

MUSLIMS CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY: A CASE STUDY OF LUCKNOW MISSIONARY CONFERENCE (1911)

Ubaid Ahmad Khan*
Hafiz Naqib Ullah**

ABSTRACT:

In the colonial period a close relation existed between Christian missionaries and western imperialism. In the first half of twentieth century Christian missionaries held several missionary conferences in colonized areas. These conferences were organized by protestant missionary societies to achieve their goals. The objectives of these conferences were to ponder over different problems in missionary fields and to increase conversion towards Christianity of the native people. Interestingly, some of these conferences became known after the name of important cities of the Muslim world, where these conferences were held, such as Cairo conference (1906), Lucknow conference, (1911), Jerusalem conference (1928), and Madras conference (1938). The basic reason behind selection of these Islamic centers seemed to evangelize Muslims and to adopt a missionary approach based upon correct observation of their weak and strong sides. This article deals with the proceedings, themes and findings of Lucknow Missionary Conference (1911) held for the conversion of Indian Muslims towards Christianity.

BACKGROUND OF THE CONFERENCE: CHRISTIAN MISSION AT THE BEGINNING OF TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Christian missionary enterprise had close connections with the political powers during the colonial period. The Christian missionaries found great opportunities in the colonial expansion of western powers and expanded their missionary work to those new areas where western colonial powers were politically dominant. However, in India Christian missionaries faced great resistance from Indian Muslims as was the case in other parts of the Muslim world. Due to this resistance pessimistic views prevailed among missionary thinkers regarding the prospects of mission to Muslims. Apart from Muslims the Christian also concentrated on other social groups like “Out casts” and deprived classes of Hindus because of less resistance on their part.

By the end of 19th century, the situation started changing in favor of Christian missionaries. According to Stephen Neill the beginning of twentieth century brought hope for Christian missions due to the increasing domination of the Western powers. He claimed that at the beginning of twentieth century Christian missionaries were profiting from British political power. They were no more under fear and restriction as was the case in early 19th century. Turkish Empire which was a big hindrance in the progress of Christian missions was declining and Balkan states were getting independence from Turkish Empire and appearing as Christian states. Churches in the West were becoming strong as their membership increased on large scale especially in the United States. Although scientific developments created problems for Christianity as it resulted

* Assistant professor, Department of Islamic Learning, University of Karachi
Email: drubaidkhan@hotmail.com

** Lecturer Government Degree College Pishin ,Baluchistan.
Email: hafiznaqib@yahoo.com,

Date of Receipt: 21-8-2013

in Biblical criticism but overall situation for Christian mission was favorable.¹

So Christianity entered the twentieth century with the strong conviction, as described by the prominent missionary leader J. R. Mott in the following words:

“The evangelization of the world in this generation’.²

This missionary leader and founder of Christian Ecumenical Movement surveyed different missionary fields of the world and reached the conclusion that the non-Christian world was passing through a change and a revolution. He further considered the situation of non-Christian religions as a “plastic situation”. He informed the Christians that this favorable condition may change into rigidity against Christian mission.³ He tried to convince Christians that the conditions were more favorable for them than before. He further elaborated this opportunity in the following words:

“It is decisive hour for the non-Christian nations. Far reaching movements, national, racial, social, economic, religious are shaking them to their foundations. These nations are still plastic...it is the decisive hour for the Christian church. If it neglects to meet successfully the present world crisis by failing to discharge responsibility to the whole world. It will lose its power both on home and on foreign field.⁴

In that favorable atmosphere there were still some areas where Christian missionary work did not reach. John. R. Mott described those areas as “Unoccupied Fields” According to his assessment the unoccupied fields were the following areas: Afghanistan, Turkistan, Bhutan, Nepal and some parts of Arabia like Hijaz, and Najd.⁵

Apart from these unconquered fields, the overall favorable circumstances provided Christian missionaries confidence about the possibility of evangelizing the Muslim world. However, it demanded comprehensive planning and a carefully sketched out strategy. Here Samuel Marinus Zwemer,(1867-1952) an important expert of Muslim missionary field, presented a plan to hold missionary conferences in the areas of Muslim population for their conversion towards Christianity. He succeeded in convening the first conference in Cairo in 1906, under his own chairmanship. In this conference, Christian missionaries working among Muslims surveyed different aspects of their activities and adopted an organized plan for conversion of Muslims. It is interesting to note that previously S. M. Zwemer himself had described the Muslim world “the immovable block” due to inaccessibility and Muslim resistance to Christian mission.⁶

In the beginning of the twentieth century the political situation was in favor of Christian mission in India as in many other parts of the world. They had stations in almost every area of India and lower caste Hindus and aboriginals were converting to Christianity in large numbers through Mass Movements.

