

Parliament of Religions, 1893

Summary: In 1893, the World's Parliament of Religions convened in Chicago with the goal of bringing together world religious leaders on common ground. The event introduced many Americans to the world's religions and their leaders. However, some critiqued the convention for its strongly Christian terminology and themes, its dismissal of African American Christian groups, and its denial of Native American religious traditions.

The late 19th century produced a distinctive solution to the growing awareness of religious diversity and the problems it posed, both in America and the world. That solution was an all-embracing universalism that envisioned a coming together of the great religions of the world. In 1893, a remarkable event took place in Chicago expressing this spirit: the World's Parliament of Religions. The Parliament was planned as part of the Chicago World's Fair, or World's Columbian Exposition, which celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America. Organizers called this major interreligious conclave "the morning star of the 20th century."

America's technological triumphs—engines, telephones, and electric lights—were on display in the "White City" built to house the huge fair. World congresses were held on medicine, engineering, and women's progress. Yet these were overshadowed by the Parliament, where Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Unitarians, and adherents of the Shinto and Zoroastrian traditions met together for the first time in modern history.

The event's chairman, Presbyterian minister John Henry Barrows, noted the Exposition planners' skepticism: "Many felt that Religion was an element of perpetual discord, which should not be thrust in amid the magnificent harmonies of a fraternal assembly of nations. On the other hand, it was felt that the tendencies of modern civilization were toward unity. Some came to feel that a Parliament of Religions was the necessity of the age."

Ten thousand invitations were sent out, not just throughout America but around the world. When responses returned they voiced approval and excitement as well as disapproval and suspicion, some hinting at the kind of exclusivism that would arise again in so many religious traditions in the late 20th century. The Sultan of Turkey, Abdul Hamid II, refused the invitation; his reasoning, whether active disapproval or sheer lack of interest, is unclear. The Archbishop of Canterbury declined to attend because, as he put it, "the Christian religion is the only true religion." But a professor at the Southern Baptist Theological

Seminary in Louisville was more optimistic: “Let an honest effort be made to get at the facts of religious experience, and the truth of God will take care of itself.”

As the Parliament began that September, a replica of the Liberty Bell rang out ten times, once for each of the major religious traditions represented. At the opening session the Reverend Barrows proclaimed, “We are met together today as men, children of one God. We are not here as Baptists and Buddhists, Catholics and Confucians, Parsees and Presbyterians, Methodists and Moslems; we are here as members of a Parliament of Religions, over which flies no sectarian flag.”

The predominant spirit of the three-week event was a kind of welcoming universalism or inclusivism on the part of the Western, mostly Christian, hosts. From every religion, however, speakers optimistically affirmed the universal principles that surely would undergird all faiths. The word “universalism” tolled like a bell through the halls of the Parliament. The world stood on the technological brink of a global civilization, and the hope for the universal in matters of the spirit was just beginning to be voiced. For example, many Reform Jews saw the social and religious vision of Judaism as the ethical leavening for all humanity. Chicago rabbi Emil Hirsch titled his talk “Elements of a Universal Religion,” and declared: “National affinities and memories, however potent for good, and though more spiritual than racial bonds, are still too narrow to serve as foundation stones for the temple of all humanity. The day of national religions is past. The God of the universe speaks to all mankind.”

It was the first time that many Americans had ever heard Hindus or Buddhists speak in their own voices on behalf of their own faith. Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu, confirmed the vision of universal convergence that had captured the imagination of the planners. Their self-understanding was confirmed, mirrored back to themselves in the presence of this exotic swami from the East who was one of the most popular speakers at the Parliament. One journalist wrote of him: “Vivekananda’s address before the Parliament was broad as the heavens above us, embracing the best in all religions, as the ultimate universal religion—charity to all mankind, good works for the love of God, not for fear of punishment or hope of reward.”

The language of the universal was wielded eloquently by the Christian participants as well. Some presumed, however, that the Parliament “over which flies no sectarian flag,” was convened in a spacious but clearly Christian tent. Christians claimed universality for Christianity, while listening with earnestness to the witness of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. It became clear that even Barrows’ conception of the

“universal” was but a larger and more expansive Christianity. Barrows recalled with satisfaction how all the representatives of the great historic religions recited the Lord’s Prayer together daily. “The Christian spirit,” he wrote, “pervaded the conference from the first day to the last. Christ’s prayer was used daily. His name was always spoken with reverence. His doctrine was preached by a hundred Christians and by lips other than Christian. The Parliament ended at Calvary.”

There were many voices at the Parliament that stressed not the universals, but the real differences between and within religions. Their voices made clear the difficult tasks that lay ahead and forecast the complex challenges that religious diversity would pose for the 20th century. The Buddhist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala asked the audience in a large lecture hall, “How many of you have read the life of the Buddha?” When only five raised a hand, he scolded, “Five only! 475 millions of people accept our religion of love and hope. You call yourselves a nation—a great nation—and yet you do not know the history of this great teacher. How dare you judge us!” One of the Buddhists from Japan was equally challenging, pointing to the anti-Japanese feeling he had met in America and deploring the signs that read “No Japanese is allowed to enter here.” “If such be the Christian ethics,” he said, “We are perfectly satisfied to be heathen.”

Of the major speakers only two were African Americans. Frederick Douglass called the “White City” created for the event a “whitened sepulchre” for blacks. Fannie Barrier Williams declared, “It is a monstrous thing that nearly one-half of the so-called evangelical churches of this country repudiate and haughtily deny fellowship to every Christian lady and gentleman happening to be of African descent.” She challenged Christians to take seriously their own religion.

Among the women who spoke was the first ordained as a minister in America, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, who declared, “Women are needed in the pulpit as imperatively and for the same reason they are needed in the world—because they are women.” And Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had been working on the Women’s Bible, called for a religion that would preach the dignity of all human beings. A new world, she said, would have to build its house with the cellar first, and that meant justice for the poorest.

Finally, despite sentiments of universal fellowship expressed at the Parliament, there were no Native Americans present except as curiosities displayed on the fair’s Midway. For many visitors, these Indians were as exotic as Vivekananda. But no native elder or chief was invited to speak at the Parliament. Native

American lifeways were not yet seen as a spiritual perspective. Just three years earlier Chief Sitting Bull had been arrested and killed, the Ghost Dance had been suppressed, and 350 Sioux had been massacred at Wounded Knee Creek.

As the Parliament concluded, many felt that the universalist vision should be sustained. One of the Unitarian conveners suggested that the representatives of the world's traditions convene again in 1900 "on the banks of the Ganges in the ancient city of Benares." This was not to be, but there was a meeting in Boston in 1900 of a new group: the International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers. It came to include a few Muslims, Jews, Catholics, and reformist Hindus. Its agenda of international congresses addressed the question of justice for women and the expansion of narrow patriotism to a wider human loyalty. From this seed grew the International Association for Religious Freedom. Two world wars would impede the progress of organized interreligious efforts such as this one, but the wars would, at the same time, underline the importance of interreligious efforts.

When the original Parliament had concluded, the Reverend Barrows reflected: "Religion, like the white light of heaven, had been broken into many-colored fragments by the prisms of men. One of the objects of the Parliament of Religions has been to change this many-colored radiance back into the white light of heavenly truth." When the centennial of the 1893 Parliament convened in 1993, the religious face of America had changed radically. By this time, America itself had become a truly multi-religious country and the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, and Jewish organizers were residents of a very different Chicago.