

Travelling with John Mott. Switzerland and the World Student Christian Federation

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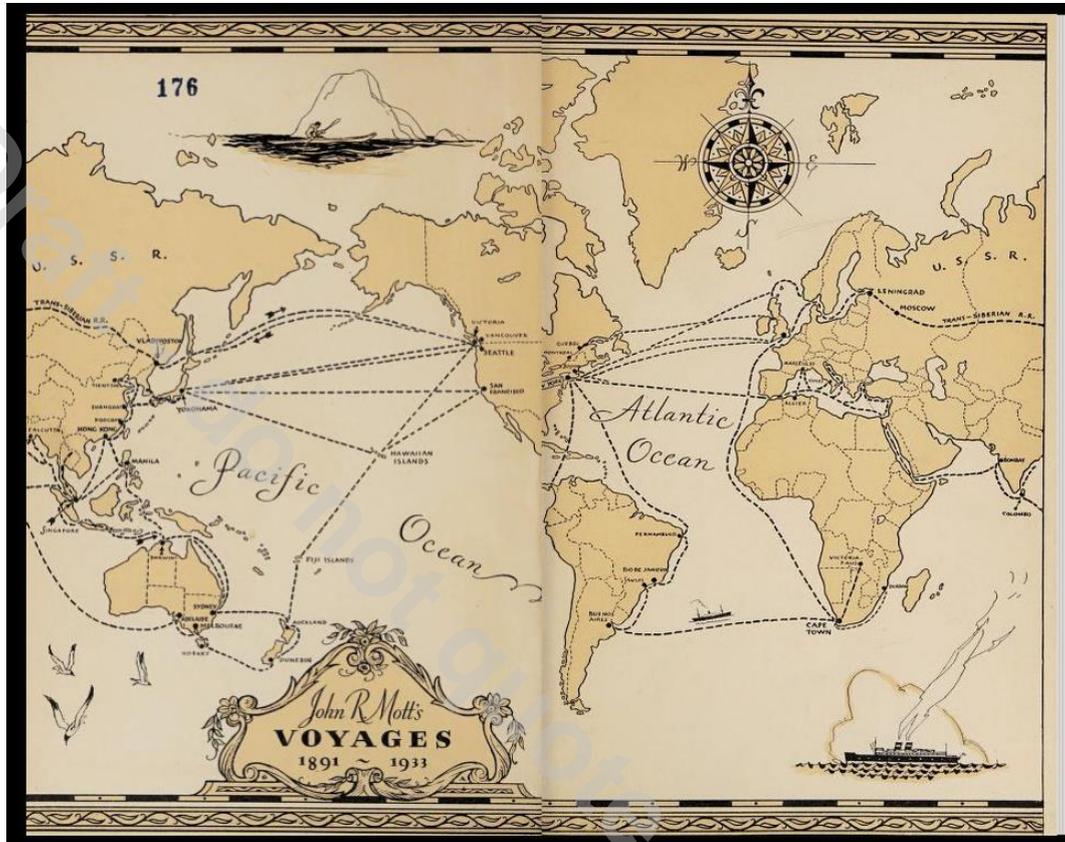
To explore the idea that the young ecumenical movement was set up from concrete practices of unification and internationalization, we need to understand the uses, the ways of doing and even the rituals put in place by its actors. This paper will put in perspective the travel notes of the American John Mott on Europe with the data available on the establishment of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in Switzerland. The Swiss were active very early in Protestant youth movements and quickly assumed a major role that extended to hosting the central offices of the YMCA and the WSCF. The question is how Swiss nationalism, of which neutrality as well as confessional diversity were integral parts, is articulated through these international organizations and missionary actions. How did the meeting of the ecumenical movement's international actors and the Swiss people play out, on what basis, around what agenda, and how was it accomplished?

