segregationist policies after his election in 1912 and his racist attitudes toward African Americans are well-known to historians of the period.<sup>75</sup>

While it is clear that Mott and Wilson had dramatically different views on the issue of race in America, there is no evidence of direct confrontation between these two men concerning their differing opinions. This is not entirely surprising. They rarely saw one another, and their friendship largely stemmed from a shared love for college students. Nonetheless, Wilson clearly respected Mott a great deal and was deeply disappointed when Mott turned down his invitation to serve as ambassador to China in 1913, by which time Wilson's racist policies were becoming clear in his administration. Mott's and Wilson's reactions, for example, to the racist film "Birth of a Nation" were strikingly different. Wilson may have praised the film when it came out in 1915, perhaps the first film ever to be shown in the White House.<sup>76</sup> Mott, by contrast, ensured that screenings of the film were stopped in YMCA chapters

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<sup>75</sup>Michael Dennis, "Race and the Southern Imagination: Woodrow Wilson Reconsidered," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 29/3 (1999): 109–31. For a nuanced examination of Wilson's views on race see John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), 271–73.

<sup>76</sup>James Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 100–101. Cooper (*Woodrow Wilson*, 272–73) calls into question whether Woodrow Wilson actually praised this film.

around the country.<sup>77</sup> Few things could have inhibited Mott's and the YMCA's goals of Christian unity for the sake of mission as much as that film. By contrast, Wilson's beliefs about African Americans' racial inferiority held strong throughout his student years and his political career.

If the historical record is unclear on Mott's attitudes toward Woodrow Wilson's racism, one can say with confidence that Mott's rhetoric against racism became more robust (if still episodic) after World War I. In a July 1921 issue of *The Student World* Mott strongly criticized the Christian church for its racist attitudes:

It is against such background that the apostasy of many of Christ's professed followers to-day stands in such black relief. The hatred and abuse of coloured races by the whites, or of white races by the coloured is reminiscent of the jungle and of the primitive blood feud. That it persists even under the shadow of cross-tipped church spires proves not the impotence of Christ but the infidelity of his disciples.<sup>78</sup>

The January 1924 Student Volunteer Movement conference in Indianapolis was a watershed event in the SVM's history due to the resolutions passed against racism and in promoting interracial study groups in dorms and clubs on college campuses.<sup>79</sup> Later in the year four books on race appeared; three of these were authored by Mott's close colleagues Basil Matthews, Joseph Oldham, and Robert Speer. The fourth book, *Race Relations and the Christian Ideal*, was written as a study guide following the 1924 Indianapolis gathering to help students put into practice the resolutions passed at the SVM gathering. Veteran leaders of the foreign missionary movement Oldham and Speer both wrote lengthy treatises on the problem of race and sought to make sense of the changing ideas about race and racial conflict observed around the world.<sup>80</sup>

Mott's growing convictions concerning the problem of racism in America between 1906 and the 1920s, however, did not entirely displace his conservative

<sup>77</sup> Matthews, *John R. Mott*, 304.

<sup>78</sup> Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865–1955*, 626.

<sup>79</sup> The Methodist Episcopal Church also passed resolutions against racism at its May 1924 General Conference. For more on racial justice efforts in the YMCA see David P. Setran, *The College "Y": Student Religion in the Era of Secularization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 231.

<sup>80</sup> Basil Matthews, *The Clash of Color: A Study in the Problem of Race*, (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1924); Joseph H.

sensitivity toward those whom he might offend. The very cautious qualifications Mott makes on the problem of segregation in a 1931 publication illustrate this conservatism most clearly:

Generally speaking, the Christian conscience of the world, so far as I know, does not rest upon segregation as the ultimate ideal or practice for the solution of the race problem. The Christian spirit is necessarily missionary and inclusive, and cannot be content to let any barriers permanently remain between man and man.<sup>81</sup>

Mott did not wish barriers to “permanently remain” nor did he see segregation as the “ultimate ideal,” but could such barriers remain for decades to come? Could they be a penultimate ideal? Mott chose his words carefully and never elaborated on such things.

