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**An Unmanageable Encounter:
The meeting of religions and cultures
in Chicago, 1893**

Richard Hartz



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The World's Parliament of Religions in History

On the morning of September 11, 1893, with fanfare and pageantry, the world's first Parliament of Religions opened in Chicago. The seventeen-day event, held in conjunction with the mammoth World's Columbian Exposition, was the brainchild of Charles Carroll Bonney, a Swedenborgian lawyer and comparative religions enthusiast.¹ As Chairman of the World's Congress Auxiliary, which organized some twenty congresses on various topics during the summer of 1893, Bonney considered the religious congress to be the culmination of the Exposition. Welcoming the assembly, he declared that it was convened in the hope of 'marking the actual beginning of a new epoch of brotherhood and peace'.² His optimism was echoed in subsequent speeches. The anticipation of great things to come was heightened by the colorful presence, on the platform, of speakers from far corners of the earth. There was a sense that history had reached a momentous turning point.

The century or so that followed sadly belied the expectations aroused by the Parliament. The anniversary of its inauguration, September 11 itself, now has dramatically different associations. Yet in a number of ways this unprecedented gathering in the late nineteenth

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century, bringing participants from diverse religions and cultures face to face, did point toward a ‘new epoch’. It did not usher in peace or unity, though it initiated a movement of interfaith dialogue. But perhaps more importantly, at the height of the colonial era it provided a forum where the discourse of Western exceptionalism, the assertion of the superiority of values derived from European civilization, could be publicly challenged by representatives of non-Western cultures.

It matters little that the forum was officially apolitical. Issues pertaining to the global balance of power were just below the surface. In the mid-twentieth century, the transition to an age of more equal relations among civilizations would begin with decolonization. Well in advance, its advent was symbolically foreshadowed at the extraordinary confluence of human diversity in Chicago. If the Parliament is worth talking about today, it is partly because it was a spectacular failure for the dream of Christian inclusivism that inspired many of its organizers and supporters. Its failure to achieve its proclaimed objectives is the key to its enduring significance.

What is most remarkable about the Parliament of Religions is the degree to which the issues it raised over a hundred years ago are relevant to our own times. In this age of globalization, multiculturalism and religious resurgence, the same issues confront us in new forms in our post–Cold War and post–9/11 world. Some historians have minimized the Parliament’s tangible influence and consequences. Yet an event that in many ways was so far ahead of its time may deserve more attention than its actual achievements seem to justify. Several features of the Parliament invite us to look at it in the largest possible context. The more we do so, the more it repays our study.

A Global Cultural Event

Globalization is the broadest and most basic context for situating the Parliament of Religions in history. Such an event could hardly have been conceived much earlier in the process of growing interconnectedness whose latest developments we usually have in mind when we now speak of globalization. The word ‘globalization’ itself did not enter into the common lexicon until the 1960s. By the 1980s



it was becoming both a subject of extensive academic study and a popular buzzword. But in the view of some scholars, globalization was already well under way between around 1890 and 1914, during the later part of the *belle époque* (or, in America, the Gilded Age). In terms of certain factors such as the openness of national economies to trade and the scale of migration, they even argue that the world today is less globalized than it was then.

Economically, the integration of world markets became possible in the second half of the nineteenth century with the advent of telegraph. As Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson point out, ‘If the theorists of globalization mean that we have an economy in which each part of the world is linked by markets sharing close to real-time information, then that began not in the 1970s but in the 1870s.’³ Politically, the international system is more fragmented by national borders in the early twenty-first century than it was in the age of imperialism.

