Swami Vivekananda and the World’s Parliament of Religions, 1893 —New Perspectives

Swami Narasimhananda

Swami Vivekananda lives even today through his words that shake the reader to one’s very foundations. He is fulfilling his prophecy: ‘It may be that I shall find it good to get outside of my body—to cast it off like a disused garment. But I shall not cease to work! I shall inspire men everywhere, until the world shall know that it is one with God.’ His words are not mere articulations of thought, but they represent the most radical of ethos transmitted through powerful spiritual energy that transforms all who receive them and continues to grow as part of their personalities, and finally engulfs them in an ocean of holy poise, and elevates those who show endeavour, to the fulfilling knowledge of non-difference and to the realisation of Self. To Swamiji, it was Sri Ramakrishna, who staged the World’s Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893.

Chronicling the Parliament

The proceedings of the World’s Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 has been historically recorded with meticulous care by many people, notable being the account by John Henry Barrows (1847–1902), the clergyman of the First Presbyterian Church, who was the chairman of the Parliament. Before the Parliament, Barrows announced that the convention was to take place during the month of September, 1893, and was to consist of a series
of separate congresses, which were to be followed by a massive seventeen-day Parliament of the world’s religions. Each of the seventeen days was to be devoted to a specific theme—ethical, social, historical, or theological. Thus the third day of the Parliament concerned itself with the nature of man, the sixth with sacred books, the ninth with the relationship of religion to science and art, the eleventh with social problems, and the fifteenth with religious reunion. Upon each of these days international authorities were invited to deliver addresses in the main auditorium and participate in more intimate religious discussions in smaller rooms set aside for that purpose.2

Barrows published the most authoritative account of the Parliament in two volumes with numerous illustrations. He was quite hopeful of the readership of these volumes:

This Book will also be read in the cloisters of Japanese scholars, by the shores of the Yellow Sea, by the watercourses of India and beneath the shadows of Asiatic mountains near which rose the primal habitations of man. It is believed that the Oriental reader will discover in these volumes the source and strength of that simple faith in Divine Fatherhood and Human Brotherhood, which, embodied in an Asiatic Peasant who was the Son of God and made divinely potent through Him, is clasping the globe with bands of heavenly light.3

In the end of the second volume, Barrows comments upon the Parliament: ‘The Parliament was not a place for the suppression of opinions but for their frankest utterance, and what made it so supremely successful was mutual tolerance, extraordinary courtesy, and unabated good will. Christians who entered the Hall of Columbus with timidity and misgivings found themselves entirely at home in an atmosphere charged with religious enthusiasm’ (2.1560).

Apart from Barrows’s account of the Parliament, Walter R Houghton also recorded the proceedings of the Parliament. By far, the accounts of Barrows and Houghton are the only complete and most accurate records of the Parliament. According to Houghton, the ‘work of organization [for the Exposition] began in 1890, and was carried on by the committees until the opening of the congresses in May of 1893.4 Unlike Barrows’s account, which was in two volumes, Houghton’s account was in a single volume with the remark on the title page, ‘Two Volumes in One’. The publisher’s note ends in a happy tone: ‘There is no soaring dream of future perfection, no kindly thrill of goodness, no yearning for the unseen, no prayer for light and truth, which may not be met or answered in these triumphal announcements of the faith of Humanity. The golden chain of brotherhood here forged shall endure and shall lead all men up toward that heaven in which there shall be no more sorrow, and the shadows of parting shall be lifted for eternity’ (10). Houghton’s account has the photo of Swamiji in which he is holding a rolled-up paper (505). The last part of this volume contains ‘Biographies, Articles, and Opinions’ (971).

Much before the Parliament or the Columbian Exposition, the Catholic community was celebrating the discovery of Columbus, who ‘remained a hero for most of the nineteenth century’.5 There was a great anticipation to know about other religions and faith-traditions through the Parliament. For instance, Merwin-Marie Snell was quite hopeful about the Parliament:

In the month of September there is to take place in Chicago an event which promises to be epoch-making in the history of religions, and perhaps, by its ultimate consequences, in the general history of mankind. I refer to the World’s Parliament of Religions, at which the representatives of the Catholic, Oriental and Protestant forms of Christianity, with their various sub-divisions, will meet on equal terms with those of the different sects of Judaism, Mohammedanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism,
Parseeism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, and other non-Christian systems.

These religious bodies will present to the Parliament, through their accredited representatives, a statement of their teachings, practices and claims, and many of them will also have special congresses of their own, in which their doctrines, histories and practical methods will be still more fully exhibited.

Only a small proportion of the sacred books of the world have thus far been translated by European scholars and placed within the reach of the student; and these books can have but a partial and preliminary value so long as the complicated systems which have produced them, or grown out of them, have not been studied in the details of their historical development, subdivision, reproduction, interaction and fusion.

What does European scholarship know, for example, about the religious development of India, in spite of the vast amount of good work which has been done in that field by Vedic scholars, general philologists, and other classes of students? There exists to this day but one professedly original résumé (and that very imperfect, and based to a large extent upon a native work) of the existing sects of Hinduism, and from this all other descriptions have been, for the most part, copied or abstracted.

Who is there, even among professional Indianists, who is thoroughly acquainted with the various ramifications of either Vaishnava, Saiva or Sakti Hinduism, the dates and circumstances of origin of the sects into which they are divided, the minutiae and sources of their doctrinal and practical differences, and their relative dependence upon ancient Vedic or non-Vedic Aryan religion, the pre-Aryan cults of Bactria and India, Mohammedan and Christian influences, the old and new philosophical schools, and internal processes of corruption and decay or of constructive or agglutinative development?

