Reflecting on the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions: The Continuing Challenges for the Interreligious Movement

Desmond Cahill

Introduction

In 1993 in Chicago when Barak Obama was learning to sharpen his political teeth in the hotbed of the city's class and ethnoreligious factions, the first Parliament of the World's Religions of the modern era was held, and it was held precisely a 100 years after the very first Parliament in 1893. Under the guidance of the Chicago Board of Trustees, successive Parliaments have been held in Cape Town (1999), Barcelona (2004) and Melbourne in December 2009. To what extent the US first black president was affected by the 1993 Parliament remains unclear but he has spelled out his religion-in-politics philosophy in an address he gave in June 2006 at a *Call to Renewal* Conference. He argued that the religious right should not be allowed to monopolize religion and articulated how his own Christian commitment had emerged out of the central and prophetic role of the Black churches (Glaude, 2008).

Obama reflected on this commitment, "I still believe in the power of the African-American religious tradition to spur social change, a power made real by some of its leaders here today. Because of its past, the Black church understands in an intimate way the Biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities". He went on, "I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death, but rather as an active hope palpable, an active palpable agent in the world as a source of hope". This personal base led him to reflect on how religious belief ought to animate public deliberation and public policy. "Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal rather than religion-specific values". In other words, religious or secularist followers cannot hide behind the claims of their worldview. Those claims must be subject to the social conscience within the parameters of public reason and accord-

D. Cahill (✉)
RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: des.cahill@rmit.edu.au

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ing to the discourse of public debate. Such policy claims must be made accessible to public reason though in the world of religious pluralism and democratic societies this capacity and need to speak across differences in worldview in a publicly reasonable way is never easy in the consultative process that leads to the formulation of public policy (Glaude, 2008).

It is not surprising given his international family heritage that Obama's heritage is also multifaith. His father became an atheist though today his African relatives in Kenya remain Muslim. His revered mother was skeptical of organized religion. His half-sister is Buddhist and there is a rabbi in his mother's ancestry. Not long after his inauguration on 5 February 2009 at the National Prayer Breakfast, this multifaith and Chicago heritage expressed itself in President Obama's establishment of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, a revamped version of President Bush's multifaith office. At the Breakfast, he recalled that he became a Christian after moving to the south side of Chicago, working as a community organizer from a Catholic Church office. "It was on those streets, in those neighbourhoods, that I first heard God's spirit beckon me. It was there that I felt called to a higher purpose – His purpose" (*CathNewsUSA*, 2009).

The reflections for this chapter are focused on the 1893 Parliament. They are indebted to and based on the collection of speeches edited by Richard Hughes Seager (1993). His work in turn is based on the two-volume compilation edited by John Henry Barrows' *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular History* (1893) and Neely's *History of the Parliament of Religions* (1896). It also contains useful introductory commentaries and press excerpts that give the flavour of the Parliament during its course of 17 days. The dawn of religious pluralism is said to have occurred at the first Parliament of the World's Religions, held in the building that is today Chicago's Art Institute. It began in 1893 on the morning of September 11, exactly almost to the minute 108 years before the religiously inspired terrorist attacks on New York and Washington which again have highlighted the need for the interreligious movement.

Circumstances of the 1893 Parliament

The Chicago of the 1890s was a very different and diverse place, an unlikely place for the Parliament. It was chosen because its staging was associated with the Colombian Exposition, celebrating 400 years after Christopher Colombus had arrived on American shores. New York and St. Louis had competed to stage the event but Chicago won the bid because it was perceived as "the great city of the West" and had finished recovering from its Great Fire of 1871. Chicago had been founded as a trading post in the 1770s but it was the opening of the railroad in 1838 in the same year as the opening of the Illinois and Michigan Canal that led to the establishment of Chicago as a major world city and the leading city of the United States' mid-west. Rural refugees from within the United States had migrated into the

rapidly expanding metropolis as had their overseas counterparts. By 1893, Chicago had just over one million people.