The aspect of this phenomenon that relates most directly to our topic is cultural globalization. The Parliament of Religions was among the first instances of a global cultural event. Its repercussions in distant lands were largely due to the rapid growth of mass circulation newspapers since the 1830s. Sociologist Anthony Giddens notes the ‘globalizing impact of media’ by the last decade of the nineteenth century:

Thus one commentator in 1892 wrote that, as a result of modern newspapers, the inhabitant of a local village has a broader understanding of contemporary events than the prime minister of a hundred years before. The villager who reads a paper ‘interests himself simultaneously in the issue of a revolution in Chile, a bush-war in East Africa, a massacre in North China, a famine in Russia’.⁴

This awareness of worldwide events put the discussion of religion in a new perspective. At the Parliament, a certain William Alger reminded the audience that Hindus and Muslims had just been fighting each other in Bombay, while clashes between Christians were threatening in Montreal and Toronto.⁵ His address on ‘How to Achieve



Religious Unity' was thus placed in a global as well as historical context that would not have been so readily available a few decades earlier.

We need not hesitate, then, to speak of globalization in the late nineteenth century. Some scholars extend the historical timeframe of globalization even further back. They maintain that its present forms are the continuation and intensification of processes that began some five centuries ago with the emergence of modernity and the capitalist world system. Still another view – the least Eurocentric – is that economic, political and cultural processes that can only be described as globalizing have been going on for thousands of years.

Whatever our theory of globalization, a decisive phase in the long march of history was the period of Western expansion, beginning in the fifteenth century, which among other things led to the flooding of the so-called New World with colonists from Europe. The results of this expansionism were explicitly celebrated in the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The Parliament of Religions was conceived largely in the same spirit. But it took an unexpected turn and became, in effect, the arena for an ideological contest over the meaning and direction of globalization itself.

From Columbus to Vivekananda

The Exposition ran from May to October, 1893. In those six months it drew some 27 million people, equivalent then to roughly half the population of the United States. This number dwarfs the audience of four thousand that could be packed at any one time into the newly built Hall of Columbus where the main sessions of the Parliament of Religions were held.⁶ But the Parliament, with its exalted aspirations, shared the grandiosity of the Exposition. At times it even surpassed it in high-flown rhetoric, compounding the Exposition's American triumphalism with Christian millennialism.

Both the Columbian Exposition and the Hall of Columbus were so named in honor of the Italian explorer, employed by the monarchs of Spain, whose voyage in 1492 was credited with linking the Old World with the New. The Exposition was meant to be held in 1892 to celebrate



the four hundredth anniversary of this epochal event. The extravagant scale of the preparations, involving the construction of an entire town called the White City, delayed it by a year. But in the light of recent scholarship, it seems not inappropriate that the commemoration of Columbus's discovery took place in 1893. Clarifying the precise nature of Columbus's accomplishment, the historian Fernández-Armesto points out the importance of 1493 in this connection:

[W]hat Columbus discovered was a route from Europe to the New World and back which was previously unrecorded and which remained, with some modifications, the standard route throughout the age of sail. Strictly speaking, this was an achievement of 1493, not 1492, since Columbus's first outward route proved unsatisfactory and it was only on his second crossing that he made the best possible use of the Atlantic wind-system. World history is a matter of cultural transmissions at long range, which depend on explorers for route-finding. Columbus found routes which, for the first time and forever, established viable, commercially exploitable and durable links between hemispheres which then began to influence each other in re-shaping ways.⁷

Fernández-Armesto's last phrase suggests a parallel of sorts between Columbus's achievement of 1493 and the outcome of the assembly convened four hundred years later in the hall named after him. The Parliament of Religions likewise established, though in a different sense, 'durable links between hemispheres which then began to influence each other in re-shaping ways.' For better or worse, Columbus's voyages in 1492–93 marked the European arrival in the Americas. In 1893 the Asians who surprised the world at the Parliament arrived as bearers of Eastern philosophy and spirituality on the same shores, by then populated mostly by immigrants from Europe. To this day, the consequences of this new and more benign linking of the hemispheres continue to unfold.

In the last century, the tide of Western power and influence that was rising since Columbus has begun to recede. The Parliament's quest for the unity of religions on a Christian foundation was the religious

expression of a mindset created by four hundred years of expansion. The frustration of this attempt to put forward the vision of a Christianized world gave a foretaste of the faltering of the expansionist impulse of Western civilization in the decades to come.

