

Response to Ms Sato's Paper "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

I deeply appreciate Ms Sato's research on the World's Parliament of Religions and Catholic Congress. In this paper, she suggests that the Parliament could be carried out in the last decade of 19th century, the industrialization era. It was a time when labor and urban problems were so crucial that these problems could be platforms on which religious denominations could cooperate. In this response, I attempt to compare the Parliament with today's interreligious dialogue. Is it dialogue?

I would like to ask the question whether the World's Parliament of Religions was the birth of interreligious dialogue in today's sense.¹ Did the participants really have a conversation? Could the non-Protestant participants enjoy a position equal to Protestant participants? Did "nineteenth century reform-minded" Protestants have a relativistic view to other religions?

Ms Sato's paper reminds me of the so-called Anthropological Pavilion affair (*jinruikan jiken*). The affair occurred during the fifth Osaka Industrial Exposition in 1903. The purpose of the Exposition was to promote improvement of technology. There was an "Anthropological pavilion" (*jinruikan*) presenting the results of anthropological research. The pavilion displayed living persons from various ethnic groups in Hokkaido, Okinawa, Taiwan and so on. They wore their everyday clothes and lived in their traditional houses made in the pavilion by the promoter. When spectators came into the pavilion, a guide pointed out each person with a stick and explained physical and cultural characteristics of each ethnic group. The intention of the promoter was to show the superiority of Japanese. Because of bitter accusations by the press in Okinawa and Japan, the pavilion was suspended. This affair discloses the reality of the Exposition in 1900's.

Studying the World's Parliament of Religion through Ms Sato's paper and pictures which I found in Internet, I recognize it as an exhibition of the world

religions, just as the Anthropological Pavilion was an exhibition of ethnic groups. The participants in the Parliament were treated like “exhibits.” Compared with today’s interreligious dialogue, it lacked fair dialogical relations among religious denominations. The representatives were gathered by invitation from the promoter. The schedule of the congress was not discussed by the participants but had been decided previously only by the promoter. The representatives were exhibited in front of the hall, just like the people taken from Hokkaido or Okinawa in the Anthropological pavilion. Edwin Gaustad calls the Parliament “a sort of ‘side exhibit.’”² Hence the Parliament was not the germ of interreligious dialogue in today’s sense.

Comparison with interreligious dialogue today

Interreligious dialogues nowadays are very different from the World’s Parliament of Religions. Today, Christian leaders’ attitudes toward other religions have changed. They used to try to gain converts from other religions, but now they attempt to learn something from them. The Second Vatican Council issued “The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” in 1965. It says, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.” As a result of continual dialogues with other religions since the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC), they published “Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies” in 1979 and provided a theological foundation for forming a community with other religions. What Christians lacked was the appreciation of other people’s faiths. Now we observe it from the Christian point of view.

What made Christian attitude toward other religions more relativistic and affirmative? I suggest three points here.

A. The dialogical relations among religions have matured since the time of the World’s Parliament of Religion. Today, religious denominations have established continuous relations among themselves. They have cooperated for peace, poverty, and human rights.

B. The U.S. has experienced greater ethnic and religious diversity since the time of the Parliament. As Ms Sato points it out in her paper religions were not diverse in the U.S. at that time. The increasing number of immigrants from Asia and Asian religions was prominent in the first half of 20th century in the West coast of the U.S. Today, the growth of immigrants from Islamic nations is prominent. It is said that more than 2 million Muslims are connected to 1,200 mosques and centers. American Christians cannot avoid cultural and religious diversity made by these immigrants. They have started to learn of various faiths.

C. The world missionary boom has cooled down. Interreligious dialogues have been held in the periphery of the Christian world, such as the missionary field. The shift of Christian attitudes toward other religions in the missionary fields from persuasion to dialogue influences Christianity in the U.S., which sends

Christian missionaries. Today, Christian seminaries in the U.S. teach seminarians world religions not to defend Christianity against them but to learn something "that is true and holy in these religions."

Beyond social issues

Sato correctly points out that social issues work as a common ground for interreligious dialogue. However, as far as I know, the Parliament and other interreligious dialogues in the U.S. before World War II did not promote any joint action for social issues. Indeed, a few Jewish rabbis joined pacifist movements, but no other religions, (e.g. Islam, Buddhism...) joined such a movement. Churches in the West ran support programs for immigrants from Asia in the late 19th century and beginning of 20th century, but they never asked Buddhists or other Asian religious leaders to cooperate in helping immigrants. A few Christians wished for dialogue with people who believed in other religions, but few Christians wished to act with them even on social issues.

Nowadays, interreligious dialogues promote joint action on social issues. The World Conference of Religions and Peace (WCRP) is a good example. Interreligious dialogue can play an important role for making peace in the world. In addition to cooperation of religions in regard with the social issues, e.g. peace, ecology, and human right, religions start talking about spirituality and notion of God among them.

Moreover, religious groups have begun discussions about spirituality and topics of theology beyond social issues (e.g., Salvation, God, discussions on death and QOL). In the field of hospice, pastoral caregivers of various religions have discussed these topics and have cooperated with each other. I have heard that Christian and Buddhist churches often hold joint funerals in California. The realm of interreligious dialogues and cooperation is becoming wider today.

Conclusion

Comparing the World's Parliament of Religions with today's interreligious dialogue, I point out that the Parliament was a "side exhibit" of the Chicago Columbian Exposition. "Nineteenth century reform-minded" Protestants did not have a relativistic view of other religions until the U.S. experienced ethnical and religious diversity in the first half of 20th century.

Notes

1. See also Mori Koichi, "World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago: 1893," *Doshisha American Studies* 26 (March 1990): 1-21.
2. Edwin S. Gaustad ed., *A Documentary History of Religion in America* (Second Edition; 2

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vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 2:4.