The 1890s marked the twilight and end of the colonial era of globalization triggered by technological innovations such as the steam engine and the telegraph. The introduction of international conventions and exhibitions was also hallmarks of colonial globalization, and the 1893 Parliament fitted into this pattern as did the Exposition itself. In the colonial era, west generally met east in the east, whereas during the Parliament, rather uniquely for that time, east met west in the west. Whilst there had been over the centuries many previous interfaith contacts (e.g. Francis of Assisi visiting the Sultan in Istanbul), the 1893 interreligious gathering was the first truly global interfaith event where religious leaders from east and west met in formal dialogue. Whilst its vision was grand, even global, and inclusive, the first Parliament deliberated in a particular historical and geographical context that was, at times, quite narrow.

During the previous decade in 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act had been passed by Congress, though the presence of Asians was critical to the global image the Parliament wanted to project. It was run by the Protestants, perhaps for the Protestants, but they were careful to invite the Catholics who had begun to step onto centre stage in the United States of President Grover Cleveland. But it would be almost 70 years before a Catholic became President. The Parliament was diverse for its time, but it could have been and should have been more diverse. The native Americans were not invited nor did immigrant Americans play much of a role; the leading Muslim of the time, the Turkish Sultan Abdul Hamid II, declined the invitation. Few Muslims attended. India and the Indians were to become very popular in the person of Swami Vivekananda. The Asians were Orientals, the Muslims were Mohammedans. The world was divided between Christians and heathens, Christians and pagans, though many speakers did rise above such disparagement. Boos and hisses twice greeted presentations on Islam, especially when polygamy was mentioned. But generally the atmosphere was open and curious of the different. Many new voices were to be heard.

The Many Voices of the Parliament

The Jewish voice was one voice to be heard, and it was part of the intellectual foundation of the Parliament. It was open and inviting, coming from the liberal Reform tradition. The Jewish inputs stressed the universality and necessity of religion as well as the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. The Holocaust was still half a century away but it was a Jewish laywoman, Josephine Lazarus (1846–1910), who raised the issue of anti-Semitism. Josephine was the older sister of the more famous Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), poet and writer, who was responsible for the immortal words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" associated with the Statue of Liberty. Both sisters had committed

themselves to reinforcing the Jewish identity and to Zionist causes, these commitments triggered by the Russian pogroms in the 1880s. Josephine admitted that "when we are attacked as Jews, we do not strike back angrily, but we coil up in our shell of Judaism and entrench ourselves more strongly than before" (Lazarus, 1993, p. 234). She condemned barbarous Russia, liberal France and philosophic Germany where the scourge of anti-Semitism was most acute at that time, and asked, "What is the meaning of this exodus from Russia, from Poland, those long black lines, crossing the frontiers or crushed within the pale – these "despised and rejected of men", emerging from their ghettos, scarcely able to bear the light of day?" (Lazarus, 1993, p. 242).

Black migration from down south was yet to occur. African Americans were given little part in the Columbian Exposition with one representative comparing the "white city of Chicago" to "a whitened sepulchre". Though underrepresented at the Parliament, Black America was represented by some powerful speakers who were progenitors of the same tradition to which Barak Obama belongs. It was pointed out that Simon the Cyrenian who carried the cross of Jesus on the road to the hill of Calvary, the site of his execution, was an African.

The searing comments of Benjamin Arnett still ring down the 11 decades since,

> We speak not thus in anger, but in the words of truth and soberness. We know what has been done in the name of Christianity, in the name of religion, in the name of God. We were stolen from our native land in the name of religion, chained as captives, and brought to this continent in the name of the liberty of the gospel; they bound our limbs with fetters in the name of the Nazarene in order to save our souls; they sold us to teach the principles of religion; they sealed the Bible to increase our faith in God; pious prayers were offered for those who chained our fathers, who stole our mothers, who sold our brothers for paltry gold, all in the name of Christianity, to save our poor souls. . .when the slave trade was abolished by the strong hand of true Christianity, then false Christianity had no interest in our souls at all (Arnett, 1993, p. 140).

The Black American speakers addressed the destructive stereotypes and the negative historical perspectives whilst admitting there were "heroic men and saintly women" who had always believed in the humanity of African Americans. The Black laywoman, Fannie Williams, was equally searing:

> The hope of the negro and other dark races in America depends upon how far the white Christians can assimilate their own religion. At present there seems to be no ethical attitude in public opinion toward our colored citizens. White men and women are careless and meanly indifferent about the merits and rights of colored men and women. The white man who swears and the white man who prays are alike contemptuous about the claims of colored men (Williams, 1993, p. 149).

