

The Theme of Coexistence of Religions in the World's Parliament of Religions and the Catholic Congress in Chicago, 1893

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Introduction

In 1893, the World's Parliament of Religions was held along with other religious congresses as part of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. These religious congresses were among the earliest examples of the encounter between Eastern and Western religions in the United States. The participants who gathered in Chicago from all over the world had a good reason to cooperate, under the name of *Religion as a universal category* which includes all the individual *religions* in the world. At the same time, we can see that the participants of the religious conferences discussed these issues from perspectives that were deeply rooted in their *specific* religious traditions. I believe that discourse at these congresses functioned simultaneously on two different levels: one universal (i.e. the category of "Religion,") the other specific to the speaker's own religious tradition. The question, however, remains: to what degree were these two discourses compatible with one another in the context of the Chicago congresses? Or, rather, were they mutually exclusive, leading to miscommunication and misunderstanding among the participants? In many ways, very little has changed in the more than a hundred years since these congresses took place, and this possible incompatibility between the universal and specific in discourse on religion is the very point that I wish to discuss here.

As a social phenomenon, religion is not limited to a person's inner private life. Mediated through various and complicated paths, "religion" always has some influence on the realm of what is usually called the "secular," such as politics or the economy. Religion, as a social force, gains power as long as it is rooted in everyday life of the people.¹ This fact is also true when we investigate American Protestantism in the nineteenth century. Despite they expressed a deep concern for the condition of one's own soul, many American Protestants extended this concern toward how this ostensibly private condition played out in the public sphere. As a result, one's private life and one's public life were seen as deeply connected, and the Protestant teachings of the time tried to discipline both simultaneously.

This characteristic of American Protestantism is well represented by the phrase “religious and moral,” which is found repeatedly in the writings of nineteenth century Protestant leaders. As in their works, the two words were closely connected and assumed to be interdependent. Indeed, they were virtually inseparable; it seemed impossible for Protestants to think of an immoral religious person, or, conversely, a moral but non-religious person, or worst of all, a moral atheist. Being a good Christian always meant being a good citizen, and vice versa. Religion was not understood as merely the inner state of a person; rather, it was thought to be something more holistic, encompassing his or her whole life.

In the past, this way of thinking formed one of the Protestants’ conventional criticisms of Catholics. They concluded that Catholics were doomed to failure as American citizens by virtue of the fact that their religious beliefs were mistaken. Indeed, the Catholic immigrants who were trying to take root in the soil of the United States sometimes felt friction between their Catholic identity and their identity as Americans. The Protestant majority imagined the United States as essentially Protestant in character. American Catholics, as a religious minority, could not always ignore this orientation of the majority, however difficult it may have been.

With this view of religion in mind, I focus on the World’s Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. This event provides a vantage point from which we can grasp various religious contexts in the United States. I first investigate the World’s Parliament of Religions, the most famous gathering on religion in the Exposition. Next, I compare its general attitude toward the matter of the co-existence of religions with the one that appeared in the Catholic Congress, which also took place in Chicago at about the same time. Both were part of the Congress of Religion, one of the sections of the World’s Congress Auxiliary of the World’s Columbian Exposition. The Auxiliary included various congresses on the humanities and sciences, such as religion, literature, and medicine.²

In this paper, I will use the term “liberal attitude” to refer to the tendency within all religions towards the conscious adaptation—some might say “loosening”—of formal aspects of religion, such as doctrine, practice, and observance in the face of rapid intellectual and social change. The liberal attitude meant much in the age when the society was thought to be increasingly less religious, or anti-religious in the course of rapid industrialization. When the incompatibility between religious life and the secular were most keenly felt, the advocates of the liberal attitude dared to propose changes to religion which would minimize the abyss between them. For religious minority groups such as American Catholics, most of whose adherents had non-English immigrant roots, the liberal attitude caused a different kind of polemic: for them, to embrace their new environment was related to the Americanization of their religious traditions.

Moreover, the late nineteenth century was characterized by increasing trepidation regarding the social problems caused by the rise of industrial, urban,

and capitalist society. Members of the various Protestant sects could cooperate with each other more readily on social matters when they were thought to be a common concern to Protestants. Shared interest in social concerns diverted their attention from sectarian infighting and competing based on doctrinal matters on which the different denominations could not readily agree. This previously unthinkable scenario would contribute to the promotion of ecumenism, and the eventual organization of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908.