Introduction

In August 1895, the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) was founded at a meeting of Scandinavian students in Vadstena Castle, Sweden. John R. Mott was one of its main architects. Born in New York in 1865, John R. Mott grew up in Iowa. His family was Methodist, and he was raised in an atmosphere of lively and daily religiosity. As a teenager, he was moved by the preaching of itinerant pastors, both those from the Youth Men Christian Association (YMCA) and the Methodist circuit-riding pastors. From 1881, he studied at Upper Iowa University, a Methodist preparatory school, then, from 1885, at Cornell University. He became an influential member of the Cornell University Christian Association (CUCA), the local YMCA chapter. In 1888, he graduated with a degree in philosophy and history. Many career possibilities were open to him, but, owing to a combination of circumstances and, especially, encounters that he considered to be divinely orchestrated, he chose to devote himself to evangelization. To this end, Mott chose to become the national secretary of the Intercollegiate YMCA (United States and Canada). Events then quickly followed in succession, leading to the creation of the WSCF in 1895. Mott was WSCF general secretary for twenty-five years and then assumed its presidency from 1920 to 1928. He presided over the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference. He headed the Student Volunteer Movement from 1915 to 1928. He was the president of the YMCA's World Alliance from 1926 to 1937. For his work during the wars, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946 along with the American Emily Greene Balch. He died in 1955 in Orlando.

John Mott has been called a "world citizen" by one of his biographers, Basile Mathews, whose 1934 book opens with an impressive map of Mott's travels (see below). From the very beginning of his career in the Christian youth organizations, John Mott adopted a nomadic (itinerant) *modus operandi*, building networks by traveling first within the United States then around the world. Does this make him a world citizen? What kind of citizenship are we talking about here? Focusing on the years 1890-1900, my thesis is that the traveling method, as we can call it, is not just a method but a way of seeing the world. It is important to bear in mind that this first phase of the ecumenical movement was at once inwardly directed to strengthen indigenous

Western Protestantism and outwardly directed in a deeply missionary spirit, focused thus on both the internal mission to the lands of traditional Christianity and the external mission to the territories of other religions and cultures (“the non-Christian world”).¹ Thus, it involved a desired and coherently pursued dynamic of exporting the Gospel and Christian culture, an integral part of colonial ideology but not entirely reducible to it.



The movement generated a new “sense of the unity of Christendom” and in the process a new awareness of the oneness world. Indeed, to be conquered and evangelized, the world must be conceived as a whole. While John Mott contributed to the construction of a world consciousness, this conception, like the voyages on the map above, emanated from a single very specific source: North American Protestantism. Thus, the story of the world according to John Mott is not necessarily the story of the world as understood by the protagonists of other national places. Moreover, in the life of John Mott and in the history of the WSCF, there are varying world narratives, depending on the places and on the period. I should like to compare here two of these visions of the world for the years 1890-1900: that of John Mott and that of the Swiss who hosted him during his travels. In the first part, my attention will be particularly focused on the sources that provide information on the specific and material culture conveying this world

¹ In 1897, the Federation’s goals were defined as follows: (1) unite student Christian movements or organizations throughout the world; (2) gather information on the religious conditions of the students of all lands; (3) promote the following lines of activity: (a) leading students to become disciples of Jesus Christ as the only Savior and as God; (b) deepening the spiritual life of students; (c) enlisting students in the work of spreading the kingdom of Christ throughout the whole world.

consciousness. In the second part, I shall contrast information from Mott's travel archives with Swiss sources of the student movement.

I. The material culture of the world consciousness

It is well known that the birth of the international movement of both the YMCA and Christian students is linked to the development of communications and technology. John Mott's personal papers at Yale attest amply to this, for they comprise, among other things, transport tickets, shipping company letters, photographs and details on transport. A significant portion of Mott's correspondence could be used for a history of global transportation, for he even described the hours spent on ships and trains!

