To Unite Religion against all Irreligion

The 1893 World Parliament of Religions

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‘He will lift up an ensign to the nations from afar and will hiss unto them from the ends of the earth, and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly.’

Introduction

The World Parliament of Religions that was held in Chicago from 11–27 September 1893 is a conflicted subject, evaluated at the time by some as one of the greatest events in history, but also as a masterpiece of Satan. It is analyzed by present-day scholars from various angles – as a landmark in American religious history, but also as a key element in a series of international interfaith meetings. The Parliament is seen as a contribution to the emerging science of religion, or – diametrically opposed to this view – as a blending of faith and scholarship. The remarkable participation of women and their new public role as speakers at the Parliament are also often highlighted. Yet it is wise to qualify such statements about what was achieved. Yes, the Parliament was indeed a step in the emancipation of Christian women, but their role was defined in stereotyped ways. Yes, there were con-

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2 Isaiah 5: 26 (King James Version), quoted in the preface of Neely 13.


4 Barrows 1557.

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tributions to scholarship, but religious superiority claims were never far away. The organisers themselves were to some extent aware of the precarious relationship between Christianity and the other invited religions. They tried to avoid controversies by stipulating strict rules of conversation that forbade for instance polemics against other positions.5

In this contribution I will deal with various aspects and contexts of the World Parliament of Religions. Special attention will be paid to the discourse of religion as it was used and developed by the key players in this event, especially by the initiators Charles Bonney and John Henry Barrows, but also by other contributors to the Parliament. What was understood by ‘religion’ and ‘faith’, and what were its linguistic opposites? What were the leading ideas behind this event? How did the representatives of “other” religions react? My aim here is to give a comprehensive and readable account of the first World Parliament of Religions.

World Exhibitions6

The most immediate and indeed spectacular context of the Parliament was the 1893 Columbian Exhibition, celebrating the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America. World exhibitions or world fairs were major business in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century. The fairs epitomized progress and made it very clear that not all nations were at the same level of industry and civilization.7 The educational and civilizing intentions of the organizers were evident. The explicit international character of the World’s Columbian Exhibition, in which various nations and peoples participated with their own pavilions, did not preclude a furthering of nationalistic feelings. Relics of American history, such as a lock of Thomas Jefferson’s red hair, were shown at the Chicago Exhibition and the text of the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States was framed for this occasion. At the opening ceremonies school girls formed a living flag, whereas millions of children around the country pledged ‘allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands, one Nation indivisible with Liberty and Justice for all’.8 The fairs provided the visitors with nationalistic images, reinforced by ritualistic practices.9

6 In this section I am drawing on Arie L. Molendijk, The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands (Leiden etc.: Brill, 2005), 223–255.
8 Quoted in Rydell, All the World’s a Fair, 46. The clause ‘under God’ was added in 1954 to distinguish the United States from the atheistic Soviet Union; cf. Joan Didion, ‘Fixed Opinions, or the Hinge of History,’ The New York Review of Books 50/1, January 16, 2003, 56.
If one looks at the photographs of the great fairs, it is easy to imagine how the magnificent architecture of the buildings and the design of the huge exhibition spaces and amusement parks must have made a deep impression on the visitors. At the ‘Midway Plaisance’ (where the more “popular” attractions were assembled) of the Chicago exhibition, for instance, there were Javanese, Egyptian, Indian and Eskimo villages, German and Hungarian bands, camel drivers and donkey boys, dancing girls from countries ranging from Samoa to Brazil, and the Ferris Wheel, from which it was possible for visitors to enjoy a bird’s-eye view of the attractions and the crowds below. The simulated native villages doubtless furthered prevailing racial stereotypes, which were largely underpinned by ethnological scholarship. The contrast between the Midway Plaisance (rue des nations) and the Court of Honor with Doric temples and other classically inspired forms of architecture could not be greater. It lent an evolutionary and even utopian flavour to the whole event. Religious rhetoric was used frequently at these occasions. The construction of the 1893 Chicago Exhibition was seen as the building of a New Jerusalem: ‘The city so holy and clean,/ No sorrow can breathe in the air;/ No gloom of affliction or sin,/ No shadow of evil is there’.

The 1893 World Parliament

It would be wrong to view these exhibitions solely in terms of material and economical progress and expansion. They also had a strong intellectual and even spiritual dimension. During the preparations of the Chicago exhibition Charles Carroll Bonney (1831–1903), a Chicago lawyer and counselor of the Supreme Court, launched the idea to organize intellectual conferences for this occasion as well. To this end a new committee was established, called the World’s Congress Auxiliary, of which Bonney became the chair. This committee appointed more than 200 working committees to organize the various special conferences. In the field of religion the World Parliament

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12 Rydell, All the World’s a Fair, 48. After a hymn of the Methodist Charles Wesley ‘Away with our sorrows and care.’
14 Neely 15–16.
was by far the biggest event, but there were other meetings as well. It was the explicit aim of the organizers ‘to have a presentation of the faith and creeds of every denomination in Christendom as well as expositions of the beliefs of peoples and sects outside its pale’. These were the so-called denominational congresses, 41 of which convened from 27 August till 15 October 1893. Most of these were meetings by Christian organisations or related groups, such as the Lutheran General Council, the Congress of Colored Catholics, the Universalist Church, the Disciples of Christ, the Friends’ Orthodox Church, the African Episcopal Church, the International Board of Women’s Christian Associations, the Sunday-Rest Congress and the Evangelical Alliance. Furthermore meetings and presentations of Jewish groups, Theosophists and Buddhists were held.

The balance between Christian and non-Christian churches and groups was strikingly uneven, and neither was the whole of Christianity represented. Although there was a large representation of (American) Catholic organisations, the American Presbyterian General Assembly and the Archbishop of Canterbury of the Church of England explicitly declined to come to Chicago. The criticism of the Archbishop of Canterbury was aimed in particular at the (alleged) presumption that the Christian religion is principally on the same footing as other religions. The chairman of the Parliament, Dr. John Henry Barrows, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, emphasized the point that invitations went primarily to individuals, not to organizations, and that the meeting was outside ecclesiastical control.