Eighteen women addressed the Parliament, and whilst this was only 10% of the total number of speakers, it was more than tokenism as we have seen with Josephine Lazarus and Fannie Williams. Swami Vivekananda, having journeyed from his ashram outside Kolkatta, began his first speech with the electrifying words, "Sisters and brothers", which resulted in a sustained, standing ovation. Later, in his speech on Hinduism, he raised the feminist cause fleetingly yet tellingly when referring to the *Rishis*, some of the very greatest of whom were women. The *Rishis* had

discovered the spiritual laws governing the relationships between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits (Vivekananda, 1993a).

The Seeking of the Truth in Sharing and Disagreement

The majority of attendees were from the United States, and the Parliament reflected the confidence of the Christian West and the American dream. Charles Bonney, lawyer and member of the Swedenborgian Church, who had conceived the idea of the Parliament, initially saw its mission as, in the spirit of religion as social capital, "to unite all religions against all irreligion . . . to present to the world . . . the substantial unity of many religions in the good deeds of the religious life". The focus was on the 10 world religions which were considered to be Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Taoism and Zoroastrianism. Sikhism was strangely missing. The Parliament metamorphosed into a concentration on the articulation of truth, its sharing and its showcasing. The blatant Anglo-centrism, if not Christian triumphalism, implied highlighting the superiority of Christianity. According to the guidelines, the speakers were instructed "to state their own beliefs, and the reasons for them, with the greatest frankness, without, however, employing unfriendly criticisms of other faiths". Other faiths, however, were not backward in stating their superiority.

Almost two-thirds of the speakers were Protestant Christians. Henry Jessup, a Presbyterian with missionary experience in Syria, led the way with views widely shared by mainstream Protestants in an address entitled, *The Religious Mission of the English-Speaking Nations*. "No nobler service has been given to any people, no nobler mission awaits any nation than that which God has given to those who speak the English tongue" (Jessup, 1993,p. 37). He went on:

> A divine voice summoned the Anglo-Saxon race out of paganism into a positive faith and the cheering hopes of the Gospel; but centuries of discipline and gradual growth were needed to fit them as a nation to be the messengers of light and life to the world. The native love of truth of these peoples has been confirmed and intensified by the English Bible. Integrity, veracity and impartial justice are to great extent national traits. These great nations are permeated with the principles of the Bible (Jessup, 1993, p. 39).

This expression of Protestant colonialism was then laced with a little anti-Catholicism: "We are not ashamed of that Divine Book which has made the difference between North and South America, between Great Britain and the Spanish peninsula" (Jessup, 1993, p. 42).

A clergyman, George Pentecost, did not live up to the iconic and inclusivist tone of his surname, "Christianity is not intolerant of other religions except as light is intolerant of darkness, but will in no way compromise with error nor enter into fellowship with any religious system or philosophy that is not built on the Rock of Ages" (Pentecost, 1993, p. 319). John Gracey and others were dismissive of any religious thinking that came before Jesus Christ unless it was Jewish.

The Catholic delegation, particularly happy to have been invited and thus be formally recognized on the American scene, was led by Cardinal Gibbon from Baltimore. The 1965 Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, and the Pope's 1984 joint prayer service with non-Christian leaders were still far in the historic distance. The Protestants may have thought their version of the Christian faith superior whereas the Catholics had no doubt, but they were more circumscribed in its proclamation. The cardinal's vision for the Parliament was "to present to thoughtful, earnest and inquiring minds the respective claims of the various religions", quickly dismissing most other religions except the Jewish, but especially condemning polytheism and pantheism: "Before the advent of Christ, the whole world, with the exception of the secluded Roman province of Palestine, was buried in idolatry" (Gibbon, 1993, p. 155).