According to Stephen Neill in one area alone, one million people from underprivileged classes were converted to Christianity in thirty year missionary work. However, he notes that among the converts very few were Muslims and high caste Hindus.⁷

The mission towards Indian Muslims had great importance for Christian missionaries. The Chairman of Cairo Conference (1906) S. M. Zewemer wrote on the basis of the census of 1901, "The chief numerical strength of the Mohammadan faith, however, is in India, which has a larger Moslim population than all Africa and far more than the total population of Arabia, Persia, and Turkish Empire combined."⁸

Due to this demographical factor, S. M. Zewemer tried to draw the attention of Christian missionaries to this important missionary field. He succeeded in convening General missionary Conference Lucknow (1911) in India. This Conference was convened five years after the General Missionary Conference of Cairo (1906). Christian missionaries selected the city of Lucknow for this Conference because it was an ancient Muslim capital and had geographical importance for its location in the center of India. So the Lucknow conference was held from January 23 to 28 in 1911, in the Hall of Isabella Thoborn College. The Christian Missionaries in this conference concentrated exclusively on the missionary work among Muslims. The reason behind this exclusive strategy was the presence of huge population of Muslims in India and the failure of the earlier Christian missionaries to evangelize them.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE

In the General Missionary Conference Lucknow 160 delegates representing 54 missionary societies participated. The organizers of this conference had taken strict measures to prevent the leakage of program details. They had also arranged an exhibition on Islamic literature in major languages spoken by Muslims and bookstalls on Islamic history and philosophy were also arranged on the occasion.⁹

The important participants and missionary leaders of the Lucknow Conference were: Samuel Marinus Zewemer, the Chairman of the Conference, H. U. Weitbrecht the vice chairman, F. W. Whery, W. H. Gairdner, and George Alfered Lefory, Bishop of Lahore and many more.¹⁰

The organizers of the conference had proposed program for discussions and presentations of papers comprising comprehensive plans for commenced of the Muslim world. The program of Lucknow conference with the speech of chairman of the conference S. M. Zewemer on the following topic.

"General survey of the Muslim world"

Other important topics of discussion by different participants included:

- i) The political changes in the Muslim world.
- ii) Governmental attitudes toward missions to Muslims.
- iii) The pan-Islamic movement and how it affects Muslim evangelization.
- iv) Islam among pagan races and practical measures to check the advance of Islam.
- v) Social and educational developments among Muslim women.
- vi) Conclusions of the conference.¹¹

At the end of conference an appeal was made from churches and different missionary bodies. This appeal emphasized the need to unify Christian forces for accomplishment of the difficult missionary task of Muslim evangelization and to halt the progress of Islam in various lands. The appeal was sent to home boards with the signatures of executive committee of the conference.¹²

The overall attitude of the general Missionary conference Lucknow was negative and offensive regarding Islam. Missionary leaders adopted aggressive approach towards Islam. The participants of this conference were confident to evangelize the Muslim world due to favorable conditions for Christian missions. In spite of their optimism, they were well aware of the formidability of the task. In this connection, they were afraid of the presence of Pan-Islamic sentiments, which in their view were the basic cause behind Muslim resistance.

We may conclude that the aggressive approach of Lucknow conference concerning Islam was twofold:

- (a) To stop the progressive spread of Islam.
- (b) To triumph over Muslims and convert them to Christianity.

The reason behind this negative approach which Christian missionaries adopted in this conference was due to the participants of this conference, especially, the chairman of the conference S. M. Zewemer. Throughout his missionary career and writings he misrepresented Islam. He attributed false ideas to Islam. The key reason behind his approach was to present Islam in a distorted form and prove the superiority of Christianity over it.

The important thing to be noted here is that, G. A. Lefory, Bishop of Lahore in the closing address of the Lucknow conference criticized the offensive approach toward Islam and suggested to the participants of the conference that criticism of Islam must be done carefully, the good aspects of Islam should also be recognized. He further viewed that the approach of former missionary leaders had complicated their goal of evangelization of Muslims. He pointed out that their negative approach was the chief cause of slow progress of Christian missions in the sub-continent.¹³

THEMES AND ISSUES OF THE CONFERENCE

Now, let us mention the important themes of General Missionary Conference Lucknow. In this conference, the missionaries discussed evangelization of Muslims in detail. The delegates presented papers on issues related to problems and obstacles in the way of missionary objectives. The point to be noted is that the discussions in this conference were focused exclusively on evangelization of Muslims. The major themes of Lucknow conference were the following.

