A History of the Desire for Christian Unity

Ecumenism in the Churches (19th–21st Century)

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Volume 1

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The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions: Striving for Religious Unity

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1 Introduction

The first World's Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago in 1893 during the World's Columbian Exposition, which celebrated 400 years of America.[1] Conceived by the lawyer Charles Carroll Bonney, it convened in the main hall of the Chicago Art Institute and attracted 150,000 people, according to a generous count.

The 1893 parliament has been analyzed by present-day scholars from various angles, not only 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. The parliament was indeed a step forward in the emancipation of Christian women, but their role was defined in stereotyped ways. Furthermore, it is true that contributions were made to scholarship, but claims of religious superiority were never far away. The organizers themselves were to some extent aware of the precarious relationship between Christianity and the other religions invited. They tried to avoid controversies by stipulating strict rules of discussion that forbade, for instance, polemics against other positions.[2] The term "parliament" itself may raise false expectations, as in Chicago the participants assembled "for mutual conference, fellowship, and information, and not for controversy, for worship, for the counting of votes, or for the passing of resolutions."[3]

1 This text is based on Arie L. Molendijk, "'To Unite Religion against All Irreligion': The 1893 World Parliament of Religion," *JHMTH* 18, 2011, 1–23, and Arie L. Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*, Leiden, Brill, 2005, 223–255. Section 9 and some considerations on liberal theology in the conclusion have been added by the editors and approved by the author.

2 Charles Carroll Bonney, "The World's Parliament of Religions," *The Monist* 5, 1895, 321–343, here 331.

3 Bonney, "The World's Parliament of Religions," 331. Of special importance to the organizers was the documentation of the parliament. Actually, several records were published within a year after the parliament 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: John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*, Chicago IL, The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893. The second important collection was edited by "a corps of able writers" with Professor Walter R. Houghton as editor in chief and Frank Tennyson Neely as publisher. It counts some 1,000 pages and is entitled: Walter R. Houghton, ed., *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition: Compiled from Original Manuscripts and Stenographic Reports*, Chicago IL, F.T. Neely, 1893. These two reports are quoted as, respectively, Barrows and Neely, followed by page number. Two other – less known and even less reliable – editions are those by John Wesley Hanson, *The World's Congress of Religions: The Addresses and Papers Delivered before the Parliament*, Chicago IL, W.B. Conkey, 1894, and Jenkin Lloyd Jones, *A Chorus of Faiths as Heard in the Parliament of Religions*, Chicago IL, Unity Publishing, 1893, a Unitarian who was the executive secretary of the general committee on religious congresses and the parliament in particular.

2 World Exhibitions

The most impressive and indeed spectacular context of the parliament was the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Yet world exhibitions or world trade fairs were major business in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The fairs epitomized progress and made it very clear that not all nations had reached the same level of industry and civilization.[4] The educational and civilizing intentions of the organizers were evident. The explicit international character of the World's Columbian Exposition, in which various nations and peoples participated with their own pavilions, did not preclude an encouragement 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."[5] The fairs provided the visitors with nationalistic images, reinforced by ritualistic practices.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8] The contrast between the Midway Plaisance (a *rue des nations*) and the Court of Honor with Doric temples and other classically inspired forms of architecture could not have been greater. It lent an evolutionary and even utopian flavor to the whole event. Religious rhetoric was frequently used on 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."[9]

3 The 1893 World's Parliament

It would be wrong to view these exhibitions solely in terms of material and economic progress and expansion. They also had a strong intellectual, even spiritual dimension. During the preparations for the Chicago exhibition, Charles Carroll Bonney, a Chicago lawyer and counselor of the Supreme Court, launched the idea to organize intellectual conferences for this occasion as well.[10] To

4 See Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions (1876–1916)*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 1984, 45.

5 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; see Joan Didion, "Fixed Opinions, or the Hinge of History," *NYRB* 50/1, 2003, 56.

6 Astrid Böger, *Envisioning the Nation: The Early American World's Fairs and the Formation of Culture*, Frankfurt a.M., Campus, 2010, 109–172.

7 Norman Bolotin & Christine Laing, *The World's Columbian Exposition: A 100-Year Retrospective*, Washington DC, Preservation Press, 1992.

8 See Burton Benedict, "Rituals of Representation: Ethnic Stereotypes and Colonized Peoples at World's Fairs," in: Robert W. Rydell & Nancy E. Gwinn, eds., *Fair Representations: World's Fairs and the Modern World*, Amsterdam, VU University Press, 1994, 28–62; Nicolas Bancel & others, eds., *Zoos humains: De la Vénus hottentote aux reality shows*, Paris, La Découverte, 2002.