Mott himself wrote about what he called the facilities at the disposal of the Church for evangelization. In *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation* (1900), he mentioned several things, starting with the geographic societies, owing to which the full world was mapped out. (p. 107) "So to-day practically all of the inhabited portions of the earth are known to civilization." (p. 108) Moreover, missionaries could rely on brand new knowledge "of the social, moral and spiritual condition and need of all races of mankind". (p. 108)

Other facilities included the means of contact and communication: train, steamship, cable and telegraph. "Any important event which takes place at the antipodes in the morning we hear of in the afternoon." (*Evangelization*, p.112)

Mott places great emphasis on the idea of accessibility. For him, the particularity of the years 1890-1900 lies in that the world was accessible to evangelization (*Evangelization*, pp. 104-105; *The Pastor and modern Missions*, pp. 3-4).

For the first time in the history of the Church practically the whole world is open. The marvellous orderings of Providence during the nineteenth century, and notably during the past fifty years, have set before the Church the open doors for which Christians for generations have been praying. (*Evangelization*, p. 105)

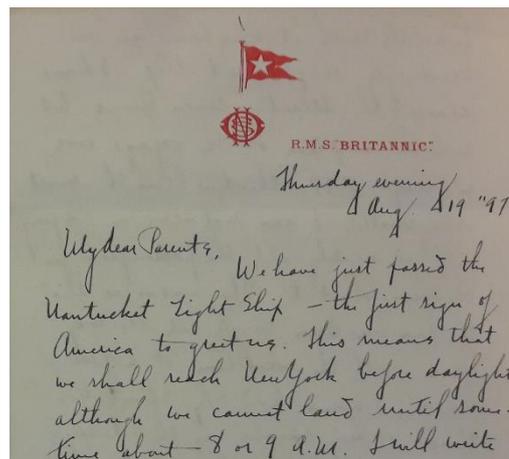
This accessibility and knowledge of the world provides a first track for the international-national articulation, as formulated by Mott himself in 1914 using the lexicon of disease and epidemic spread:

The cancerous growths of the non-Christian civilizations are eating with great directness and deadliness toward the very vitals of Christendom. We cannot trifle with cancers nor can we safely ignore them. Now that the world has found itself in its unity as one body (and this is the first half generation in which this could be said), it can no longer be a matter of indifference to one part of the world-body what happens in any other part. If there be a plague spot in China or Turkey or Africa, sooner or later it must affect America, England, Germany. It would seem that even though a man were not a Christian he would believe in foreign missions, that is, in the spread of the knowledge and life-giving power of the Christian religion, solely on grounds of patriotism. (*The Present World Situation*, p. 13).

The idea, then, is that out of national concern (or patriotism), Westerners have an interest in promoting the Christian religion and its culture. Here we have a testimony of the moral

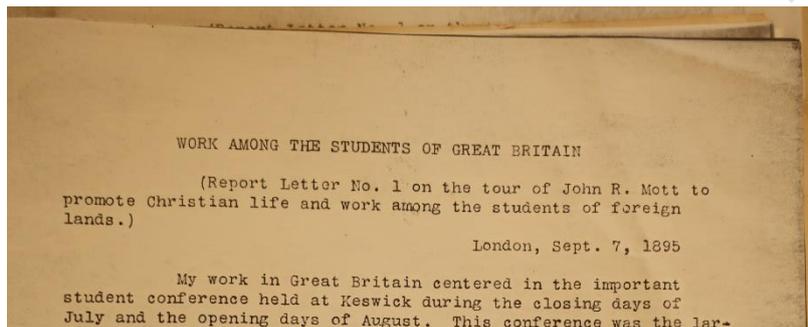
imperialism described by Ian Tyrrell in his controversial book *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire* (2010), which we can discuss. Mott's world is therefore a world conceived in its unity as a place of Christianization, for the salvation of all.