- (a) Pan-Islamism and its bearings on Christian mission.
- (b) Training of Christian missionaries for evangelization of Muslims.
- (c) Missionary literature for Muslims.
- (d) Integrated policy of the missionaries to counter spread of Islam.

Each of these themes is detailed below:

(a) Pan-Islamism and its Bearings on Christian Mission.

One of the Lucknow Conference's important themes was the flourishing pan-Islamic movement and its impact on Christian mission. The missionaries considered this movement as a major threat for Christian mission and an obstacle in the way of Christianization of Muslims. The movement was seen as a source of motivation for Muslim brotherhood and unity. It was recognized that Islamic beliefs and rituals play a vital role in uniting the Muslim world. Particularly the ritual of Hajj was focused upon in which Muslims from all over the world despite their ethnic difference come together and display their unity.

In this regard the Lucknow conference emphasized the Christian unity in the following words.

“As the Muslim hajj makes for the spirit of unity and Pan-Islamism, so must Christian unity mark all our policy and strategy; there must be one united front and in all great moves, the forces at work must move in concert”.¹⁴

In the same vein, the chairman of Lucknow conference S. M. Zewemer suggested in his book that: “We must meet Pan-Islamism with Pan-evangelism”.¹⁵

The point made above indicates that the famous Ecumenical Movement in Christianity emerged in the context of Pan-Islamic movement. So it can be maintained that Pan-Islamism among Muslims was one of the important factors behind emergence of ecumenical movement among Christians.

(b) Training of Christian Missionaries for Evangelization of Muslims.

The second important theme of the Lucknow conference was the training and qualification of Christian missionaries for the conversion of Muslims, in view of strong resistance from Muslims. Let us mention here some important ideas presented by the Conference delegates on this subject:

Professor R. S. McClenahan from Egypt emphasized the selection of trained and competent missionaries having appropriate qualification for the evangelization of two hundred million Muslims. He highlighted that Muslim population at that time was one seventh of the world population. He also noted the uncompromising and self satisfactory attitude of the Muslims. On the issue of training, he emphasized that missionaries working among Muslims must be experts of respective languages and familiarise themselves with Islamic literature especially with the text of the Quran. Furthermore, he advised the missionaries working among Muslims that they must avoid western style and manner of life like language, dress and so on, while dealing with Muslims because it is intolerable to them.¹⁶

S. M. Zewemer, the chairman of the conference brought forth some social issues like eating pork. He advised that the Christian missionaries must be “Muslim” to Muslims.¹⁷

Ahamad Shah from India emphasized the importance of learning Arabic language alongside the local languages. He analyzed in detail the syllabus of traditional Islamic institutions such as Dāral ’ulum Deoband and Nadwat- al ’ulāmā. He prescribed the syllabus of these institutions for the missionaries sent to India. However, he modified the above mentioned syllabus and considered some books unnecessary for Christian missionaries¹⁸. According to him for the Christian missionaries it is possible to study eight year course in only three years.

C. G. Mylrea finally proposed establishment of a training school for Christian missionaries in Cairo to increase their qualification.¹⁹

(c) Missionary Literature for Muslims.

Another important theme of the Lucknow conference was preparation and production of specific Christian literature for Muslims. In this regard the following views were presented in the Lucknow missionary conference:

H. U. Weitrech presented the details of languages spoken by Muslims and emphasized on the production of Christian literature in these languages. According to him Arabic was spoken by 45 million: and Urdu by nine million (but a shared dialect of 62 millions), Persian, by 9 million, Bangali, by 23 million, Punjabi, by 13 million, Pashto, by 12 million, and Sindhi by 2 million. He further stressed the need of the production of Christian literature in English language for the modern educated Muslims influenced by the west. Then he presented the catalogue of books of Christian literature in four important languages spoken by Muslims. The Urdu catalogue alone consisted of 72 books and other pamphlets.²⁰

E. M. Wherry detailed the production of Christian literature and periodicals in Urdu language. According to him the production of Christian literature in Urdu language started with Karl Gottlieb Pfander(1803-1865) with his book “Mīzān - ul haq”. Then he mentioned those Muslim 'Ulāmā' who engaged in polemics against Christians like Rahmat Allah Kayrnāwi and Dr Wazīr Khān. He tried to demonstrate the superiority of Pfander in the polemical debates. In his article he also ventured to raise some objections to Islamic faith and praised the aggressive Christian writers like Pfander, William Muir, and St. W. Clair Tisdall. His views indicate that orientalism played active role in Christian mission as did the colonial power.

