



The World's Parliament of Religions John Henry Barrows (1893)

The Chicago World's Fair was held in 1893 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first landing in the Americas. In connection with the fair, a pioneering multifaith gathering called the World's Parliament of Religions was held, for which speakers from around the world were invited to Chicago to lecture on their religions. Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Shinto, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Bahá'í, and Western occult traditions were among those represented. Notable absences included Sikhs and indigenous peoples whom Westerners regarded as "uncivilized."

The organizing committee for the World's Parliament of Religions was led by white American John Henry Barrows, a Congregational minister who was then pastoring a Presbyterian church in Chicago. The following excerpts come from a triumphant two-volume report that Barrows published after the event. When plans for the Parliament had been announced, some Christians had objected to Christianity's being, as they saw it, lowered to an equal level with other religions. In reaction, Barrows insists here that while the Parliament promoted friendly relations among the world's peoples and their faiths, it also showcased Christianity's superiority over all other religions.

The Congress was a notable event for the African, whose manhood was fully recognized; for the Jew, who has suffered various forms of persecution; for the liberal, who saw the truths for which he had specially contended grandly recognized; for the Catholic, who came out into a new atmosphere and gained from theological opponents new admiration and respect; for woman, for then she secured the largest recognition of her intellectual rights ever granted. It was a great event for the social reformer and the advocate of international justice, for the Parliament was unanimous in denouncing the selfishness of modern society and the iniquity of the opium trade and the rum traffic; for the Buddhist, the Brahman, and the Confucian, who were permitted to interpret their own faiths in the parliament of man; for the orthodox Protestant, whose heart and intellect were expanded and whose faith in the Gospel of God's grace was strengthened by the words and scenes of that assembly; and it was especially a great event for the earnest and broad-minded Christian missionary, who rejoiced that all Christendom was at last forced to confront the problem of bringing Christ, the universal Savior, to all mankind.

[...T]o most of the readers of these volumes, the supreme question regarding the Parliament is that which concerns the relation of Christianity to the other faiths. It may be safely said that participation in this meeting did not compromise any Christian speaker's position as a believer in the supremacy and universality of the Gospel. There was no suggestion on the part of Christian speakers that Christianity was to be thought of as on the same level with other religions. It was gladly seen that some of its truths are held in common with other faiths; that monotheism appears in Mohammedanism, Parseeism, original Hinduism; that the essence of religion is always the same, that aspiration and dependence are universal, and that ethical unity is more marked than doctrinal unity. Many perceived that Christendom has important lessons yet unlearned, that the Christianity of Japan and India is not to be a bald repetition of the Christianity of America and England. [...Christianity] can supersede [other faiths] only as it absorbs and takes up into itself, as a part of its own birthright and heritage, all the truths taught by Confucius or Buddha, for

Christ is the light enlightening every man. Dr. Lyman Abbott^a has well said that the difference between Christianity and the other religions is that we have something that they have not. We have the Christ, the revelation of God, the ideal Man, the loving and suffering Savior. Those who attended the Parliament got a larger conception of what Christ is and Christ means.

There is no doubt that by the Parliament, Christianity made a favorable impression on those whom it desires to win. The Christian religion will be interpreted from the Parliament, and not hereafter by the bad laws of so-called Christian nations. The Orientals learned what is true Christianity, and they can speak with authority and say that these evils are not apologized for by the Christian men of America and Europe. The sages of the Orient will learn that Christian America and Europe have no sympathy with the abominations which falsely named Christians have practiced; that the opium trafficker and the rum trafficker do not represent them; and that, while they believe that a true Christianity is the world's best boon and hope, they think that a mild and sober Buddhism and a self-respecting and temperate Confucianism are preferable to a brutal, drunken, intolerant, and persecuting false Christianity. The chairman of the Parliament^b said to the Orientals that while Christian disciples will continue to obey the Master more and more faithfully and will bring the messages of Bethlehem and Calvary to those for whom Jesus lived and died, we believe that the Gospel, instead of striking mercilessly at indigenous faiths, should adopt them so far as they agree with its truth and should always present to men the sweetness and mildness, the tenderness and grace, of Jesus Christ. [...]

Christendom, as it is now organized, is not fitted for the swift or immediate conquest of the globe. The followers of Christ are wickedly and foolishly divided, and they thrust their divisions and follies before the eyes of heathendom. An acquaintance with Christian civilization furnishes many plausible arguments to the non-Christian mind for clinging to the old faiths. Not until the disciples of Christ get closer together, not until Christian society becomes more Christlike, [...] and not until missionaries generally are equipped with a better knowledge of ethnic faiths and filled with more Christian ideas in regard to them will there dawn upon the globe the golden age of Christian missions. [...]