9 Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 48. After a hymn of the Methodist Charles Wesley "Away with our Sorrows and Care."

10 Neely 15–16.

this end, a new committee was established, called the World's Congress Auxiliary, of which Bonney became the chairman. This committee appointed more than 200 working committees to organize the various special conferences. In the field of religion, the World's Parliament of Religions was by far the biggest event, but there were also other meetings. 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."[11] These were the so-called denominational congresses, 41 of which convened from Aug 27 till Oct 25, 1893. Most of them were meetings by Christian organizations or related groups, such as the Lutheran General Council, the Universalistic Church, the Disciples of Christ, the Friends' Orthodox Church, the African Episcopal Church, the International Board of Young Women's Christian Associations, the Sunday-Rest Congress, and the EA. Furthermore, meetings and presentations of Jewish groups, Theosophists and Buddhists were held.[12] Many denominational congresses bore a clear Catholic mark. Examples are the Congress of Colored Catholics, the German Catholic Young Men's Guilds, the Catholic Benevolent Legion, the Catholic Young Men's National Union, the Catholic Press, the Reunion of the Students of the American College in Leuven (Belgium), the Catholic Young Men's Societies, and – above all – the Columbian Catholic Congress.[13] Important officials – including the archbishops of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New Orleans – were present at "most of the sessions" of the Columbian Catholic Congress, and Pope Leo XIII signaled his approval by a letter, in which he "imparted [his] apostolic benediction."[14] Msgr. Satolli, the pope's delegate to the United States, made "a thrilling speech in his native tongue," which was translated by Archbishop John Ireland of Saint Paul Satolli stated that it is the duty of Catholics and the Catholic Congress "to bring into the world the fullness of supernatural truth and supernatural life."[15] The Columbian Catholic Congress attracted huge crowds and expressed its loyalty and "unaltered attachment to our Holy Father, Pope Leo XIII." It was a meeting within the strict confines of the Catholic tradition, that established once again that "the Catholic Church, properly understood, is the light of the world, and the refuge of suffering humanity."[16]

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 organizations, the American Presbyterian General Assembly and the archbishop of Canterbury, of the Church of England, explicitly declined to go 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.[17] The chairman of the parliament, John Henry Barrows, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago and author of the most authoritative and complete edition of the parliament's records, emphasized the point that invitations went primarily to individuals, not to organizations, and that the meeting stood outside ecclesiastical control.[18]

Notwithstanding these critical voices, the World's Parliament of Religions was a huge success in the eyes of its organizers 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

11 Neely 865.
12 See Neely 865–970.
13 Neely 865.
14 Neely 891.
15 Neely 894.
16 Neely 898.
17 See Barrows 20–21.
18 Barrows 60, 1560; for a short curriculum vitae of Barrows, see Neely 972.

were listening to the same addresses in turns).[19] 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 to the parliament.[20]

4 Objectives

What was the parliament about? It is not so easy to answer this simple question. The event was meticulously prepared by an American committee representing many Christian and Jewish groups. In June 1891 they sent out some 3,000 invitations throughout the world "to the religious leaders of mankind in many lands."[21] 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:

> [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.[22]

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."[23] 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.[24] The first three items were quintessential for the organizers: the goals were (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 historical religions have important things in common, and that an exchange of ideas would bring this further to light and stimulate mutual understanding. In a cautious formulation, the focus was exclusively on what the various religions and branches of Christianity considered to be their most important truths. It is worthwhile quoting 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

19 Barrows 110; see Eric Jozef Ziolkowski, "Introduction," in: Eric Jozef Ziolkowski, ed., *A Museum of Faiths: Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions*, Atlanta GA, Scholars Press, 1993, 1–68, here 8. On Sept 27, the last day of the meeting, one of the main Chicago newspapers published an article, "Crowds Besiege Managers of Parliament for Tickets," *The Chicago*, Sept 27, 1893, 9, 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"; cited in: Dorothea Lüddeckens, *Das Weltparlament der Religionen von 1893: Strukturen interreligiöser Begegnung im 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2002, 182; see Barrows 158 about the black market for tickets.

20 Barrows 110, 111f, 158.

21 Barrows 11.

22 Barrows 10.

23 Barrows 10.

24 Barrows 18.

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 was that between the religious ("spiritual" was also a favorite term) and the material.[25] It is also evident that a certain level of religious development was presupposed, and that only representatives of developed and theistic forms of religion would be invited. To secure sound knowledge "leading scholars" were invited, representing (6) "the Brahman, Buddhist, Confucian, Parsee, Mohammedan, Jewish and other Faiths" as well as "representatives of the various Churches of Christendom."[26] 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, labor, poverty, and education. The final objective was 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 had succeeded in establishing a sphere of harmony and mutual understanding.