The proceedings of the parliament will form an invaluable addition to the materials for the study of religions, but as many as possible of those who take a scientific interest, in the subject, should attend the parliament in person, so that they may in face-to-face intercourse with the picked representatives of the Christian, Jewish, Moslem and pagan sects and sub-sects, if not by their action in the great congress itself, bring out and note for their own use, and the future uses of science, the many facts which will otherwise fail to be collected.

At the turn of the last decade of the nineteenth century, efforts were already underway to teach the major religions in schools in the US and some courses had already been developed. Emily Mace describes this development:

Between 1890 and 1896, the Western Unitarian Sunday School Society (WUSSS), headquartered in Chicago, disseminated a religious education...
curriculum called the ‘Six Years’ Course in Religion’ to liberal Sunday schools across the country. The course, first published by the WUSSS from 1890 to 1896, emerged out of the milieu of academic and popular interest in evolutionary understandings of the origins of religion, comparative theology, the ‘science’ of comparative religions, and the higher criticism of the Bible. Most schools using the course included flourishing Midwestern congregations in places such as Chicago, Minneapolis, and St. Louis, and in cities and towns across the United States. Congregations in places as far distant from each other as Winchester, Massachusetts; Greenville, South Carolina; Greeley, Colorado; and Salem, Oregon, all used the curriculum. Although the course never achieved anything close to the phenomenal success of the uniform lessons of the American Sunday School Union, that this small publication found favor in a variety of places across the United States nonetheless indicates widespread interest in the work of the course.

Of course, in the education of comparative religions, there was a major focus on the training of the missionaries and the local languages were also taught. As noted by The Biblical World, ‘An elementary knowledge of Hindi … [was] of special importance to intending missionaries’. Jenkin Lloyd Jones (1843–1918), a Unitarian minister brought out another recording of the Parliament by the title A Chorus of Faith. It ‘contains one hundred and sixty-seven extracts from one hundred and fifteen different authors, all of them taken from the utterances of the main Parliament’. This account is neatly divided into various themes of ‘Greeting’, ‘Harmony of the Prophets’, ‘Holy Bibles’, ‘Unity in Ethics’, ‘Brotherhood’, ‘The Soul’, ‘The Thought of God’, ‘The Crowning Day’, and ‘Farewell’. Each section starts with a poem by a leading poet and contains some papers related to the theme. Jones acknowledges the vastness of the record by Barrows and assures that his ‘little book will not take the place of the larger two-volume history’. We know from Jones that ‘the limits of Columbus Hall, accommodating about three thousand people, was maintained to the end’ (ibid.). The extracts published in this volume had been made from ‘remarkably full and satisfactory reports which appeared from day to day in the Chicago Herald’ (ibid.). Only extracts from Swamiji’s ‘Response to Welcome’, ‘Why We Disagree’, ‘Paper on Hinduism’, and ‘Address at the Final Session’ are given in this volume. The other two lectures, ‘Religion Not the Crying Need of India’ and ‘Buddhism, the Fulfilment of Hinduism’ have not been cited. Jones is not very enthusiastic about the outcome of the Parliament and believes that the Parliament ‘is not going to put an end to bigotry. There are those who distrusted the project and who regret the triumph’.

Jones’s account ends with memoriam to Philip Schaff (1819–93), the Protestant theologian, who passed away the very next month after the Parliament. In the appendices is an extract from a letter written to Jones by Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) which reveals the idea of holding a ‘Parliament of Religions in Benares’ (326). In the appendices are also given a letter from a Christian who is concerned how Christianity ‘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’ (321). So much for the catholicity of the Catholics! The other two items of the appendices are extracts from addresses by the clergy. The extract from the address by Joseph Cook at the Parliament ends with the note that ‘except Christianity, there is no religion under heaven or among men that effectively provides for the peace of the soul by its harmonization with this environment’ (323). The other address is by Arthur Cleveland Coxe (1818–96), the second Episcopal bishop of Western New York, delivered at the Church of the Epiphany, Chicago. Coxe affirms that
non-Christians are ‘thieves and robbers’ in that they have ‘robbed’ Jesus Christ ‘of millions of souls who should have been sheep of his pasture’ (325).

Another report has twelve addresses delivered by the missionaries of the Church of Christ in the World’s Congresses of Religions that was also organised as part of the World’s Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893. The popularity and attendance of these Congresses were not anywhere near those of the Parliament. Nevertheless, these talks were recorded as they ‘are able discussions of great living issues’.10

There is another, smaller, account of the World’s Parliament of Religions by Reverend L P Mercer, who confuses the Parliament with the World’s Religious Congresses mentioned above. Mercer’s account is called a ‘review’ and has short summaries of most of the papers and complete versions of the opening speeches. Mercer is quite proud of the meetings that were auxiliary to the Columbian Exposition:

When the record of the achievements of the World’s Columbian Exposition shall have been fully written and considered by those far enough removed from the event to form impartial judgments, it will be found that the most remarkable and unique in kind and substantial in results are those of the Auxiliary Congresses, covering more than twenty departments of thought, and embracing over two hundred distinct congresses, participated in by distinguished specialists.11

The mistake of confusing the Parliament with the World’s Religious Congresses is repeated by John Wesley Hanson. His account is almost as large as Barrows’s, however, the same cannot be said about its accuracy. It includes selections from the Parliament and the Religious Congresses. Hanson says in his preface: ‘This volume contains the most and the best of the Parliament and the Congresses. The Parliament papers are largely from authors’ manuscripts or stenographic reports, and the Congresses are mainly written by eminent clergymen and others who participated in them.’12

Charles C Bonney, who originally thought of the idea of the Parliament, hoped that the grand work so auspiciously inaugurated at Chicago in 1893 go forward in renewed efforts, until all the world shall respond to its benign and gracious spirit; and the pure and noble peace it both prophesied and exemplified in the Parliament of Religions shall prevail among all the peoples of the earth, exalting, not only their religious, but at the same time their personal, social, business, and political life. This is the mission of the World’s Religious Parliament Extension.13

An Eye-Opener to the Eastern Thought
The World’s Columbian Exposition held in 1893 at Chicago, of which the World’s Parliament of Religions was a part, opened the eyes of the West to many things from the other side of the globe of which the Westerners were oblivious.

Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard
The Exposition made a welcome departure in accommodating women as speakers on religion, who actively participated and spoke in the proceedings. The proceedings of Second Biennial Convention of the World’s Woman Christian Temperance Union (wctu) and the twentieth Annual Convention of the National Women’s Christian Temperance Union was published by their president Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard (1839–1898), the famous educationist. These proceedings took place in the very same Art Institute building that housed the Parliament. This convention took notice of the Eastern thought and society and how women were treated there. Denouncing alcoholism and emphasising the need to fight it, Willard said in this convention: ‘The high caste Hindoos have received the impression that Christianity means intemperance ... High caste women are total abstainers, and they oppose Christianity on no other ground so strongly as because it permits the use of alcoholics [sic]. Although women are in subjection, they still have much power in the home, and Hindoo men do not like to return to their wives with the smell of strong drink on their breath.’ 14 Interesting observation indeed! The Parliament not only cleared misconceptions about Eastern faith-traditions, it also cleared wrong ideas about the cultures of the East. As we know well, Swamiji himself had clarified many misconceptions and wrong ideas about Hinduism and India, during the course of the Parliament.

(To be continued)

References

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(Continued from the previous issue)

Analysing the Parliament

According to Konden Rich Smith, the ‘Columbian World’s Fair of Chicago in 1893 was one of the most publicized events of the nineteenth century’. He writes further:

Its announced intentions were to represent the beginning of a new age, one of cultural awareness and also technological development. The World’s Fair, which ran from May to October 1893, had three components, the ‘White City’, the ‘Midway Plaisance’, and the massive ‘Congress Auxiliary’. The White City celebrated the glories of ‘secular’ government, commerce, and manufacture; the Midway exploited cultural as well as racial differences; and the Congress Auxiliary (which included 224 General Divisions in twenty departments) was devoted to even more diverse interests, ranging from the fine arts to the latest developments in surgery.15

1893 was a historic year. It ‘foreshadowed the century that was to produce two world wars, the atomic bomb and nuclear weapons, unconscionable racism, religious intolerance and ethnic cleansing’.16 Thillayvel Naidoo believes that Swamiji’s ‘addresses at the august gathering left upon all an “indelible impress”, as Gandhi described it. For Vivekananda the heart of religion lay in restating the right of every person in the world to a life of economic, social and political freedom as a prelude to spiritual freedom’ (79). This points to the broad vision that Swamiji had regarding the religious and spiritual life of an individual.

One of the aims of the Parliament was to ‘demonstrate the cumulative power of religion’ and to ‘show that religion was capable of producing a “cosmopolitan” person, who transcended the pitfalls of a parochial spirit, and who was capable of having a “universal” outlook’.17 According to Egal Feldman, a very important reason for the ‘general approval in academic and religious circles both in home and abroad’ of the idea of the Parliament was ‘a growing interest in the study of comparative religions’.18

It was definitely a great step on the part of the orthodox Christians to organise such a Parliament. Some shared an egalitarian vision of religion. As James F Cleary argues,

Catholic participation in the parliament most probably ought to be considered as an outgrowth of the liberal vision of the place of the Church in America. It was their answer to charges that the Church could not successfully accommodate itself to the American mode of life. They believed that the Church belonged in the midst of the other religions and maintained that the Church had nothing to fear from the scrutiny of the world, but rather should welcome it.19
Also, ‘the Parliament ... reflected growing interest of Americans in exotic non-Western religions’. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M Kitagawa make this assessment of the Parliament:

Among the participants were many notable scholars, including historians of religions, but they attended the parliament as representatives of their faiths or denominations and not of the discipline of the history of religions. Nevertheless, in the minds of many Americans, comparative religion and the cause of the World Parliament of Religions became inseparably related. What interested many ardent supporters of the parliament was the religious and philosophical inquiry into the possibility of the unity of all religions, and not the scholarly, religio-scientific study of religions. Nevertheless, the history of religions and comparative religion, however they might be interpreted, became favorite subjects in various educational institutions in America.

Richard Hughes Seager follows Kitagawa in giving the proper place that the Parliament deserves in history. Seager is concerned that it ‘is also instructive to consider those parties that were underrepresented at the Parliament or were not there’. In the same vein, Eric J Ziołkowski aims to ‘reassess the meaning and significance and the histories and legacies of the 1893 Parliament as a meeting of religious faiths and to shed light upon the role of the event as a critical moment in the development of the very perspective from which we now reassess it: that of the academic study of religion’. The Parliament ‘was the first time in history that leaders of so-called “Eastern” and “Western” religions had come together for dialogue, seeking a common spiritual foundation for global unity’. The Parliament was also ‘one of the first instances of contact between Americans and Asian religionists’.

David Mislin situates the Parliament in the context of Protestant leaders and how they view religious pluralism. David F Burg states that ‘John Henry Barrows pointed out that it required the parliament of all faiths to bring together the dissident Christian faiths’. Tomoko Masuzawa’s study of the Parliament ‘concerns a particular aspect of the formation of modern European identity, a fairly recent history of how Europe came to self-consciousness: Europe as a harbinger of universal history, as a prototype of unity and plurality’. Lakshmi Niwas Jhunjhunwala analyses the Parliament as the backdrop for colonial and missionary agenda, particularly, unmasking the real motives of Max Muller. Swami Prabhananda argues that ‘history demonstrated that Swami Vivekananda practically seized control of the Parliament and forced it to a new goal’.