Mott also refused to speak out in opposition to the segregationist policies enacted by his own denomination, the Methodist Church, at its Uniting Conference of 1939. Mott’s prominent role in leading legislative sessions to unify the mission boards of the southern and northern churches and his stirring rhetoric concerning the importance of unity in Christian endeavors was tragically muted in the deliberations concerning a separate “Central Jurisdiction” for African American Methodists in the new denomination. Nor was the problem of segregation in the new denomination mentioned in Mott’s (ironically entitled) mission study book that he wrote for the Methodist Church, *Methodists United for Action*.

In the final analysis, Mott’s position on race relations was complicated and inconsistent and only haltingly moved toward a more progressive stance. At times his rhetoric could be soaring in its aspirations for world friendship that sought out Christian unity and crossed boundaries of race and class. One catches a glimpse of this in his reflections on Ephesians 4 at a 1925 missionary conference where Mott proclaimed that

. . . the Church which is His body cannot be perfected until they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it—that is to say, until the spiritual characteristics of every race and Christian name

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Oldham, *Christianity and the Race Problem* (London: SCM Press, 1924); Robert E. Speer, *Race and Race Relations: A Christian View of Human Contacts* (New York: Fleming H. Revel, 1924).

<sup>81</sup>John R. Mott, *Present-Day Summons to the World Mission of Christianity* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1931): 104

have been, not submerged, but brought to their individual perfection, in a perfect whole.<sup>82</sup>

Such visions of perfection which clearly echoed Methodist holiness rhetoric were difficult for Mott to fully live out in his leadership of ecumenical and denominational gatherings. Perhaps more so than in any other area, Mott's attitudes and actions on the problem of racism illustrate that he was a far greater master of compromise than he was a prophet.

### Conclusion

John R. Mott's desire to promote unity for the sake of mission was expressed in many different ways and created a number of tensions in his life. I have argued in this paper that Mott's Methodism was important throughout his career. At the same time, because of his emphasis on unity for the sake of mission, Mott was always strikingly open to unity with Christians of other denominations and theological views. This was perhaps most profound in the case of his unwillingness to more strongly criticize the findings of the LFMI in spite of the fact that its theology of religions was more liberal than Mott's own theological outlook. Mott's theology of religions held firmly to the importance of Christian evangelism while also striving to honestly engage persons of other faiths. On the matter of race, the contrast between his attempt to encourage African American leadership and his blind-eyed inaction toward segregationist moves as elder Methodist statesman illustrates that Mott's desire for racial unity was sometimes compromised by his desire to promote institutional unity.

In assessing Mott's contributions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it is instructive to compare him to another Methodist leader from a century prior. As John H. Wigger's recent biography of Francis Asbury helps to illustrate, there are a number of parallels between Mott and Asbury in their respective desires to maintain unity in the institutions to which they were committed.<sup>83</sup> Neither can be called great systematic theologians. Both probably spent comparable amounts of time "on the road," even if their access

<sup>82</sup>Mott, cited in Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865–1955*, 626. The idea (expressed in Mott's quotation) that each race in the world brings its own peculiar contribution to spirituality such that race became a kind of epiphenomenon of religion was a rather common theory at the end of the nineteenth century. See Kidd, *The Forging of Races*, 171–72.

<sup>83</sup>John H. Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

to transportation technology differed greatly. Both also compromised in their stands on racism. Asbury and Mott are perhaps best remembered for the way they inspired people in one-to-one encounters. They were trusted, and they had a profound ability to promote trusting relationships among others “that they all might be one.”

### *About the Author*

**Benjamin L. Hartley** is Associate Professor of Christian Mission and Director of United Methodist Studies at Palmer Theological Seminary, the Seminary of Eastern University in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania (suburban Philadelphia). He is an ordained deacon in the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference. His most recently published book is *Evangelicals at a Crossroads: Revivalism and Social Reform in Boston, 1860–1910* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2011). This book received the quadrennial Jesse Lee Prize awarded by the General Commission on Archives and History of the UMC. Previously he has published articles in *Methodist History*, *Quarterly Review*, and *Missiology: An International Review*. Along with Paul Van Buren he also wrote *The Deacon: Ministry through Words of Faith and Acts of Love*, published in 1999 by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the UMC.