

The Parliament of World's Religions Salt Lake City October 15th-19th

Dear New Thought Delegate ~

The Association for Global New Thought has offered programs and brought delegates to past Parliament events in 1999, 2004, and 2009. For those who are attending the upcoming event next month, we thought you might like to read some history of the event -- it will enrich your experience on site!

History of the Parliament of the World's Religions

With pride, the Parliament of the World's Religions hosts their sixth convention, this year in Salt Lake City, Utah, October 15-19. Expecting 10,000 people from 80 nations and 50 faiths, they proclaim the theme, "Reclaiming the Heart of our Humanity: Working Together for a World of Compassion, Peace, Justice, and Sustainability." The world has been blessed with these gatherings since 1893.

In June 1891, the Parliament sent out 3,000 invitations for this first gathering to be held two years later. The mailings included copies of the Parliament's preliminary address along with invitations to religious leaders from all over the world to participate in the event. The invitation read: "We affectionately invite the representatives of all faiths to aid us in presenting to the world...the religious harmonies and unities of humanity, and also showing forth the moral and spiritual agencies...at the root of human progress." Enthusiastic responses came from those who said the Parliament "stands unique and unprecedented in our history."

The 1893 World Parliament of Religions

The first Parliament of the World's Religions-initially called the World's Parliament of Religions-was held in 1893 in Chicago. As part of the World's Columbian Exposition, a large trade fair celebrating the quadri-centennial of European contact with America, the Parliament turned out to be the most spectacular event of the assembly. Running for fifteen days, this was the first formal gathering of representatives of Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. The conference included new religious movements of the time such as Spiritualism and Christian Science.

The General Committee formulated ten objectives of the Parliament that were possibly written in the 1891 Preliminary Address (Barrows 1893a, 18):

1. To bring together in conference, for the first time in history, the leading representatives of the great historic religions of the world.

- 2. To show to men, in the most impressive way, what and how many important truths the various religions hold and teach in common.*
- 3. To promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious men of diverse faiths, through friendly conference and mutual good understanding, while not seeking to foster the temper of indifferentism, and not striving to achieve any formal and outward unity.*
- 4. To set forth, by those most competent to speak, what are deemed the important distinctive truths held and taught by each Religion, and by the various chief branches of Christendom.*
- 5. To indicate the impregnable foundations of Theism, and the reasons for man's faith in Immortality, and thus to unite and strengthen the forces which are adverse to a materialistic philosophy of the universe.*
- 6. To secure from leading scholars, representing the Brahman, Buddhist, Confucian, Parsee, Mohammedan, Jewish and other Faiths, and from representatives of the various Churches of Christendom, full and accurate statements of the spiritual and other effects of the Religions which they hold upon the Literature, Art, Commerce, Government, Domestic and Social life of the peoples among whom these Faiths have prevailed.*
- 7. To inquire what light each Religion has afforded, or may afford, to the other religions of the world.*
- 8. To set forth, for permanent record to be published to the world, an accurate and authoritative account of the present condition and outlook of Religion among the leading nations of the earth.*
- 9. To discover, from competent men, what light Religion has to throw on the great problems of the present age, especially the important questions connected with Temperance, Labor, Education, Wealth and Poverty.*
- 10. To bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship, in the hope of securing permanent international peace*

At the September 11 opening ceremony, more than 4,000 people gathered. In mid-morning, twelve representatives from various faiths advanced into the Hall of Columbus walking hand in hand. At the same time, the Columbian Liberty bell in the Court of Honor rang ten times for the ten great world religions: Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Swami Vivekenanda from India gave the opening talk [please see following article for excerpts]. He was one of the earliest Hindu teachers and the first swami to visit the United States.

Despite some initial opposition to the Parliament, the convention was recognized as a great achievement in modern civilization. For instance, Reverend Dr. Marcus Braybrooke, current President of the World Congress of Faiths (WCF) and author of more than forty religious books, wrote, "It remains a remarkable pioneer event, and no subsequent interfaith gathering has come near to it in size or complexity."

The Parliament of the World's Religions did not hold another conference for 100 years. Factors working against such a gathering included secularism, communism, and fascism - all hostile to religions as well as competitive rather than cooperative. Nonetheless, the importance of

understanding between members of the world religions gradually became recognized. Significant factors contributing to this acceptance were the growing academic study of world religions and two significant religious collaborations: the International Association of Religious Freedom and the WCF, founded in 1936 by explorer and mystic Francis Younghusband.

Chicago again hosted the 1993 Parliament. Native American religious figures, Sikhs, and other indigenous or earth-centered religionists were not present at the initial event. This second Parliament corrected the mistakes by ensuring representation of these religions and spiritual traditions.

The first Parliament raised awareness of the value of religious plurality. Scholars and religious communities consider this first gathering, along with the emergence of the study of comparative religion, the cradle of the interfaith movement. In contemporary times, the Parliament is recognized as the occasion of the birth of worldwide interreligious dialogue.



Swami Vivekananda's Message to the Parliament of the World's Religions on September 11, 1893 (Excerpted)

Sisters and Brothers of America. [At this moment came the three minute standing ovation from the audience of 7,000] It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects....

We believe not only in universal toleration but we accept all religions as true. 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. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites who came to Southern India and took refuge with us in very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the

religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation....

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful Earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.

But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.
-Vivekananda

Twenty-first century Swami Jnaneshvara describes the continuing relevance of Vivekananda's message from the late 19th century Parliament:

This first message of Swami Vivekananda in America, often said to be a key point of the bridging of Eastern and Western spirituality, and the coming of yoga to the West, was given on September 11, 1893, exactly 108 years, to the day, before the date September 11, 2001, the date of the bombing of the World Trade Center. Whether by coincidence or precognition, it calls out for a closer reading of Swami Vivekananda's message and its appropriateness for our current times.

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