Lucien Arréat argues about the Parliament that ‘A generous thought has however dominated this assembly, and the unanimous applause provoked each time by the words of fraternity and concord strongly testify that the peoples of today claim a religion of peace and are tired of writing the annals of the world with
blood. Larry A Fader argues that the 1893 Chicago World’s Parliament of Religions was a significant event in the history of interreligious dialogue, generating excitement and anticipation on many levels. As a human spectacle, for example, consider the curiosity aroused by the appearance of the many delegates espousing strange and little-known beliefs, arriving from distant, mysterious lands, dressed in alien garb, unfamiliar ways and speaking languages rarely heard by Americans.

Some religious traditions used the Parliament as a place to shift ‘from premillennial proselytizing to a balance of evangelism and “exhibition” — exhibition being intended, at least in part, to pave the way for evangelism.’ Kirin Narayan says that Swamiji’s visit to America for the Parliament provided ‘the first concrete illustration that the Hindu tradition was not just frozen in misshapen forms or buried in lofty texts but continued to be transmitted by living teachers.’ Narayan also analyses the last passage from Swamiji’s ‘Paper on Hinduism’: ‘Hail, Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who never dipped her hand in her neighbour’s blood, who never found out that the shortest way of becoming rich was by robbing one’s neighbours, it has been given to thee to march at the vanguard of civilisation with the flag of harmony.’

Narayan says that this portrayal of a noninterventionist, nonimperialist United States mocks history. It ignores the bloody conquest of the Americas. Ironically, moreover, just five years after Vivekananda spoke, the United States would acquire the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and also Hawaii in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Nonetheless, Vivekananda’s emphasis on America’s acceptance of imported religions is in many ways prescient. Despite the claims of Indian newspapers, Vivekananda did not convert vast numbers of Americans, but he did occupy an important historical position as the first guru to accept Western disciples, thus inaugurating a reverse transcultural religious flow.

Many scholars concur that the Parliament failed in achieving its high aims. According to Smith, ‘However lofty its goals, the Parliament of Religions failed notably in inclusiveness and actually highlighted evangelical Christianity’s growing inability to control the social and religious world around them. The final message of the parliament was not the triumphalism of the Christian message but the limitations and sectarian divisions of the Christian nation.’

Paul E Teed affirms that the ‘growing vibrancy and ferment of religious thought among Indian intellectuals, a trend embodied by men like Vivekananda and Mazumdar, helped to convince American missionary societies that young recruits heading into the field would need more sophisticated knowledge of South Asia’s rich spiritual heritage in order to be effective advocates for their own.’ Travis D Webster argues that the Parliament ‘was a testament to nineteenth century ideals of universalism.’

Gwilym Beckerlegge argues that at the Parliament ‘arguably for the first time, representatives of different religions began to make common cause in the light of their shared experience of global pressures exerted by scientific and other socio-economic forces. Vivekananda’s encounter with the sense of globality fostered at Chicago in turn may have increased the pressure on him to identify and clarify the place of Hinduism in the world.’

Amy Kittelstrom argues that Swamiji’s ‘conviction of the social purpose of religion turned out to be perfectly attuned to the mood of the Parliament, its American Protestant organizers, and its late Victorian audience.’

Ziolkowski argues that as an unprecedented meeting of representatives of the world’s major religions, the parliament...
allowed certain Eastern faiths to be presented for the first time in America by spokesmen of their own, and is justifiably remembered for having stimulated Western sympathy and curiosity in Eastern spirituality, encouraged the study of comparative religion in American universities, and for having helped foster the ‘dialogue’ between East and West.  

Ziolkowski traces the idea of the Parliament to the religious tradition of Din-i Ilahi propounded by the ‘Mogul emperor Akbar, a figure whose life and accomplishments were still not well known in the West at the time of the parliament.’

According to Dennis P McCann, the ‘representatives of non-Western religions at the 1893 Parliament generally were not in a position to question the tacit understandings warranting the Social Gospel perspective; instead, they tried to show how their own traditions contributed at least as effectively to the overall progress of humanity.’

Carlos Hugo Parra has done his doctoral research on the Catholic Church and the Parliament. Though Parra concentrates on the perspectives of the Catholics on the Parliament, he also delves on the Catholic interactions with the other religions. He believes that Swamiji’s speeches at the ‘Parliament is considered by many a highlight of the gathering. His speeches were acclaimed as the most insightful uttered at the event. His visit to Chicago and subsequent trips to North America are recalled as key to the penetration of Hindu thought and practices in the West.’

According to Peter van der Veer, Swamiji’s ‘translation of Ramakrishna’s message in terms of “spirituality” was literally transferred to the West during his trip to the United States ... Vivekananda’s spirituality was not modest or meek; it was forceful, polemical, and proud.’ He sees the Parliament as a ‘major step in … direction’ of ‘the development of an audience for universal spirituality.’

Seager considers the Parliament to be an arousing call from America to the other nations for gearing up towards a pluralistic understanding of religions:

The encounter on the Parliament floor can be considered a call and response, with industrializing America, the young scion of the West, issuing a call for congresses … It was a grand, idealistic, and fundamentally liberal call inviting the Asians to share in an expansive, global vision, but one cast wholly in western, Christian terms and partaking of an often smug largess that depended upon the West’s racial, political, economic, and religious hegemony.

Clarification of Some Facts of the Parliament

When any great historical event is fogged by time, numerous theories and concoctions of facts surface. New artefacts emerge and the olden documents are forgotten. The World’s Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 is no exception. There are mainly two distortions of fact that I would like to clarify here. Many detractors of Swamiji and Hinduism claim that Swamiji’s ‘Response to Welcome’ did not evoke the response and applause that it is said to have received. This claim is baseless because Barrows, who later went against Swamiji, records: ‘When Mr. Vivekananda addressed the audience as “sisters and brothers of America”, there arose a peal of applause that lasted several minutes.’

