

SPU Works

11-2022

The 1921 Founding of the International Missionary Council in the Life of John R. Mott

Benjamin L. Hartley
Seattle Pacific University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/works>

Recommended Citation

Hartley, B.L. (2022), The 1921 Founding of the International Missionary Council in the Life of John R. Mott. *International Review of Mission*, 111: 253-267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12431>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ SPU. It has been accepted for inclusion in SPU Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ SPU.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Hartley, B.L. (2022), The 1921 Founding of the International Missionary Council in the Life of John R. Mott. International Review of Mission, 111: 253-267., which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12431>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions. This article may not be enhanced, enriched or otherwise transformed into a derivative work, without express permission from Wiley or by statutory rights under applicable legislation. Copyright notices must not be removed, obscured or modified. The article must be linked to Wiley's version of record on Wiley Online Library and any embedding, framing or otherwise making available the article or pages thereof by third parties from platforms, services and websites other than Wiley Online Library must be prohibited.

The 1921 Founding of the International Missionary Council in the Life of John R. Mott

Benjamin L. Hartley

Abstract: The 1921 beginning of the International Missionary Council (IMC) at Lake Mohonk, New York represented a “pivot point” in the life of John R. Mott (1865-1955). It symbolized for him and other participants a bold initiative in international missionary collaboration that had ramifications for liberal internationalism well beyond the Christian movement itself. World War I was devastating for millions throughout the world, but for Mott it was also a time where his influence in world affairs grew. This article focuses on the years after the war as a time of many challenges and disappointments for Mott as he struggled with nationalisms, racism, and the dire effects of colonialism. Student movements which he championed (the YMCA, the World’s Student Christian Federation, and the Student Volunteer Movement) also began to go in theological directions with which Mott sometimes disagreed. Mott further experienced setbacks during these post-war years in his efforts to promote collaboration in mission. He nonetheless possessed hope for a new era of international missionary cooperation that the IMC inaugurated.

When John R. Mott gathered in the autumn of 1921 with sixty representatives of the world missionary movement at Lake Mohonk, New York to inaugurate the International Missionary Council (IMC), he was on familiar ground. Apart from annual student gatherings at Northfield, Massachusetts, no conference venue anywhere in the world was more frequently utilized by Mott than Lake Mohonk. Beautifully situated amidst the lakes and streams of the

Catskill Mountains, Lake Mohonk was a place where Mott organized or attended conferences four times before the 1921 meeting that established the IMC. His last visit before 1921 was to attend the Conference on International Arbitration in May of 1914.¹

A great deal had changed in the world – and for Mott – between the Conference on International Arbitration in May of 1914 (three months prior to the war’s onset) and the Lake Mohonk meeting in 1921. Heady confidence in the possibilities of the American peace movement in 1914 turned to somber disappointment in 1921 as people grieved the loss of millions of dead soldiers and civilians. The carnage of war had by no means ceased. Mott gave a speech in January of 1920 where he acknowledged the twenty-three wars raging in the world that were a direct result of the “Great War.”²

As awful as the war years were for everyone, for Mott they were also when his influence in world affairs grew. Mott’s relationship with President Wilson exemplified his growing influence. A year prior to the arbitration conference’s meeting, Mott turned down Wilson’s invitation to serve as ambassador to China, but he continued to advise him on foreign relations throughout his presidency, meeting with him in-person at least nine times during Wilson’s eight years in office.³ Mott served as a diplomat for the Wilson administration on two occasions. His

¹ This was an annual gathering for the American peace movement at Lake Mohonk. Mott only once mentioned his attendance at the twentieth annual Conference on International Arbitration. Letter from John R. Mott to J. H. Oldham, May 30, 1914, Box 26.0005, Folder 1914, WCC Archive, Geneva, Switzerland. For more on the conferences on international arbitration see Cecilie Reid, "American Internationalism: Peace Advocacy and International Relations, 1895-1916," PhD dissertation, Boston College, 2005.

² Fennell P. Turner, ed., *Foreign Missions Conference of North America: Being the Report of the Twenty-Seventh Conference of Foreign Missions Boards in the United States and Canada, at the Hotel Taft, New Haven, Conn. January 13-15, 1920* (New York: Foreign Missions Conference, 1920), 94.

³ Mott was Wilson’s second choice to serve as ambassador to China (after Charles Eliot, president of Harvard, who also declined the offer). After declining Wilson’s offer, Mott helped him find a suitable candidate for the Chinese ambassadorship. “Remarks at a Press conference,” *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson Digital Edition*, Vol. 27, University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2017. Originally published in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, 1966-1994*,

first diplomatic role was as a member of the Joint High Commission with Mexico in 1916. Six months later, Mott traveled to Russia with former Secretary of State Elihu Root and seven other official envoys to strengthen Russian resolve to remain in the war and to support the new Russian government after the overthrow of the czar.⁴

As General Secretary of the American YMCA's International Committee beginning in 1915, Mott presided over a massive effort to support American and allied soldiers and to provide relief for prisoners of war on both sides of the conflict. In the war's aftermath he also supported relief efforts carried out by the YMCA and the European Student Relief (ESR), a ministry of the World's Student Christian Federation (WSCF).⁵ Mott co-founded the WSCF in 1895 and led it as General Secretary until 1920.⁶ One of his greatest achievements toward the end of the war was leading a seven-organization effort that raised over \$200 million dollars for soldiers through the United War Work fundraising appeal.⁷ It was acclaimed as the largest voluntary offering in US history. As these examples illustrate, Mott accomplished much during the war years, and previous historians have often stressed these achievements.

