

John R. Mott and John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: Dimensions of an Unlikely Friendship

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Abstract

This research report is based on research performed at the Rockefeller Archive Center during January 2019. The report explores several dimensions to the friendship and professional relationship of Dr. John R. Mott and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. John R. Mott was a Nobel Peace Prize laureate of 1946 and was one of the most important ecumenical and Christian mission leaders in the first half of the twentieth century. Mott traveled the world to establish student Christian associations in many different countries, and also served in diplomatic missions for the Wilson administration. He refused Woodrow Wilson's offer to be the U.S. ambassador to China. Rockefeller was a financial supporter of Mott and of Mott's projects for over four decades. Projects discussed in this paper include aid to soldiers during World War I, the funding of a large survey research project about Christian mission around the world, and support of a Russian Orthodox seminary in Paris after the Bolshevik Revolution. Similarities with regard to theological views of Mott and Rockefeller are also briefly discussed in this report.

John R. Mott and John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: Dimensions of an Unlikely Friendship

John R. Mott (1865-1955) was the most famous organizer of the world Christian movement during the first half of the twentieth century. Few twentieth-century ecumenical or missionary conferences happened without his consultation, and frequently he was the one leading the way in organizing such gatherings. Mott was a key leader of the YMCA in its work among students, helped to found the World's Student Christian Federation, the Student Volunteer Movement, the International Missionary Council, and several other organizations that were critical in the Christian missionary movement of his era. Mott received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946 for his work in organizing students around the world, and specifically for his work in organizing relief efforts for student refugees after World War I.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was a steadfast supporter of Mott, beginning at least by 1905, but Albert F. Schenkel notes that they first met in 1895 when Mott was visiting Brown University where Rockefeller was enrolled as a student.¹ It is difficult to estimate how much money Rockefeller donated to Mott personally and to the organizations that Mott led, but it is surely in the tens of millions of dollars. Even quite early on in their relationship, Rockefeller donated to Mott in excess of \$1 million in one, five-year period between 1900 and 1905 – much to the consternation, it would seem, of at least one Rockefeller associate! This sustained and high level of support meant that Mott frequently wrote personalized reports to Rockefeller, outlining his perceptions of the political, economic, and religious situation in the various parts of the world where Mott visited.

I refer to the Mott / John D. Rockefeller, Jr. friendship in this paper as “unlikely” because their personal backgrounds were quite different from one another. Mott was raised in a small Iowa town of about 1,000 persons where his father was a local businessman. He chose not to follow in his father's footsteps to take over the family business, and instead became active in the YMCA while still in college and afterwards as a traveling student secretary. Mott and Rockefeller did share an Ivy

League education (Mott attended Cornell) and both had charismatic personalities that others frequently found disarming and endearing. They also shared a commitment to the Christian faith even if it remains unclear the extent to which they thought similarly about that faith. The purpose of this research report is to identify some of the key dimensions of discovery about the life of John R. Mott – and specifically his friendship with John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (henceforth, Rockefeller) – from the five days I spent at the Rockefeller Archive Center (henceforth RAC) in New York. I intend to use the research I did there to write a new biography of John R. Mott. Readers of this report are advised, however, that this report contains conclusions that are tentative and preliminary.²

John R. Mott and John D. Rockefeller had similar views of the Church which animated their collaboration on some of their greatest successes and on their greatest failure. Both men exhibited a great deal of confidence that denominational boundaries can and should be overcome. Rockefeller expressed this best in his speech entitled, “The Christian Church: What of its Future?” Here, he described the church of the future as one that “would pronounce ordinance, ritual, creed, all non-essential for admission into the Kingdom of God or His Church. A life, not a creed, would be its test; what a man does, not what he professes; what he is, not what he has.”³ In comparison with Rockefeller, Mott was less willing to be as dismissive of the value of creeds, although his early formation with the YMCA did make him impatient with ecclesiastical structures and nuanced theological systems.