Swami Vivekananda, the uninvited guest from India who memorably crashed the party in Chicago, had little patience with Christian pretensions to superiority. Nevertheless, he appreciated the cosmopolitanism of the Parliament. He praised his hosts for their ‘great attempt... to break down the barriers of this little world of ours’.⁸ But the real breaking of barriers occurred because things did not go according to plan. Though the appearance of a Christian victory was kept up in the end, the unanticipated impact of the Asian visitors was no secret. The principal historian of the Parliament, Richard Seager, observes:

Given the momentum of western expansion, the tenor of the Columbiad, and the skewed playing field of the Parliament, the Asian delegates entered the contest between East and West as underdogs, but these charismatic individuals emerged from the theological fracas on the floor as darkhorse candidates.⁹

This drama was what caught the attention of the general public. If the Parliament is remembered in history as it deserves to be, it will be remembered for this surprise turn of events, rather than for its aspiration to win universal acceptance for a Western-dominated religious discourse centered around Jesus Christ.

Human Brotherhood and the ‘Problem of Heathenism’

In the long run, the Parliament contributed to the growth of more equal and mutually respectful interactions between Eastern and Western religions and cultures. This had begun before 1893, but has greatly accelerated since then. The one-sided influence of the West on the East in the preceding period has been partially reversed by Eastern ideas infiltrating the West. The equality and reciprocity of religions and cultures is not exactly what most of the organizers of the Parliament



wanted to bring about, however. For all their rhetoric of brotherhood, part of their motive was to reinforce the triumphalism of the Columbian extravaganza with a religious sanction giving it a halo of Christian universality.

In the 1890s, imperialism was in the air. America was not immune to it, nor were religious leaders necessarily less hawkish than politicians. Josiah Strong was a Protestant clergyman and one of the founders of the Social Gospel, usually considered a liberal movement. In 1893 he published *The New Era*, where he asked: ‘Is it not reasonable to believe that this race is destined to dispossess many weaker ones, assimilate others, and mould the remainder, until, in a very true and important sense, it has Anglo-Saxonized mankind?’¹⁰ Catholic historian Gary Wills comments:

This vision of racial domination has ominous resonances for us who live after the Aryan vision of Adolph Hitler. A shiver can be felt when Strong says he is describing “God’s final and complete solution of the dark problem of heathenism among many inferior peoples”.¹¹

At the Parliament of Religions such views were not often expressed so blatantly. But among the predominantly Christian speakers there were many who would have liked to see humanity Christianized, if not Anglo-Saxonized.

Presiding over the Parliament was the Presbyterian minister John Henry Barrows, Chairman of the World’s Congress Auxiliary’s Department of Religion. Barrows is something of a paradox. He was probably voicing his genuine feelings when he greeted the assembly on the first day:

If my heart did not overflow with cordial welcome at this hour, which promises to be a great moment in history, it would be because I had lost the spirit of manhood and had been forsaken by the Spirit of God.... Welcome, one and all, thrice welcome to the world’s first Parliament of Religions! Welcome to the men and women of Israel, the

standing miracle of nations and religions! Welcome to the disciples of Prince Siddartha [*sic*], the many millions who cherish in their heart Lord Buddha as the light of Asia! Welcome to the high priest of the national religion of Japan! ... Welcome to the men of India and all faiths! Welcome to all the disciples of Christ.... When, a few days ago, I met for the first time the delegates who have come to us from Japan, and shortly after the delegates who have come to us from India, I felt that the arms of human brotherhood had reached almost around the globe.¹²