5 Opening Ceremony: Historic Faiths

The parliament was described (and this neatly summarizes the event) as the "invitation of Christianity to all historic faiths."[27] 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."[28] According to the reports, the ten strokes represented the ten "chief religions of the world."[29] 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 Sept 11 at 10 AM, "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."[30] The national element was clearly in the mind of the organizers, which might also explain why they chose to call the assembly a parliament.[31] 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 programme 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.[32]

25 See the section on spiritualization below.

26 See James Edward Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and its Persecution*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1993, esp. ch. 4; Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition*, Chapel Hill NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2003; Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2013.

27 Neely 24.

28 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).

29 Neely 33; see Barrows 58.

30 Barrows 62.

31 I have found no references explaining why this term was chosen.

32 Barrows 70, Neely 39, which present identical formulations in this case.

The invitation sent out by the organizing committee mentioned various Christian churches and the "Brahman, Buddhist, Confucian, Parsee, Mohammedan, Jewish and other Faiths."[33] Depending on how one counts, and on whether one lists various Christian denominations as separate religions or not, the parliament counted some ten major, allegedly theistic, religions.[34]

In this way, many religions and denominations were excluded. Mormons, for example, were not invited,[35] 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 as caliph) to send delegates helped explain the gross underrepresentation of Muslims at the parliament.[36] 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 to 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.[37] "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."[38] Interestingly enough, the book also included illustrations of "idolatrous" forms of religion, forms that were explicitly excluded by the objectives of the parliament.[39]

6 "Religion"

In his opening address, Charles Bonney thought it useful to give a kind of working definition of "religion" as "the love and worship of God and the love and service of man."[40] 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 the latter formulation. Bonney also

33 Quoted in Bonney, "The World's Parliament of Religions," 330.

34 Richard Hughes Seager included Jainism in his list of ten religions: Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893*, Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 1995.

35 However, according to Barrows 153 there were contributions on Mormon religion.

36 Friedrich Max Müller, "The Real Significance of the Parliament of Religions," *The Arena* 61, 1894, 1–14, reprinted in: Ziolkowski, ed., *A Museum of Faiths*, 149–162, here 156. Fifty volumes of the "Sacred Books" appeared between 1879 and 1910, most of them under Müller's supervision: Friedrich Max Müller, ed., *The Sacred Books of the East: Translated by Various Oriental Scholars*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 50 vols., 1879–1910, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/sbe/index.htm> (accessed July 4, 2019); see Arie L. Molendijk, *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016; Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2001, ch. 5.

37 Neely 34.

38 Barrows vii.

39 Barrows 553, 559, 615; see Barrows 1358–1362 for three contributions on nature religion, lower religions and superstitions, which were all included in the scientific section of the report.

40 Barrows 68; reprinted in Richard Hughes Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions (1893)*, La Salle IL, Open Court, 1993, 17–22, here 17.

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."[41] Although the emphasis in this statement is on religious unity and common understanding between the various faiths, at the same time Bonney made it very clear that this does not imply "the least surrender or compromise of anything which we respectively believe to be truth or duty."[42] 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.[43] 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.[44]

In the moving last words of his report Barrows, reflecting on the death of his 13-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."[45] By claiming here that the Christian god can ultimately bring humanity together and thus be the god of all mankind, the World's 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.'"[46] 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 L. Moody.[47]

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) was, of course, not acceptable to (most) outsiders, who were "reduced" to (potential) insiders and thereby denied their own particular religious identity. It is easy to criticize the fact that the non-Christian guests were not perceived in their own right, but as potentially *aufgehoben* into the inclusive (and, therefore, higher) Christian religion. Many authors writing about the World's Parliament of Religions do so, and in principle they are right.[48] Yet how far does this help us to really understand the organizers, who are consequently depicted as some kind of intellectual and moral villains who invited "natives" or "others" in order to underscore their own superiority? It is true that 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

41 Barrows 72.
42 Barrows 68.
43 Barrows 22.
44 Neely 73.
45 Barrows 1582.
46 Neely 35–36.
47 Barrows 1566.
48 Ketelaar, *Of Heretics*, 153; Lüddeckens, *Das Weltparlament der Religionen*, 175–176; Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*, 1, 47, *passim*, stresses the (American and Christian) aggressiveness of the event and the power relations involved; see Norman J. Girardot, *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge's Oriental Pilgrimage*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 2002, 486–490.

no interest at all? Why should they have taken the trouble to hold this event at all?