Notwithstanding these critical voices, the World Parliament of Religions was a huge success in the eyes of its organisers and attendants. It convened in the main hall (the Hall of Columbus) of the Chicago Art Institute near Lake Michigan, which could accommodate 4,000 people. This enormous venue was at times still not big enough so that people were invited to go to the adjacent hall – the Hall of Washington (people were listening to the same addresses in turns). On September 27, the last day of the meeting, one of the main Chicago newspapers published an article ‘Crowds besiege managers of Parliament for tickets’, which informed its readers of the enormous interest in the closing session:

At 9 o’clock it had been announced that tickets for the closing session of the parliament to be held this evening would be given out. At that hour 1,500 people were packed in Hall 2,
and every one of the halls and corridors was equally crowded. The demand for seats was apparently greater than for boxes at a grand opera opening.\textsuperscript{20}

Barrows claimed that almost 150,000 people attended the meetings and boasted that the ‘splendors and wonders of the great Fair itself’ seemed powerless to divert the attention of the visitors of the Parliament.\textsuperscript{21}

**Objectives**

What was the Parliament about? This simple question is not so easy to answer. The event was meticulously prepared by an American committee representing many Christian and Jewish groups. In June 1891 they sent out some 3000 invitations all over the world ‘to the religious leaders of mankind in many lands’.\textsuperscript{22} This ‘preliminary address’ starts with the statement that God exists and that he who fears God and works righteously is accepted by Him. The key aim is presented in the following way:

[\textit{W}]e affectionately invite the representatives of all faiths to aid us in presenting to the world, at the Exposition of 1893, the religious harmonies and unities in humanity, and also in showing forth the moral and spiritual agencies which are at the root of human progress.\textsuperscript{23}

The address also shows differences of opinion within the organizing committee. Apart from the alleged beneficial moral effects of religion, one of the aims is also to show its dominance in institutions of higher learning and ‘to make prominent the value of the weekly rest-day on religious and other grounds’.\textsuperscript{24} This last issue at least was controversial, and the Parliament would as a matter of fact convene on Sundays.

The goals of the committee are specified in somewhat more detail, to be precise, in ten points.\textsuperscript{25} The first three items were, as far as I can judge, quintessential for the organisers: the goals are (1) to bring together in conference ‘the leading representatives of the great Historic Religions of the world’; (2) to show how many ‘important truths’ these religions have in common, and (3) ‘to promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious men of different faiths’ (while neither promoting indifferentism nor formal unity). The basic idea was that the great Historic Religions have important things in common, and that exchange of ideas will bring this further to light.


\textsuperscript{21} Barrows 1538 and 110 f.

\textsuperscript{22} Barrows 11.

\textsuperscript{23} Barrows 10.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} Barrows 18.
and stimulate mutual understanding. In a cautious formulation the focus is exclusively on what the various religions and branches of Christianity deem to be their most important truths. I quote this in full: (4) ‘to set forth, by those most competent to speak, what are deemed the important distinct truths held and taught by each Religion, and by the various chief branches of Christendom’. The terminology is unashamedly elitist; competence, leadership and also scholarship are the prerequisites of the whole venture. The next goal specifies the minimum of what is expected: (5) ‘to indicate the impregnable foundation of Theism, and the reasons for man’s faith in Immortality, and thus to unite and strengthen the forces which are adverse to a materialistic philosophy of the universe’.

One of the main oppositions structuring the whole event is that between the religious (‘spiritual’ is also a favorite term) and the material. It is also evident that a certain level of religious development is presupposed, and that only representatives of developed and theistic forms of religion will be invited. To secure sound knowledge ‘leading scholars’ are invited, representing (6) ‘the Brahman, Buddhist, Confucian, Parsee, Mohammedan, Jewish and other Faiths’ as well as ‘representatives of the various Churches of Christendom’. In at least three objectives the beneficial effects of religions on each other and on culture and society are mentioned, with particular emphasis on their contributions to issues such as temperance, labour, poverty and education. The last objective is to (10) ‘bring the nations of the world into a more friendly fellowship, in the hope of securing permanent international peace’. These were high hopes indeed. World peace was not achieved, but notwithstanding some moments of strife and dissent, the attendants thought that the Parliament succeeded in establishing a sphere of harmony and mutual understanding.

Reports

Of special importance to the organizers was the documentation of the Parliament. One of the explicit goals of the committee was to publish a ‘permanent record’ of the meeting, ‘an accurate and authoritative account of the present condition and outlook of Religion among the leading nations of the earth’. Actually, several records were published within a year after the Parliament.

26 See the section on spiritualization below.
28 Barrows 18.
closed. The most authoritative and complete edition is that of John Henry Barrows, ‘chairman of the general committee on religious congresses of the world’s congress auxiliary’ (as is indicated at the title page of the collection), which comprised more than 1,500 pages. Its complete title runs as follows: *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*. The second important collection was edited by ‘a corps of able writers’ with Professor Walter R. Houghton as editor in chief and F.T. Neely as publisher. It counts some 1000 pages and is titled: *Neely’s History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World’s Columbian Exposition (compiled from Original Manuscripts and Stenographic Reports)*. Most students of the Parliament refer primarily – sometimes even exclusively – to Barrows’ edition, which indeed is the most careful of the two, but nevertheless contains lots of typographical mistakes. I consulted these two editions, which are by no means identical, and paid special attention to passages which are missing in Barrows.

Two other – less known and even less reliable – editions are those by J.W. Hanson and Jenkin Lloyd Jones, a Unitarian who was the executive secretary of the general committee on religious congresses and the Parliament in particular. As I did not have access to these collections I have to rely on the judgements of others. Hanson’s *The World’s Congress of Religions. The Addresses and Papers Delivered before the Parliament* (Chicago: W.B. Conkey, 1894) is less comprehensive, and Jones seems to have presented a still shorter and highly selective collection, titled *A Chorus of Faiths as Heard in the Parliament of Religions* (Chicago: Unity Publishing, 1893). In his book on the Parliament Richard Hugh Seager writes that Jones took issue with the alleged Christocentric bias of Barrows’s collection. Comparing the introductions and the concluding and evaluative remarks of Barrows one does get the impression that – along the way – he put more emphasis on the unique [and special] character of Christianity. Jones, on the other hand, stressed the common aspirations of the participants from all these different religions. ‘For him [Jones], the Parliament’s opening day was a revelation of the oneness of humanity, the harmony of all the prophets, and “the mysterious in the infinite, the thought of God”’.  