Yet Barrows later followed up his collection of the speeches at the Parliament with books entitled *Christianity: The World-Religion* and *The Christian Conquest of Asia*. Noting the contrast between Barrows and Bonney, the two chief figures in the genesis and organization of the congress, Protestant scholar Martin Marty comments: 'The Bonney-Barrows tandem displayed some of the inner contradictions of the parliament. Both had a blueprint for universalism, yet one [Barrows] was more repudiative of existing Judaism, Islam, and other non-Christian faiths.' Barrows' theology seems to have been somewhat at odds with his sentiments, however. Marty remarks that he was 'of the new style in temper; his heart was so liberal, so world-embracing, so many-sided, it was said, that it also fit the cosmopolitan mold'.¹³ His role in the Parliament brought out this side of him for the time being. Yet he was capable of saying a few years later: 'wherever on pagan shores the voice of the American missionary and teacher is heard, there is fulfilled the manifest destiny of the Christian Republic.'¹⁴

In America of the late nineteenth century it took courage for a Presbyterian clergyman like Barrows to go as far as he did in promoting dialogue between Christians and 'pagans'. His own church turned against him in this matter. Barrows himself in his book on the Parliament of Religions reported the opposition, while minimizing its seriousness:

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, at its meeting in Portland (1892), passed a resolution emphatically disapproving of the Parliament; but as this resolution was adopted without debate



in the hurried closing hours of the Assembly, when probably the majority of those who voted for the resolution of the Committee did not know accurately what they were condemning, this action of the General Assembly produced very little effect.¹⁵

Actually, the vote condemning the Parliament reflected deeper problems in the church than Barrows was willing to admit. It was an early symptom of a division that would continue until the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in American Presbyterianism came to a head in the 1920s and '30s and led to a schism. Similar schisms occurred in other denominations.

A 'Many-colored Bubble'

The meeting of East and West in Chicago took place against the background of America's own culture wars. The successes and failures of the Parliament of Religions can only be understood in this context. Its numerous opponents saw it as furthering the agenda of liberals and radicals. To conservative Christians, the Parliament was an act of aggression against traditional values. They reacted accordingly. Dwight Moody, for example, would have nothing to do with it. Moody is sometimes called the father of American fundamentalism, though he died in 1899 before the word 'fundamentalism' was coined. It was probably fortunate that he and others of a similar persuasion chose to ignore an event that was contentious enough without them.

Moody's refusal to participate was recounted by an associate of his, a certain Rev. H. M. Wharton, who added comments of his own which many contemporaries would have agreed with:

When this ecclesiastical menagerie, gathered from all quarters of the globe, made its appearance, Mr. Moody was asked again and again to take part. He only replied that he had his hands full of work, and declined to go. When it seemed to some of us that our Lord was belittled and disgraced by the motley crew who disported themselves upon the platform day by day in the wonderful "Parliament,"



we suggested that we should attack them all along the line. Mr. Moody was very emphatic in his instructions. "Preach Christ," said he, "hold up Christ; let the Parliament of Religions alone, preach Christ." And he was right. The many-colored bubble burst, and went to thin air. It will hardly be known in history. Christ lives and reigns; let us live for Him and preach His blessed Gospel.¹⁶

The Parliament of Religions has been called the dawn of religious pluralism.¹⁷ But in America in the 1890s, religious pluralism as we now understand it was a radical idea with little support in the social reality of the time. It would be decades before this changed. Few of the organizers of the Parliament had any conception of what we would now recognize as pluralism. Theologically speaking, the major issue in American religion was the quarrel between exclusivism and inclusivism. This corresponded more or less to the social divide between conservatives and liberals. The voluntary self-exclusion of the exclusivists/conservatives from the Parliament made it a liberal forum. It could have been rather uneventful, if the orientals had played their part according to the script. Because they did not, the Parliament ended up anticipating some of the issues proper to the very different and more complex social reality we confront today.

There is some truth, however, in the evangelical perception of it as a 'many-colored bubble' that vanished in thin air and left almost no trace in American history. No doubt this is an overstatement. Its impact on American society was modest, but varied and lasting. It deserves to be regarded as a landmark in the early development of American multiculturalism. It stimulated the beginnings of interfaith dialogue and pointed toward the institutionalization of religious pluralism in the following century. It contributed to the growth of academic interest in comparative religion. It brought to the United States a number of articulate exponents of Asian religions, some of whom stayed on after the Parliament and established Buddhist and Hindu-inspired organizations. Thus it permanently altered the spiritual landscape of America.