Convinced that he was living a time of special opportunities, John Mott conceived of this Christianization of the world as a battle, developing strategies, bringing together the material and money necessary and organizing trips to carry the message to as many places as possible and, within the framework of the Federation, to set up groups of students there. John Mott never understood his own mission as requiring his settling somewhere. In this globalized world, he made travel his mode of operation. It is therefore of interest to analyse how he reported on his travels. During the period preceding the First World War, Mott made three "world tours", in 1895-1897, in 1901-1902, 1911-1913 (Mathews, 130). Despite technical progress, travel remained demanding, tiring, painful, far more than today. Mott, who spent long months travelling, organized a daily discipline of travel, in terms of rest, food and spiritual life, a very good description of which one finds in Mathews (1934, pp. 135-139).



John Mott always reported on his travels and visits first in letters, often written while on his way to another location. This can be seen materially in his handwritten, typed or printed correspondence. We see in the example opposite that he wrote to his parents while on a boat.

He wrote numerous Report Letters – numbered and typed then used in balance sheets – of both his travels and the movement. These reports and the published books served to account to colleagues, friends and donors in the United States. But they also served to keep the members of the Federation and future missionaries informed overall. In these texts, John Mott not only gave details of his visits but also produced a sort of diagnosis of the religious situation in the various places he visited.



Doing so, he informed all the members of the Federation of the situation of each national movement. These reports, in the form of letters or books were thus a key element in the creation of an international culture within the WSCF. The other essential aspect, which I

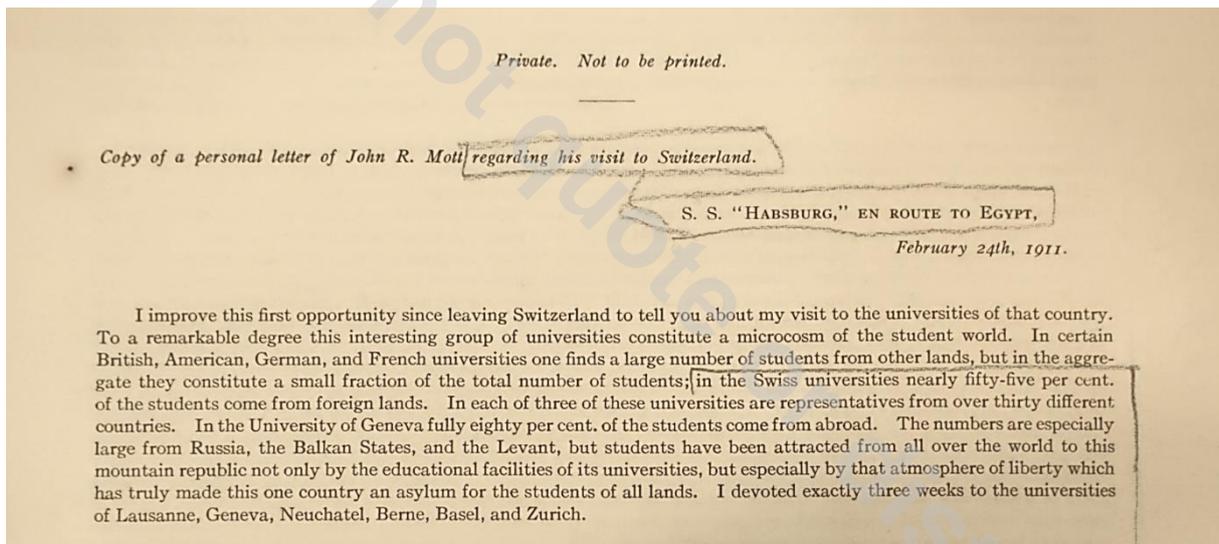
think needs to be better studied, is the regular holding of the Assemblies of the Federation in the different parts of the world.