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. What did they have in mind when they spoke of "all irreligion"? This point is not taken up explicitly in the programmatic text. However, in a general sense it is evident that the aim was to further religious faith – against a spirit of indifference, agnosticism or even atheism.[49] Equally important was the theistic aspect, which was presumed to be shared by all these historic religions and which excluded polytheism(s).[50]

In this respect, a revealing contribution was made by "the author, scientist, scholar, and traveler" Richard Henry Savage, whom Neely called "a man of worldwide experience," whose "comprehensive, poetic, and appropriate words" were given a prominent place at the very beginning of his report.[51] Savage presented the parliament first and foremost as a peaceful event, where the brotherly spirit of religious men and women was admired by skeptics, 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 fetishism, 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![52]

Earnestness versus idleness, thinking versus gazing, believers versus children of fetishism, earnest-browed versus wide-eyed, amusement versus acquiring the true 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."[53] In the view of the conveners, the parliament was indeed a serious and noble cause, which had no place for "cranks" and sectarian propaganda.[54] 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.

7 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."[55] The "hisses and cries of 'Shame!' were so emphatic that the speaker seemed deterred from pursuing

49 Barrows 1577.
50 Barrows 1578.
51 Neely 25–31. This text is not included in Barrows' report.
52 Neely 27.
53 Neely 31.
54 Barrows 1561.
55 Mohammed Webb, "The Spirit of Islam," in: Neely 459–464, here 460; this remark is omitted from Barrows' report (989–996).

the line of discourse on which he had entered."[56] 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.[57]

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 Hughes Seager and Dorothea Lüddeckens, 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.[58] Nevertheless, it remains difficult to discern clear patterns of engagement, self-definition and "othering" in the gamut of speakers and texts. The aim here is simply to offer a couple of examples of stories which go against the grain of the parliament. The first "case study" is the contribution of Alexander Kohut, a rabbi in New York and a proponent of reformed Judaism. He eloquently showed "what the Hebrew scriptures have wrought for mankind" and defended the thesis that "[i]n religion the Hebrew genius was supreme."[59]

> 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.[60]

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

The substantial representation from the Far East was all the more impressive as some of them were not able to express themselves in fluent English, 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,[61] 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, was "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.[62] The most important hindrance was, he claimed, the unjust treaties between the West and Japan, and the blunt discrimination against Japanese people. He detailed a number of discriminatory acts, such as signs saying "No Japanese Allowed," which make us "unintelligent heathens" hesitant "to swallow the sweet and warm liquid of the heaven of Christianity."[63] If such was the ethics of Christians, "we are perfectly satisfied to be heathen."

He then went on – in a rhetorically brilliant move – to point out that he did not want to be a hypocrite (hinting at the point he was finally going to make, that is to say, that Christians sometimes

56 Barrows 127.

57 Barrows 115; see Ketelaar, *Of Heretics*, 169f.

58 Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, and Lüddeckens, *Das Weltparlament der Religionen*.

59 Barrows 725.

60 Alexander Kohut, "What the Hebrew Scriptures Have Wrought for Mankind," in: Barrows 725. The speech is also printed in Neely 308–312.

61 For reasons of convenience I adopt the transcription used in Barrows.

62 Kinza Riuge M. Hirai, "The Real Position of Japan toward Christianity," in: Barrows 444–450, here 444. The same text is included in Neely 157–161; see Ketelaar, *Of Heretics*, 169f.

63 Barrows 449.

are), and that he would 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 maintained that his criticism was aimed at a false Christianity, which preaches one thing and does another. Finally he quoted extensively from the United States 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 realization 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."[64]

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."[65] 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.[66]

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.[67]

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."[68] He presented the Hindu religion and Hindu people as the cradle of tolerance and inclusion. He began by thanking the audience "in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world," then dwelled on the tolerance and hospitality of his own people in sentences that all started with "I am proud":

> I am proud to tell you that I belong to a religion into whose sacred language, the Sanskrit, the

64 James Edward Ketelaar, "The Reconvening of Babel: Eastern Buddhism and the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions," in: Ziolkowski, ed., *A Museum of Faiths*, 251–304, here 299–300. For Hirai's vision – again artfully constructed – of the unity of religion see his second long speech "Synthetic Religion" (Neely 798–803, Barrows 1286–1288).

65 Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 111; van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, esp. 46–48, 72–74.