All of this occurred somewhat on the fringes of the mainstream culture. But ironically, the strongest impact of the Parliament was on



colonial history. The awakening of self-confidence in subjugated peoples, who saw their representatives acclaimed in the West, was to have incalculable consequences. That is why the Parliament of Religions is remembered vividly, if selectively, in South Asia, while in Chicago itself it has been nearly forgotten. It is in a global perspective that its significance is best appreciated.

Groping towards the Light

What led to the initiation of interfaith dialogue in Chicago was the inclusivist trend in liberal American religion, rather than any pronounced disposition toward real pluralism.¹⁸ In his book on the Parliament, Barrows quoted approvingly a statement of the French priest Père Hyacinthe, summing up the attitude of inclusivism in the Christian view of other religions:

It is not true that all religions are equally good; but neither is it true that all religions except one are no good at all. The Christianity of the future, more just than that of the past, will assign to each its place in that work of evangelical preparation which the elder doctors of the church discern in heathenism itself and which is not yet completed.¹⁹

In other words, non-Christian religions are not to be condemned outright as they are by exclusivists, since they can serve as stepping-stones to the true faith. Barrows formulated the principle of inclusivism in his own way in his opening speech at the Parliament:

It is perfectly evident to illuminated minds that we should cherish loving thoughts of all peoples and humane views of all the great and lasting religions, and that whoever would advance the cause of his own faith must first discover and gratefully acknowledge the truths contained in other faiths.... Why should not Christians be glad to learn what God has wrought through Buddha and Zoroaster – through the sage of China, and the prophets of India and the prophet of Islâm?²⁰



But this generous outlook, recognizing elements of truth and even divine inspiration in religions other than one's own, did not prevent Barrows from writing on another occasion:

We believe that Christianity is to supplant all other religions, because it contains all the truth there is in them and much besides, revealing a redeeming God.... Though light has no fellowship with darkness, light does have fellowship with twilight. God has not left himself without witness, and those who have the full light of the Cross should bear brotherly hearts toward all who grope in a dimmer illumination.²¹

This is how Barrows defended himself from criticism by his co-religionists when the Parliament was being planned and promoted. He tried to refrain from such overt condescension on the floor of the assembly. The basically Christian gathering was designed to respectfully include a sample of brother souls groping 'in a dimmer illumination', in the expectation that they would freely and gladly let themselves be led toward 'the full light of the Cross'. The things to be avoided were bigotry, on the one hand, and 'indifferentism', on the other. These corresponded roughly to what we now call exclusivism and the relativism often associated with pluralism.

It was a noble conception and the Hall of Columbus was an impressive setting for its execution. The Parliament was inaugurated with this liberal-Christian inclusivism firmly in control of the discourse. Those who might want to question it were vastly outnumbered. The Asians had no chance of winning such an unequal contest outright. But they could, and did, make a substantial dent in the preordained semblance of a Christian victory. In so doing, they paved the way for the more egalitarian interfaith dialogues that would occur in the future. This much is widely acknowledged, but one can go further. The Asian challenge to Christian supremacy in Chicago had more than theological implications. In retrospect we can see how it prefigured far-reaching developments in the coming century, which few at the time could have imagined.