^a *Lyman Abbott was a white American and a prominent Congregational minister. In this and the next sentence, Barrows appears to be paraphrasing something Abbott preached in an address to the Parliament: "We recognize the voice of God in all prophets and in all time. [...] We do not think he has been vocal in Christendom and dumb everywhere else. [...] But we believe no other revelation transcends, and none other equals, that which has been made to man in the one transcendent human life that was lived eighteen centuries ago in Palestine. And we think we find in Christ one thing that we have not been able to find in any other of the manifestations of the religious life of the world."*

Lyman Abbott, "Religion Essentially Characteristic of Humanity," in The World's Parliament of Religions, ed. John Henry Barrows (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), 1:494-501 (quote at 500), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3316177>. Additional commas inserted for readability.

^b *The chairman of the Parliament was Barrows himself. It is uncertain when he said to the Asian delegates what he relates here. Possibly Barrows intends this sentence as a paraphrase of remarks he delivered at the opening of the Parliament.*

"Address of Chairman John Henry Barrows of the General Committee," in World's Parliament of Religions, 1:72-79 (esp. 73-75).

Because the Parliament brought into clear light the better side of heathendom and showed some of the mistakes of Christian missionaries, a few have prophesied that missionary activity would certainly be diminished. The opposite effect will follow. "A new impetus," as Rev. D. S. Schaff has said, "will come to Christian missions."^c As the *Oceanic* steamship which carried Mr. Dharmapala and Mr. Pung across the Pacific^d had on board a large number of Christian missionaries in whose hearts glowed the light of Bethlehem and Calvary and Pentecost, so the tides of missionary activity, purified and enlightened and also strengthened, are to flow over all the earth. Human nature needs the Gospel. Certain Orientals at the Congress, who have heard and rejected the Gospel, are not the best witnesses to the needs of India. Some of the speakers at the Parliament objected to the carrying of Christian theology to India and demanded that Christendom should minister to the sick, the famine-struck, and the impoverished. The two go together and have gone together since Jesus preached the kingdom and healed the sick. The record of Christian charity in non-Christian lands, of the various ministries which Christian love has wrought for the bodies of men, should have prevented such unfounded criticism of missionaries as was expressed by one speaker in the Parliament.^e [...]

The Parliament has shown that Christianity is still the great quickener of humanity; that it is now educating those who do not accept its doctrines; that there is no teacher to be compared with Christ, and no Savior excepting Christ; that there is no assured and transforming hope of conscious and blessed immortality outside of the Christian scriptures; and that all the philosophies do not bring God so near to man as he is brought by the Gospel of Christ. The non-Christian world may give us valuable criticism, and confirm scriptural truths, and make excellent suggestions as to Christian improvement, but it has nothing to add to the Christian creed. It is with the belief, expressed by many a Christian missionary, that the Parliament marks a new era of Christian triumph that the editor closes these volumes.

^c *David Schley Schaff was a white American and a Presbyterian minister. He was the son of Philip Schaff, a prominent German Reformed theologian from Switzerland who settled in the United States. Barrows is quoting a review of the Parliament that David Schaff wrote for an American Protestant magazine.*

D. S. Schaff, "The Parliament of Religions and the Christian Faith," Homiletic Review, December 1893, 552-561 (quote at 559), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89077077329>.

^d *Anagarika Dharmapala was a Theravada Buddhist teacher who promoted Buddhist revival in 19th-century Sri Lanka, which was then under British rule; he traveled from Sri Lanka to speak at the Parliament. Peng Guangyu ("Mr. Pung") was a diplomat for imperial China working in Washington DC at the time of the World's Parliament; the Chinese embassy sent him to the Parliament to present a lecture on Confucianism.*

^e *Barrows is referring to extemporaneous remarks made by Swami Vivekananda, a teacher of Vedanta who had traveled to the Parliament from India. Vivekananda alleged that "in India during the terrible famines, thousands died from hunger, yet you Christians did nothing. You erect churches all through India, but [...] it is bread that these suffering millions of burning India cry out for with parched throats. [...] It is an insult to a starving people to offer them religion."*

World's Parliament of Religions, 1:128-129. An additional comma inserted for readability.

Source: John Henry Barrows, “Review and Summary,” in *The World's Parliament of Religions*, ed. John Henry Barrows (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), 2:1569-1582, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3316178>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. A British spelling Americanized. Punctuation emended for readability. Quotation marks omitted in cases where it appears that Barrows is paraphrasing, rather than quoting, other texts. A ship's name, which appeared in quotation marks in the source publication, is italicized here instead. Capitalization has been modernized by converting the following terms to lowercase: *liberal*, *parliament of man*, *chairman*, *editor*, and nouns modified by the immediately preceding adjective *Christian* (*religion*, *nations*, *missions*, and *scriptures*). However, Barrow's capitalizing of the Christian terms *Gospel*, *Savior*, and *Master* is retained from the source publication, given how those capitalizations reinforce Barrows's view of Christianity's supremacy over other religions.

These edited excerpts from Barrows's essay are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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