Another distortion of fact is the claim that Swamiji’s voice was recorded in the Parliament. While the Parliament has numerous accounts, many of which are verbatim, we find no description of any kind of public address system employed there, much less of phonogram, which was the only audio recording system extant in 1893. Also, Swamiji was not the only speaker at
the Parliament. It is highly implausible that all the other distinguished speakers at the Parliament did not have their voices recorded and only Swamiji’s voice was recorded. Also, there is only one version of Swamiji’s speeches at the Parliament that is claimed to be his voice; the other versions are expressly, only readings of his speeches. The version that is claimed to be Swamiji’s voice begins with an introduction by a woman, whereas we find from Barrows’s account that all introductions for that session were done by Barrows himself (196–101). Swamiji himself tells this in his letter to Alasinga Perumal on 2 November 1893: ‘I ... bowed down to Devi Sarasvati and stepped up, and Dr Barrows introduced me.’ The extant recording was published by an organisation in the early eighties to attract some buyers and the voice had been artificially synthesised to give the archival feeling. This fact has been cleared up by the extensive research of M S Nanjundiah. Those who like to dupe less-knowing people into the attractions of artefacts by creating fake ones, need to know that history punishes such people by enveloping them into its dust.

**The Intolerance of the Church**

As is now well known, the core idea behind the organising of the Parliament was that ‘all “lower” religions would be subsumed as part of Christianity.’ Feldman says that the ‘hope that the Parliament would promote the Christian faith was foremost in the minds of a number of its leading American supporters.’ ‘Unbending orthodoxy had its say’ and at ‘one point, for example, a prayer was offered “for those blind heathens who attended the congress”,—especially Hindus, Mohammedans, Brahmans, “that God might have mercy on them and open their eyes”, so that they could “see their own errors and accept the truth of Christianity”’ (185). However, though the church authorities ‘endeavored to plan their appearances and speeches so that they would give no notion of yielding a single point of Catholic doctrine while urging the basic need of religion, there were several ambiguous circumstances over which they had no control.’ But, the charge ‘that the participating prelates had compromised the Catholic position’ by allowing members of the other religions to participate was denied on the ground that much good ‘was accomplished by permitting non-Catholics to hear Catholic doctrines.’

The intolerance of the orthodox Christians can be seen by the musings of this observer, just after the Parliament:

The Congress may have sinned by the excess of its mastery. The spirit of profound charity which animated it seems to have inspired it with too much indulgence for even contradictory doctrines. It is not the syncretism of the honest elements of all religions that will be the basis of the cult of the future, as the promoters of the work of the Congress seem to believe; it will be the sincere, complete return to the One whom the Parliament has acclaimed and who alone has been able to say: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life!’

Even after a century, the Parliament did not seem to have a great effect in curbing the growing intolerance of the Church. As Karen Armstrong observes,

Western Christianity ... since the Crusades, has found it notoriously difficult to live side by side with other religions; it has also tended to lose sight of the agnostic approach and to seek an unrealistic certainty in religious matters. We in the West are fond of castigating others for their intolerance, but the conservative venture has a special urgency for us, if we are not to fail the test of our century and are to hand on a compassionate faith to the next generation.
instead was ‘the tendency toward religious imperialism, where sincere but unmindful attempts at inclusion end up excluding.’

Donald H Bishop argues that the Parliament was ‘a classical example of the attitudes a follower of one religion may take when he is confronted by other faiths. Three emerged at Chicago; they may be called exclusion, inclusion and pluralism. Exclusion is the attitude that there is only one true religion which is destined to become universal. It was the attitude or view expressed most often at the Congress.’ Derek H Davis reminds us that ‘one of the founding principles [of the Parliament] was that no religious group would be pressured into sacrificing its truth claims.’

Denouncing Hinduism

The religion that gained the maximum prominence out of the Parliament was Hinduism as was its gifted monastic proponent, Swamiji. The interest in Hinduism that was slowly developing in the West increased astronomically after the Parliament. And it was not surprising that the Christians did not like this at all. Since then, they started a systematic campaign to vilify the religion and keep closely following Swamiji’s speeches to find out apparent ‘grey areas’, where they could dig a trench and hide there to destroy Hinduism. Of course, these ‘grey areas’ were and are visible only to the uneducated, who do not have the dedication to read into the contexts and true meanings of Hindu texts.

It is no secret that the Christian missionaries ridiculed and scoffed at the Hindus and went to great lengths to proselytise them. However, the methods they adopted are appalling. In spite of great developments in Western thought, ‘there was a feeling of religious superiority that the colonialists felt they had acquired due to their Christian revelation.’

Swamiji explained, in his lectures in the West, how the migrants from the other side of the River Sindhu, called the practitioners of Sana\-tana Dharma, ‘Hindus’, because they could not pronounce the consonant ‘S’. This explanation has been twisted by the Christians to mean that there was no religion named Hinduism and that ‘it was constructed, piece by piece.’

Hinduism has been said to be ‘imagined’ and its construction has been held to be colonial. Some over-enthusiastic thinkers had in the nineteenth century labelled Hinduism as ‘a way of life’ that has led the missionaries and the quasi-liberals masquerading as Marxists to define Hinduism as an ‘umbrella of religions’. By this logic, any person changing one’s name, changes into a completely different person whose birth coincides with the time of name change!

Roderick Hindery argues that Swamiji ‘offered his sophisticated defense of Advaitic neo-Hinduism as the matrix of what was spiritually superior in every religion.’ Hindery believes that Swamiji tried to homogenise Hinduism, relegating its rich tradition of mythic lore. Stephan Schlensog argues that Swamiji created a brand of political Hinduism at the Parliament where he was ‘an imposing representative of a pluriform, tolerant, and cosmopolitan Hinduism.’