From the Margins to the Center

In a study of the origins of American multiculturalism, Carrie Bramen emphasizes the unforeseen and largely uncontrollable dynamics of the volatile situation that arose at the Parliament:

Occurring at the height of imperialism, the event was an unmanageable encounter between dominant and subordinate religions and races in a hall filled with over four thousand people. Within this dynamic space, where the audience frequently interrupted speeches with boos and cheers, the minority presence of the Asian delegates became overwhelming, with their colorful robes overshadowing, literally and figuratively, the black raiment of the Christian clergy. During the two-week event, speakers such as Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda became instant celebrities, pursued by fans and soon lecturing across the country.... By moving from the margins to the center, the Asian representatives altered the Christian logic of the event, transforming a potentially Orientalist spectacle into an anti-colonial critique.²²

Barrows' record of the proceedings of the Parliament matter-of-factly reports a now almost legendary moment. This was one of the first signs that things were not going quite according to the Christian agenda. It occurred late in the afternoon of the first day:

Swami Vivekananda, of Bombay, India, was next introduced. When Mr. Vivekananda addressed the audience as "sisters and brothers of America", there arose a peal of applause that lasted for several minutes.

The short, unprepared speech was a masterpiece of impromptu oratory that elicited further thunderous applause. Vivekananda effectively contrasted 'sectarianism, bigotry and ... fanaticism', which have marred much of the religious history of humankind, with the Hindu spirit of tolerance and India's tradition of sheltering victims of persecution from elsewhere in the world.²³ Probably few in the audience



would have had much trouble accepting this. Thanks to the work of the Transcendentalists, Theosophists and others earlier in the century, many of the people in attendance were already well disposed toward India. Barrows himself in his opening remarks had referred to India as the ‘mother of religions’ and ‘the hugest standing Parliament of Religions in the world’.²⁴

Potentially more controversial, for those who were listening closely, was Vivekananda’s further distinction between ‘tolerance’ and ‘universal acceptance’. He attributed the latter attitude to Hinduism: ‘we accept all religions as true’.²⁵ Violent fanaticism is an extreme form of religious exclusivism. Everyone present would have joined in condemning it. The difference between toleration and acceptance, on the other hand, amounts to the distinction that is now made between inclusivism and pluralism. This distinction when clearly brought out was more contentious, since religious pluralism is not what some of the chief architects of the Parliament wanted to promote.

Vivekananda later returned to this point and elaborated upon it, especially in his address at the final session. This speech contains perhaps the most explicit enunciation of the principle of pluralism in the course of the Parliament:

Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity.... But if anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, “Brother, yours is an impossible hope.” ...

The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant.

Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist



to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.²⁶

Barrows, after quoting the speech, comments tersely: ‘Swami Vivekananda was always heard with interest by the Parliament, but very little approval was shown to some of the sentiments expressed in his closing address’.²⁷ Whether or not the audience’s enthusiasm for the popular Swami actually waned at the end, Barrows’ impression is of interest. His dismissiveness highlights the tension between Christian inclusivism and a pluralism that allowed Christianity no special status. Barrows himself could not countenance the pluralist position, stigmatized by him as ‘indifferentism’. He may have read his own disapproval into the audience response to Vivekananda.

In any case, Barrows’ report is contradicted by other accounts of the impact of the same speech. It was the high point of the day according to Lucy Monroe, the Chicago correspondent for the New York-based *Critic*:

But eloquent as were many of the brief speeches of this meeting, whose triumphant enthusiasm rightly culminated in the superb rendering by the Apollo Club of the Hallelujah chorus, no one expressed so well the spirit of the parliament, its limitations and its finest influence, as the Hindoo monk. I copy his address in full, but I can only suggest its effect upon the audience, for he is an orator by divine right, and his strong intelligent face in its picturesque setting of yellow and orange was hardly less interesting than these earnest words and the rich, rhythmical utterance he gave them.²⁸

As this statement suggests, the audience was not concerned only with theological issues. Vivekananda and some other Asian speakers were as philosophically sophisticated as anyone on the platform, but it was not only by reasoning that they swayed their hearers. The reference to the Hallelujah chorus shows how the effectiveness of the Christian discourse depended on stirring the emotions. The comparative handful of Asians were handicapped in a number of ways as they tried



to present an alternative discourse. But they quickly discovered their own advantages and put them to good use.

