

A “Necessity of the Age”: The 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions as a Public Pedagogy of Hope

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Abstract

The 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions offered a public pedagogy of hope by promoting the idea of coexistence amidst religious diversity. The Parliament advanced the cause of interreligious dialogue as the one of the first gatherings devoted to the cause of interreligious cooperation in the modern era. This paper raises up lessons from the Parliament for the present that suggest both the challenges and the possibilities of fostering peaceful cooperation between religious traditions.

Introduction

In 1891 the Committee for a Religious Congress met in Chicago as part of the World’s Congresses Auxiliary which planned a series of Congresses to take place at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, more commonly known as the Chicago World’s Fair. The meeting was attended by local representatives of various Protestant denominations, including the Episcopal Bishop of Chicago, as well as the Catholic Archbishop of Chicago, and Rabbi E.G. Hirsh, a professor of Rabbinic Literature at the newly formed University of Chicago, whose President, William Rainey Harper, was a member of the advisory council. John Henry Barrows, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Chicago and chair of the committee, expressed the committee’s hope that the Parliament would offer a unifying vision of religion to the world. He indicated that “many” outside of the committee “felt that religion was an element of discord which should not be thrust in amidst the magnificent harmonies of a fraternal assembly of the nations.” On the other hand, those on the committee “felt that the tendencies of modern civilization were toward unity” and that “a Parliament of Religions was the necessity of the age” (1893, 5-6).

Acknowledged by historians as the beginning of the modern interreligious movement, the Parliament was “almost completely unprecedented” since “Intellectuals and leaders of the various non-Western religions had never before been invited to such a gathering” and “American Protestants had never included Jews and Catholics in a conference on religion” (Hutchinson 2003, 112). There were representatives of most of the world’s major religions in attendance, including Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Parsees, Jains, and Sikhs alongside Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians as well as Jews from various branches of Judaism. This paper explores ways in which the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions offered a public pedagogy of hope by promoting the idea of coexistence amidst religious diversity. It analyzes the Parliament’s role in advancing the cause of interreligious dialogue and its continuing legacy. And, it raises up lessons from the Parliament for the present that suggest both the challenges and the possibilities of fostering peaceful cooperation between religious traditions.

On the one hand, the Parliament represented the ebullient confidence of its age that a new era of cooperation was dawning, a confidence symbolized by the Exposition itself referred to as the “White City,” alluding to its electric lights which were seen as lighting the way toward a new future of progress and unity. In his opening remarks, George Davis, director of the Exposition captured this spirit well, insisting they were in an age when people would learn “the nearness of man to man, the Fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of the human race,” a progressive vision shared by the University of Chicago’s President, William Rainey Harper, who would go on to found the Religious Education Association (REA)

ten years later as an organization espousing similar ideals. On the other hand, inherent in the modernist impulse “toward unity” was an underlying tension. Uncritical acceptance of the “civilizing” influence of colonialism, imperialism, and white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant hegemony undermined the broader inclusivist aims of the Parliament from within, while the emergence of Protestant Fundamentalism and Catholic Anti-Modernism shortly thereafter threatened the Parliament’s decidedly liberal, progressive vision of religious unity from without. Thus, the Parliament presents a mixed legacy in promoting a fuller conception of interreligious cooperation and in realizing a wider pluralist vision. Standing at the threshold of a century of division, war, and strife, the Parliament’s overconfident optimism serves as a cautionary reminder of the tenuous edge between unity and discord. And, its very insistence on “unity” invites critical reflection on the value of diversity. Yet, despite its shortcomings, the First World’s Parliament of Religions stands as a significant step in advancing interreligious dialogue. The Parliament broadened the horizons of many Americans about the wide spectrum of the world’s religions and brought together leading figures in the emerging field of religious studies in the late 19th century with religious leaders and theologians. More importantly, by its very existence the Parliament offered a public pedagogy of possibilities by educating the public’s imagination to see the potential of religion to become a source, not of conflict, but of coexistence, cooperation, and continued hope.

Methodology

This paper utilizes a historical methodology, drawing on the published speeches, letters, and reports from the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions. It will also draw on archival material found in the Harper Papers in the Special Collections at the University of Chicago Library as well as material from the Archives of the Religious Education Association in the Special Collections at Yale University Divinity School Library and the Research Collections of the Chicago History Museum.