In the following argument about these two religious congresses, I pay special attention to these two things: the “liberal attitude” toward religion, and responses to social problems by religious adherents. The liberal attitude and shared concern towards social problems supported one another. They could work as a unifying power among the various religious traditions but not without certain limitations. With the liberal attitude as a backdrop, an answer to the problem of co-existence of religions seems to be found in the battle against some common realistic and pragmatic social problems, but it is not likely that that is always the case.

I. The World's Parliament of Religions and its Contexts

The World's Parliament of Religions was held as a part of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. It gathered the leaders of religions and religious scholars from all over the world. It opened in September 11th and continued for seventeen days. The delegates met in what is now the Art Institute of Chicago. It was located in a place a little distant from Jackson Park, where, as the center of the World's Fair, Americans constructed the famous exhibition buildings called the White City. A history of the Exposition estimates 150,000 people participated in the World's Parliament of Religions,³ and says “for a time even the great Exposition then in progress seemed overshadowed and forgotten” by the Parliament.⁴

The Parliament is now thought to be a symbolic milestone on the road toward multi-religiosity found in the United States today. For most of the American participants, it was the first time in their lives that they saw Buddhists, Hindus, and other practitioners of Asian religions. The Parliament showed the penetration of the liberal attitude toward other religions in American society. The center of the congressional administration itself was more inclusive. There were a Jewish rabbi and a Catholic archbishop, clergies from a Unitarian, a Universalist, and a New Jerusalem Church, although it was mostly occupied by Protestants of the evangelical denominations.

Still, it seems curious that in 1893 such a Parliament took place in the United States. Most Protestants were still wary of those who they conceived to be religious outsiders—a category which at times included naturalized Catholics. In fact, the Americans celebrated this memorable gathering of different religions of the world in a context divorced from the very religious clashes happening in the United States: Mormons and Native Americans were purposefully excluded from

the Parliament. Furthermore, those who did not—or could not—accept the liberal attitude that prevailed at the Parliament simply refused to participate in any official capacity. Even from within the spirit of acceptance that permeated the Parliament, the conveners found themselves nevertheless having to hide the conflicts and clashes which inevitably arise when different groups are living in a place side by side.⁵

Several conditions were necessary to realize this Parliament, and among these, the rise of the academic discipline of Comparative Religions was perhaps the most critical development. The concept of Religion as a universal category was created by the scholars working under the banner of the “Science of Religion.” Furthering this Science of Religion provided the context and the rationale for gathering the world’s religions in one place. In other words, the Parliament was founded on a common sharing of the liberal attitude that was further cultivated by academic interest.

Religion as a universal category in principle leads to a relativistic and comparative understanding of religions. It offered the possibility of treating Christianity as only one of many religions, no different than Buddhism, Islam or any other. At least in theory, the pride of the Protestants as the end point on the scale of religious evolution was superseded by the comparative perspective that permeated the Parliament. At the same time, however, it was tacitly implied in many of the official documents that, for the Protestants, the goal of the Parliament was not to admit the equal value of religions in the world. Rather, they thought it as an opportunity to assert their superiority in the face of progressive development of the religions. They were grossly optimistic about the superiority of Christianity as the last and greatest step in the evolution of religions. Confident of their status, many Christians in the Parliament believed that religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism could be united under the universal category of Religion, without threat to their own superior position.

With this conviction there appeared several contrasts between religions and other areas. The World’s Congress Auxiliary had its purpose to promote “something still higher and nobler” than the material progress of the American civilization, which was fully demonstrated by the World’s Fair.⁶ John Henry Barrows, the chairman of the General Committee of the World’s Parliament of Religions and a Presbyterian minister, also highly praised the World’s Fair. He described it as a presentation of “material progress”⁷ which provided a counterpoint to “man’s intellectual and moral progress”⁸ in the World Parliament of Religions. However, the praise for the material was lost when it went as far as “materialism.” The fifth of the ten expressed goals of the Parliament contrasted “Theism,” which was represented by various religions, with “a materialistic philosophy of the universe,”⁹ against which all religions must struggle.

Another reason for the Protestants’ generous attitude may have been their distance from the life of Asian religious traditions. It was true that many European and American missionaries were working throughout the world, and

they brought ample knowledge of the world's religions to the Parliament. However, the Parliament was held in the late nineteenth century, and not in the late twentieth century. Americans did not anticipate that the adherents of "heathen" religions from Asia would soon come to the United States as mass immigrants and claim a right to practice their own religious customs. On the other hand, the Protestants as a majority of the United States had already had difficulty accepting the several minority groups that actually existed at home. Though most of the participants were indifferent, kept silent, or made only subtle recognition of the political ramifications of the Parliament, it was nevertheless wrought with inner conflicts and the inescapable backdrop of European imperialism.¹⁰

Naturally, there was no total consensus among the delegates. The leaders of the different religions invited to this event brought their own purposes to the Parliament. Protestants saw the Parliament as a venue for teaching their "truth" to non-Christians; Buddhists from Japan similarly recognized the Parliament as the first step towards greater proselytizing in the world. The Hindu swami Vivekananda succeeded in establishing the first Vedanta Society in the United States. Catholics took advantage of the Parliament to communicate the true knowledge about Catholicism. The representatives of the various religions had their own expectations and intentions which were distinct from those of the Protestants.