Seager points out that ‘leading Asians at the Parliament held a position that gave them a strategic leverage; they were of the East, and thus untainted by the West, yet able to utilize modern and western concepts, values and sentiments to serve their own ends’.²⁹ Most of the Asian participants came from cultures that had begun to evolve a critical and creative response to the European impact, absorbing much but adapting it to their own needs. Even as they accepted modernity, they dissociated it as far as possible from its Western origins and made it their own. The modernity of these Asians allowed them to participate successfully in a global forum. But it was as representatives of an emerging *Asian* modernity that they made their debut on the world stage.

The Exotic Cosmopolitan

The thirty-year-old Vivekananda and two or three others – notably the even younger Dharmapala from what was then Ceylon – stood out among these brilliant young men from the East. A combination of cosmopolitanism and exoticism contributed to Swami Vivekananda’s exceptional ability to bond with his Western audiences, both in Chicago and on subsequent tours. He was fascinatingly different, yet he spoke their language and by all accounts spoke it superbly. He had assimilated Western thought and, at the same time, fathomed the depths of his own tradition. But he kept his independence and creatively remolded his tradition for modern conditions. For all his love of India, he was a planetary citizen.

When Vivekananda was returning to India after his first visit to the West, as his ship neared Port Said he wrote: ‘From Suez begins Asia. Once again Asia. What am I? Asiatic, European, or American? I feel a curious medley of personalities in me’.³⁰ This hybrid identity enabled him to bridge cultures and represent India in a way that the West could understand. He was a breaker of barriers, contemptuous of narrow and exclusive identities. In this respect Vivekananda’s achievement was consistent with what he appreciated in the quest for unity at the



Parliament of Religions. Yet he saw the disguised imperialism implicit in much of the talk of brotherhood. He was an unsparing critic of Christian ambitions for global religious hegemony.

The Asian presence at the Parliament was not the one-man show that Swami Vivekananda's admirers sometimes imagine. It is true, though, that the delegates from the Far East were overshadowed by the South Asians, among whom Vivekananda became perhaps the most famous. This was partly due to unintended consequences of British colonialism. We can only guess how effective the substantial Japanese contingent would have been if they had possessed the same language skills as the British colonial subjects. The Japanese participation was nevertheless significant for the future of Eastern spirituality in the West. The Parliament brought D. T. Suzuki's teacher, Soyen Shaku, to America. Thus it marked the introduction of Zen Buddhism into the country.

Four centuries after Columbus took his reckless leap into the unknown, hoping to reach Asia but stumbling instead upon America, Vivekananda embarked from India without sponsorship or adequate funds on a voyage nearly as rash as Columbus's. Its outcome was almost equally unpredictable. The movement of Western expansion that had begun in the time of Columbus was by the end of the nineteenth century affecting the lives of most human beings. This aggressive expansion, rationalized in Europe as its 'civilizing mission' or the 'white man's burden' and in America as 'manifest destiny', showed as yet no sign of slowing down. The Parliament of Religions, for which Vivekananda undertook his journey, was part of the self-congratulatory celebrations of what Columbus had set in motion. Yet this triumphalist event provided Vivekananda and other Asians with a platform for presenting alternative scenarios for future global interactions.

The next hundred years saw the rise and fall of totalitarian ideologies, but the cataclysmic events associated with them were ephemeral disturbances in comparison with the most far-reaching political development of the century: the end of colonialism. Communism and fascism have come and gone as serious threats to democracy, but the freeing of vast populations from foreign rule has irreversibly altered



the prospects of much of humanity. Decolonization has overturned the expansionist logic that links modernization to Westernization. The irresistible trend of globalization is no longer tied to this logic, but could take a different course. Sociologist Martin Albrow points out:

We need to entertain the idea that globalization, far from being the last stage of a long process of development, is the arrest of what was taken for granted, a transformation arising out of a combination of different forces which unexpectedly changes the direction of history. It could be the transition to a new era rather than the apogee of the old.³¹

What happened when religions and cultures met in Chicago in 1893 suggests the nature of some of these forces. It momentarily seemed to presage such a change in the direction of history. When we look back on it today, we find few events in the nineteenth century that point so prophetically to developments in the twentieth century and beyond.