66 *The Daily Inter Ocean*, Sept 20, 1893, cited in: Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 337–338.

67 Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, 73; see also Vivekananda's main speech "Hinduism [as a Religion]" (Barrows 968–978, Neely 438–445), reprinted in: Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 421–432.

68 Barrows 101 = Neely 64.

> 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.[69]

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 were apparently firmly opposed to the tradition he himself represented.

This message was repeated again in his closing words, which, according to Barrows' report, were not very well received.[70] Vivekananda warned in particular against triumphalist tendencies and ventured his "own theory" of religious unity. Using organic imaginary he argued that everything developed according to its own substance and laws. Therefore, it was wrong to expect a 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."[71] 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 Vivekananda's discourse, to cross-fertilize each other.

There was much admiration for the "wise men of the East," as they were often called.[72] 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."[73] 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."[74] 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 the same strategy of opposing East and West is the end of Protap Chunder Mozoomdar's speech "World's Religious Debt to India."[75] Mozoomdar was a member of the Brahmo Samaj, a small movement that defended a universalistic kind of religion, based on the Vedanta.[76] 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.

69 Barrows 102 = Neely 64 (with almost identical wording).
70 Barrows 171.
71 Barrows 170 = Neely 853.
72 Barrows 179.
73 Neely 41.
74 Barrows 173.
75 P.C. Mozoomdar, "World's Religious Debt to Asia," in: Neely 596–601; Barrows 1083–1092, cited in: Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 440–449. In modern transcription his name is spelled Protap Chunder Majumdar.
76 See van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, 44–45. Mozoomdar addressed the Brahmo Samaj itself in a speech "Voice from New India" at the parliament: see Neely 134–138 and Barrows 345–351.

> 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.[77]

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 as no real 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.'"[78]

8 Spiritualization

The organizers of the Columbian Exposition did not want to restrict the event to the display "of the material triumphs, industrial achievements, and mechanical victories of man." In the autumn of 1889, Charles Bonney, who would become the president of the World's Congress Auxiliary, already wrote that something "higher and nobler is demanded by the progressive spirit of the present age."[79] The many conferences that were organized by the auxiliary had the motto "not matter, but mind." The World's Parliament of Religions epitomized the opposition between the material and the spiritual. In his opening words John Henry Barrows had already referred to two motivating ideas of the parliament. First, he expressed his belief that "even in this capital of material wonders" there is "a spiritual root to all human progress."[80] 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.[81]

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, Mozoomdar's criticism of the Western work ethos and subjugation of nature was mentioned. 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.[82]

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 directed at America.[83] The Indian theosophist, Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti, detected beneath the "thickness of material luxury, a secret and mystic aspiration to something spiritual."

77 Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 448–449; see Neely 596–601.

78 Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 449. See also Ezekiel 43:2.

79 Neely 15f.

80 Barrows 42.

81 See also the penultimate paragraph of his opening address: Neely 44.

82 Barrows 1227, cited in: Lüddeckens, *Das Weltparlament der Religionen*, 217.

83 Neely 848.

These are the final words of Chakravarti's opening statement:

> 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.[84]

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."[85] 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."[86] 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 of living a good life as children of God.[87] 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."[88] He began his speech with the programmatic statement that the aim of religion is "to direct the aspirations of the soul toward an infinite good, and to secure a perfect fruition."[89] In line with this type of thought, Elliott finally stated that love or charity, rather than obedience, is the highest Christian virtue.[90] He used elements from mystical traditions to stress aspects common to very different religions. Spiritualizing religion was probably the most important device employed in the endeavor to reach religious unity.

9 Philip Schaff's Speech on "The Reunion of Christendom"

Many among those who attended the Chicago event would become leaders of the ecumenical movement or important voices on the European theological scene: John Mott – who was to establish, two years later, the WSCF – was called to present the North American Intercollegiate Association Movement;[91] Joseph Estlin Carpenter – a leading pioneer in the early days of what was then called comparative religion – would be selected in 1900 as the first president of the International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious

84 Barrows 100 = Neely 63f.

85 Only in Neely 64.

86 Barrows 180.

87 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."

88 Walter Elliott, "The Supreme End and Office of Religion," in: Barrows 462–465, here 462; Neely 167–169.

89 Barrows 462.

90 Barrows 465.

91 Mott became the secretary of the movement in 1888. According to his biographer, his speech was "an unashamed proclamation of [the NAIAM's] evangelical motivation and its ethical, social, and ecumenical aims"; Charles Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott (1865–1955): A Biography*, Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans, 1979, 107–108. See Sarah Scholl's contribution in this volume. The biographer confirms that "although Mott said that he had 'attended and participated in' the Parliament (JRM-IV, p. 995 [John Raleigh Mott, *Addresses and Papers of John R. Mott*, vol. 4, New York NY, Association Press, 1947, 995]), his address is not to be found in any of the several compilations of the speeches given there"; Hopkins, *John R. Mott*, 710 (endnote no. 89).