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Thus, the basis for my discussion is the collections of Barrows and Houghton. A word of caution is in place, however, because both books have been significantly edited, as is already evident from the sometimes major differences between them. Eric J. Ziolkowski, who presented a collection of papers of the 1893 Parliament on the occasion of its centenary in 1993 with a view to its importance for the rise of the academic study of religion, puts it – perhaps over-dramatically – as follows:

While embodying invaluable treasure-troves of materials, both those editions [Barrows and Houghton/Neely] are an editor’s purgatory and annotator’s inferno, filled with such constant torments as typographic errors, misspellings, and spelling inconsistencies; placements of sometimes loose paraphrases within quotation marks; omissions of documenting references for quotations; and so forth.30

For a general impression the two collections will do, and even for a more precise analysis of the semantics and rhetorics of the event these volumes form a good starting point, but because of the opaque editing practices we have to be careful not to jump to conclusions on the basis of scant textual evidence. This is not to say that the editors did a bad job or that the editing of the proceedings was not important to them. On the contrary, the editors had to make hard decisions in cutting the material back to a more digestible form. Barrows wrote that even the comments that reached him after the meeting could easily fill more than 4,000 pages.31 In a retrospective article with the ominous title ‘The Real Significance of the Parliament of Religions’, Max Müller, the most famous scholar of religion of the period, said he very much regretted that he could not come to the Parliament, pointing to the importance of texts for interfaith understanding and peaceful intercourse. Did not his own project, the edition of the Sacred Books of the East, contribute significantly to ‘spread[ing] a feeling of toleration [and] of respect for other religions’?32 Counterfactually, he spoke of the forty silent volumes of the Parliament which in his view were ‘in some respects more authoritative than the parliament that was held at Chicago’ and thus pointed, indirectly, to the value of the two-volume editions that were actually published.33

30 Ziolkowski, A Museum, xi.
31 Barrows 135.
33 Müller, ‘The Real Significance,’ 158.
Opening Ceremony/Historic Faiths

The Parliament was described as – and this summarizes the event neatly – the ‘invitation of Christianity to all historic faiths’. The opening of the assembly was proclaimed by ten strokes of the new Liberty Bell, upon which according to Neely’s report were engraved the words: ‘A new commandment I give unto you that ye love one another’. According to the reports the ten strokes represented the ten ‘chief religions of the world’. It is not a hundred percent clear which religions were meant. To some degree ten is a symbolic number. In another report it is said that on 11 September at 10am, ‘the representatives of a dozen world-faiths’ marched down the aisle of the Hall of Columbus, ‘beneath the waving flags of many nations, and amid the enthusiastic cheering of the vast audience’. The national element was clearly in the mind of the organizers, which could explain also why they chose to call the assembly a parliament. In his opening address Charles Bonney first mentioned the states involved, and then the religions:

The programme of this general Parliament of Religions directly represents England, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland, France, Germany, Russia, Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Syria, India, Japan, China, Ceylon, New Zealand, Brazil, Canada, and the American States, and indirectly includes many other countries. This remarkable program presents, among other great themes to be considered in this Congress, Theism, Judaism, Mohammedanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Catholicism, the Greek Church, Protestantism in many forms, and also refers to the nature and influence of other religious systems.

The invitation sent out by the organizing committee mentioned various Christian churches and the ‘Brahman, Buddhist, Confucian, Parsee, Mohammedan, Jewish and other Faiths’. Richard Hughes Seager included Jainism in his list of ten religions. Depending on how one counts and whether or not one lists various Christian denominations as separate religions or not, the Parliament counted some ten major, allegedly theistic, religions.

In this way many religions and denominations were excluded. Mormons, for example, were not invited and Barrows explicitly discussed in his report the negative reactions from the leadership of his own Synod of the Episcopal Church and of the Sultan of Turkey. According to Max Müller, the refusal of the Sultan (in his capacity of Khalif) to send delegates helped

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34 Neely 24.
35 Neely 33 refers only to this text, John 13: 34 in the King James Version, whereas two other texts were engraved on the Liberty Bell as well (Lev. 25: 10 and Luke 2: 14).
36 Neely 33; cf. Barrows 58.
37 Barrows 62.
38 I have found no references as to why this term was chosen.
39 Barrows 70; Neely 39, which present identical formulations here.
41 However, according to Barrows 153 there were contributions on Mormon religion.
explain the gross underrepresentation of Muslims at the Parliament. However, what was more surprising in Müller’s view was how many representatives – especially from the religions from the Far East – made the trip to Chicago.

A close connection that could have hardly escaped the attention of the visitors of the Parliament was that between national, in particular religious, affiliation on the one hand and particular modes of dress on the other. ‘There were strange robes, turbans and tunics, crosses and crescents, flowing hair and tonsured heads’. In the center of the platform in the main hall was Cardinal James Gibbons, ‘magnificent in his robes of red’, ‘Buddhist monks were attired in garments of white and yellow; an orange turban and robe made the Brahman conspicuous’, and so on. ‘Picturesque’ was a word that was frequently used to characterize the event. Barrows’ report (‘an illustrated story’) tries to convey an impression of this, by including not only black-and-white pictures of organizers and representatives, but also of places of worship. ‘These volumes are enriched with views of Eastern Temples, painted and tiled Pagodas, superb and stately Mosques, humble meeting-houses and all the beautiful forms of Christian architecture in Europe and America’. Interestingly enough, the book also included illustrations of ‘idolatrous’ forms of religion, forms that were explicitly excluded by the objectives of the Parliament.