Robert Eric Frykenberg describes the so-called ‘construction’ of Hinduism:

The ‘official’ (or establishment) structure, in summary, consisted of at least five elements: (1) Hinduism as a nativistic synonym for all things Indian (or pertaining to India); (2) Hinduism as an ancient civilization, something clearly identifiable before 1800 and going back 5,000 years; (3) Hinduism, as a loosely defined label describing all socioreligious phenomena found or originating in India (comparable to, but less pejorative than, paganism as a label for nonmonotheistic religions in the ancient Graeco-Roman world); (4) Hinduism as an institutional/ideological instrument for the
sociocultural and sociopolitical integration of an All-India (imperial or national) sway; and (5) Hinduism as a single religion which, with the coming of Swami Narendrath Datta Vivekananda to the First World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893, was gradually recognized and then elevated by liberally minded and eclectic Western clerics into the rank of a world religion. A pragmatic, and sometimes, romantic blending of these five representations ... helped to reify Hinduism in popular imaginations. With Western impetus, this blending was then projected onto the world.67

Axel Michaels divides Hinduism into three ‘religions’ of ‘sectarian religions’, ‘syncretically founded religions’, and ‘founded, proselytised religions’. He places Swamiji’s thought under ‘syncretically found religions’.68 Richard King calls Swamiji’s presentation of Hinduism as the foundation of ‘a renascent intellectual movement, which might more accurately be labelled “Neo-Hinduism” or “Neo-Vedanta” rather than “Hinduism”’.69

Describing a congress of religions named Dharma-Mahotsava that took place in Ajmer, India in September 1895, Virchand R Gandhi, who participated in the Parliament, counters arguments against Hinduism and India, and says that ‘the people of India, say our opponents, are merely speculative, visionary, unpractical. If one tries to reach the ancient literature of India and dive deep into it, he shall know what the great sages in the past have said about politics, law, war, and polity in general.’70

This discourse about ‘Imagined Hinduism’ needs to be critically analysed and challenged in another place as this is not the appropriate venue for that. However, we need to understand that the Christian missionaries have repeatedly portrayed Swamiji’s success at the Parliament as his attempt to create a new religion called ‘Hinduism’.

**Influence on the United States of America**

There are numerous accounts of the impact that the Parliament in general, and Swamiji in particular, made on the US. A look at the new dimensions of this influence can be best begun by quoting this poem by Minnie Andrews Snell:

Aunt Hannah on the Parliament of Religions
Minnie Andrews Snell
Wall—I’m glad enough I’m hum agin—kin rest my weary brain,
For I’ve seen an’ heered so much too much, I guess I’ve heered in vain.
I thought th’ Fair was mixin’ an’ th’ Midway made me crawl,
But th’ Parl’ment of Religions was th’ mixin’est of all!
I seen th’ Turks going round th’ Midway in th’ Fair,
But our minister reproved me when he seen me peep in thair.
‘Defilin’ place’ he called it, an’ th’ Turk ‘a child of sin’;
But th’ Parl’ment of Religions took all them heathen in.
It made me squirm a little,
to see some heathen’s air,
As he told us Christians ‘bout out faults an’ laid ‘em out so bare,
But thair flowin’ robes was tellin’ an’ th’air mighty takin’ folk,
So th’ Parl’ment of Religions clapped to every word they spoke.
I listened to th’ Buddhist,
in his robes of shinin’ white,
As he told how like to Christ’s thair lives,
while ours was not—a mite,
Thel I felt, to lead a Christian life,
a Buddhist I must be,
An’ th’ Parl’ment of Religions brought religious doubt to me.
Then I heered th’ han’some Hindu monk, drest up in orange dress,
Who said that all humanity was part of God—no less,
An’ he said we was not sinners,
so I comfort took, once more,
While th’ Parl’ment of Religions roared with approving roar.

Then a Cath’lic man got up an’ spoke,
about Christ an’ th’ cross;
But th’ Christians of th’ other creeds,
they giv’ thair heds a toss.
When th’ Babtist spoke,
th’ Presbyterians seemed to be fightin’ mad,
’Tel th’ Parl’ment of Religions made my pore old soul feel sad.
I’ve harkened to th’ Buddhists,
to th’ Hindu an’ th’ Turk;
I’ve tried to find th’ truth that in our different sects may lurk,
’Tel my pore old brain it buzzes,
like its goin’ religious mad—
For th’ Parl’ment of Religions nigh put out th’ light I had.
Must I leave all this sarchin’ ’tel I reach th’ other side?
I’ll treat all men as brothers while on this airth I bide,
An’ let ‘Love’ be my motto,
’tel I enter in th’ door.
Of that great Religious Parl’ment,
where creeds don’t count no more.71

Some scholars argue that interreligious dialogue got a great impetus by the Parliament and if such dialogue were to be compared to a table, ‘Guests have been sitting at this table, which has been conveniently moved around—especially since the 1893 first Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago’.72 Some scholars argue that the ‘beginning of the interfaith movement dates back to the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893’.73 Patrice Brodeur argues that a new attitude of non-proselytizing came to prevail during the Parliament in an otherwise conservative Christian milieu. Several factors coincided to create this new space, three of which are: the new travel technologies resulting from the industrial revolution; the new philosophies, both political and theological, that emerged from the growing Western scientific discourse; and the new colonial discoveries about the diversity of human cultures. The idea of World Fairs combined all of these factors. Yet one factor in particular made the Chicago parliament unique within the history of World Fairs: its American social location allowed new forms of religious explorations, such as the new concept of interfaith dialogue, because of the social impact of the First Amendment of the US Constitution.74