Background and Planning to the Parliament

In June 1891, more than three thousand copies of the Preliminary Address for the Parliament went out, outlining a plan for a Parliament of the World’s Religions to be held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition of 1893 and inviting religious leaders from around the world to attend it. Responses were mixed. Enthusiastic responses came from scholars like Max Müller, a leader in the nascent field of comparative religious studies. He expressed hope that the Parliament would increase interest in the study of religions. He also said that the Parliament “stands unique, stands unprecedented in the whole history of the world” (Quoted in Seager 1993, 154). Others who showed interest in attending, highlighted mixed motives and interests, such as wanting to prove the supremacy of one religion over others or clarifying popular misconceptions about their own religious traditions (Braybrooke 1980, 2).

Amidst favorable responses, there were also those who rejected the idea. For example, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the denomination of John H. Barrows, organizer of the Parliament, passed a resolution condemning the idea. Further opposition came from the Archbishop of Canterbury, saying in his letter that his disapproval rested on “the fact that the Christian religion is the one religion. I do not understand how that religion can be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the equality of the other intended members and the parity of their position and claims” (Barrows 1893, 20-2). In addition, the sultan of Turkey, the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Europe, and many Evangelical leaders such as D.L. Moody also opposed the gathering.

The World's Parliament

At the Parliament's opening ceremony, on September 11, 1893, more than four thousand people gathered in the Hall of Columbus. At ten o'clock representatives from different faiths marched into the hall hand in hand, while the Columbian Liberty bell in the Court of Honor tolled ten times, honoring the ten great world religions—Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The inaugural ceremony began with "an act of common worship to Almighty God," in which Isaac Watts' paraphrase of the hundredth Psalm was sung (Barrows 1893a, 66):

Praise God, from whom all blessing flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. (67)

Afterwards, Roman Catholic representative, Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore led the crowd in the Lord's Prayer, which interestingly became the "universal prayer"—to use Barrows' words—that marked the beginning of each day during the seventeen days of the Parliament.

In addition to support from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy, there were several other world religions represented at the Parliament: Virchand Gandhi represented Jainism. Anagarika Dharmapala represented Buddhism. An essay by the Japanese Pure Land master Kiyozawa Manshi, "Skeleton of the philosophy of religion" was read in his absence. Swami Vivekananda represented the Hindu faith. His speech began with the salutation, "Sisters and brothers of America!". To these words he got a standing ovation from a crowd of seven thousand, which lasted for two minutes. When silence was restored he began his address. He greeted the youngest of the nations on behalf of "the most ancient order of monks in the world, the Vedic order of sannyasins, a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance!" Islam was represented by Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, an Anglo-American convert to Islam and the former US ambassador to the Philippines. Theism or the Brahma Samaj was represented by Pratap Chandra Majumdar. The Theosophical Society was represented by the Vice-President of the society, William Quan Judge and by activist Annie Besant. And new religious movements of the time, such as Christian Science was represented by Septimus J. Hanna, who read an address written by its founder Mary Baker Eddy.

Although the Parliament was dominated by English-speaking Christian representatives, who delivered 152 of 194 papers and although the opportunity for the leaders from other religious traditions was limited, it was significant; 12 speakers represented Buddhism, 11 Judaism, 8 Hinduism, 2 Islam, 2 Parsis religion, 2 Shintoism, 2 Confucianism, 1 Taoism, and 1 Jainism (Seager 1986, 87). The whole program of the Parliament was designed to provide a wide range of topics presented by a great variety of speakers. Beside a large amount of papers focused on religion per se, several papers were categorized under the rubric of "scientific section" and "denominational congress."

More than seven thousand people attended the closing session on the seventeenth day. Several Christian hymns were sung before Bonney and Barrows delivered their concluding addresses. Along with them, some representatives also spoke to express their thanks and impressions. The "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's Messiah was then sung. About this Barrows commented, "To the Christians who were present, and all seemed imbued with a Christian spirit, [the chorus] appeared as if the Kingdom of God

was descending visibly before their eyes and many thought of the Redeemer's promise—"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." (Barrows 1893a, 172-3) The Parliament was officially closed with the Lord's Prayer led by Emil G. Hirsch, a rabbi from Chicago.