‘Religion’

In his opening address Charles Bonney thought it useful to give a sort of working definition of ‘religion’ as ‘the love and worship of God and the love and service of man’. This definition – often summarized in the more catchy form of the ‘fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men’ – resonated throughout the congress. The theistic idea of God and the ideal of religious unity that were motivating the event are even more clearly expressed in this last formulation. Bonney also referred to an earlier programmatic statement by the organizers which proclaimed that the goal of the Parliament was ‘to unite all Religion against all irreligion; to make the golden rule the basis of this union; and to present to the world the substantial unity of many religions in the good deeds of the religious life’. Although the emphasis in this statement is on religious unity and common understanding between the var-

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42 Müller, ‘The Significance,’ 155.
43 Neely 34.
44 Barrows vii.
45 Barrows 553, 559, 615; cf. Barrows 1358–1362 for three contributions on nature religion, lower religions and superstitions, which were all included in the scientific section of the report.
46 Barrows 68 (reprinted in Seager, Dawn, 17–22, here 17).
47 Barrows 72.
ious faiths, Bonney made it at the same time very clear that this does not imply ‘the least surrender or compromise of anything which we respectively believe to be truth or duty’. The unique and superior character of Christian doctrines and ethics was not endangered by this meeting, the organizers claimed – probably trying to soothe the minds of participants who shared the criticism of the Archbishop of Canterbury that the Parliament assumed the parity of religious positions. Christian superiority was enacted ritually by reciting the Lord’s Prayer, ‘known in the parliament as the “universal prayer”’ at the opening of the daily meetings.

In the moving last words of his report Barrows, reflecting on the death of his thirteen year-old son, who laid ‘unburied in [his] house’, made this claim again and asked his readership to ‘join once more in the prayer of Him who is the unifier of humanity’. By claiming here that the Christian god can ultimately bring humanity together and thus be the god of all mankind, the World Parliament of Religions is presented as an almost eschatological event in history. Neely’s report describes the joint saying of the Lord’s prayer at the opening ceremony as ‘the supreme moment of the 19th century’. ‘This harmonious use of the Lord’s Prayer by Jews, Mohammedans, Buddhists, Brahmans, and all the divisions of Christians, seemed a rainbow of promise pointing to the time when the will of God will ‘be done on earth as it is done in heaven’. The Parliament was compared to what happened in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, although this was – as Barrows added – a much more provincial assembly in comparison to Chicago. It is said that a ‘holy intoxication’ overcame the speakers and the audience. One of the participants was even reminded of the emotions he had felt in the great revival movements of Charles Finney and Dwight Moody.

The Parliament is described as an event which brought people together – physically, intellectually and emotionally. The framework used by the Christian reporters is – notwithstanding the respect for the representatives of other religions – that of the ultimate triumph of their own God, who is universal, that is to say, inclusive. This discursive strategy (achieving unity by inclusion) is, of course, not acceptable to (most) outsiders, who are ‘reduced’ to (potential) insiders and thereby denied their own particular religious identity. It is easy to criticize the fact that the non-Christian guests are not perceived in their own right, but as potentially aufgehoben in the inclusive (and, therefore, higher) Christian religion. Many authors writing about the World Par-

48 Barrows 68.
49 Barrows 22.
50 Neely 73.
51 Barrows 1582.
52 Neely 35 f.
53 Barrows 1566.
liament do so, and in principle they are right. But in how far does this help us to really understand the organizers, who are consequently depicted as a sort of intellectual and moral villains who invited ‘natives’ or ‘others’ to underscore their own superiority? No, they were not interested in foreign religions in their own right in the same sense as religious scholars nowadays are supposed to be, but does that imply that there was no interest at all? Why should they have taken the trouble at all to have this event?

Before I go into this issue more deeply in the conclusion of this paper, it is important to pay attention to the – sometimes very outspoken – exclusions made by John Barrows and his colleagues. One of the explicit aims was to unite all religion against all irreligion. The positive connotation of this statement is clearer than the negative one. As [has been] noted above, the organizers wanted to bring together representatives of the great historic religions. With the possible exception of Islam (which was poorly represented) they more or less succeeded in achieving this aim. But what did they have in mind when they spoke of ‘all irreligion’? This point is not taken up explicitly in the programmatic text. But, of course, in a general sense it is evident that the aim was to further religious faith – against a spirit of indifference, agnosticism or even atheism.\(^55\) Equally important was the theistic aspect, which was presumed to be shared by all these historic religions and excluded polytheism(s).\(^56\)

In this respect a revealing contribution was made by ‘the author, scientist, scholar, and traveler’ Richard Henry Savage, whom Neely called ‘a man of world-wide experience’, whose ‘comprehensive, poetic, and appropriate words’ were given a prominent place at the very beginning of his report.\(^57\) Savage presented the Parliament first and foremost as a peaceful event, where the brotherly spirit of religious men and women was admired by sceptics, atheists and ‘those of little faith’. His whole text is pervaded by oppositions at different levels:

> Not in idle curiosity, led on by no mere desire of amusement, did the earnest-browed religious thinkers of the world gather here to heap up a pyramid of garnered golden grains of truth, in honor of the great Giver of All Good. In their temporary camps the children of fetichism, wide-eyed and speechless, have gazed here upon this multitude of believers bearing palms, trooping hither from the uttermost parts of the earth and the islands of the great deep!\(^58\)


\(^{55}\) Barrows 1577.

\(^{56}\) Barrows 1578.

\(^{57}\) Neely 25–31. This text is not included in Barrows’ report.

\(^{58}\) Neely 27.
Earnestness versus idleness, thinking versus gazing, believers versus children of fetishism, earnest-browed versus wide-eyed, amusement versus acquiring the real gold of truth. It is clear which side of these juxtapositions were to be preferred by the author (and his readers). The visitors are addressed by Savage as ‘pilgrims’ on their way to a more enlightened form of religion, which should outdo the ‘Old World of Intolerance, Narrowness, Bigotry and Persecution’. In the view of the conveners the Parliament was indeed a serious and noble cause, which had no place for ‘cranks’ and sectarian propaganda. The congress was intended to contribute to the mutual understanding of the great theistic religions (excluding fetishism, magic and superstition), and in this process of mutual engagement it was thought to stimulate world peace.

Contested Claims

Not all participants were happy to be included in the grand narrative of the Parliament. There were moments of serious criticism, which was sometimes met by approval, but also by booing. The most serious incident seems to have taken place when Mohammed Webb, an American convert to Islam, defended the practice of polygamy and even claimed that ‘a pure-minded man can be a polygamist and be a perfect and true Christian’. The ‘hisses and cries of “Shame!” were so emphatic that the speaker seemed deterred from pursuing the line of discourse on which he had entered’. On another occasion, after Kinza Riuge M. Hirai, a Buddhist from Japan, had severely denounced the way Christians had treated the Japanese, he was greeted by loud applause.