In this article, however, I do not rehearse the successful initiatives Mott experienced during the war but rather focus more on the disappointments and challenges that made the

Princeton University Press, 463; John R. Mott letter to Woodrow Wilson, July 3, 1913, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson Digital Edition*, Vol. 28, 22.

⁴ "Gen. Scott Joins the Root Mission," *New York Times*, May 12, 1917.

⁵ Benjamin L. Hartley, "Saving Students: European Student Relief in the Aftermath of World War I," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 42, 4 (2018): 1-21

⁶ In 1920, the WSCF elected Mott Chairman of the WSCF instead of General Secretary and he continued in that role until 1927.

⁷ Kenneth Steuer, *Pursuit of an "Unparalleled Opportunity" American YMCA and Prisoner of War Diplomacy among the Central Power Nations during World War I, 1914-1923* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 385. For a good introduction to the scope of the United War Work campaign see <http://unitedwarwork.com/>.

years surrounding the Lake Mohonk 1921 meeting pivotal for Mott and for the organizations he led.⁸ Mott himself suggested that there was much to learn from disappointments. In a paper distributed to participants just prior to the 1921 IMC meeting and subsequently published in the *International Review of Missions*, Mott wrote that because of all of the disappointments from the war and post-war years – not in spite of them – “the present is the best time to recognize international shortcomings, to realize sins of omission and of commission, and to lay to heart the lessons which should be learned from recent bitter and humiliating experience.”⁹ The experience of ostensibly “Christian nations” at war with one another is part of what Mott refers to here as “bitter and humiliating experiences,” but it is not the whole of it.

This article examines three sets of disappointments or challenges Mott faced in the few pivotal years preceding and following the 1921 IMC meeting at Lake Mohonk that were related to the war but also stemmed from shifts in thinking in organizations Mott led. Mott’s growing concern over colonialism and racism, his failure to promote mission collaboration through the Interchurch World Movement, and his experience with changing theological priorities in student organizations he helped establish were all items of concern in the months and years surrounding the meeting at Lake Mohonk. Understanding the challenges and disappointments in Mott’s life in 1921 is instructive for better understanding the history of the ecumenical movement and can offer insight into the contemporary challenges ecumenical and mission leaders still face a century later.

⁸ Hopkins similarly argues that this period was pivotal in Mott’s life but attributes this more to the effects of the war itself. Charles Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865-1955: A Biography*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 597.

⁹ John R. Mott, “International Missionary Co-operation: Its Possibilities, Its Cost, its Realization,” paper sent to delegates a month prior to the Lake Mohonk 1921 IMC meeting. Box 26.0016, Folder 3, WCC Archives; John R. Mott, “International Missionary Co-operation,” *International Review of Missions* 11, 1 (January 1922): 43-72.

Nationalisms, Colonialism, and Racism

Early in Mott's career it is difficult to find examples where he criticized the nationalist fervor among student movements that he was in contact with around the world, but in the wake of World War I he was starting to see the darker side of nationalisms. He was also growing in sympathy for anti-colonial feelings among friends and the anti-colonial movements some of them vigorously supported. Through his participation on the Root Mission in 1917, Mott directly encouraged nationalist devotion to the new regime in Russia after the overthrow of the czar (four months prior to the Bolshevik Revolution).¹⁰ No nationalist movement was ever more disappointing to Mott than the Russian revolution.

Mott remained hopeful for two months after the second Bolshevik revolution that Russia would eventually become a democracy. He persisted in this belief longer than most knowledgeable observers of the Russian situation. His optimism even prompted a New Year's Eve, 1917 letter from his Root Mission colleague and friend Cyrus McCormick, Jr. where he asked with an air of disbelief how Mott could still hold out such hope. Mott's secretary responded on Mott's behalf that his confidence in a future democratic Russia was due "first, because of the character of the Russian people; secondly, because of the number and ability of

¹⁰ "Address of John R. Mott, at the Great Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow, June 19, 1917," Box X391, World Alliance of YMCA's Archive, Geneva, Switzerland.

the leaders of Russia; thirdly, because of the principles of the Russian Revolution; fourthly, because of the rising tide of democracy.”¹¹

By the time participants gathered at Lake Mohonk on September 30, 1921, however, the dire situation of Russia was indisputable. Famine raged, Vladimir Lenin’s dictatorship of the Soviet Union was abundantly clear, and the Russian church was being brutally persecuted.¹²

Mott acknowledged this reality in a November 1919 address to a YMCA International Convention in Detroit. He even added fuel to the fire of the “red scare” that was prevalent in the United States at the time. He expressed fear of the “great disease” of Bolshevism spreading in western Europe, adding that “North America is not free!” He also declared Lenin to be “sinister” and “the most formidable person raised up in this war.”¹³

And yet, Mott persisted in his hope for a future democratic Russia and the role he believed the Church could play in the country’s transformation. Unlike in 1918, however, in 1920 Mott’s hope for Russia rested only in “the informing and transforming, and the vitalizing influence of the living Christ!”¹⁴ Mott went on to articulate his hope that the Russian Orthodox Church could provide such an influence that would eventually result in a democratic Russia. To that end, Mott worked hard raising money for European relief (including helping Russian

¹¹ Letter from William Barber to Mr. Steuert, January 9, 1918, Box 116, Cyrus McCormick, Jr. Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹² Between 1918 and 1920 at least twenty-eight bishops were murdered and thousands of clergy imprisoned. Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982, Volume One* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 38.