Mott had been through too many gatherings with church leaders to believe that creeds and rituals could be so easily set aside. But he valued creeds for reasons which extended beyond mere pragmatism. Mott grew up as a committed child and young adult of the Wesleyan holiness movement which valued creeds, even while it also stressed the importance of heartfelt faith that went beyond creedal affirmations in emphasizing a more enthusiastic expression of Christianity. At times, in Rockefeller’s papers one sees evidence of Rockefeller pushing Mott to advocate for more liberal theological views within the YMCA, with which Mott had a great deal of “pull.” However, in the few letters from Rockefeller where he pushes Mott in this regard, there is never a response from Mott. Mott had seen the destructiveness of theological debates in American Protestantism and seems

to have followed at a personal level what the YMCA practiced at an institutional level – namely, that avoiding conflict and finding a middle way is preferable to the prophetic stance. Mott had also succeeded in getting church and secular bodies with a wide diversity of beliefs to support recovery efforts at the end of World War I. With substantial Rockefeller support, Mott was successful in helping to raise \$170 million for the United War Work Campaign, at the time, the largest voluntary financial campaign in U.S. history.

It was precisely Mott's rather low estimation of the importance of church institutions that resulted in his making of one of the biggest failures of his life – a failure that Rockefeller financially supported both far longer and far more than he should have. During the time when Rockefeller was considering supporting Mott's Interchurch World Movement initiative, an associate of Rockefeller interviewed one of Mott's long-time friends, a well-respected mission board bureaucrat with the Presbyterian Church, Robert E. Speer. Speer spoke about Mott's view of the Christian Church and how it differed from his own. Detailed notes from this interview are in the RAC:

Dr. Speer attaches very great importance to the Church as an historic institution, using the word "Church" in no narrow sectarian sense, an institution which feels bound to regard jealously its prerogative as God's agent on earth for the accomplishment of His Divine purposes. Dr. Mott, according to Dr. Speer, attaches much less importance to the Church, regarding its historic character as merely one of a number of influences entering into the religious life of mankind. In other words, Dr. Mott's interdenominational character... has led him to take insufficient account of the prerogatives of the Church (in its various denominational forms), while devoting his attention to the extra-ecclesiastical agencies working for the practical application of Christianity. Dr. Mott regards himself as a champion of Christianity rather than as a champion of the Christian Church. The distinction is one which Dr. Mott would probably not recognize as significant, but to Dr. Speer the distinction seems of vital importance.⁴

The different views of Speer and Mott with regard to the importance of the Church were symptomatic of the challenges to come with the Interchurch World

Movement that hoped – among other things – to merge all of the missionary-sending energy of multiple Protestant denominations into one large organization. Some scholars have argued that the Interchurch World Movement became, in effect, a rival to the already-established but more administratively conservative Federal Council of Churches.⁵ After years of effort and millions of dollars of expense, this grand ecumenical project ended with as much failure as the United War Work Campaign was a success.⁶

The financial gifts Rockefeller made directly to Mott (including paying his salary for many years) and the causes which Mott promoted at times caused disagreement among Rockefeller and his associates. Relatively early in Mott's relationship with Rockefeller, Mott appeals to his friend to provide half of the funds needed to support aid to Japanese soldiers serving in Manchuria and Korea in 1905. Rockefeller advisor F. T. Gates expresses his disagreement with colleague Starr Murphy about the value of the pastoral care provided to Japanese soldiers. Gates goes further to explain his own views of the value of the missionary enterprise as a whole:

As my own conception of the value of foreign missions lies in the transplanting of our western civilization, our improved methods of production in agriculture, manufacture and commerce, our better social and political institutions, our better literature, philosophy, science, art, refinement, morality and religion, the work which these gentlemen are seeking to do for the Japanese army seems to me too inconsiderable and trifling, too remote from anything real and fundamental, to be worthy of serious notice...⁷

It is difficult to say what sort of influence this view of missions had on Rockefeller personally, but it is suggestive of the sorts of ideals about missions Rockefeller would later espouse in supporting (again very generously) the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry (LFMI) in the early 1930s. This was a multi-year survey project involving teams of laypersons investigating the condition of Christian mission around the world. Rockefeller provided the majority of the funding for this and was effusive in his praise of the more secular humanitarian views of this report that prescribed how Protestant mission should change in the future. Rockefeller's correspondence about the LFMI adds a new dimension to the history of this rather

famous report. In one letter, he describes how he began to shed tears of joy when reading a draft of the report that put forward views that he also held dear. Predictably, Mott fails to either endorse or disagree with Rockefeller's positive portrayal of the report. I have mentioned elsewhere that in subsequent publications Mott remained silent about it.⁸ I had hoped that the Rockefeller papers would reveal something different about Mott's views of the LFMI, but there does not exist more personal reflections from Mott about the LFMI in the Rockefeller collection.