Among John Mott's work mirroring the travelogue literary genre, the book resulting from Mott's first world tour (1895 to 1897) seems to me to be very interesting and representative. This trip was also the journey that set the federation in motion. The book is called *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest*, and its title is highly representative of the spirit of the times: one of conquest and strategic implementation among the universities. In analyzing this text, I should like to note two salient aspects.

conventions thus far held on the Continent". (p. 1)³ On this occasion he made the following appraisal:

While the student movement of this country will never be a large movement, the characteristics of the Swiss – industry, adaptiveness, courage, enterprise and independence – will make their work strong and influential.⁴

It was fairly clear to Mott by this time that it was impossible for the Swiss to create numerically significant Christian student movements. But he noted Switzerland's importance, due to its location and various characteristics (industry, adaptiveness, courage, enterprise and independence). These were characteristics that Swiss Protestants themselves invoked as part of their national and religious identity. So, John Mott was relying on the national narrative of the Swiss and especially the Genevans who, since the creation of the Red Cross in 1863-1864, had begun to see themselves as being at a world centre of international organizations. Indeed, the headquarters of the World's Committee of the Young Men's Christian Association was already in Geneva at that time. For those years, I have as yet found no assessment of Mott himself formulated by the Swiss. His presence was not noted by the press. This was no longer the case in 1911. His fame by then having become substantial, his stay in Switzerland was the subject of numerous accounts.



First, what can be found in Mott's letter of February 24, 1911 regarding his visit to Switzerland?⁵ Mott strongly emphasized that Swiss universities had a high percentage of female and male foreign students and therefore were a means of reaching them for evangelization. Here we find the idea of Switzerland as the hub of the European continent, a "mountain republic", with "that atmosphere of liberty which has truly made this one country an asylum for the students of all

³ John Mott, *Ten days in Switzerland*, Report Letter Number XI, in John R. Mott Papers, Yale Divinity library. Archives and Manuscripts, RG 45 Box 117.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

⁵ John Mott, *Private. Not to be printed. Copy of a personal letter of John R. Mott regarding his visit to Switzerland. S.S. "Habsburg", en route to Egypt. February 24th, 1911*, in John R. Mott Papers, Yale Divinity library. Archives and Manuscripts, RG 45 Box 117.

lands". Once again, Switzerland, land of asylum and freedom, is the exact national narrative developed during the nineteenth century to justify the country's neutrality and create a new national cohesion (Herrmann 2006; Zimmer 2003). During his three weeks in Switzerland, Mott gave lectures specifically tailored for each of the various nationalities widely represented in the country, especially the Russians. His visit was thus intended not only for the Swiss themselves but also for movements of other nationalities, each to be consolidated through a particular discourse.

He reported: "Notwithstanding the brevity of the visit I was able to accomplish as much in three weeks as I usually do in six, owing to the magnificent preparation which had been made, I averaged four public addresses daily, and one day gave ten." He claimed to have had such significant attendance that "more than half of the student population of the country heard one or more of these messages". Its aim was "presenting in a constructive and practical way the best method of meeting successfully the moral, spiritual, and intellectual problems of students in the modern age". Very happy with the numerical scope of his audience and his results, Mott spoke in particular of the increase in Geneva of "circles for the study of religious questions from the point of view of Jesus Christ".

But he also stated: "One of the most encouraging results has been the violent opposition awakened here and there where before there was indifference concerning religious and moral questions." (p. 2) There follows the list of difficulties, which John Mott described, characteristically, in terms of the national groups encountered: "among Russians the chaos of nihilism, agnosticism, destructive socialism, pessimism and free sexual theories" as well as the misconception that Christianity was synonymous with government oppression; for the students of the Balkan states and the Near East, it was the view that Christianity was a matter of forms, ceremonies and superstitions. For their part, the students of Latin Europe were described as free-thinkers and positivists. The Swiss were described as convinced by ultra-liberal theology, radical criticism, and "subtle materialism" and/or by the idea that religion is a private matter only. This letter is thus a subtle mixture of successes and difficulties, the aim of which clearly seems to be to give its readers good reasons to continue supporting the strategy put in place by Mott and the Federation.