¹³ Verbatim transcript of proceedings in “40th International Convention Detroit,” Book 2, 1919, Box: 13. YMCA North American international convention records, Y.USA.65. Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

¹⁴ Fennell P. Turner, *Foreign Missions Conference of North America: Being the Report of the Twenty-Seventh Conference of Foreign Missions Boards in the United States and Canada, at the Hotel Taft, New Haven, Conn. January 13-15, 1920* (New York: Foreign Missions Conference, 1920), 97.

émigrés) through the YMCA and the ESR. By 1923 he was also raising funds to establish St. Sergius, a Russian Orthodox seminary in Paris.¹⁵

Other nationalisms in Europe also became matters of concern in the travails of the post-war period. One of the most vexing problems in Europe was the rise of anti-Semitism during the post-war years, but the problem of anti-Semitism in student Christian movements Mott led did not begin then. The Austrian Student Christian Movement joined the WSCF at its 1913 Lake Mohonk meeting and, according to WSCF traveling secretary Ruth Rouse's reflections some decades later, "anti-Semitism was rampant in universities throughout the area." She further noted that "'Disunion' was a fitter term than 'union'" in the Austrian movement.¹⁶ It was in May of 1920 when Rouse first underscored for Mott the problem of anti-Semitism that she saw unfolding in central Europe. "Do give much attention to the Jewish problem on this tour. There's a ghastly danger in front of us there [emphasis in original]"¹⁷ Mott had paid attention to challenges faced by Jewish persons in Russia during his 1917 diplomatic tour. As the member of the Root Mission charged with focusing on "religious and social betterment," Mott had at least three interviews with leading Russian Jewish representatives during his weeks in Russia and at

¹⁵ Robert C. Williams, *Culture in Exile: Russian Emigres in Germany, 1881-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 128-29. By the mid-1920s, Mott's fundraising to support St. Sergius Seminary was overwhelmingly directed toward his friend John D. Rockefeller, Jr. who expressed concern to his friend Arthur Woods about this project. Rockefeller asked, "Is it wise for me thus to assume two-thirds of the cost and responsibility of saving the Russian Church[?] Important as this prohect [sic] is in its aim, is it either wise or possible for me to undertake to carry it almost single handed?" Memorandum from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Arthur Woods, February 1926, Series N, Box 26, Folder 194, Russian Orthodoxy, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

¹⁶ Ruth Rouse, *The World's Student Christian Federation: A History of the First Thirty Years* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1948), 166. Ironically, the 1913 WSCF meeting was also noteworthy for racial inclusivity. Thirteen African American delegates attended the 1913 Lake Mohonk gathering of the WSCF and Mott directed seating arrangements to ensure cross-cultural and interracial conversation.

¹⁷ Ruth Rouse letter to John R. Mott, May 25, 1920, RG 45, Box 153, Folder 2549, John R. Mott Papers, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

least once posed a question to the rest of the Root Mission delegation about the welfare of Jews in Russia at a briefing during their trans-Pacific voyage.¹⁸

As for anti-colonial movements and leadership, Mott had a number of colleagues in his movement who influenced his thinking, but in the months leading up to the Lake Mohonk gathering in 1921 the Indian imperial context was most on Mott's mind. For his knowledge of the Indian political and missionary context, no one was more of a teacher to Mott than J. H. Oldham, whose own perspective was profoundly influenced by his dear friend and Indian nationalist leader Surendra Kumar Datta. In the months preceding the Lake Mohonk 1921 gathering, Oldham and Datta exchanged several letters where Datta's anger toward British imperialism in India was on full display.¹⁹ Mott and Oldham discussed Datta's views, and they both agreed that Datta should go to the Lake Mohonk meeting in October of 1921.²⁰ Datta was the only Indian representative present and one of just eight persons at Lake Mohonk who was not a white European or North American. He was the person who was likely the most critical of colonialism and western missions in India at the Lake Mohonk gathering.²¹

¹⁸ "Special Diplomatic Mission to Russia," McCormick's personal secretary report, Box 114, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society. For more on Mott's role in Russia as it relates to Russian Jews see C. Howard Hopkins and John W. Long, "American Jews and the Root Mission to Russia in 1917: Some New Evidence," *American Jewish History* 69, 3 (1980): 342-354.

¹⁹ Letter from S. K. Datta to J. H. Oldham, May 6, 1919, Box 1, Folder 14, J. H. Oldham Papers, New College, Edinburgh, UK; Letter from S. K. Datta to J. H. Oldham, December 1, 1920, Box 2, Folder 2, J. H. Oldham Papers; Letter from J. H. Oldham to S. K. Datta, December 2, 1920, Box 2, Folder 2, J. H. Oldham Papers.