B G Gokhale states that Swamiji ‘profoundly impressed his audience [at the Parliament] by his eloquence and earnestness, and his activities in America became the basis of his fame and leadership upon his return to India’.75 Prem Shanker and Uma Parameswaran argue that Swamiji, a Hindu monk, invited to speak at the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893, was sweeping across the United States like an effulgent beam of light, illuminating areas of possible intellectual development that had been peripherally speculated upon but never thought of as integral to the science of psychology. Swami Vivekananda’s visit to the United States had far-reaching effects in many fields, not the least important of which was psychology.76
The Lasting Impression

The World’s Parliament of Religions has an impact that is felt even today. The spread of Indian philosophy in general and yoga in particular, owes much to Swamiji’s addresses at the Parliament. Even the predominantly ‘mental yoga equivalent to the Yoga Sutra’, which was later taught by Swamiji, gained more audience in the West after the Parliament.77

The 1893 Parliament of Religions created a great interest in interfaith dialogue and a demand for similar gatherings. The centenary of the 1893 Parliament was observed as another Parliament in 1993 at Chicago. This was followed by Parliaments in 1999 at Cape Town; in 2004 at Barcelona; in 2009 at Melbourne; in 2015 at Salt Lake City, and the forthcoming Parliament will be held in November 2018 at Toronto.78 The 1993 Parliament called for a ‘mutual transformation of world religions.’79

Jon P Bloch is of the opinion that these Parliaments are not ‘receiving wider attention.’80 He argues that ‘the Parliament’s understanding of global religious ethic falls short insofar as addressing the inherent complexities of globalization’ (614). The Parliament has to be studied and newer ways of addressing the phenomenon of religion have to be effectively communicated to wider audiences. Bill J Leonard opines that ‘The World’s Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, included representatives of the great world religions in an effort to survey the changing spiritual environment of the then “modern” world. A century later ... few observers of American culture would deny that there is an increasing curiosity about, if not participation in, varying dimensions of the spiritual life.’81

The Parliament was the harbinger of sweeping changes in the religious tapestry across the world, particularly in the US. As R Marie Griffith notes, ‘it is no longer possible to describe the United States as a Judeo-Christian nation, as many Americans once thought of their country. Nor is it possible today to defend theories of secularization that once held sway, when it was believed that religious faith and practice would markedly decline in the U.S. and that religion’s social prominence and cultural influence would likewise fade into obscurity.’82

Undoubtedly, if any one nation has benefited the most from the Parliament and Swamiji’s participation in it, it is India. In one masterly stroke, with his famous address, ‘Sisters and Brothers of America’, Swamiji not only awakened the intrinsic spirituality of the world, through the modern conglomeration of cultures that is the US, he reinvigorated India’s channels of renunciation and service and reminded her that her slumber was causing a global gloom, and that she had to wake up, be free in all spheres, and uplift the entire humanity to the lofty ideal and realisation of identification with God.

Swamiji’s speeches at the Parliament became the seeds of a unique kind of integrative nationalism that has not yet been completely understood. As Samta Pandya argues, ‘Commencing with the postulate of the educative role of India to the west in the sphere of value, religion, and spirituality as per the 1893 Chicago address, the insertion of “religion” as a keynote to the national life of India became integral.’83

However, D N Dhanagere laments that Swamiji’s ‘words of wisdom’ at the Parliament ‘have been either forgotten or their meaning misread by the American superpower. To dominate the unipolar world, today, the United States, assisted by her MNCs, is doing exactly the opposite.’84 His sentiment is shared by Jagmohan:

By forgetting Vivekananda’s insightful message to accept the entire planet as an inextricably enmeshed entity and recognise the common ancestry and common future of man, present-day United States is missing an epoch-making opportunity to extend its strong helping hand to
propel human consciousness to a higher orbit of global fairness, balance and harmony. On the other hand, barring a few formal declarations, it continues to act virtually as a ‘godfather’ of the current system which is pumping huge quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, overheating the Earth, transforming it into a pressure-cooker, and exposing it to the grave risk of explosion and resultant destruction of all life on our planet. At home, [India] too, the opportunity to attain social cohesion and family stability has been lost because of the neglect of the soul-force which Vivekananda wanted the Americans to develop along with development of their economy and technology.85

Diana L Eck succinctly describes how the challenges for interreligious understanding have changed today:

The universalism so dominant 100 years ago is now challenged by fundamentalists and pluralists alike, though for different reasons. For the fundamentalist, the very idea that all religions have a common kernel and core undermines the particularity of one’s own faith and reduces those well-defended boundaries to mere husks. For the pluralist, universalism poses a more covert problem. As the Parliament so clearly demonstrated, and as the early phases of the comparative study of religion confirmed, the universal is usually somebody’s particular writ large. Pluralism, however, is a distinctively different perspective. The pluralist does not expect or desire the emergence of a universal religion, a kind of religious Esperanto. Nor does the pluralist seek a common essence in all religions, though much that is common may be discovered. The commitment of the pluralist is rather to engage the diversity, in the mutually transformative process of understanding, rather than to obliterate it.86

According to Rolland Emerson Wolfe, ‘A good start [at interreligious understanding] was made at the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893 when the “Parliament of Religions” was formed, but that movement was allowed to die. As it is, religion again is found trailing humanity instead of being out to the fore and leading.’87

After the Parliament and mainly after hearing Swamiji’s speeches, many faith-traditions became quite tolerant and even sold literature on Swamiji.88 Amanda Lucia argues that Swamiji ‘ushered in a new age of the guru as a public figure with his American debut in 1893.’89 Dillip Kumar Maharana sees Swamiji’s ‘Response to Welcome’ as ‘one of the testimonies of Indian multiculturalism’.90 Rajeev Dubey states that Swamiji’s success at the Parliament ‘is widely considered to mark the beginning of “globalising” Hinduism’.91 Chandrakant Yatanoor believes that Swamiji ‘brought Hinduism to the West’ through the Parliament.92 Swami Nikhilananda states that Swamiji was ‘the first cultural ambassador of India to the New World’.93