Discussion

John P. Burris argues that in the Parliament "religion was perceived as the center of any given society and the most obvious aspect of culture through which the essence of a given people's cultural orientation might be understood" (2001, 123-4). The importance of culture and ethnicity was replaced by "religion" as a new central category. Consequently, the decision of which religion could reasonably be included in or excluded from the group of "ten great world religions" had put aside the categories of culture and ethnicity. By using such a conception the Parliament excluded all Native Americans and included African Americans insofar as they were converted Christians (125).

The discovery of America by Columbus, which became the *raison d'être* of the Exposition, ironically, had become the beginning of Spanish colonialism on the Indian lands. In this sense, the presence of various Native American groups in this Columbian Exposition and their underrepresentation in the World's Parliament of Religions had magnified this irony. In the Fair, they consented to be set up in "mock villages" or exhibited within the exhibition of American anthropologists without their own display as other social groups had. I agree with Burris that this fact reveals the leitmotifs that dominated all aspects of the Fair, i.e., "the evolutionary hierarchy of cultures" (110) and "colonial illusions" (123-4). Richard Hughes Seager rightly concludes,

"The Columbian celebration claimed to be the World's Columbian Exposition, not simply white America's, and it sought to represent the entire globe in a single, unified vision. People of other colors, creeds, and ethnic traditions were not excluded, but their inclusion was based on precarious grounds which, as in the case of American blacks, placed them in a position clearly subordinate to the progressive, allegedly universal vision of the Greco-Roman, Christian White City." (1986, 51)

The officially stated objects avoided any attempt to prove the supremacy of one particular religion over others. Emphasis was placed more on searching for religious commonalities and building of "the brotherhood and man under the Fatherhood of God," through which the world's religions could make the world a better place. Neither did the Parliament aim to establish a universal religion or "any formal and outward unity." Interestingly, the importance of the comparative study of religions in order to maintain "mutual good understanding" among religious traditions was also introduced here. The statements also recommended the necessity for presenting religions as accurately as possible by those who were "competent" and "authoritative."

However, these "objective" statements did not reflect the real diverse attitudes that we find in writings and speeches throughout the Parliament. Donald H. Bishop eloquently discusses three common attitudes towards other religions occurred in the 1893 Parliament: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (Bishop 1969; cf. Williams 1993). William C. Wilkinson, for instance, proudly proclaimed in his presentation, "Men need to be saved from false religion; they are in no way of being saved by false religion. Such, at least, is the teaching of Christianity. The attitude, therefore, of Christianity towards religions other than itself is an attitude of universal, absolute, eternal, unappeasable hostility ... "(Barrows 1893b, 1249)

Pluralism's common manifestation in the Parliament was the one that emphasized more the peaceful coexistence of religions. Any superiority claim of one religion over others was rejected because "the differences between religions are mainly in externals" (Bishop 1969, 72). The best example of this attitude could be found in Bonney's opening speech,

"As the finite can never fully comprehend the infinite, nor perfectly express its own view of the divine, it necessarily follows that individual opinions of the divine nature and attributes will differ. But, properly understood, these varieties of view are not causes of discord and strife, but rather incentives to deeper interest and examination, Necessarily God reveals himself differently to a child than to a man; to a philosopher than to one who cannot read. Each must see God with the eyes of his own soul. Each must behold him through the colored glasses of his own nature. Each one must receive him according to his own capacity of reception." (Barrows 1893a, 68)

Inclusivism as an attitude toward other religions based on an underlying assumption that one's religion is superior; yet allowing openness toward other religions. While the value of other religious beliefs are undermined in exclusivism, they are respected by the inclusivists, exactly because those beliefs could be possibly included in or subordinated to the terms defined by the inclusivists without sacrificing their own religious superiority. Once foreign religions have been subordinated to the superior religion, they become "more fascinating than threatening—as objects to be played with in a game where the rules [have] been stacked against them" (Burris 2001, 127).