²⁰ Letter from J. H. Oldham to S. K. Datta, February 10, 1921, Box 2, Folder 3, J. H. Oldham Papers. There does not appear to be correspondence between Mott and Datta around 1921, but in later years Datta candidly expressed to Mott his frustrations with continued foreign control of the Indian YMCA. Letter from S. K. Datta to John R. Mott, June 20, 1930, International Work Subject Files, Box 10, Folder "Philosophy and Interpretation, 1930-1954," Kautz Family YMCA Archives.

²¹ In addition to S. K. Datta, there were two Chinese, two Japanese, one African, one African American, and one Burmese delegate at the founding conference of the IMC at Lake Mohonk. The rest of the sixty delegates were of European or North American origin. Frank Lenwood, "The International Missionary Council at Lake Mohonk, October 1921," *International Review of Missions* 11, 1 (1922): 32. Datta traveled in North America before the Lake Mohonk gathering and, in at least one instance, his criticisms of western colonialism and missions in India

Mott joined S. K. Datta in his critique of western colonialism, nationalism, and racism in the paper he prepared for the Lake Mohonk gathering. Repeatedly – and in a way not seen in other writings by Mott up to this time – he stressed the personal challenge to genuinely understand colleagues from other cultural backgrounds and the importance in the missionary community to reckon with nationalist and racist attitudes for the sake of international missionary collaboration. This was not an entirely new discourse for Mott in 1921, but he had begun to speak out against racism more forcefully in the post-war period than he had before the war.²² Mott shared in the disappointment of Indian and Chinese delegates especially in the failure of the Paris Peace Conference to truly support “self-determination.”²³

prompted heated disagreement. H. C. Priest of the Interchurch Advisory Council of Canada wrote to J. H. Oldham about this, and Oldham defended S. K. Datta’s position. Letter from H. C. Priest to J. H. Oldham, October 12, 1921 and Letter from J. H. Oldham to H. C. Priest, October 25, 1921, Box 2, Folder 5, J. H. Oldham Papers.

²² There were important actions by Mott to address the problem of racism before the war. Mott supported the leadership of African American YMCA leader William Alphaeus Hunton and increasingly encouraged the participation of African American students in the 1913 WSCF gathering at Lake Mohonk and in the Negro Christian Student Conference in Atlanta a year later. A. M. Trawick, ed., *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); Addie W. Hunton, *William Alphaeus Hunton: A Pioneer Prophet of Young Men* (New York: Association Press, 1938). I discuss Mott’s work in race relations in more detail in “Pragmatic Internationalist: John R. Mott’s Negotiation of Nationalisms and Racism, 1895-1925,” in *The Young Ecumenical Movement: Explorations in Christian Internationalisms, 1895-1920s* edited by Dana L. Robert and Judith Becker (Leiden, Brill, forthcoming). See also Benjamin L. Hartley, “‘That they All May be One’: John R. Mott’s Contribution to Methodism, Inter-religious Dialogue, and Racial Reconciliation,” *Methodist Review*, 4 (2012): 1-30.

²³ Three days after the November 1919 failure to ratify the League of Nations in the US Senate, Mott noted that Wilson’s famous phrase, “self-determination” prompted hope but “almost as much despair in certain quarters, as any words that have been spoken” during the war years. “40th International Convention Detroit, book 2, 1919,” Box: 13. YMCA North American international convention records, Y.USA.65. Kautz Family YMCA Archives, 381. Mott supported the League of Nations. He praised the argument set forth by William Howard Taft at a meeting at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in early March, 1919 where, according to Mott, Taft gave “the most satisfying statement regarding the League of Nations which I have heard.” Letter from John R. Mott to William H. Taft, March 12, 1919, RG 45, Box 90, Folder 1594, John R. Mott Papers, Yale Divinity School Library. J. H. Oldham also spoke out in favor of the League of Nations at missionary gatherings around this time. Fennell P. Turner, *Foreign Missions Conference of North America: Being the Report of the Twenty-Seventh Conference of Foreign Missions Boards in the United States and Canada, at the Hotel Taft, New Haven, Conn. January 13-15, 1920*, (New York: Foreign Missions Conference, 1920), 77. For a recent historical analysis of the Paris Peace Conference from the perspective of colonized peoples see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

A January 1920 editorial in the *Student World* expressed Mott's strongest articulation to date of the problem of racism.

Turn our eyes where we may throughout the world, we see friction between different races. Even where Christian influences have been longest at work, the demon of racial antipathy has not been exorcised. Many other evil spirits – religious persecution, slavery, infanticide – have been overcome by the spirit of Christ, but this one still remains unsubdued.²⁴

Noting the race riots in the United States and violent political upheavals in recent years, Mott went on to even express a measure of sympathy for “violent strivings” as “the abortive issue of Christian principles.”²⁵

Just three months prior to the IMC's 1921 meeting in Lake Mohonk, Mott underscored what American anthropologists (here called ethnologists) had been emphasizing about race for decades.