By contrast, Canon. J. Ali Bakhs in his article pointed out that the production of Christian literature should be in a conciliarity tone. He criticized the controversial style of Christian literature. He maintained that their indecent attacks on Islam had compelled Muslims to take aggressive attitude toward Christian faith. This was in his view, dangerous for the spreading of Christianity. He further said that their aggressive style had been counterproductive and thus the idea of corruption of Bible had become more common among Muslims. Muslims had clung to their position that Europeans themselves approved the corruption in bible and at the same time were propagating it on a large scale.²¹

Here it seems appropriate to quote W. Wilson Cash:

“Missionaries during the past fifty years have learned much, and probably some of the older controversial work should be now scraped. Christians have come to understand the Muslim mind better, and through this experience have learned to approach the Muslims not as antagonist, but rather in the spirit of love as one brother seeking to help another along life 's way....”²²

(d) Integrated Policy of the Missionaries to counter the spread of Islam.

Another important consideration of Lucknow Conference was to draw an integrated policy against the spread of Islam.

The situation in Muslim world compelled the missionaries to take a united action of all Christian churches. They considered the efforts of individual societies working among Muslims insufficient due to their weakness and lack of strength. C. G. Mylrea, a delegate at the conference, proposed the following solution: “Advance and advance all along the line, is the only way in which both the progress of Islam among pagan races can be arrested, by preoccupying the field and also by direct evangelization of the Muslims”.²³

He further referred to the progress of Islam in Africa and other parts of the world and emphasized the Christian missionaries to take urgent practical measures to stop Muslim advance. In this regard an appeal was made from western and Indian churches to take active part in missionary enterprise to counter the

progress of Islam and convert Muslims to Christianity. For this purpose the training of Christian missionaries and their relevant qualification were emphasized.²⁴

RESOLUTIONS OF THE CONFERENCE.

As mentioned earlier, the proceedings of Lucknow Conference were published for private circulation among missionaries working in Muslim areas. The resolutions of Luknow Conference were classified as “Confidential”. These resolutions were related to Christianization of Muslims and countering the spread and progress of Islam. Now, we will discuss these resolutions one by one:

- i) The next missionary conference about the Muslim world will be convened in Cairo in 1916. If the political situation was not good to hold it there, London will be the alternative place.
- ii) A follow up committee was formed to implement the resolutions passed at the Lucknow Conference and to make arrangements for the upcoming conference.
- iii) The Conference recognized the weakness of Christian missionaries working among Muslims and identified the causes of their weakness. The conference also made an appeal to rectify these deficiencies.
- iv) The consistent progress of Islam in different parts of the world was noticed and it was strongly recommended for the Christian organizations and mission boards to take practical and prompt measures to stop the advance of Islam. A comprehensive policy for the evangelization of Muslims was emphasized.
- v) The Conference accepted the findings of International Missionary Conference Edinburgh (1910) on how to stop the advance of Islam, especially in Africa. It recommended practical action of Christian missionaries in this regard.
- vi) The Conference emphasized the need for establishment of a college in Cairo for the training of missionaries working among Muslims. It further recommended that missionaries for Muslim evangelization should be highly qualified and specially trained in Islamic history and related disciplines.²⁵ For this purpose the Henry Martin School was established in 1930 in India to equip the Christian missionaries and develop in them an understanding of Islam. Thus, the conference provided the bases for the establishment of Henry Martin School.²⁶
- vii) The Conference showed keen interest in evangelistic work among depressed and animistic communities to stop the Muslim progress among these tribes. It is believed that the sole reason behind this decision was to increase Christian population as they had faced great resistance from Muslims and high caste Hindus.
- viii) The Conference recommended the preparation and production of Christian literature for Muslims by experts and trained Christian missionaries. It further emphasized on the selection and establishment of important centers