Thinkers and Workers, and Charles William Wendté – a Unitarian minister from Boston – would become at the beginning of the new century a pivotal figure of liberal theology and for twenty years (1900–1920) the general secretary of the council headed by Carpenter.[92]

However, it was the elderly Swiss American scholar, Philip Schaff, a respected professor of church history at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and one of the key figures in the process that led to the creation of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System in 1877, who delivered carefully crafted sentences under the title "The Reunion of Christendom."[93] The speech was the last public statement of Schaff who was to die before the year ended.

In point of fact, many had already spoken of uniting divided denominations: the American Episcopal Rector William Reed Huntington, for instance, set forth at the end of the 19th century what he called "the Quadrilateral of pure Anglicanism" – four points essential to reunion between, in this case, the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States and other Protestant Churches in America:[94] "The Holy Scriptures as the Word of God"; "The Primitive Creeds as the Rule of Faith"; "The Two Sacraments ordained by Christ himself"; and "The Episcopate as the keystone of Governmental Unity." Here we have the origin of the Chicago Quadrilateral of 1886 and the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 on which the Episcopal Church first and then the Anglican Communion as a whole, in 1886 and 1888 respectively, laid down their concept of church unity and the conditions that were necessary, in their view, for such unity to be realized.

The route that Schaff proposed to achieve the goal of unity was very different and a frankly pragmatic one: for him there would be no prior conditions of the sort required by Huntington and other Anglicans, no ultimatums, only the basic biblical principle that God was himself reconciling the world in Christ. All else – including Anglicanism's beloved doctrine of the historic episcopate dating back to the restoration period under Charles II – was to be secondary. The components of a reunited Christian church would be bound together, not by a uniformity of doctrine or a uniformity of liturgical texts and rites, but by a common basic religious belief in the divinity of Christ. Schaff's ecclesiology, indeed, was based on the principle that "variety in unity and unity in variety is the law of God" and those "who believe in the ultimate triumph of their own creed, or form of government and worship, *but they* are all mistaken, and indulge in a vain dream."[95]

Appealing to simplicity as the basis for unity, the reunion of Christendom, Schaff argued, presupposed "an original union which has been marred and obstructed, but never wholly destroyed."[96] He already noted the existence of such an agreement on fundamental articles of faith necessary for salvation: Christ, the head of the church; God manifested in Jesus Christ and, for Schaff, an already accepted consensus among scholars concerning the creeds, the exegesis of scripture, and historical studies. These three points, he insisted, encapsulated the essentials of unity and were "more and more carried on without prejudice, and with the sole object of ascertaining the meaning of the text

92 On Carpenter, Wendté and the International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers, see Mark D. Chapman's contribution in this volume.

93 Barrows 1192–1201. Among Schaff's literary production see in particular: Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, Chambersburg PA, Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1845, and Philip Schaff, *Harmony of the Reformed Confessions*, New York NY, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1877. On Schaff see: George W. Richards, "Philip Schaff: Prophet of Church Union," *Christendom* 10/4, 1945, 463–471.

94 See William Reed Huntington, *The Church-Idea: An Essay Toward Unity*, New York NY, E.P. Dutton, 1870; William Reed Huntington, *A National Church*, New York NY, C. Scribner's Sons, 1898; and Paul Avis's contribution in this volume.

95 Barrows 1194.

96 Barrows 1192.

and the facts of history."[97] Rather optimistically, he thought that historical exegesis would bring out the "real meaning of the writer instead of putting in the fancies of the reader."[98] This conviction was based on the idea that the study of history – if carried on "with malice toward none, but with charity for all" – consisted in "a means of correcting sectarian prejudices and increasing mutual appreciation."[99] Such an investigation would, he believed, bring the denominations closer together in "an humble recognition of their defects and a grateful praise for the good which the same Spirit has wrought in them and through them."[100]