Humility is the master word. How easy to spell but how hard to exemplify. And it is doubtless harder for men and women whose skin pigmentation happens to be white, but it is also becoming hard for some other races of darker colour. It is therefore wholesome for all the dominant peoples of the modern world to reflect upon the fact that race, like nationality, is an accident and a ground neither for pride nor for reproach. Ethnologists tell us that assertions as to racial superiorities are based more on assumption than on science. It is certain that no race is pure; all races have been inextricably mixed in past ages and the process is still going on... The moral is obvious. St. Paul's parable of the body applies to races as “members one of another” in which none can say to the others “I have no need of thee”, but where each must discharge its function and rejoice in the differing gifts of its fellows.²⁶

In the same editorial Mott also critiqued recent actions of western countries, noting that “despite the lofty pronouncements made during the World War” the western powers continue

²⁴ John R. Mott, “Editorial,” *Student World* 13, 1 (January 1920): 32-33

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ John R. Mott, “Interracial Problems and Christian Duty: An Editorial,” *The Student World* 14, 3 (July 1921): 109. Authors of articles on race relations in this issue included Nitobe Inazo of Japan working for the League of Nations, R. R. Moton of the Tuskegee Institute, Y. Y. Tsu of China (working with Chinese students in America), M. N. Chatterjee of India (working among Indian students in London), K. Kato of Japan (working among Japanese students in America), and W. H. T. Gairdner of Britain and a missionary scholar of Islam working in Egypt.

to “exploit and oppress conquered or dependent races. The selfish exploitation of the natural resources, the toleration of indentured labour, the denial of liberty of speech and religion are among the offences still being committed by the dominant nations. . . under the guise of spreading the blessings of a higher civilization.”²⁷

Missionary Collaboration

The challenges Mott experienced in relationship to the war, the Paris Peace Conference, the League of Nations, and racism were world events beyond his control; Mott exercised a greater measure of control over the Interchurch World Movement (IWM) to promote “a common plan of action” among thirty American denominations in the realm of home and foreign missions.²⁸ Mott led the IWM as chairman of its executive committee, and this role made a great deal of sense. The IWM’s first objective was to raise a lot of money, and Mott had recently completed the United War Work fundraising campaign that raised over \$200 million to support soldiers in the months of demobilization after World War I. The general secretary of the IWM, S. Earl Taylor, who, like Mott, was a Methodist had also recently completed an astounding \$140 million fundraising campaign for his denomination’s missionary efforts.²⁹ The triumph of both fundraising campaigns led by the chairman and general secretary of the IWM doubtless inspired many denominational leaders that another one would also be successful.

²⁷ John R. Mott, “Interracial Problems and Christian Duty: An Editorial,” *The Student World*, 14, 3 (July 1921): 110.

²⁸ S. Earl Taylor, “The First Great Co-operative Church Campaign,” *Federal Council Bulletin: A Journal of Religious Co-operation and Inter-Church Activities*, 3, 4 (April 1920): 67.

²⁹ David W. Scott, “Commemorating Mission: History as a Means to Revival of the Missionary Spirit,” paper delivered at the Thirteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, August 12-19, 2018, 6.

Despite the promising record of fundraising for both Mott and Taylor, no plan under Mott's leadership ever failed so spectacularly or so expensively as this one. Mott's friend, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., sank at least a million dollars into this effort, and even asked his father to support the IWM at a level of \$50 to \$100 million shortly before the movement collapsed with an \$8 million deficit.³⁰ Expanded plans for mission inspired by the IWM in Japan, China, and elsewhere were either never launched or were radically altered by the IWM's failure to raise funds.³¹

Mott's friend Robert E. Speer of the Presbyterian mission board gave the most articulate summation of the ways the IWM suffered from an ambiguous self-conception which had led to its demise.³²

Some joined the Movement with the understanding that it was temporary; others with the view that it was a beginning which must be carried forward into a new, permanent form. Some joined on the condition that it would be promotive only and not administrative; others saw in it a chance to displace old and, as they deemed them, slow and inadequate administrative agencies. Some based their cooperation on the assurance that denominational interests and prerogatives would not be disturbed, and that the Movement could operate through denominational grooves; others deemed this an opportunity to transcend these. Sooner or later these and contrasted tendencies were sure to breed difficulty and misunderstanding.³³

The tensions within the IWM were, in some ways, an expression of the strategic ecumenical differences between Speer and Mott on a very large scale. Speer prized careful representation

³⁰ Letter from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to John D. Rockefeller, April 16, 1920, Series N, Box 38, Folder 318. Rockefeller Family Archives Center. The IWM discontinued its activities on June 28, 1920. Albert F. Schenkel, *The Rich Man and the Kingdom: John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the Protestant Establishment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 141. Georgina Anne Gollock and E. G. K. Hewat, "A missionary survey of the year 1920," *International Review of Missions* 10, no. 1 (1921): 49.

³¹ Gollock and Hewat, "A missionary survey of the year 1920," 6, 10.

³² The work of the IWM continued to some extent well beyond 1920 through the Institute of Social and Religious Research. Gina A. Zurlo, "The Social Gospel, Ecumenical Movement, and Christian Sociology: The Institute of Social And Religious Research," *The American Sociologist* 46, 2 (2015): 177-193.