Notes

¹ The eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg was highly esteemed by the religious avant-garde in nineteenth-century America. Charles Bonney's Swedenborgianism is important, therefore, for understanding one aspect of the Parliament. Catherine Albanese observes: "Something akin to the immanent theology of Swedenborg... ran through the organizing ideology of the entire World's Parliament event" (*A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007], p. 333). But the part played by Bonney and thus by Swedenborg in shaping this ideology was offset, as we will see, by the more conservative role of John Henry Barrows.

² Barrows, John Henry (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), vol. 1, p. 67. Bonney's speech is reprinted in Richard Seager (ed.), *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1993), pp. 17–22.

³ Held, David and Anthony McGrew (eds.), *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 101.

⁴ Giddens, Anthony, "The Globalizing of Modernity," *ibid.*, p. 65. Giddens quotes from Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1892; New York: Fertig, 1968), p. 39.

⁵ Marty, Martin, *Modern American Religion, Volume 1: The Irony of It All, 1893-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 20.

⁶ The figure of seven thousand which is sometimes cited includes the capacity of the adjoining Hall of Washington, where supplementary sessions were held and on some days the main program was repeated for an overflow crowd. See Barrows (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, pp. 157–58, and Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 74–75, 79.

⁷ Fernández-Armesto, Felipe, *Columbus and the Conquest of the Impossible* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), p. xiii.

⁸ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002), vol. 1, p. 5.

⁹ Seager, Richard, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 108–9.

¹⁰ Strong, Josiah, *The New Era: Or, The Coming Kingdom* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1893), pp. 79–80.

¹¹ Wills, Gary, *Head and Heart: American Christianities* (New York: Penguin, 2007), pp. 391–92.

¹² Barrows (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, pp. 72, 78–9; Seager (ed.), *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 23, 29–30.

¹³ Marty, *Modern American Religion*, pp. 21, 308.

¹⁴ Barrows, John Henry, *The Christian Conquest of Asia* (New Delhi: Logos Press, 2007), p. 248.

¹⁵ Barrows (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, p. 19.

¹⁶ Chapman, J. Wilbur, *The Life and Work of Dwight Lyman Moody* (1900), chapter 33, “Personal Reminiscences of D. L. Moody” (<http://www.biblebelievers.com/moody/33.html>).

¹⁷ In the foreword to *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, Diana Eck accepts with some caveats the evaluation of the Parliament’s significance implied by the title of the volume. While it “captures the vision of the Parliament,” she points out, “we must be somewhat cautious in acquiescing to its claims.... For some, this was surely the dawn of what we might call pluralism.... For others, however, this plurality was seen as but a step on the way to an emerging world religion” (Seager [ed.], *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, pp. xiii–xiv).

¹⁸ According to the Anglican theologian Alan Race, “theories of exclusivism and inclusivism can both claim ample pedigree in the Christian tradition, stretching back to the New Testament”; the pedigree of pluralism in Christian history, on the other hand, “is virtually non-existent before the modern period” (*Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983], pp. 70–71).

¹⁹ Barrows (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, pp. 19–20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²² Bramen, Carrie, *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the*

Quest for National Distinctiveness (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 255.

²³ Barrows (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, pp. 101–2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 78; Seager (ed.), *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 23, 29.

²⁵ Barrows (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, p. 102.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170; Seager (ed.), *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 336–37. This brief statement somewhat simplifies Vivekananda's position in that it does not bring out his radical individualism and insistence on freedom of choice. He did not regard anyone as bound to remain in the religion into which he or she was born.

²⁷ Barrows (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, p. 171.

²⁸ Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, vol. 1, p. 137.

²⁹ Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, p. 96.

³⁰ Letter of 3 January, 1897, quoted by Nemai Sadhan Bose in “Vivekananda and Fundamentalism,” William Radice (ed.), *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 297.

³¹ Martin Albrow, *The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 101.