Speakers took the opportunity to celebrate the contribution of their own nation and faith. This is a major theme in itself, which has been addressed by some authors, especially by Richard Hugh Seager and Dorothea Lüdeckens, the former presenting the Parliament as an encounter between East and West, and the latter paying a good deal of attention to the various contexts of the participants. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to discern clear patterns of engagement, self-definition and “othering” in the gamut of speakers and texts. My aim here is simply to give a couple of examples of stories which go against the grain of the Parliament. My first “case study” is the contribution of Alexander Kohut, rabbi in New York and a proponent of reformed Judaism. He eloquently showed ‘what the Hebrew scrip-
tures have wrought for mankind' and defended the thesis that ‘[i]n religion the Hebrew genius was supreme’.\(^\text{65}\)

Israel […] gave the world a pure religion — a creed undominated by cumbrous tyranny, unembarrassed by dogmatic technicalities, unstrained by heavy self-sacrifice and extravagant ceremonialism — a religion sublime and unique in history, free from gaping superstitions, appalling idolatries, and vicious immoralities — a pure, taintless, lofty, elevating, inspiring, and love-permeating faith, originating in a monotheistic conception — a religion at whose sparkling fountain wells of ethical truths, the world’s famed pioneers in art, science, literature, politics, philosophy, and architecture slackened their thirst.\(^\text{66}\)

The claims are almost as high as those of the organizing committee, but they are ‘transferred’ to the Jewish religion.

There was also a substantial representation from the Far East, which was the more impressive as some of them were able to express themselves in fluent English, which was the only language permitted at the conference. Many texts of delegates from the East had to be translated and were read by Barrows, the chairman of the Parliament. The previously mentioned Kinza Riuge M. Hirai,\(^\text{67}\) however, was clearly capable of presenting his contribution ‘The real position of Japan toward Christianity’ himself. It was one of the more critical papers and caused a small sensation. The aim of the Parliament, according to Hirai, is ‘to finally establish religious affinity all over the world’, and he saw it as his task to point to a ‘vigorous obstacle’ to this noble aim.\(^\text{68}\) The most important hindrance was, he claims, the unjust treaties between the West and Japan and the blunt discrimination against Japanese people. He details a number of discriminatory acts, such as signs [posted] ‘no Japanese allowed’, that make us ‘unintelligent heathens’ hesitant ‘to swallow the sweet and warm liquid of the heaven of Christianity’.\(^\text{69}\) If such is the ethics of Christians, ‘we are perfectly satisfied to be heathen’.

He then goes on – in a rhetorically brilliant move – to point out that he does not want to be a hypocrite (hinting at the point he is finally going to make that Christians sometimes are) and that he will not hide from his audience the fact that he was the first in his country to attack Christianity. Again trying to win over the sympathy of his listeners, Hirai maintains that his criticism was aimed at a false Christianity, which preaches one thing and does another. Finally he quotes extensively from the American Declaration of Independence, before concluding:

If any religion urges the injustice of humanity, I will oppose it […] with my blood and soul. I will be the bitterest dissenter from Christianity or I will be the warmest admirer of its gospels. To [those] who are assembled here, I pronounce that your aim is the real-

\(^{65}\) Barrows 725.

\(^{66}\) Kohut, ‘What the Hebrew Scriptures Have Wrought for Mankind,’ in Barrows 725. The speech is also printed in Neely 308–312.

\(^{67}\) For reasons of convenience I adopt the transcription used in Barrows.

\(^{68}\) Kinza Riuge M. Hirai, ‘The Real Position of Japan toward Christianity,’ in Barrows 444–450, 444. The same text is included in Neely 157–161; cf. Ketelaar, Of Heretics, 169 f.

\(^{69}\) Barrows 449.
ization of religious union, not nominally, but practically. We, the forty million souls of Japan, standing firmly and persistently upon the basis of international justice, await still further manifestations as to the morality of Christianity.

The Chicago Daily Times called the speech ‘a voice out of darkness, a cry of oppression from a strange land. It came […] as a thunderblast, and when [he] had finished, the peoples rose again to their feet and gave him three mighty cheers’. This way – as one author summarized Hirai’s performance – he “out-Christianized” the Christians and “out-Americanized” the Americans.70

Swami Vivekananda, who propagated a reformed Hindu spirituality and founded the Ramakrishna Mission, was deemed to be ‘the most popular and influential man in the Parliament’.71 Newspapers pointed to his strong physiognomy, his ‘oriental’ dress, his excellent command of English and, last but not least, his attraction to women:

Ladies, ladies everywhere, filled the great auditorium. They gave no outward sign of impatience through the delivery of three classic essays which separated them from Vivekananda’s eloquence, but it was evident from the applause which greeted the Oriental about 5 o’clock, as in his orange garb he arose to speak, that had he spoken first instead of last some of the great audience might not have been present at the close of the session.72

Vivekananda was an ardent disciple of Ramakrishna. He sanitized and spiritualized his teacher’s ideas from aspects such as an explicit eroticism which would have appalled his Chicago audience. As Peter van der Veer notes, Vivekananda’s Hindu spirituality is devoid of any specific devotional content that would involve, for instance, temple worship and thus a theological and ritual position.73

In this way Vivekananda was able to reach out to his predominantly Christian audience, addressing them as ‘brothers and sisters of America’, whereupon ‘there arose a peal of applause that lasted several minutes’.74 He presents the Hindu religion and Hindu people as the cradle of tolerance and inclusion. He begins by thanking the audience ‘in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world’, then dwells on the tolerance and hospitality of his own people in sentences that all start with ‘I am proud’:

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70 Ketelaar in Ziolkowski, A Museum, 299 and 300. For Hirai’s vision – again artfully constructed – of the unity of religion see his second big speech ‘Synthetic Religion’ (Neely 798–803 and Barrows 1286–88).
74 Barrows 101 = Neely 64.
I am proud to tell you that I belong to a religion into whose sacred language, the Sanskrit, the word exclusion is untranslatable. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth.\footnote{Barrows 102 = Neely 64 (with almost identical wording).}

Finally, Vivekananda presented the Parliament as a vindication of the ‘wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita “Whosoever comes to me, through whatsoever form I reach him, they are all struggling through paths that in the end always lead to me”’. He expressed the hope that the congress might mark the end of sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism – things that are apparently firmly opposed to the tradition he represented himself.