- in Muslim world to make possible easy supply of Christian literature to Muslims.
- ix) The Conference recommended that female Christians should work for the evangelization of Muslim women.
 - x) Another resolution of Lucknow conference was about the Muslim advance in Africa. The conference stressed on Christian churches to increase missionary efforts there. It was further recommended to Indian Christian missionaries to help the church in Africa.
 - xi) The Conference highlighted some policies of colonial governments which had created difficulties for Christian mission.
 - xii) The Conference demanded from the colonial powers to compel Turkish government to give freedom and create suitable conditions for the Christian mission in all Turkish territories.²⁷

RESULTS FOR MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE IN INDIA

Despite the efforts of organized missionary societies and conferences with their huge expenditures and support of the colonial government, they failed in achieving their objectives. Missionaries mostly succeeded in converting only the depressed and outcast Hindus furthermore failed to convert Muslims and high caste Hindus to Christianity. It is right that Christian missionaries succeeded in increasing Christian population in India, but it is also a matter of fact that this increase in population occurred through Mass Movements amongst depressed classes of Hindus only.

In this regard Christian historian Stephen Neill admitted that Christianity in the sub-continent remained the religion of poor and depressed people. Christian missionaries hardly succeeded in converting the followers of three dominant religions of the sub-continent, namely Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Eventually, Pakistan become a Muslim, India a Hindu, and Sri Lanka a Buddhist country.²⁸

Christian missionaries found greatest difficulties and opposition from Muslims. Due to this reason Charlis R. Watson considered the expansion of missionary work among Muslims to be “microscopic”. He wrote: “Missionary work in Muslim lands have a strange fatality for turning away from Muslims and addressing itself to non-Muslim groups. The latter are generally pagans, as in Africa; Hindus and out casts, as in India.”²⁹

REFERENCES

- 1- Neill, Stephen,(ed) *Twentieth Century Christianity : A Survey of Modern Religious Trends by Leading Church Men*.pp, 1-5.
- 2- Ibid.p, 225.
- 3- Mott, john R. *The Decisive Hour of Christian Mission*. (London: The Christian Literature Society for India,1912)
- 4- Ibid, pp, 180-181.
- 5- Ibid. pp, 76-77.
- 6- Bengt, Sundkler. *The World of Mission*, p, 218.

-
- 7- Neill, Stephen,(ed) *Twentieth Century Christianity : A survey of modern religious trends by leading church men*, pp,12-13.
 - 8- Zwemer, Samuel. M, *Islam a Challenge to Faith*. p,161.
 - 9- *Lucknow, 1911: Papers and Discussions of Lucknow Missionary Conference*, (London; The Christian Literature Society for India, 1911), pp, 7-9.
 - 10- See for the detail of all participants: Ibid, pp, 12-24.
 - 11- See for the detail of thesis topics: Al- Khaṭīb, Muḥib u Dīn and al yāfi, Sa'īd (tr.) *Al-ghārah 'il 'ālamī islāmī ,Al- dārassa'udīyya linnashri watawziḥ. jidāh,1985.*
 - 12- *Lucknow, 1911: Papers and discussions of Lucknow Missionary Conference*, pp, 30-33.
 - 13- Ibid, pp, 258-260.
 - 14- *Lucknow, 1911: Papers and discussions of Lucknow Missionary conference*, p, 10.
 - 15- Zwemer, Samuel. M, *Islam a Challenge to Faith*, p.240.
 - 16- *Lucknow, 1911: Papers and Discussions of Lucknow Missionary conference*, pp, 46-59.
 - 17- Ibid, p,71.
 - 18- Ibid, pp,8597.
 - 19- Ibid, p,115.
 - 20- Ibid, pp, 118-127.
 - 21- Ibid, pp, 169-170.
 - 22- Cash, W. Wilson, *The Muslim World in Revolution* (London: Edinburgh House Press,1926),p87.
 - 23- *Lucknow, 1911: Papers and discussions of Lucknow Missionary Conference*, p,209.
 - 24- Ibid, pp, 210-212.
 - 25- Ibid, pp, 34-38.
 - 26- See for detail: Lelvis, Patricia M, *The Henry Martin School of Islamic studies of India: its History and Function*,(Hertford: Seminary Foundation,1970)
 - 27- *Lucknow, 1911: Papers and Discussions of Lucknow Missionary Conference*,pp,38-42.
 - 28- Neill, Stephen, *Under Three Flags*, pp,68-70, New York: Friendship Press, 1954.
 - 29- Watson, Charles R, *What is this Muslim World?*,p,153 New York: Friendship Press, 1937..