

Europe, Britain and America: Extracting a European voice from the historical debate about mission



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Europeans, including the British, have long gazed wonderingly (and some would say enviously) at Americans, convinced that they are that tricky phenomenon, the neighbour who is like us but, at the same time, somehow very different. Ever since the young American nation emerged, we Europeans have been busy analysing 'American exceptionalism'.¹ And we are amazed that a society which had its origins, generally speaking, in European culture, has been so changed by its experience of the New World. Also we are not quite sure what the relationship between us should be. Are we friends, or rivals or just plain incompatible?

The issue that this essay wants to raise is whether these questions have any importance for the way we think about and conduct mission today. Is there a European way? Is it different from an American way? Are two voices better than one, and has one obscured the other? Another question might be: is there any sense in which Europe speaks with a unified voice? Are the British, for example, while so obviously part of Europe geographically, more akin in their thinking to their American cousins than their European neighbours? In the past, as we shall see, many Continentals spoke of the 'Anglo-Americans'² as if they were one constituency and Europe was another.

As a way in, I am going to make an appeal to history. I do this because, despite its contemporary flavour, these are not new debates. Particularly if we think of the history of the modern missionary movement as predominantly one which has little to do with Europe (Britain excepted), then immediately we need the corrective that Continental historians of mission have been trying to apply ever since the nineteenth century. Also, in striving to be heard, these historians have often voiced their concern precisely in terms of a critique of Anglo-American missiology. So let me set the scene.

The most obvious gap in the history of the modern missionary movement, at least as told by the Anglo-Americans, is the virtual silence that surrounds the Pietist and Moravian missionaries. I shall not try to tell their story here (another case of silence perhaps!) but William Carey, often called the 'Founder of Modern Missions', reached India almost a century *after* the first Pietist missionaries, Ziegenbalg and Plütschau, had been sent to India from Halle in North Germany. Furthermore the science of mission, a scholarly study of its history and theology, began on the Continent, and its proponents, men like Karl Graul (1814-64), Gustav Warneck (1834-1910) and Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965)³ produced work which (with the exception of the output of David Bosch – not an Anglo-American either) has not been equalled since. It has not been equalled but it has been ignored. It is not a coincidence that Gustav Warneck's work on missiology, *Evangelische Missionlehre*, has never even been translated into English.⁴

This marginalisation of Continental European mission is a long story but I want to pick out Gustav Warneck as somebody who directly confronted the issue in his day. He added the important question: is there a significant difference between mission as done by Anglo-Americans and Continental Europeans? There were, perhaps two 'big issues'. Warneck was suspicious of the thought of the two most influential figures in Anglo-American nineteenth century missiology, Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, and their disciples such as John Nevius and Roland Allen. He felt that they had over emphasised the issue of church autonomy at the expense of a more thoroughgoing indigenisation of the gospel., and that this

led to churches gaining a premature independence based on what he called 'liberal and republican'⁵ ideas. If there were no long-term and painstaking indigenisation of the gospel then there would be no 'rooting in the life of the people'.⁶ The other (related) issue was the dispute with John Mott and his followers over the ethos of the Student Volunteer Movement with its slogan 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation' and its accompanying eschatology. Now, there is much to be said on both sides of each of these issues. What I am at pains to point out is the depth and quality of the debate and its antiquity. Warneck raised these issues at the Missionary Conferences in London (1888), in New York (1900) and at the great Edinburgh Conference (1910). Though he did not attend any of these conferences he did make his views felt, and by a variety of means. (His non-attendance was partly in protest. English was the only official language at the Conferences and Warneck was not wrong in believing that Continental missions would find it hard to have their voice heard.) Always you sense that he and his colleagues were fearful that they would be sidelined and their viewpoints misunderstood or ignored.⁷

This may all sound like the beat of a 'a very distant drum'. Perhaps. But something was afoot here that we need to be aware of. There are plans, I gather, for another Edinburgh Conference, a hundred years after the first one. It would be sad if the same issues surface in 2010 still unresolved. So let me try to pinpoint what I think those issues were. Not all of these come from the Warneck era, but all of them, I believe, are still relevant to mission today. And let me try to express them in terms of a European 'voice'. This is what *they* (the Europeans) have wanted to say to *us* (the Anglo-Americans).