This message was repeated again in his closing words, which, according to Barrows’ report, were not very well received.\footnote{Barrows 171.} Vivekananda warned especially against triumphalist tendencies and ventured his ‘own theory’ of religious unity. Using organic imaginary he argues that everything develops according to its own substance and laws. Therefore, it is wrong to expect Christian to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, or the other way around. ‘[E]ach must assimilate the others and yet preserve its [sic] individuality and grow according to its own law of growth.’\footnote{Barrows 170 = Neely 853.} Holiness, purity and charity – these are the key terms used by Vivekananda – are not the exclusive possession of one religion, but are shared by many. By learning from each other – by assimilation, as he called it, and not by destruction – the various beliefs are supposed to enrich each other or, probably more in line with Vivekanda’s discourse, to cross-fertilize each other.

There was much admiration for the ‘wise men of the East’, as they were often called.\footnote{Barrows 179.} Barrows made the biblical reference very explicit, as he said in his opening speech: ‘Welcome, most welcome, O wise men of the East and of the West. May the star which has led you hither be like unto that luminary which guided the men of old’.\footnote{Neely 41.} The contrast between East and West that pervaded the Parliament enabled speakers to stress similarities and differences at the same time. A good example is the following address by Bonney (with a curious mixing of family metaphors): ‘Fathers of the contemplative East; sons of the executive West — Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity’.\footnote{Barrows 173.} The contrast catches the eye immediately: the passivity of the East versus the activity of the West, the fathers of religions versus the sons, who finally dwell in unity as brothers.

Another example of this same strategy of opposing East and West is the end of P.C. Mozoomdar’s speech ‘World’s religious debt to India’.\footnote{P.C. Mozoomdar, ‘World’s Religious Debt to Asia,’ in Neely 596–601; Barrows 1083–1092, quoted after Seager, The Dawn of Religious Pluralism, 440–449. In modern transcription his name is spelled Protap Chunder Majumdar.} He was a
member of the Brahmo Samaj, a small movement that defended a universalistic kind of religion, based on the Vedanta. The oppositions listed here may be stereotypes, but that does not make them less strong or persuasive:

In the West you observe, watch, act, and speculate. In the East we contemplate, commune, and suffer ourselves to be carried away by the spirit of the universe. In the West you wrest from nature her secrets, you conquer her, she makes you wealthy and prosperous, you look upon her as your slave, and sometimes fail to realize her sacredness. In the East nature is our eternal sanctuary, the soul is our everlasting temple, and the sacredness of God’s creation is only next to the sacredness of God himself. In the West you love equality, you respect man, you seek justice. In the East, love is fulfillment of the law, we have hero worship, we behold God in humanity. In the West you establish the moral law, you insist upon propriety of conduct, you are governed by public opinion. In the East we aspire, perhaps vainly aspire, after absolute self-conquest, and the holiness which makes God its model. In the West you work incessantly, and your work is your worship. In the East we meditate and worship for long hours, and worship is [Neely: in] our work.

These oppositions underline the contrast between being active and passive (even suffering), between working (for material goods) and worshipping (for spiritual goods), between subjugating and respecting nature and its creator, and between (formal) justice and love. Although Mozoomdar suggests a kind of synthesis to overcome these oppositions, the final message that religious truth is ultimately found in the East comes not really as a surprise: ‘it has been some consolation [sc. for us] that we still retain some of our spiritual ground; to reflect on the prophecy of Ezekiel: “Behold, the glory of the Lord cometh from the way of the East”’.

**Spiritualization**

The organizers of the Columbian Exhibition did not want to restrict the event to the display ‘of the material triumphs, industrial achievements, and mechanical victories of man’. Already in the autumn of 1889 Charles Bonney, who would become the president of the World’s Congress Auxiliary, wrote that something ‘higher and nobler is demanded by the progressive spirit of the present age’. The many conferences that were organized by the Auxiliary had the motto ‘not matter, but mind’. The World Parliament of Religions epitomized the opposition between the material and the spiritual. Already in his opening words John Henry Barrows referred to two motivating ideas of the Parliament. First, he expressed his belief that ‘even in this capital of ma-

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85 Neely 15 f.
terial wonders’ there is ‘a spiritual root to all human progress’. Second, he expressed the hope that the Parliament would be more ‘spiritual and moral than theological’, thereby hinting at one important tendency of the meeting, the spiritualization of religion.

The opposition between matter and spirit (often associated with the West and the East, respectively) was invoked by many speakers and was often used to criticize (Western) materialism. In the previous section I pointed to Mozoomdar’s criticism of the Western work ethos and subjugation of nature. Similarly, his compatriot Nagarkar pointed to the dangers of this mentality:

The ceaseless demand on your time and energy, the constant worry and hurry of your business activity and the artificial conditions of your western civilization are all calculated to make you forgetful of the personal presence of God.

On the other hand, speakers also saw opportunities to counter these Western tendencies, and Mozoomdar even went so far as to praise the Parliament as the final rebuttal of the charge of materialism against America. The Indian theosophist C.N. Chakravarti detected beneath the ‘thickness of material luxury, a secret and mystic aspiration to something spiritual’. I quote the final words of Chakravarti’s opening statement in full:

I can see that even you are getting tired of your steam, of your electricity, and the thousand different material comforts that follow these two great powers. I can see that there is a feeling of despondency coming even here – that matter, pursued however vigorously, can be only to the death of all, and it is only through the clear atmosphere of spirituality that you can mount up to the regions of peace and harmony. In the West, therefore, you have developed this material tendency. In the East we have developed a great deal of the spiritual tendency; [but even in the West] [...] I have observed an ever increasing readiness of people to assimilate spiritual ideas, regardless of the source from which they emanate.