Not differently from Huntington, Schaff found in the North American situation the kind of atmosphere most favorable to Christian union. On the one hand, he explained, in the United States there was religious "liberty and equality before the law";[101] on the other hand, the evil of divisions, antagonism, and competitive interferences at home and on the missionary fields abroad was "beginning to be felt more and more."[102] Starting with North America, where once the Europeans deeply implanted their schisms, Schaff predicted that the movement towards a future reunion would expand to include even the Greek and Roman Churches. He also suggested by a stretch of imagination that the pope, "under the inspiration of a higher authority, should infallibly declare his own fallibility in all matters lying outside of his own communion, and invite Greeks and Protestants to a fraternal pan-Christian council in Jerusalem, where the mother-church of Christendom held the first council of reconciliation and peace."[103] In a spirit of humility and of listening to the others Schaff called for "a restatement of all controverted points … [that] shall remove misrepresentations, neutralize the anathemas pronounced upon imaginary heresies, and show the way to harmony."[104] In the meantime, before reunion, churches had to do their part by cultivating an irenic spirit, cooperating in philanthropic initiatives, and staying true to the "duty and privilege of prayer for Christian union, […] that his [Christ's] disciples may all be one in him, as he is one with the Father."[105]

At another occasion Schaff urged the restitution of the undivided church in the form of a "federal or confederate union" resembling the "political confederation of Switzerland, the United States, and the modern German Empire." This great union would be charged with monitoring the doctrine of each church, but it would not be invested with disciplinary power or the capacity to interfere with the liberty and autonomy of the various communities that adhered to the union. This federation would be, as Schaff specified, "a voluntary association of different Churches in their official capacity, each retaining its freedom and independence in the management of its internal affairs, but all recognizing one another as sisters with equal rights, and co-operating in general enterprises, such as the spread of the gospel at home and abroad, the defense of the faith against infidelity, the elevation of the poor and neglected classes of society, works of philanthropy and charity, and moral reform."[106]

Although no open debate on issues dividing different religions, or even Christian denominations, took place in the Chicago parliament before and after Schaff's speech, this farewell address of the elderly ecumenical leader was in a certain way prophetic: a decade and a half later, in 1908, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America was formed with 32 denominations, accounting for a total of 18 million Americans.

97 Barrows 1192.
98 Barrows 1198.
99 Barrows 1199.
100 Barrows 1198.
101 Barrows 1193.
102 Barrows 1193.
103 Barrows 1196.
104 Barrows 1196.
105 Barrows 1199.
106 Don Herbert Yoder, "Christian Unity in Nineteenth-Century America," in: *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. 1, Ruth Rouse & Stephen C. Neill, eds., *1517–1948*, London, SPCK, 1954, 221–259, here 256.

10 The Comparative Study of Religion

In his opening address, John Barrows said that "we" meet here "in a school of comparative theology"[107] and in his final evaluation he hailed the parliament's contribution to the "study of comparative religion."[108] 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,"[109] "where papers of a more scientific and less popular character were read."[110] Barrows gives a helpful overview of the papers that were presented there.[111] Nowadays 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).[112]

To some extent, the opening address of the "scientific section" held by its chairman Merwin-Marie Snell illustrates this second issue. In his speech "Service of the Science of Religions to Unity and Mission Enterprise,"[113] Snell claimed that the parliament itself was "a vast hierological museum, a working collection of religious specimens, having the same indispensable value for the hierologist that the herbarium has to the botanist."[114] The "science of religions" had to carry out its beneficial work, give a fair overview of the facts, and counter religious prejudice and animosity.[115] This was not effected 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.[116]

Notwithstanding these "practical" inclinations on the part of Snell, it is clear that the organizers had a clear picture of the current situation of religious studies. Many key figures, such as Max Müller, Cornelis Petrus Tiele, Jean and Albert Réville and the previously mentioned Joseph Estlin Carpenter, had been invited, and although some of them declined to come, many of them sent a paper. Perhaps they feared that the parliament would be too much of a religious – or what would now be called "interfaith" – meeting. Snell's framing of the study of religion with clear reference to religious unity and missionary work was to confirm 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 due to his heavy work load and teaching obligations, and then gave a short exposition of the field, expressing his joy that there was such a great interest in the study of religion in America.[117] The next speaker, Laura Ormiston Chant, who was greeted "with a great outburst of enthusiasm,"[118] was not

107 Barrows 75.
108 Barrows 1571.
109 Neely 227.
110 Barrows 152.
111 Barrows 150–152; see Barrows 1317–1383 (with selected papers from the "scientific section").
112 Ziolkowski, "Introduction," 38f.
113 Barrows 1347, under a slightly different title also reproduced in Neely 259–261.
114 Neely 260. The term "hierologist" was, to the best of my knowledge, introduced by the Dutch scholar of religion Cornelis Petrus Tiele as *terminus technicus* to denote the scholars of the science of religion (*godsdienstwetenschap*); see Cornelis Petrus Tiele, *Outlines of the History of Religion*, London, Trübner, 1877, vii.
115 Neely 260.
116 Neely 260–261.
117 Cornelis Petrus Tiele, "On the Study of Comparative Theology," in: Barrows 583–590 and Neely 245–250.
118 Neely 250.

so 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."[119] Other participants were perhaps a little less skeptical, but if we try to balance scholarly and religious interests, we undoubtedly see the pendulum swinging heavily towards the latter.