The Americans were not unaware of these different and potentially competing voices. The administrative office of the World's Congress Auxiliary restricted free discussion or unprepared addresses to keep order in the congresses where the delegates gathered from all over the world.¹¹ But sometimes the latent conflicts were uncovered. The Asian delegates occasionally criticized the Christians, and vice versa. It should be noticed that comparatively few of the delegates, American or foreign, were directly denounced for their abstract theological beliefs. In the occasional instances where judgments were explicitly made, they were often expressions of displeasure with the social or cultural aspects of other faiths, rather than issues pertaining to doctrine. Americans could not accept the custom of polygamy among Muslims, nor could the Asian delegates tolerate the arrogance of the Christian missionaries in their countries.¹²

On the other hand, it was expected that the social welfare movements would function as a bridge between the various world religions. It was explicitly asserted by the Catholic Archbishop of Baltimore and Cardinal, James Gibbons who said that, "though we do not agree in matters of faith, ...thanks be to God there is one platform on which we all stand united. It is the platform of charity, of humanity, and of benevolences."¹³

In some cases, the rejection of "the matters of faith" was ambivalently accompanied by the acceptance of social matters. B. B. Nagarkar, one of the representatives of Brahmo-Somaj from India, was a good example of this apparent contradiction. Although he was critical of the English colonization of

India, he nevertheless appreciated the social and political improvements brought about in India by the British colonial presence. At the same time, he said, "So far as religious progress and spiritual culture are concerned we have little or nothing to learn from the West."¹⁴ Also he severely denounced the Christian missionaries in his country, calling their religion "dogmatism."¹⁵

For the most part, the Parliament proceeded in harmony. Conflicts between religions existed but were not allowed to become topics of conversation. Rather, the organizers were careful to insist on a discourse praising the unity of religions. Also, both the Protestant sects and Catholicism were placed under the umbrella of "Christianity," which obscured at least for a time the tension between them. It was symbolic that in the procession marching to the platform of the opening session of the Parliament, the Presbyterian cleric Barrows stood on the left of the president of the Auxiliary, Charles C. Bonney, who was a Swedenborgian, and the Cardinal Gibbons stood on his right.¹⁶ However complicated the reality may have been, at least in the World's Parliament of Religions, leaders of various religions could gather at a place peacefully from both the United States and all over the world.

II. The Catholic Congress and its Approach to the United States

The World's Parliament of Religions and the Catholic Congress were only two among the congresses of the Department of the Congress of Religion. The Congress of Religion itself was only a section of the Departments of the World's Congress Auxiliary. The Parliament had become especially famous among the Congress of Religion because it was much bigger than other congresses and successfully drew Asian delegates who were a spectacle for the Americans. The Congress of Religions contained many of the congresses of the evangelical Protestant denominations in America. There were the congresses of the Congregational women or the African Methodist Episcopal Congress. The non-evangelical congresses of the Unitarians, the Universalists, the Theosophists, and the Christian Scientists were also held. Furthermore, Jews and Catholics each held their own congresses.

Previous academic research on the Parliament seldom discusses it in the context of these other congresses. Some researchers of American Catholicism have pointed to the virtual overlap of the Catholic Conference with the World's Parliament of Religions (the Catholic Congress convened a week earlier at the same place) but even this is only mentioned in passing. James F. Cleary indicated that the second Catholic Congress had already been planned at the first Congress in 1889, completely independent from the Parliament and the World's Fair.¹⁷ The Catholics had no idea or intention of developing the universalistic idea of Religion at their congress; rather, the language and logic of the Catholic Congress was specifically Catholic.

On the other hand, some common characteristics are to be found between the

Parliament and the Congress. It goes without saying that the liberal attitude enabled the opening of the Parliament. For Catholics, the leadership of liberal prelates who occupied positions of power in the American Catholic hierarchy, such as James Cardinal Gibbons and John Keane (the rector of the Catholic University of America,) was important for their participation in both the Catholic Congress and the World's Parliament. Both the liberal Protestants and the liberal Catholics were less exclusive toward the cultural and social context, and felt more responsibility for society and more engaged in the reality of the social problems surrounding them. Within the Catholic community, these liberal Catholics were condemned as Americanists, though Americanism had some other dimensions than the cultural accommodation and social concern.