At the end of his speech, Chakravarti envisioned the union of East and West, ‘the West supplying the vigor, the youth, the power of organization, and the East opening up its inestimable treasures of a spiritual law’. The Light of Asia is here presented as the salvation of Western man from his indulgence in the comforts of material prosperity.

Participants from the West also stressed the importance of spiritual truth, and spoke about the ‘unity of the spirituality of God’. Laura Ormiston Chant, a British Protestant laywoman, claimed that religion is the principle of spiritual growth and ‘that God has no creed whatever’, detected a ‘religiousness’ inside and outside the churches and proclaimed a message

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86 Barrows 42.
87 Cf. also the penultimate paragraph of his opening address: Neely 44.
88 Barrows 1227, quoted after Lüdeckens, Das Weltparlament der Religionen, 217.
89 Neely 848.
90 Barrows 100 = Neely 63 f.
91 Only in Neely 64.
92 Barrows 180.
of living a good life as children of God. In a slightly more sophisticated fashion the ‘rev. Walter Elliott, O.S.P.’, an ordained American priest, spoke about the ‘infinite reality of the Supreme Being, the most loving God, calling his creature to union with himself’. He began his speech with the programmatical statement that the aim of religion is ‘to direct the aspirations of the soul toward an infinite good, and to secure a perfect fruition’. In line with this type of thought Elliott finally stated that love or charity rather than obedience is the highest Christian virtue. He used elements from mystical traditions to stress common aspects of very different religions. Spiritualizing religion was probably the most important device to try and reach religious unity.

The Comparative Study of Religion

In his opening address John Barrows said that ‘we’ meet here ‘in a school of comparative theology’ and in his final evaluation he hailed the Parliament’s contribution to the ‘study of comparative religion’. Besides various contributions to this subject in the main meeting, the organizers also opened an ‘interesting overflow meeting in hall 3 of the Art Palace’, ‘where papers of a more scientific and less popular character were read’. Barrows gives a helpful overview of the papers that were presented there. Presently two points of criticism are raised: first, that the focus was very much on ancient, tribal, or non-Western, non-Christian topics, and second, that these religions were mainly represented by their own practitioners (Hindus representing Hinduism, and so on).

To some extent the opening address of the ‘scientific section’ given by its chairman Merwin-Marie Snell illustrates this second issue. In his speech ‘Service of the Science of Religions to Unity and Mission Enterprise’, Snell claims that the Parliament itself was ‘a vast hierological museum, a working collection of religious specimens, having the same indispensable

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93 Barrows 591–593. The title of her speech was ‘The Real Religion of To-day.’ Mentioned in Neely 250–252 under the title ‘Duty of God to Man Inquired.’
95 Ibid.
96 Barrows 465.
97 Barrows 75.
98 Barrows 1571.
99 Neely 227.
100 Barrows 150–152; cf. Barrows 1317–1383 (with selected papers from the ‘scientific section’).
101 Ziolkowski, A Museum, 38 f.
102 Barrows 1347, under a slightly different title also reproduced in Neely 259–261.
value for the hierologist that the herbarium has to the botanist.\textsuperscript{104} The ‘science of religions’ must do its beneficial work, give a fair overview of the facts, and counter religious prejudice and animosity.\textsuperscript{105} This is not done by professional scholars alone. ‘[T]he man of broadening culture and thought may study them [religions] with the practical end of a fuller self-enlightenment regarding his duties to God and the race; and the intelligent religious partisan may seek to master, by means of his science, the secret of religious variations, and to obtain such a knowledge of the relation of other religious systems to his own, their points of agreement and contradiction’. By comparing religions, according to Snell, a ‘very powerful and fruitful propaganda’ was possible, and this lent science of religion great importance for missionary work.\textsuperscript{106}

Notwithstanding these ‘practical’ inclinations on the part of Snell, it is clear that the organizers had a good picture of the current situation of religious studies. Many key figures such as Max Müller, C.P. Tiele, Jean and Albert Réville and J. Estlin Carpenter had been invited, and even though some of them declined to come, many of them sent in a paper. Perhaps they feared that the Parliament would be too much of a religious – or what would now be called ‘inter-faith’ – meeting. Snell’s framing of the study of religion with clear reference to religious unity and missionary work would have confirmed their uneasiness.

Scholarly papers, however, were also presented in the main hall, as was the case with Tiele’s contribution on the study of comparative theology. In the text that was read for him Tiele excused himself for not being able to attend, because of his heavy work load and teaching obligations, and then gave a short exposition of the field and expressed his joy that there was such a great interest in the study of religion in America.\textsuperscript{107} The next speaker, Laura Ormiston Chant, who was greeted ‘with a great outburst of enthusiasm’,\textsuperscript{108} was not that enthusiastic. She started: ‘Dear Friends, — After listening long enough to the science of religion, probably, as this is the last word this morning, it may be a little relief to run off, or leave the science of religion to take care of itself for a while and take a few thoughts on religion independent of its science. […] We have learned that religion, whatever the science of it may be, is the principle of spiritual growth.’\textsuperscript{109} Other participants were perhaps a little less sceptical, but if we try to balance scholarly and religious interests, we undoubtedly see the pendulum swing heavily towards the latter.

\textsuperscript{104} Neely 260. The term ‘hierologist’ was to the best of my knowledge introduced by the Dutch scholar of religion C.P. Tiele as \textit{terminus technicus} to denote the scholars of the science of religion (\textit{godsdienstwetenschap}); cf. Tiele, \textit{Outlines of the History of Religion} (London: Trübner & Co, 1877), vii.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Neely 260 f.
\textsuperscript{107} Tiele, ‘On the Study of Comparative Theology,’ in Barrows 583–590 and Neely 245–250.
\textsuperscript{108} Neely 250.
\textsuperscript{109} Barrows 591 = Neely 250.
Conclusion

Barrows’ description of the Parliament as a *school of comparative religion* which would be more spiritual and ethical than theological may nowadays sound as a paradox, but at the time the hope was still widespread that scholarly and spiritual goals could be combined. Contemporary scholars of religion can find it difficult to appreciate the Chicago event. It is telling what Eric J. Sharpe in his still influential history of the field has to say about its merits:

> The parliament was an encouragement, and a danger, to the emerging science of religion. An encouragement, because it showed the extent to which earlier impatience and intolerance was being overcome. A danger, because it tended to associate at least some comparative religionists (those who dared to associate themselves with it) with an idealistic programme of world peace and understanding. Observers were right when they pointed out that this meeting could only have been held in brash, sentimental, pluralistic America.