In the 1893 Parliament, interestingly, this attitude received its justification from the evolutionary interpretation of religious plurality. The invitation sent to the world's religious leaders said, "we affectionately invite the representatives of all faiths to aid us in presenting to the world, at the Exposition of 1893, the religious harmonies and unities of humanity, and also in showing forth the moral and spiritual agencies which are at the root of human progress" (Barrows 1893a, 10). Barrows, who in his opening address spoke about "a spiritual root to all human progress," seemingly, drafted this statement (75). According to Barrows, "human progress" would objectively reached its culmination through Christianity. As the apex of all religions, Christianity can influence other religions meaningfully, but not vice versa. This was the inclusivism par excellence. Other religions are appreciated with an open heart yet, at the same time, being subordinated to the finality of Christian answer. They could be included within the conversation with Christian faith insofar as there is nothing from them that is needed to fulfill Christian system. On the contrary, it is Christian message that could fulfill the lack within other religious systems.

For ones who adopted this position, such as Barrows, there is no tension between seeking universal religious truth and keeping the finality of Christian message, insofar as the affirmation of universal truth do not lead them to the building of a new universal religion, since it would judge Christianity as incomplete so that it should be replaced by the new one. Rather, by "universal truth" it means that the truth in other religions is considered the foreshadowing of the Gospel or the preparatio evangelium. Thus, what is important for Christians in their encounter with people from other faiths is to find the "points of contact" between Christianity and other religions. Then, we can surely find certain fundamental beliefs in Christianity that cannot be reconciled with other religious systems. Those fundamental beliefs would prove Christian supremacy over other religions. This understanding was very common within Christian missionaries who attended the Parliament, especially those who worked in India (Goodpasture 1993, 404-5).

This is exactly the background of the “silent” debate between Barrows and Vivekananda. An advocate of the Vedantic Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda believed that “every religion is only an evolving a God out of the material man; and the same God is the inspirer of all of them” (in Barrows 1893b, 977). Contradictions among religions for him were only apparent and came from the same truth “adapting itself to the different circumstances of different natures” (977). Vivekananda's ultimate goal was undoubtedly represented in his proposal of a “universal religion,” which would hold no location in place or time, which would be infinite like God it would preach, whose sun shines upon the followers of Krishna or Christ; saints or sinner alike; which would not be the Brahman or Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity would embrace in its infinite arms and formulate a place for every human being, from the lowest groveling man who is scarcely removed in intellectuality from the brute, to the highest mind, towering almost above humanity, and who makes society stand in awe and doubt his human nature. (977)

To be sure, these statements captivated the attention of the American audience who had been influenced by the evolutionary way of thinking. As a different model of “human progress” that every religious people could dream of, it was more intriguing than that of the inclusivist model proposed by Barrows.

What Vivekananda meant by the “universal religion” was not that all religious traditions would be disappeared and replaced by a new and single religion. Rather, it would be an authentic togetherness of all religions, in which “each must assimilate the others and yet preserve its individuality and grow according to its law of growth” (in Barrows 1893a, 170). The necessity to “assimilate the others” was expressed by Vivekananda as the avoidance of the triumph of any one of the religions over others. He stated, “Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid” (Barrows 1893a, 170).

For Barrows and other inclusivists, Vivekananda's idea was certainly threatening the Christian supremacy. In his “Review and Summary” of the Parliament, Barrows seemed to attack Vivekananda directly, “The idea of evolving a cosmic or universal faith out of the Parliament was not present in the minds of its chief promoters. They believe that the elements of such a religion are already contained in the Christian ideal and the Christian Scripture. They had no thought of attempting to formulate a universal creed.” (Barrows 1893b, 1572) Barrows then continued with a Christian version of the Darwinian “survival of the fittest.” He wrote, “The best religion must come to the front, and the best religion will ultimately survive, because it will contain all that is true in all the faiths” (1572).

Legacy and Reception

Richard Seager suggests the Parliament as a “brief storm” that was “quickly banished from our collective memory” (1993, 214). During the two decades thereafter the world's optimism for global unity appeared to be shattered with the emergence of the First World War. Nevertheless, there were several legacies of the Parliament during the two decades after the Parliament and reemerging a century later.