11 Conclusions

Barrows' description of the parliament as "a school of comparative theology" which would be spiritual and ethical rather than theological[120] may nowadays sound paradoxical, but at the time the hope was still widespread that scholarly and spiritual goals could be combined. Contemporary scholars of religion may find it difficult to appreciate the Chicago event. What Eric J. Sharpe has to say about its merits in his still influential history of the field is telling:

> 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.[121]

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 favor the association of the new science with the endeavor to achieve world peace and understanding. Why this association should be rejected is not explained. Scholars of religion tend to see the Chicago parliament as a false beginning in the series of truly scholarly conferences on the history of religions, which would start with the Premier Congrès International d'Histoire des Religions held in Paris in 1900.

Nevertheless, the parliament has continued to be remembered among scholars of religion. At about the time of its centennial in 1993, various papers presented at the parliament were republished and its impact on the academic study of religion was assessed in various studies. While the tone was mainly 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. Well over a century has passed since the 1893 Chicago parliament took place, during which time the scholarly study of religion, on the one hand, and confessional theology and interfaith dialogue, on the other, have grown apart.[122] The World's Parliament of Religions that came together in Chicago in 1993 was not devoted to the study of religion, but sought rather "to celebrate diversity and harmony and to explore religious and spiritual responses to critical issues that confront us all."[123]

By way of conclusion, it is interesting to look at the short presentation given by Julia Ward Howe at the parliament. Howe was an American abolitionist, social activist, founder of the AWSA, and

119 Barrows 591 = Neely 250.

120 Barrows 75.

121 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, London, Duckworth, 1984, 139.

122 On the process by which the early historians of religion defined themselves as *scholars* against those interested in religious dialogue and theology, see Arie L. Molendijk, "The First Conferences on the History of Religion," *NTT JTSR* 72, 2018, 211–224.

123 See <http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/index.cfm?n=1&sn=4> (accessed July 4, 2019).

author of the well-known patriotic "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The title of her speech was "What Is Religion?"[124] 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."[125] 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."[126] 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 places the emphasis on the relationship between the individual and his or her God – a relationship that is conceived as being 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 an outspoken plea for the equality of men and women, she undoubtedly 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. … 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.[127]

While the issue of slavery is not directly addressed, it is certainly 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, 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 permitted only a short speech of no more than ten minutes),[128] 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, needless to say, 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. Most Christian participants claimed the superiority of their own tradition, but did not argue for specific dogmatic truths. Christianity was defined in general terms of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Within the

124 Barrows 1250–1251; Neely 764–766.
125 Barrows 1250.
126 Barrows 1251.
127 Barrows 1251.
128 Neely 764.

special denominational congresses, the identity of one's own church could be reaffirmed more easily, whereas the World's Parliament of Religions represented a form of ecumenism that went beyond the single Christian traditions, not only because the parliament had a strong ethical and spiritual orientation, fighting poverty, intemperance and materialism, but also because the parliament symbolized for many of the churches' representatives a unique opportunity to provide an answer to the need for dialogue which was perceived by many of them as a very urgent issue.

The event offered to many Christian participants the possibility to experience a human and spiritual proximity which strengthened the perception that the essence of Christianity rests in a humanistic universalism that moves beyond any form of doctrinal Christianity, variously articulated as Christ-mysticism or as the expression of love. The search for unity among the churches assumed here a non-dogmatic perspective, which would be expressed in a more incisive way by part of the liberal theology wherein Wendté and Carpenter, both attending the Chicago parliament, played a fundamental role. What is significant is that such a perspective in addressing the problem of Christian unity went against the received wisdom of the time: either voluntary federalism or organic church unity, but not both. Philip Schaff disagreed; he saw the value of exploring both paths simultaneously, indeed that the one anticipated the other, leaving in Chicago a kind of legacy to the next generation of theologians and pioneers, which was destined to produce the majority of the leadership of the modern ecumenical movement.

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's Parliament of Religions]."[129] 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, was a powerful attraction for the crowds that gathered at that time in Chicago on the shores of Lake Michigan.

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