³³ Eldon G. Ernst, *Moment of Truth for Protestant America: Interchurch Campaigns Following World War One* (Missoula, MT: Scholar's Press, 1974), 160.

of denominational constituencies and a more decentralized approach, while Mott saw the possibilities in extra-ecclesial organizations like the YMCA and admired the more centralized methods of big corporations.³⁴

Another friend of Mott's, British mission leader J. H. Oldham, also expressed concern over the IWM experiment. He critiqued the ambitiously large fundraising goals of the IWM, and on one occasion used it as a teaching opportunity to increase British empathy toward Indian desires for ecclesial independence. He compared the situation between British mission organizations and the Americans' IWM as analogous to the situation between Indian Christians and British missionaries.

We ourselves are up against the same thing in a rather mild form as a result of the Interchurch World Movement in America. There is a strong sentiment here [in Britain] that we do not want our missionary enterprises to be dictated by Americans simply because they have the money. This helps us of the West to understand the problem in India. Because a large part of the money comes from foreign sources, the Indians feel that that is not the reason why questions of policy in regard to the Christianization of India should be largely determined by foreigners.³⁵

Months before the demise of the IWM Oldham noted further that the "dominance of the financial objective" in the IWM was such that "certain vital aspects of the Church may be obscured in the public mind[.]" Indeed, the larger purpose of promoting collaboration for the sake of Christian mission was lost behind the fundraising emphasis of the movement.³⁶

³⁴ Charles E. Harvey, "Speer versus Rockefeller and Mott, 1910-1935," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 60, 4 (Winter, 1982): 285-286, 292. On theological matters, I believe Mott was closer to Speer than what Harvey implies in this article. See also Charles E. Harvey, "John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the Interchurch World Movement of 1919-1920: A Different Angle on the Ecumenical Movement," *Church History* 51, 2 (June 1982): 198-209.

³⁵ Verbatim transcript of British committee of the Continuation Committee, April 30, 1920. Box 206.0010, Folder 5, WCC Archive.

³⁶ J. H. Oldham, "The Interchurch World Movement: Its Possibilities and Problems," *International Review of Missions* 9, 2 (1920): 194-99.

Unlike Robert E. Speer and J. H. Oldham, Mott never suggested he had doubts about the IWM during its period of formation or once it had been dissolved. He even tried to distance himself from it when he was blamed for its demise.³⁷ Only in his autobiography two decades later do we find from Mott a critical reflection on the failure of the IWM. But even in 1939 Mott adroitly downplayed his own share of responsibility.³⁸

Shifts in Theology in International Student Movements

Mott is best described as a moderate with regard to theological disputes throughout his lifetime. His theological outlook changed very little. But five months prior to the 1921 IMC meeting at Lake Mohonk, Mott gave an address where one catches a glimpse of his changing spirituality (if not his theology). Sounding more like a Christian mystic than at any other time in his life, Mott told the men gathered at the regional conference of the YMCA in Atlanta, “I have just come out of the Arizona deserts where I have had time to think. It has been the most profitable period of my life.” Mott was notoriously prone to repeating such grandiose statements like “the best days lie ahead of us,” but his remark here is more personal and reflective.³⁹

Mott spoke to the young men in Atlanta about how his experience of prayer had become less regimented than what he had taught in earlier years.

³⁷ Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865-1955: A Biography*, 620-21.

³⁸ John R. Mott, *Five Decades and a Forward View* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), 63-67.

³⁹ John R. Mott, “Young Men’s Christian Association at a Fork in the Road,” in *Addresses by Dr. John R. Mott at First Southern Regional Conference, Young Men’s Christian Association, Atlanta, Georgia, April 28-29, 1921*, (n.p., n.d.). I am grateful to John R. Mott’s grandson, Andrew Mott, for providing me a copy of this address.

I would say we need time enough to forget the watch, the clock and the bell; time enough to forget what we have been doing and what we want to do next; time enough to forget time; time enough for the fires to kindle and burn; time enough to receive impressions, time enough to commune – secret prayer is not a monologue, it is a dialogue – time enough to meet God, to have fellowship with Him, to have communion with Him, to deepen acquaintance with Him.⁴⁰

In keeping with this prayerful posture, Mott urged his audience to find a more spiritual grounding for the YMCA's "guiding principle" that was not based on its experience during the "cloudy days of the war in the midst of the heat and dust and blood[.]" During the war and its aftermath, the YMCA's stature had grown immensely as it worked among soldiers and prisoners of war, but Mott here urged a quieter mood of reflection. Indeed, instead of a rousing call to heroic action which was standard fare in Mott's addresses, in this one he closed with these words: "Wherever else we fail, may none of us fail to develop the habit by which we will preserve a zone of silence around these all too noisy and necessarily busy lives of ours."⁴¹

In the months and years following this April 1921 address, Mott found it difficult to take his own advice. He remained incredibly busy later that year in preparation for the IMC meeting at Lake Mohonk and the WSCF meeting in China in 1922. In 1923 Mott went on a months-long evangelistic campaign with student in the US and Canada. It was a return to his "first love" of evangelism and students. It may also have been prompted by a concern that the YMCA and other student movements in the WSCF were secularizing.