The LFMI was a project John D. Rockefeller, Jr. clearly felt strongly about, because it aligned with his own views about humanitarianism as *the* critical dimension of Christian mission. Yet, his strong support of a Russian Orthodox seminary in Paris after World War I may very well have been entirely (or nearly so) due to Mott's enthusiasm for the project. Rockefeller himself expressed a measure of uncertainty about the level of his giving. He wrote to Arthur Woods of the Rockefeller Foundation that he questions if it is:

wise for me thus to assume two-thirds of the cost and responsibility of saving the Russian church. Important as this project is in its aim, is it either wise or possible for me to undertake to carry it almost single-handed? I fear this is only the beginning and that I will be in for a long, lonely and heavy pull, if I take this matter up. What is the answer?⁹

The Russian St. Sergius Seminary in Paris became a critically important institution for the support of Russian Orthodoxy during a period of considerable oppression under Josef Stalin. That Rockefeller played such a large role in the support of this seminary has not yet (to my knowledge) been adequately understood.¹⁰

The extent of the friendship of John R. Mott and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., while evident in the significant number of letters they exchanged over many decades, is not fully understood until the last few years of Mott's life. Nothing illustrates the close friendship of John R. Mott and Rockefeller better than the fact that Rockefeller was one of the only people who, at the end of John R. Mott's life, was seen by other colleagues of Mott's to be someone who could tell Mott that he

needed to stop working. Several poignant letters illustrate how difficult this was for both Rockefeller and Mott. Mott was becoming forgetful in his speech-making and, in the judgment of Rockefeller and other close friends, was beginning to be an embarrassment to such an extent that Mott was hurting the organizations he had helped to establish. Rockefeller eventually wrote Mott to inform him that he was going to be reducing his salary (which Rockefeller had paid for years) a certain amount each year until, he hoped, Mott would finally resign. Mott himself responded to this news with an air of indignation stating that the work he was then doing, at the age of 85, was among the most important work of his life. It appears that Rockefeller remained unconvinced and continued to reduce funding of Mott's work to, in effect, force Mott into retirement.

There are other aspects of the Rockefeller / Mott relationship that I have yet to fully understand, as there remains some material that I chose to scan while at the RAC and have yet to fully analyze. For example, within Rockefeller's papers there is a lengthy and verbatim transcript of several meetings where Mott was present. This transcript of a meeting where Mott was a significant player reveals several things about how he was viewed by others and how he viewed himself. Because of his frequent and widespread travels, even a cursory review of this transcript revealed that Mott was looked to as someone who could give political and even cultural insights about church and parachurch organizations around the world. Mott seemed especially willing to provide suggestions on travel arrangement logistics. This is just one additional source about Mott that I look forward to exploring further in the months ahead.

¹ Albert F. Schenkel, *The Rich Man and the Kingdom: John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the Protestant Establishment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 208.

² I welcome other researchers to contact me at bhartley@georgefox.edu to discuss this report at greater length.

³ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. "The Christian Church: What of Its Future?" Speeches of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Series Z Box 78, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁴ Unsigned memo likely by Jerome Greene, September 8, 1913, Series N, Box 46, Folder 365. Rockefeller Archive Center. For further discussion of the Interchurch World

Movement and the role played in it by John R. Mott and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., see Charles Edward Harvey, "John D Rockefeller, Jr and the Interchurch World Movement of 1919-1920 : A Different Angle of the Ecumenical Movement," *Church History* 51, no. 2 (1982). Footnote references in this article do not correspond in any way to the current structure of the archive at the Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁵ See Robert Schneider's chapter on the Federal Council of Churches in William R. Hutchison, *Between the Times : The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge UK; New York: Cambridge UK; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶ Charles E. Harvey, "Religion and Industrial Relations: John D. Rockefeller, Jr. And the Interchurch World Movement of 1919-1920," *Research in Political Economy* 4 (1981); "Speer Versus Rockefeller and Mott, 1910-1935," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 60 (1982). Further details on the Interchurch World Movement may be found in the papers of John D. Rockefeller, Jr, Series N, Box 39. Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁷ Memo from F. T. Gates to Rockefeller, February 2, 1905, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. papers, Series R, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Welfare Interests – Youth, Box 22, Folder 226. Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁸ 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).

⁹ "Memo for Mr. Woods," February 1926, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. papers, Series N – Religious Interests, Box 26, Folder 194. Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁰ Miller acknowledges that Rockefeller was a major donor, but is silent about the extent of his involvement illustrated in Rockefeller's papers. See Matthew Lee Miller, *The American YMCA and Russian Culture: The Preservation and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity, 1900-1940* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).