Jeffery D Long argues that speaking ‘truth to power, not unlike the biblical prophets, Vivekananda delivered [the message of plurality] … as an Indian at a time when European colonization of much of the earth was being justified as the “white man’s burden” and as a Hindu in a land where the superiority of Christianity was taken for granted.’94

Phillip Charles Lucas argues that ‘Vivekananda attempted to combine Advaita Vedanta’s teaching of non-dual reality with a more Western concern for progressive activism’.95 According to H D Sankalia, Swamiji’s message of ‘the essential oneness of all religions of the world … thrilled the vast concourse and lifted the proceedings [of the Parliament] which until then had been flowing in narrow, separate grooves, each participant speaking for his religion only.’96 S K Pachauri argues that Swamiji’s Parliament speeches generated goodwill ‘between the American and Indian peoples.’97

Swamiji’s speeches at the Parliament continue to influence believers from across religious
traditions. A Jewish believer asserts that ‘it was Vivekananda who not only helped me to understand the spirit of tolerance in the Hindu tradition but also led me to see that this spirit of tolerance is present in my own tradition’.98

Jitish Kallat, an artist, converted Swamiji’s ‘Response to Welcome’ on 11 September 1893 to a LED display on each of the ‘118 risers of the historic Woman’s Board Grand Staircase of the Art Institute of Chicago, adjacent to the site of Vivekananda’s original address. Drawing attention to the great chasm between this speech of tolerance and the very different events of September 11, 2001, the text of the speech … [was] displayed in the colors of the United States’ Department of Homeland Security alert system.99

Thus, Vivekananda’s speech is presented on the risers of the Grand Staircase with 68,700 glowing LED (light-emitting diode) lights in the five colors of the threat codes in a font that was specially created for this work. A computer-generated program was used to distribute the application of the five colors randomly throughout the text. The speech begins on the lowest risers of the staircase and progresses upward, so that whichever path a visitor takes up the three flights, he or she will walk through the entire speech.100

The display was exhibited from 11 September 2010 to 12 September 2011.

Kallat has imbibed Swamiji’s broad vision and feels that ‘the idea of the nation isn’t any more a potent tool to comprehend artistic practice. So attaching the noun “Indian” like an adjective to describe an artist may not hold good as the syntactic precision or descriptive capability of the adjective to differentiate has dissolved somewhat in today’s world, integrated though it may be by satellites in the sky and fiber-optic cables under the sea.101

Swamiji presented India to the world through the Parliament and that has led to the understanding that ‘in a transformed international order, … [India’s] assets and resources are more relevant to a wide range of American interests than they have been for 50 years. They cannot be safely ignored in the future, as they have been in the past.’102

Seager argues that ‘Vivekananda’s Hindu theism was the basis for an inclusivist theological vision that made a major contribution to the Parliament’s protean ambiguities’.103 In his review of Seager’s The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, James E Ketelaar says:

Seager interprets the Parliament from different perspectives: as a singular event in American religious history, as a facet of the Columbian Exposition, and as an event with global consequences. He suggests that the Parliament as an expression of eighteenth-century classical revivalism embodied the iconic style for Anglo-Protestant civil religion. … The Parliament was thus ‘a struggle over the content of a myth of America’ and, Seager concludes, it ‘was a liberal, western, and American quest for world religious unity that failed’ … Recognizing that ‘there was no single World’s Parliament of Religions, but many’ … Seager for his part chooses to place ‘the Asians and the East/ West encounter’ at center stage of his analysis … His discussion of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese delegates to the Parliament, though significantly hampered by the exclusive reliance upon English language materials, is a noteworthy attempt to rethink the roles of these ‘Oriental others’ in the Parliamentary vision of religion and civilization. Through a richly textured discussion of the Asian delegates, Seager effectively demonstrates that the Parliament was shot through with ‘parochialism, ethnocentrism, imperial pretensions, and hegemonic intentions’ … In such an environment, he concludes, ‘Asians and their religions could only operate as secondary, subordinate signs in a global discourse.’104

Homi K Bhabha has a poignant portrayal of Swamiji’s influence:

Vivekananda’s national ‘public’ is a cosmopolitan public sphere consisting of citizens, refugees, diasporics; it is an ethical community that respects the rights and representation of
minorities. Vivekananda’s affective mode of address represents the voice of the citizen of one country signifying the religious and political polyphony of the wretched of the earth. This is a public sphere that cannot be identified in the simple spatial polarities of local/global for two reasons: first, the historical insight that modern national territories are often sites of global settlements and the disruption or displacements of national minorities; second, ‘local’ and ‘global’ as spatial norms and measures cannot track the complex, contingent ways in which national imperatives and global interests intersect in the struggle between sovereignty and solidarity.

Thus, Swamiji’s Chicago speeches continue to inspire countless, who want to experience freedom at various levels. However, we need to have a deep understanding of his ideas and strive to actualise them. Swamiji’s idea of religion was person-centric and was devoid of the entanglements and impositions of institutions. He wanted every person to have the freedom to have one’s own religion. He wanted everyone to accept this as a reality of life and look upon every other being only as a divine being, whose true nature is quite above the mundane characterisations we see to be associated with a person. When would Swamiji’s idea of religion be realised by everyone in the world? We need not worry and have to only strive towards that goal, because as cited in the beginning of this paper, Swamiji would not rest, until every person has realised one’s Self. He does not want Hinduism to prevail. He does not want Christianity to prevail. He does not want Buddhism, Islam, or Sikhism to prevail. He does not want any ism to prevail. All he wants from us is that we do not get stuck with the labels of religion, spirituality, or even humanity, but that we realise our divinity.

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