The growing secularity of student movements was a concern shared by Swedish WSCF colleague Karl Fries who even criticized Mott himself for not being sufficiently explicit about

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ John R. Mott, "Young Men's Christian Association at a Fork in the Road," 30.

Christian theology in a 1922 address before a YMCA International Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Karl Fries expressed disappointment with what he saw as Mott's tendency to leave unsaid important matters of Christian doctrine because they were "presupposed." In a letter to Mott, Fries noted, "it is presupposed that husband and wife love each other, but it does not harm that they tell each other so from time to time. On the contrary that is necessary for keeping the love alive... [N]o ethical programme can save the individual or society: nothing else will do it than the regeneration of the heart through the forgiveness of sin by the atonement of Christ."⁴²

Mott responded to his friend, Karl Fries, with stern words. "I do make it my business on frequent occasions to emphasize as strongly as I know how the supremely important point to which you refer. The fact that I do not do so in every address should not be interpreted, at least by my friends, as showing that I am one whit behind them in appreciation of its importance, or that I am neglecting a matter of such transcendent importance."⁴³ Two more letters were exchanged on this topic; Mott finally said that this was something they would talk about in person to "reassure you once for all on this point."⁴⁴

Fries may have eventually been reassured by Mott's theological clarifications and his engagement in an evangelistic tour, but the theological tide in the American YMCA student work was clearly shifting. Robert Wilder, a more conservative friend of Mott's, warned him of

⁴² Letter from Karl Fries to John R. Mott, January 23, 1923, RG 45, Box 29, Folder 567, John R. Mott Papers, Yale Divinity School Library.

⁴³ Letter from John R. Mott to Karl Fries, February 13, 1923, RG 45, Box 29, Folder 567.

⁴⁴ Letter from John R. Mott to Karl Fries, March 30, 1923, RG 45, Box 29, Folder 567.

this already in 1918.⁴⁵ The 1922 YMCA convention was the first time that American YMCA leadership proposed to turn away from the theological emphases Mott had so treasured and instead reinterpret the gospel “in its bearings on the individual and his relationships to social, industrial, racial, national, and international issues.”⁴⁶ For an organization like the North American YMCA, however, it is difficult to pinpoint with precision when a move toward secularization took place. The Christian identity of this organization remained important for many years beyond 1922. This was especially the case among YMCA secretaries working outside of the United States.⁴⁷ And yet, it is clear that some kind of secularizing theological shift was occurring around the time of the 1921 Lake Mohonk gathering.

The YMCA may have been the largest organization Mott led that experienced shifting theological priorities, but it was not the only one. The 1919 Student Volunteer Movement meeting in Des Moines, Iowa was one where the traditional message of missionary activism rang hollow for many of the students gathered there. Mott’s own son, John L. Mott, and future Union Seminary president Henry P. Van Dusen were among the students who joined the student revolt against the SVM’s old guard.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Letter from Robert Wilder to John R. Mott, December 13, 1918. Box 8, John R. Mott Papers, Kautz Family YMCA Archives.

⁴⁶ David P. Setran, *The College "Y": Student Religion in the Era of Secularization*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 221.

⁴⁷ For example, in a January 11, 1930 letter from E. T. Colton to F. W. Ramsey, Colton notes his disagreement with fundamentalism but claims that “[w]ith possibly half a dozen exceptions our own [YMCA] Foreign staff keeps the [theological] middle ground along with the great body of North American Christians.” International Work Subject File, Box 10, Folder “Philosophy and Interpretation,” Kautz Family YMCA Archives.

⁴⁸ Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865-1955: A Biography*, 568.

Dissent was a theme in the WSCF gathering in St. Beatenberg, Switzerland in 1920 as well where nine national student organizations called into question the theological “basis” for their movements. These groups desired “substituting personal acceptance of the purpose of the Movement” in place of a “declaration of faith as the basis of individual membership.”⁴⁹ And yet, one of the most moving experiences for many at the St. Beatenberg gathering was in response to a question from Paul Humburg of Germany as to whether “some of the members were not preaching a different Christ, - minimizing His sacrificial death on the Cross.” A time of testimony ensued where nearly everyone present acknowledged “that this fundamental point... is held by the leaders of the Federation with more earnestness, if possible, than ever before.”⁵⁰

These moments of recognizing deep Christian fellowship, however, were matched by a real struggle for Mott and his colleague and WSCF “secretary to the Executive Committee” Ruth Rouse to maintain an explicitly Christian ethos in the WSCF.⁵¹ At a Parad, Czechoslovakia conference in 1923, Rouse’s desire to bring more evangelistic content to the ESR reached a peak. She wrote,

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.⁵²

⁴⁹ Rouse, *The World's Student Christian Federation: A History of the First Thirty Years*, 230.

⁵⁰ Galen M. Fisher, “The Meeting of the General Committee at St. Beatenberg, July 30-August 7, 1920,” *The Student World* 52, October, 1920, 135.

⁵¹ Ruth Rouse received the awkward title, “Secretary to the Executive Committee” at the St. Beatenberg 1920 WSCF meeting because it was believed that the title “General Secretary” was not appropriate for a woman to hold. Women were becoming more integrated into the leadership of the WSCF, but this happened slowly.