In the Catholic Congress, the American Catholics talked more specifically within their own context, which inevitably related to their minority position in the United States. They tried to embrace the American situation surrounding them, and also tried to make it compatible with the Catholic experience. These struggles were not absent but were clearly played down in the Parliament as a whole, where Religion as a universal category was the more important topic. For obvious reasons, the "exotic" Asian delegates attracted much more attention than did the plight of the Catholic community, who were already a familiar fixture of the American religious landscape.

For example, the Catholics in the Congress often pictured Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella as devout Catholics, at the same time praising them as the first European to reach the American Continent and his patroness. It should not be forgotten that the World's Fair was held for the 400th memorial of the arrival of Columbus. Also they stated that the Europeans who first came to the territory of the United States were mostly Catholics and were often enthusiastic missionaries. In their addresses in the Congress, the histories of the United States and those of the Catholics in this country were presented as closely interconnected.

In other cases the Catholics tactically talked about liberty. Liberty was defined as the core value of the United States and delegates referenced the American Constitution many times, insisting that liberty was also the central value of Catholicism. The religious liberty that the Constitution established was assumed to provide the best environment for the Catholic Church to prosper.

Though this kind of rhetoric was occasionally found among the arguments, the main purpose of the Congress was to discuss especially three topics: Catholic education, the independence of the Holy See and the Catholic response to social problems in American society. In this congress, those matters were something contrasted with matters concerning faith. Because it was a congress of the Catholic laity held in the late nineteenth century, the influence of the clergy prohibited any discussion of faith, instead focusing the discussion on matters of contemporary problems.

At first glance, the topic of social problems seemed to be the point where the

Catholics and the Protestants could meet amicably, engage with one another, and solve these problems hand in hand. This topic had already promoted ecumenism among the Protestants, and some of the papers in the World's Parliament of Religion insisted on the unity of religions for the sake of humanity. This view was found in the addresses in the Parliament by Cardinal Gibbons himself, and by C. F. Donnelly, who presented the specific examples of Catholic charity in America.¹⁸ These social problems provided a fertile ground for the liberal attitude to emerge, conceived as a common concern for all the religions. Theological differences were downplayed in favor of an insistence on one's responsibility towards humanity. In fact, at the opening of the Catholic Congress, Charles Bonney expressed his blessing for the harmony between the American Catholics and the non-Catholics. He praised such harmony as being realized through their common interest for the Prohibition, toiling workers, and education.¹⁹ Still, Bonney was not a Catholic. His blessing for the Catholics was possible only when Catholics' actions and interests were compatible with his own liberal philosophy.

Although the liberal attitude unquestionably influenced the developing American Catholic Church, it was far from being the dominant position of either the clergy or the laity. Indeed, we can find other kinds of discourses deeply rooted in the American Catholic context. First of all, the Americanists had strong opponents among both the American and international Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy, who feared that any loss of the cultural and religious identity that linked an immigrant to their native country would pose a threat to the survival of Catholicism in America. Furthermore, the distinctly Catholic discourse reinforced the basic differences between the non-Catholic advocates of the liberal attitude and the Catholics relative to their motives for solving social problems. In the Catholic Congress, the Catholics' interest regarding social problems was associated with the encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum" submitted in 1891, three years before the Congress. It was a reflection of the industrial development and labor problems in the Western nations. It showed the deep concern of the Catholic Church for the conditions of the working people and called for the better treatment of workers, governmental action, and the unity of workers to improve those conditions, with an intention to prevent them from drifting into socialism.

This encyclical was repeatedly mentioned in the papers presented at the Congress, together with the name of the Pope. For example, both were mentioned by Frank J. Sheridan, a delegate from the Diocese of Dubuque, Iowa, in his article on the promotion of a Catholic organization for the conciliation of industrial problems. He stated that the Catholic Congress itself "has been called into existence mainly for the purpose of discussing and putting into practical effect in the United States the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on the condition of labor."²⁰