- The Anglo-American approach, following Carey and the BMS, has always favoured the missionary society,⁸ and indeed many Continentals have followed Carey's example. On the whole, however, this has provided the wrong framework; church based mission is to be preferred. This over emphasis on the role of the missionary society stems from a defective ecclesiology. (This debate has re-surfaced in our day. I am not saying, of course, that there were no Continental missionary societies, but that the foremost Continental missiologists 'continued to consider missionary work as a task for the church'.⁹)
- Anglo-Americans have not taken indigenisation sufficiently seriously. Consider, by way of contrast Karl Graul, who was passionately committed to what he called *Volkskirche* i.e. churches which adequately expressed the spirit of a particular people.¹⁰ While this may sound a little suspicious in the light of his proximity to later Nazi theories, the issues raised have never gone away.
- An impatient desire for closure – to see the missionary task completed 'in our generation' – leads to a wrong eschatology and vice versa.
- Proclamation cannot be promoted as an end in itself. This is to confuse proclamation and 'making disciples' (Matthew 28:19).
- The Kingdom of God must not be given an emphasis which excludes the church. It is worth recalling that between the World Wars, Hendrik Kraemer, in particular, was highly critical of the tendency of many American missionaries to equate the Kingdom of God with American ideals. (Karl Barth was even more scathing about German attempts to equate the Kingdom of God with German culture.)
- We need to fear the attitude which might be called 'the managerial mind'. This favours commercial and administrative models, perhaps even sociology and management theory rather than theology. It is based on 'idealism, optimism, activism and pragmatism'¹¹ (those great American virtues) which, by themselves, are no recipe for realistic mission praxis.

- A number of issues still cluster around the famous missionary slogans such as 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation'. Was this little more than superficial propaganda? More seriously, did this sort of fizzy (sic) enthusiasm preclude the possibility of solid, careful work? Were the sloganeers merely impatient people who could not wait God's time, and was not God's purpose seen much more clearly in the historical process than in men's preconceived ideas? Did all this lead to an unhelpful diffusion of effort, to a search for quick results and to an unhealthy reliance on numbers instead of a realisation that slow growth is often healthy growth. Is something of the same spirit still at work today?

I have couched this comparison between Anglo-American and Continental European thought largely in terms of the European critique of Anglo-American methods and models. I realise that much could be said on the other side and that my approach may sound rather negative. So, at risk of being somewhat repetitive, I thought I would try to express the European attitudes in a more positive way. They are characterised by:

- An acceptance of the often slow, long-term nature of mission, a sort of 'I planted, Apollos watered, God gave the increase' approach.
- A concern for the planting of churches which are not just 'independent', but also genuinely representative of the local culture.
- A mission practice which is based on a sound mission theology, along with a careful relegation of the other sciences to their proper place.
- Mission societies which are working together with churches and not independently of them.
- A definition of the kingdom of God which avoids 'culture Christianity' and gives due weight to ecclesiology.
- An avoidance of an unduly managerial approach, bearing in mind that 'successful' models of human enterprise are not always the best for the practice of mission
- A more 'peaceful' state of mind; less dramatic emphasis, less excited enthusiasm, less 'hype'.

My own feeling is that we need to hear these voices. Of course I may not be hearing them correctly myself, but this article is not intending so much to expound Continental missiology, but rather to set the scene in *Encounters* in such a way that its voice can be heard! The rift between Anglo-American and Continental missiology was not helped by two world wars. Nor has American hegemony since then, both in world politics and in the practice of mission, made it any easier to close the divide. All the more reason then that we find a space where European Continental missiology is free to express itself.

¹ The earliest and still classic text is Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* which was published in 1835.

² My own opinion is that 'Anglo-American' is a useful term, but more so at some times than others. The historical period under review includes a number of episodes (for example the Edinburgh Conference) in which there was something of a united front between the Americans and the British.

³ For further information on Graul, Warneck and Kraemer in the context of European Continental missiology see Jan Jongeneel, *European-Continental Perceptions and Critiques of British and American Protestant Missions*, a paper published by the North Atlantic Missiology Project in 1998. I owe a great deal to this paper for the historical section of this essay.

⁴ Jongeneel, p. 9

⁵ Ibid p. 11

⁶ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 p. 21. Yates writes very perceptively about the American-European debate.

⁷ Jongeneel, pp. 9-11

⁸ See e.g. Andrew Walls, 'Missionary Societies and the Fortunate Subversion of the Church' chapter 18 in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1996

⁹ Jongeneel pp. 5,6

¹⁰ Ibid pp. 8,9

¹¹ This is the language of Hendrik Kraemer. See again Jongeneel p. 13

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