⁵² Ruth Rouse in Ruth Franzen, *Ruth Rouse among Students: Global, Missiological and Ecumenical Perspectives* (Uppsala: Studia Missionalia Svecana CV, 2008), 308, 34. I believe Franzen is correct in her assessment of Mott’s hesitancy in promoting women’s leadership in the WSCF.

Rouse's longing for a "more direct witness" in the ESR remained unfulfilled. The next year she left the WSCF and ESR to serve as the educational secretary of the Missionary Council of the National Assembly of the Church of England.⁵³

Mott rarely expressed in writing his explicit disagreement in the theological direction the YMCA, WSCF, or Student Volunteer Movement took, but some of his friends did and wrote to Mott expressing their displeasure and assumed Mott's agreement.⁵⁴ He relentlessly avoided theological controversy – especially in correspondence – and maintained a theological "middle ground" best expressed in statements like "The Christian Message" which he asked his friend Robert E. Speer to write for the Jerusalem 1928 IMC meeting.⁵⁵ That document remained an important expression of Mott's preferred theological position for years thereafter.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The disappointments and challenges Mott faced around the time of the IMC's establishment were pivotally important in their influence on Mott's future work. The Paris

⁵³ Ruth Franzen, "The Legacy of Ruth Rouse," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17, 4 (October 1993): 156.

⁵⁴ Letter from W. A. Visser 't Hooft to John R. Mott, June 14, 1929, RG45, Box 94, Folder 1672, John R. Mott Papers, Yale Divinity School Library; Letter from David Porter to John R. Mott, July 17, 1928, RG 45, Box 71, Folder 1295, John R. Mott Papers, Yale Divinity School Library; Henry W. Bromley letters to John R. Mott, July 19, 1940 and November 16, 1946, RG 45, Box 5, Folder 79, John R. Mott Papers. Bromley was president of Asbury College in Kentucky. Mott is somewhat more explicit in his theological views with regard to the YMCA in correspondence with former German chancellor Georg Michaelis. Letter from Georg Michaelis to John R. Mott, Christmas, 1922 and letter from John R. Mott to George Michaelis, January 24, 1923, RG 45, Box 58, Folder 1082, John R. Mott Papers.

⁵⁵ *The Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council, March 24-April 8, 1928, Volume 1: The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems of Thought and Life*, (New York: International Missionary Council, 1928), 406, 12.

⁵⁶ John R. Mott, *Addresses and Papers of John R. Mott: Volume Six: Selected Papers and Addresses on Evangelistic, Spiritual, and Ecumenical Subjects and the Outreach of Life and Influence* (New York: Association Press, 1947), 323.

Peace Conference disappointed him in the way it failed to truly promote “self-determination” for colonized peoples. The decision of the United States Senate to not join the League of Nations was a significant defeat for internationalism that Mott had supported for years.⁵⁷ Mott never again engaged directly in foreign relations work with the US government like he had for the Root mission of 1917. Nor did Mott ever try again to construct a super-organization like the failed IWM. The secularizing trends in international student movements were challenges of a different sort that Mott resisted but mostly chose to not confront directly. Mott’s theological position did not change significantly in the years after the Lake Mohonk 1921 meeting even as theological debate became more polarized in American Christianity and elsewhere.

In part as a response to his friends’ encouragement a few years after the IMC’s founding, Mott changed course somewhat by pulling back from leadership of the Student Volunteer Movement and the WSCF to focus more attention on the IMC. This had been an explicit request by the IMC at their 1925 meeting.⁵⁸ Mott could not, however, leave the YMCA behind and accepted the presidency of the World’s Alliance of YMCA’s when it was offered to him later in the year 1926. He also did not take the advice of J. H. Oldham to stop organizing large international conferences. These were gatherings that energized Mott and where he believed the Spirit moved amidst the increasingly diverse set of Christian leaders who attended the gatherings of the IMC in the years after 1921. People at those meetings formed and

⁵⁷ Mott did not give up, however, in affirming the importance of Christian student movements in strengthening through Christian friendship and “internal spiritual changes” the formal treaties and resolutions nations made with one another. John R. Mott, “Editorial,” *The Student World* 15, 1, January 1922, 3.

⁵⁸ There is a remarkably direct, twenty-two-page typed letter in January of 1926 from Oldham to Mott where Oldham conveys his own opinion and that of several of Mott’s friends (Ruth Rouse, Nathan Söderblom, and Robert Speer) that Mott needed to change course in his life priorities. Letter from J. H. Oldham to John R. Mott, January 5, 1926, Box 3, Folder 7, J. H. Oldham Papers; *Minutes of the Committee of the International Missionary Council, Atlantic City, New Jersey, USA, January 11-15, 1925*, (London: Edinburgh House, 1925), 24.

sustained friendships across cultural and linguistic barriers, and it was those relationships that had always sustained Mott and animated his hope through the disappointments he faced.

Benjamin L. Hartley (Th.D. Boston University, 2005) is Associate Professor of Mission and World Christianity at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington, USA. He has published in missiological as well as Methodist academic journals. He is an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church and has also written articles and a short book on the nature of the diaconate.