

NASSS Social Sciences Section Meeting Report

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Workshop I of the Social Sciences section was held on July 29 at Room B21 from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. The presenter was Ms. Sato Seiko, a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of the University of Tokyo. Her topic was “The Theme of Coexistence of the Religions in the World’s Parliament of Religions and the Catholic Congress in Chicago, 1893.” In her presentation she paid special attention to the liberal attitudes toward religion and responses to social problems by the participants of the two gatherings.

On the latter point, she emphasized the social impact of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical letter titled “*Rerum Novarum*,” issued in 1891, which reflected industrial development and labor problems in the Western nations. Catholics in the United States tried to comply with the spirit of this encyclical, she pointed out. This exemplified Catholics’ response to social problems at the turn of the century. As an example, she emphasized the Catholic Church’s deep concern for the conditions of working people and she also pointed out that a Catholic organization tried to conciliate industrial problems.

In conclusion, Ms. Sato pointed out that in the late nineteenth century when secular discourse was relegating religion to the fringe of the society, the harmony and cooperation the religious groups discussed in the World’s Parliament of Religions and the Catholic Congress could work to cope with social problems. Her conclusion was that secular problems which were theoretically segregated from the sacred can work as a common ground for different religions to cooperate.

To this presentation of Ms. Sato, Professor Omiya Tomohiro of Nagoya Gakuin University expressed his comment. At the beginning, he asked a question whether the dialogue between the World’s Parliament of Religion and Catholic Congress was really inter-religious in today’s sense, for he questioned whether “nineteenth century reform-minded” Protestants took a relativistic view toward other religions.

Moreover, Professor Omiya, quoting an anecdote of the Anthropological Pavilion Affair of the Osaka Industrial Exposition in 1903, just ten years after the Chicago Exposition, which displayed living persons of various ethnic groups of the then Japanese such as people from Hokkaido, Okinawa, and Taiwan and so on, pointed out that the intention was to show the superiority of Japanese of the mainland. He also mentioned that the participants of the Parliament in 1893 were

treated like “exhibits.” In this sense, Professor Omiya argued that the Parliament was not the germ of inter-religious dialogue in today’s sense.

Professor Omiya mentioned that the Second Vatican Council and its announcement of “The Relation the Church to Non-Christian Religions” in 1965 were important in promoting dialogue of religions in today’s sense. He added that Christian seminaries in America today teach seminarians world religions not to defend Christianity but to learn something true and holy in those other world religions.

Finally, Professor Omiya pointed out that the Parliament was a “side exhibit” of the Columbian Exposition and those reform-minded Protestants had no relativistic view until the U.S. experienced ethical and religious diversity in the first half of the twentieth century.

To this comment by Professor Omiya, Ms. Sato answered quoting various published materials. At first, Ms. Sato stated that the Parliament was really an “exhibit” of the world’s religions. She cited the book written by Eric J. Zialkowski titled *A Museum of Faith* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993). Although the language barrier prevented especially Asian delegates in the Parliament from communicating with each other, those fluent in English, notably from India, easily entered the discussion.

As to the comparison of today’s inter-religious dialogue and that held in the late nineteenth century, Ms. Sato pointed out the fact that exactly one hundred years later the Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago and the most important change in the hundred years, according to Richard Hughes Seager (“The Two Parliaments, the 1893 Original and the Centennial of 1993: A Historian’s View” in W. Teasdale and G. F. Cairns eds., *The Community of Religions: Voices and Images of the Parliament of the World’s Religions* (New York: The Continuum Pub. Co., 1999), is increased pluralism. On this point she concurred with Professor Oyama. Ms. Sato also argued that another characteristic of the Parliament in 1993 was its decentralization.

On the third comment about social issues and inter-religious dialogue, what Ms. Sato developed was that in the late nineteenth century, there were strong doubts about engagement in the contemporary social problems among religious people.

Then the period of questions and comments from the floor started. At first Dr. Gary Laderman gave general comments in which he appreciated Ms. Sato’s historical research at the end of the nineteenth century when the religious situation was different from contemporary America. He also pointed out the significance of contemporary religious dialogue especially after 9.11.

Many comments and questions were raised from the floor which demonstrated the diversity of interest of the participants in this section. Examples of the topics of question and discussion are as follows: Kind of social problems discussed in the Chicago Conference (Prof. Tanaka Kikuyo, Kwanseigakuin University), missionaries’ understanding of other cultures, like Asian culture under racial and

ethnic hierarchy (Prof. Thomas Sugrue, University of Pennsylvania), missionaries' role in the Parliament (Prof. Kohiyama Rui, Tokyo Women's Christian University), Americanization of Buddhism in Hawaii and its implications (Prof. Shimada Noriko, Japan Women's University), pluralism as a characteristic of American society in general and its relation to inter-religious discussion (Prof. Endo Yasuo, the University of Tokyo), and so on. In addition, topics such as Progressivism and Christianity, Social Darwinism and its implication for religious discussion in the Parliament and the relationship between secular humanism and religious values were argued. Topics were so diverse that the discussion could not go in depth sometimes, but Ms. Sato tried very hard to answer the questions. The discussion among participants was intense and earnest.

It seems that the significance of the interdisciplinary nature of the arguments was sufficiently demonstrated in this discussion. The session ended punctually at noon with appreciation for both presenter Ms. Sato and commentator Prof. Omiya.