First, it is important to highlight that the Parliament supplied—although not initiated—“a strong stimulus for the wide acceptance of the study of comparative religion” in America, especially in the academic life (Kitagawa 1987, 364). The presence of the religious others—“living forces of religions

other than Christianity” in Braybrooke's words (1980, 8)—with their fascinating beliefs and practices before the American Christian audience has raised the awareness of the value of religious plurality. Moreover, the flood of immigrants entering the USA during those times has made “religious plurality” and “multiculturalism” two characteristics of the twentieth century America. The study of comparative religion, which was tainted by the inclusivist view of Christian supremacy held by Barrows and others, has slowly been objectified within its academic environment and neutralized from any religious bias. However, Kitagawa points out that in the 1930s “the sudden decline of comparative religion was accelerated by the impact of neoorthodox theology, the depression and the impending war” (1987, 366). We should wait for its reemergence in the second half of the late twentieth century, with the 1993 Parliament as its apex.

Second, along with the emergence of the study of comparative religion, the Parliament is usually considered the cradle of interfaith movement, although no specific organization emerged in this event. The formation process of some interfaith bodies ran slowly (though recently quite rapidly) and seemed to be sporadic. The best historical exploration of the interfaith movement since the 1893 Parliament can be found in Braybrooke's works (1980 & 1992).

A third contribution of the Parliament was to the Christian ecumenical movement. According to Diana L. Eck, the Parliament itself “might be seen as one of the first events of ecumenical movement” (1993, xv). Eck is not wrong given the fact that 152 of 194 speakers were Christians (Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic) and that the “Christian flavor” was very obvious through the hymns, prayers and rhetoric during the Parliament. Barrows sometimes also discussed the necessity of Christian unity by employing the image of three concentric circle with “Christian assembly embodying its center; the American religious assembly, including Jews, comprising the next circle; and the religions of the worlds making up the outer circle” (Ziolkowski 1993, 57-8).

Among those who spoke on the subject of Christian unity, Philips Schaff was considered most authoritative (in Barrows 1893b, 1192-1201). While being critical of the organic or corporate model of ecumenism “under one government,” he argued for a federal or confederate union, in which the balance between unity and independence could be maintained. However, the relevance of the Parliament to the ecumenical movement has not been recognized fully until the 1910 Conference of World Mission in Edinburgh. Thereafter, the ecumenical movement has always been dealing with the issues of religious plurality in connection with Christian unity and mission.

World's Parliament and the Legacy of the REA

While William Rainey Harper was listed as a member of the advisory council of the World's Parliament of Religions, among hundreds of others, and most likely attended, at least, some of the sessions in his role as President of the University of Chicago, there is no indication, as Helen Allen Archibald has suggested that the Parliament inspired Harper to found the REA ten years later. Just one year after the Parliament, in 1894, Harper became the superintendent of the Sunday School at Hyde Park Baptist Church which was down the street from his office at the University of Chicago. He began a process of reforming its Sunday School program to conform with principles of modern critical Biblical scholarship. He used the newly founded University of Chicago Press to print textbooks for use in the Sunday School in hopes of starting a reform of religious education in the United States. This was in response to what he perceived to be the growing evangelical tenor of the International Sunday School Union. It was out of his work at Hyde Park Baptist Church and in his role as a leading proponent of

critical Biblical scholarship, having helped form the Council of Seventy, an organization of Biblical scholars committed to the principles of modern Biblical criticism, that led directly to the formation of the REA. In 1902, at Harper's urging, the Council of Seventy recommended a convention be held for the purpose of renewing religious education in the United States, a convention which became the inaugural meeting of the Religious Education Association. While the REA's central focus was on the renewal of religious education mostly among its overwhelmingly Protestant constituency, the REA did espouse broad-minded principles of unity and brotherhood among all religious faiths similar to those found in the World's Parliament of Religions ten years earlier.

Conclusion

Despite its historical and theological limitations, the First World's Parliament of Religions offered a public pedagogy of hope that interreligious dialogue and interreligious encounter was possible. The very fact that it was held at all became a testimony to the public optimism of the age, which, although seemingly naïve in retrospect, nonetheless, represented possibilities that later bore fruit in the development of the interreligious and ecumenical movements.

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