As the example shows, social problems were considered in their specifically

Catholic context. Their motives were more or less connected with their very Catholicism, the presence of Pope, Church, and its traditions. Although Bonney, a non-Catholic, praised Pope Leo XIII in his address, the meaning the Pope delivered may have been somewhat different between non-Catholics and the Catholics; of course the response must have been varied even within the groups. It is possible that their motives were supported by their humanistic concern irrespective of the church as well as by their Catholic identity. However, when the membership in a given religious group provides a part of the critical core of an individual's identity, it is hard to imagine a case where belief and action can be completely segregated from one another. Rather, the two are deeply intertwined, and inform many of the choices a person makes in their life.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that religious discourse cannot be divorced from its cultural and social context. Specifically in the late nineteenth century, the discourse of secularism was relegating religion to the periphery of society. This was an age of technological progress, and the World's Exposition was meant as a celebration of American material abundance. As part of this discourse, the World's Parliament of Religions and the Catholic Congress, together with other religious congresses, were organizationally distinguished as only one aspect of the various "non-material" human achievements, all of which were displayed as ancillary to the Exposition. To be "religious" in such an age required that an individual or group to deeply reconsider the meaning of their religion—and in Religion in general—in relation to the "secular" society in which they lived.

At the time like this, an answer for the harmony and cooperation between the different religious groups seems to be found in the concern about social problems and the liberal attitude which promotes it, along with the universalistic discourse of religion. Secular problems, theoretically segregated from religious concerns can work as a common ground for different religions to cooperate. In reality, the two are not as distinct as is often imagined. Individuals or groups have to keep balance somewhere in between the logic of the both realms.

More to the point, in the nineteenth century there were still strong religious discourses that were specifically rooted in individual religious traditions, operating simultaneously with a universalistic discourse of religion which found full expression in the World's Parliament of Religions. This reliance on a religiously "specific" discourse was what distinguished the Catholic Congress from the World Parliament of Religions. It is possible that the liberal attitude, in some instances, found support using the specific language and logic of a given religious tradition. However, this universalistic tendency was difficult to maintain in specific contexts, and the historical record shows that no group with its own logic, history and identity can always perform as the liberal attitude demands. Indeed, the unique claim to "Truth" is the very logic by which

religious identity is established and maintained. The consistency between that assertion of truth and the liberal attitude can be attained, but often contingently and not easily.

Notes

1. Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
2. There were twenty departments in the World's Congress Auxiliary: Woman's Progress, 25; Public Press, 6; Medicine and Surgery, 6; Temperance, 12; Moral and Social Reform, 15; Commerce and Finance, 10; Music, 9; Literature, 9; Education, First Series, 17, Second Series, 16; Engineering, 9; Art, 5; Government, 7; General Department, 1; Science and Philosophy, 13; Social and Economic Science, 4; Labor, 1; Religion, 46; Sunday Rest, 1; Public Health, 1; Agriculture, 11. The number after that follows the name of the department represents the number of divisions under the department. Rossiter Johnson, ed., *A History of the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, Volume IV, Congresses* (Tokyo: Athena Press, 2004), 6.
3. *Ibid.*, 231.
4. *Ibid.*, 221.
5. The World's Parliament of Religions was once forgotten from the religious history of the United States, only recently remembered in the face of increased variety of religions, with an effort to construct more many-sided religious history of the United States. This fact simply indicates the temporality of the enthusiasm aroused by the Parliament and its distance from daily religious practice of the people.
6. *Ibid.*, 2.
7. John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story, Held in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), 4.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 18.
10. The World's Parliament of Religions was supported by many current and former missionaries who had experienced life among non-Christian people while living abroad. These missionaries presented papers at the Parliament regarding the religions they observed all over the world. Also, the Barrows' official record shows there were a vast numbers of Western missionaries staying in China, India, Syria, Turk, Japan, etc, as well as native religious leaders, among the members of the Advisory Committee of the Parliament, which was comprised of more than 3000 people. It was true that world's religions were represented by the world's religious leaders themselves, but also it was in part a representation of religions through the filter of understanding by the Europeans. The Parliament was nothing but a result of expansion of Western power which made the world smaller.
11. Johnson, 7.
12. Mori Koichi, "World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago: 1893," *Doshisha American Studies* 26, (March 1990): 1-21.
13. Barrows, 80.
14. B. B. Nagarkar, "The Work of Social Reform in India," in Barrows, 770.

15. Ibid., 778.
16. Johnson, 226.
17. James F. Cleary, "Catholic Participation in the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893," in William L. Portier ed., *The Inculturation of American Catholicism 1820-1900* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988): 380-404, 389.
18. James Cardinal Gibbons, "The Needs of Humanity supplied by the Catholic Religion," in Barrows, 485-493; Charles F. Donnelly "The Relation of the Roman Catholic Church to the Poor and Destitute," in Barrows, 1032-1036.
19. *The World's Columbian Catholic Congresses*, (Chicago: J. S. Hyland & Co., 1893), 14-15.
20. Ibid., 162.