Aside from the anti-Americanism of such an evaluation Sharpe also seems to be confused by the event. On the one hand, he apparently appreciates the Parliament as a step in overcoming intolerance, but on the other he does not favour the association of the new science with the endeavour to achieve world peace and understanding. Why this association should be rejected is not explained.

Nevertheless the Parliament has continued to be remembered among scholars of religion. Around its centennial in 1993 various papers given at the Parliament were re-published and its impact on the academic study of religion was assessed in various studies. While the tone was mostly critical, chiefly on account of the dominance of a “presentist” standpoint (assessing the event by “our” present-day scholarly standards), this also serves to reveal its importance. It is well over a century since the 1893 Chicago Parliament took place, during which time the scholarly study of religion on the one hand, and confessional theology and inter-faith dialogue on the other have grown apart. The Parliament of the World’s Religions that came together in Chicago in 1993 was not devoted to the study of religion, but instead sought “to celebrate diversity and harmony and to explore religious and spiritual responses to critical issues that confront us all.”

By way of conclusion I will comment on the short presentation given by Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910) at the Parliament. Howe was an American abolitionist, social activist and author of the well-known patriotic ‘The Bat-

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110 Barrows 75.
tle Hymn of the Republic’. The title of her speech was ‘What is Religion?’ She stressed the fact that she was a woman and expressed the hope that the crowd could indeed hear her ‘little voice’. Referring to previous addresses (by male speakers), she further said that ‘as a woman’ she did not want ‘to dwell upon any traits of exclusiveness’. That approach, she suggested, belonged to an earlier phase of history. Instead she sought to go back ‘to that great Spirit which contemplated a sacrifice for the whole of humanity’. That was in no way an act of exclusion, she claimed, but one ‘of an infinite and endless and joyous inclusion’, for which she thanked God.

In accordance with this inclusivist point of view, which tends to place the various religions ‘all on one basis’, Howe said that it would be good to come to an agreement ‘as to what is religion and as to what is not religion’. For her and her audience, she claimed, it was ‘aspiration, the pursuit of the divine in the human; the sacrifice of everything to duty for the sake of God and of humanity and of our own individual dignity’. It is very much a liberal idea of religion, which puts emphasis on the relation between the individual and his or her God – a relation that is conceived as based on the divine element in human beings. Howe also made it clear that religion is not to be equated with magic (‘you do something that will bring you good luck’). Magic is something which is invented by and ‘for the advantage of the priesthoods’. She is very outspoken in this respect, claiming that magic is the ‘most mischievous irreligion’.

She took up the point of inclusion again at the end of her short speech, focusing on the position of women. Although Howe did not make a direct plea for the equality of men and women, she surely made a big step in this direction in the following subtle argumentation:

I think nothing is religion which puts one individual absolutely above others, and surely nothing is religion which puts one sex above another. Religion is primarily our relation to the Supreme, to God himself. [It is for Him to decide ‘who is the highest and who is not’, and about this we know nothing]. And any religion which will sacrifice a certain set of human beings for the enjoyment or aggrandizement or advantage of another is no religion. It is a thing which may be allowed, but it is against true religion. Any religion which sacrifices women to the brutality of men is no religion. While the issue of slavery is not directly addressed, it is surely hinted at, and implicitly condemned by the comparison with the (brute) suppression of women. This must have been an extremely efficient rhetorical move, as the participants and above all the organizers were so proud that women were represented at the Parliament. Although condescending remarks with respect to women were not lacking (and Howe was only allowed a short

113 Barrows 1250–1251; Neely 764–766.
114 Barrows 1250.
115 Barrows 1251.
116 Barrows 1251.
speech of no more than ten minutes), the participation of women was remarkable and certainly more than a mere ornament to the Parliament.

The “inclusivist” rhetoric of many participants did not imply, of course, that nobody was excluded. The spiritualist tendency of many – by no means all – contributors excluded those who explicitly claimed the superiority of their own faith. In the closing chapters of his report Barrows was less inclusive than in the opening chapters, claiming that this meeting took nothing away from the (superior) standing of Christianity. Participants from non-Christian religions did not accept the dominating discourse, but argued that their religion was more spiritualized and tolerant than that of their hosts.

It is not possible to draw one final conclusion from this heterogeneous event, but perhaps one can say that the participants who somehow felt united and had a strong sense of togetherness were convinced of the ultimate meaning of ‘religion’ – however defined – as a force against indulging in consumerism and materialism (which form the core of irreligion). That does not imply that the Parliament had no attractive or even fascinating aspects of its own. As Julia Ward Howe said: ‘I have turned my back to-day upon the great show [of the Columbian Exposition] in order to see a greater spectacle [at the World Parliament of Religions].’ The mixture of people of different races, nationalities and religions, combined with a rhetoric of respect, mutual understanding and even religious unity and world peace had a powerful attraction upon the crowds that gathered at that time in Chicago on the shores of Lake Michigan. The idea that the world can be changed into a better place gained momentum in 1893, as it did 115 years later when Barack Obama gave his acceptance speech as the first black President of the United States in the same city on a bright and warm early November evening, where the same sentiment uplifted the crowd in Grant Park.

Abstract

The aim of this contribution is to give a comprehensive and readable account of the first World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. The Parliament was organised in the context of the Columbian World Exhibition and attracted 150,000 people, according to one of the lengthy reports. Various aspects are addressed: the objectives of the organisers, the character of the various reports of this mega-event, the participation of women (who were among the speakers), the relationship between the Christian organisers and the representatives of the East, the various – opposing – claims about the superiority of specific forms of religion and culture, the tendency to spiritualize religion, and the role of the emerging field of religious studies versus the ‘interfaith’ character of the Parliament. The participants were convinced of the ultimate meaning of ‘religion’ as a force against indulging in consumerism and materialism (which form in this view the core of irreligion).

117 Neely 764.
118 Barrows 1250.