Gibbon went on, acknowledging its worthwhile nature. "This Parliament has been a mighty blow to atheism, to deism, to agnosticism, to naturalism, to mere humanism". Catholic superiority was built on the claim of universality, "The Catholic religion alone is world-wide and cosmopolitan", the Church then numbering 250 million. However, Gibbon's argument was built mainly on his Church's contribution to social capital with an impressive recitation of its educational, health and welfare institutions. He did not articulate the Church's social justice policies even though Pope Leo XIII had published just 2 years previously the first of the great social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*. However, the interventions of the Christians were to be trumped by a Hindu.

The Electrifying Contributions of Swami Vivekananda

The historical accounts are unanimous in suggesting that the stellar performance of Swami Vivekananda was the highlight of the 1893 Parliament. Born on 12 January 1863 as Narendranatha Dutta, he was a member of a quite rich and aristocratic family in Kolkatta. His life became one of seeking God, and his master was the famous Sri Ramakrishna whose depth of God-consciousness was the central point of his life and teachings. Sri believed that all religions lead to the same goal of communion with God.

The life of Vivekenanda was relatively short as he died on 4 July 1902 after a second and shorter stay in the west. An instant celebrity in the United States where he found a ready outlet for his teachings, he became a key figure in the introduction into the West of the Vedanta philosophy and religion together with Yoga. In tune with his master and mentor, his mantra was *Jiva is Shiva*, "each individual is divinity itself". He strongly recommended the practice of Brahmacharya or celibacy to which he attributed his own spiritual, intellectual and physical attributes. He also played a key role with his teachings in the making of modern India and had a strong influence on Gandhi and Nehru.

The Chicago press of the time dubbed Vivekananda "the cyclonic monk from India". From the beginning, Vivekananda threw down the gauntlet to Christian supremacism with the words, "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration but we accept all religions as true". He quoted the words from a Bhagavad Gita hymn:

> As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so O Lord, the different paths which people take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.

He then went on:

> 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 . . . I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour 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 Vedanta Network 2009).

In the final session, he observed, "A few jarring notes were heard from time to time in this harmony. My special thanks to them, for they have, by their striking contrast, made general harmony the sweeter" (Vivekananda, 1993b, p. 336). Unlike some others, the Swami did not argue for one world religion as this is "an impossible hope", but he suggested that each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve their individuality and grow according to their own law of growth. He concluded that the 1893 Chicago Parliament "has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any Church in the world".

Poverty and Missionary Work in India

Local and international development and social justice were never a central focus of this first Parliament though speakers did refer to social relations, which usually meant their relationships with other faiths and with the broader society. Religious truth was too overriding a concern to permit this. Vivekananda, however, did raise one very pertinent issue and was acclaimed for doing so. In a short speech on 21 September, 1893 entitled *Religion Not the Crying Need of India*, he reprimanded his American Christian audience:

> You are so fond of sending out missionaries to save the souls of heathens. I ask you: what have you done and are doing to save their bodies from starvation? . . . during the terrible famines, thousands died from hunger but the missionaries did nothing. They come and offer life but only on condition that the Hindus become Christians, abandoning the faith of their fathers and forefathers. Is it right? . . . Brethren of America, you erect churches all through India, but the crying evil in the East is not religion. They have religion enough, but it is bread that the suffering millions of burning India cry out with parched throats. What they want is bread, but they are given a stone. It is an insult to a starving people to offer them religion (Vivekananda Vedanta Network 2009).

The Final Session

At the final session on the evening of 27 September 1893, the two speeches saw the Parliament in terms of a global triumph for Christianity. In an earlier session, a Hindu reformist, Protap Chunder Majumdar (1993), reminded his audience of Asia's rich spiritual heritage. He outlined with beautiful and awe-inspiring imagery the six gifts conferred by Asia on the global religious world:

1. Asian spirituality communes with the Spirit of God who fills all creation; nature, as God's abode and God's image, is for spiritual emancipation, and it is where God is personally active. For "Asia is at one with God".
2. The second gift from Asia is introspection by which the Spirit of God generates attitudes of blessedness and reveals the abundance of Divine blessedness.
3. Through these attitudes fired by the imagination and the power of intelligence, a prophetic fire is kindled within each person, glowing with the light of the dawning heavens and spiritualized into a vision of the eternal – the philosopher has become the seer who has gone beyond logic and observation.
4. The fourth gift Asia has given is the notion of the supreme and universal Spirit manifesting himself as reason and love and righteousness and joy, leading to wisdom, including in Christ, the spirit of truth.
5. Asia has taught the world to worship, which is not a duty but instinctive, a longing and a passion to be drawn into the depths of God; the love of God is a madness of the spirit, man calling after God and God seeking after man – all this is done in devotional silence which breaks out into worship through flowers, incense, sacrificial fires, sacramental food, symbolic postures, bathings, fasting and vigils.
6. Lastly, there are the practices of self-conquest or renunciation of the force of bodily and worldly desire, a positive asceticism and an absolute holiness in poverty, simplicity and homelessness (Majumdar, 1993).

This and other less powerful attempts by Eastern religious leaders to engage the west were brushed aside, albeit politely. As a poem recited on the last day, put it, "O golden, olden East; right welcome to the feast; the New World welcomes you." In this last session in the first of the two speeches, John Keane, rector of the Catholic University of the United States, noted that the Parliament had given object-lessons in old truths, namely, that there is some truth in all religions and that the world cannot do without religion. The future of religion must be more glorious than the past. But most attendees would live to see the slaughter house of the First World War though very few would live to see the Second World War, the horror of the Holocaust and the devastation of the two atomic bombs. Neither war was caused by the forces of religion; in fact, if anything, especially the Second World War, both were caused by the forces which had humankind at their centre rather than God. The optimism of those departing the Parliament was not to be forged in the events of the dawning twentieth century.

It was hoped that a subsequent Parliament would be held at Benares in India but this never occurred. What did occur was the eventual formation in 1900 of the International Association for Religious Freedom which continues its work still today with 90 affiliated member groups in 25 countries.

Conclusion

If Christian supremacism was one dominant feature of the Parliament, on balance, it was tempered by the non-Christian input and more dominant was the theme of inter-religious understanding. There was the very strong sense that something historic was happening and that a new era of human unity was in germination. The hand of the one was outreached to grasp the hand of the other. Each Parliament has the opportunity of enhancing the sense of global consciousness and global commitment.

The 1893 Parliament did herald the beginning of the interfaith movement, but the two world wars would intervene before a group of world leaders, reflecting on the message of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, would establish the World Conference of Religions for Peace with its first world assembly in 1970 at Kyoto, based on national chapter representation. Later, as the contemporary forces of globalization became more apparent driven by the revolutions in transportation and information and communications technology, Chicago resurrected its Parliament heritage in 1993 in recognition that a more popularist event needed to be provided. The need for an interfaith movement has become more apparent and focused around the characteristics of the city to which it is awarded every 5 years. This focus on the city at a time when cities have become the hubs of the global network is timely because, as the terrorist attacks in London, Madrid and Mumbai have illustrated, the cosmopolitan cities of the world need to develop interfaith organizations as part of the need for the continuous construction of socially cohesive societies. Perhaps the lesson of the Parliament from the beginning has been the centrality of the city in contemporary society as the encounters between the religions take place principally in its streets, neighbourhoods and suburbs of the city.

A second lesson to be drawn from the 1893 Parliament is the role of education. In reading the various speeches, one is struck by the lack of reference to the importance of education at all levels in overcoming ignorance, increasing understanding and in working together though it is to be recognized that the commitment to mass education was still in its beginnings.

A third lesson which has not been forgotten is that interfaith interaction cannot be based around, even principally, the exchange of theological views if done in an exclusivist stance. It is preferable to seek theological and philosophical understandings of the various religious traditions and to emphasize the dignity and equality of each individual, however religiously inclined, as global citizens. More preferable, based on this very notion of global citizenship, is to work together to gain a consensus on addressing global, regional and local situations of injustice and conflict.

In summing up the Parliament, on 24 September 1893, *The Chicago Tribune* paid tribute to the harmonious atmosphere for "those whom we have been accustomed to call heathens are not so much heathen as we imagined'. The Parliament had worked to suppress "the antagonisms and persecutions of fanaticism", still relevant today. The search for truth will continue across the world, but in different ways. Chicago, "the youngest of cities" had successfully brought together "the oldest of faiths"'

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