On the Swiss side, in 1911, journalists questioned the reasons for the success of John Mott's lectures. He was undeniably a sort of "star", whose comings and goings as well as talks were reported. Some attributed his success to advertising, others to the curiosity aroused by his American origin. One must certainly also take into account the culture of showmanship, which pervaded religious lectures. John Mott's arrival in 1911 is presented by the *Journal de Genève* under the heading "variétés" (*Journal de Genève*, 31.1.1911, p. 2). In other writings, I have discussed the importance in nineteenth-century Geneva sociability of religious talks. They typically brought together a large number of people of all faiths and perspectives, well beyond those merely interested in a religious commitment. Above all, the Swiss were well aware that the size of the audience at meetings, when John Mott spoke, had nothing to do with the success of the Christian student movement. Indeed, the figures are clear. At that time, the Swiss Student Association was a small organization. The annual meeting in Saint-Croix brought together about a hundred people. Local reports, in the various universities, show small groups (biblical and prayer groups) of fewer than ten people on a weekly or [semi-monthly] basis.

The contents of John Mott's lectures were also a problem for the Swiss. An article in *Der Bund* (Bern) speaks of "platitudes and chatter" (quoted by the *Gazette de Lausanne*, 22.2.1911, p. 2). This harsh judgement is in the minority. However, most commentators, including the academic authorities who played host to John Mott, used words careful to distinguish Mott's speeches and ideas from their own. They made Mott out to be a man of practical life, a "man of action" (*Journal de Genève*, 03.01.1911), and not an intellectual. They also considered him an "idealist" (*Journal de Genève*, 10.2.1911, p. 3). All asserted that Mott's message, ideas, thought, were not the most important point. His success and its extent lay really in his "energy" and his capacity to play on people's willingness to act. Professor Théodore Flournoy thus affirms: "his Christianity of effort and altruism will rejuvenate ours" (quoted by the *Journal de Genève*, 9.2.1911). Doing so, he complimented Mott, but he also said that Mott's Christianity was not that of the Swiss.

John Mott met with greater ideological support – and he said so himself in the Report Letter of 1911 – in mobilizing the Swiss around the question of the mission in non-Christian lands. His knowledge of the "pagan world" was acknowledged. The *Journal de Genève* presented John Mott's representation of the world in these words:

What will become of these peoples such as China, Japan, Turkey? Will they remain in a willed and stubborn ignorance of Christianity and of the civilization whose underpinning it has been? This would be a misfortune, to express which there would not be sufficient words. We are therefore at a critical hour which calls for firm and virile resolutions on the part of the Christian world, so that the great empires in the making, which will play their role in future history", may feel drawn to the Gospel of Christ." (*Journal de Genève*, 31.1.1911, p. 2)

This aspect is so strongly emphasized that one even finds in the press an acerbic and malicious comment that John Mott "is good perhaps for the Chinese, but unbearable for us" (quoted by the *Gazette of Lausanne*, 22.2.1911, p. 2). The missionary enthusiasm aroused in Switzerland by Mott and the Federation corresponded perfectly to the literature (history of ecumenism), which has shown that the missionary projects served as cement for Western Protestants.

Conclusions

It is thus clear that the internationalism conveyed by Mott did not neatly correspond to that of his Swiss audience. In this first period of the student movement, he sought to germinate a single religious spirit in differing cultures. Starting from differentiated diagnoses, by culture, ethnicity, country, he constructed an unequivocal discourse on the modalities of conversion to Christ. He recognized national differences but hoped to sublimate them through evangelization.

From there, whether or not this evangelical international is of real importance depends on one's point of view. When one looks at Mott's figures, miles travelled, number of meetings and conferences, one gets the impression of success and titanic work. However, if one analyses the national or regional reception of the work and activities of the Federation, it seems that, as in the Swiss case, there is no important social movement, at this time. Through my work, John Mott's world citizenship appears to be essentially a figment of the imagination. Which does not take away its historical importance.

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