I

From Max Müller to Martin Marty, scholarly treatments of Chicago's 1893 World's Parliament of Religions have focused on its momentousness as a watershed event in the history of religions, American religious history, interfaith dialogue, East-West dialogue, and indeed, human history. Müller, who deeply regretted having failed to attend the parliament, echoed the statements of many when he called it "one of the most memorable events in the history of the world," a convention that "stands unique, stands unprecedented in the whole history of the world." Despite countless similar accolades, however, one of the parliament's most crucial aspects has never been considered: its prefiguration in Western literature. No one will deny the legacy left in American literature by Chicago's Columbian Exposition, the renowned world's fair of which the religion parliament was one of twenty auxiliary congresses. In its awesome grandeur, that exposition inspired dozens of poems, and figures as an important setting in thirteen novels that appeared in its wake. Consistent with its depiction by contemporary journalists, several of those novels, now obscure, present the fair's "White City" in religious terms as a sacred space removed from the flux of temporality: a "New Jerusalem" or "Celestial City." But the fact that the very conception of a World's Parliament of

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Religions was anticipated and, as we shall see, to some extent inspired by a certain theme running through prior Western literature, has been overlooked.

This oversight can be explained, in part, by the peculiarly modern Western tendency to construe religion and literature as separate spheres of human activity. This distinction was enforced programmatically by the Columbian Exposition's Congress Auxiliary, whose president was a Chicago lawyer and civic leader, Charles Carroll Bonney. The Congress Auxiliary sponsored a Congress on Literature two months prior to the Parliament of Religions, but apparently made no effort to establish any formal connection between the two meetings. The literary congress, recognized as "the first gathering of its kind ever attempted by an English-speaking people" and considered widely to be "one of the most significant of all the congresses," convened July 10–15 and consisted of sections on philology, folklore, history, libraries, and literature proper, as well as branches in copyright law, criticism, and material interests of authors. Aside from the inclusion of religions as a subject for discussion in its folklore section, this congress had no practical bearing on the much more protracted and acclaimed religion parliament that met September 11–27.

Conceived by Bonney and chaired by a prominent Presbyterian minister of Chicago, John Henry Barrows, the World's Parliament of Religions was heralded as the first convention of its kind ever to invite and attract participants from all over the earth. With a program that included two hundred speakers representing Hinduism, Judaism, Christian denominations, Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Shinto, Confucianism, Parseeism, Taoism, Jainism, and certain "ethnic" faiths, the parliament attracted a total of some 150,000 spectators over its seventeen-day period and was esteemed as the Congress Auxiliary's "crowning glory." The event was in Marty's words "the most

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5 Burg, p. 251.
7 See Johnson, ed., History, 4:176.
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elaborate display of religious cosmopolitanism yet seen on the continent,” epitomizing what he calls the “cosmopolitan habit” among modernists in late nineteenth-century American liberal theology. Although, of the parliament’s ten stated objectives, the sixth was “to secure from leading scholars, representing [the world’s religions], . . . full and accurate statements of the spiritual and other effects of the Religions which they hold upon the Literature, Art, Commerce, [etc.] . . . of the peoples among whom these Faiths have prevailed,” only two of the parliament’s papers were devoted to “literary” topics.

While the 1893 parliament has been ignored by literary scholars, and while its debt to Western literature has not been acknowledged by theologians, scholars of religions, or the planners of a 1993 centennial celebration of the parliament, the Western literary tradition furnishes an illuminating context in which to consider the original event. This tradition, needless to say, yields a plethora of texts reflecting the legacy of religious suspicion, polemics, and intolerance that have plagued the West over the centuries—for example, from the Middle High German poem Das Jüdel and Dante’s Inferno (with its placement of Muhammad (“Mâometto”) and Ali in the eighth of hell’s nine circles [canto 28, lines 31–32]), through Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata, Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta, and Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice of the late sixteenth century, to Byron’s The Giaour (1813). Nonetheless, as I shall show, the kernel idea of a fraternal meeting of the world’s religions is prefigured in a concurrent maverick theme of religious tolerance that had been emergent in Western literature since the Middle Ages and that impressed itself upon the parliament’s chairman through the poetry of Alfred Tennyson.

The reason that the vision behind this theme did not—and could not—become a reality at the religion parliament might best be explained in terms of the threefold distinction between exclusivism (rejection of other faiths), inclusivism (acceptance of the spiritual power manifest in other faiths, but rejection of their sufficiency for salvation apart from Christ), and pluralism (acceptance of all faiths, including Christianity, as possessing partial knowledge of God). The parliament’s raison d’être precluded an exclusivist position. This was borne out by the strong dissent expressed

12 I am grateful to Anthony C. Yu for suggesting to me the last four examples listed.
13 I borrow these well-known categories from Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982).
by certain religious leaders at the very idea of such a parliament, including the Sultan of Turkey and the Archbishop of Canterbury. The latter’s appeal to “the fact that the Christian religion is the one religion” and hence cannot “be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the equality of the other intended members,”14 hearkens back uncannily to the classic expression of religious bigotry offered up by the cleric Thwackum in Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749): “When I mention religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England.”15 As it turned out, however, the parliament stood for an inclusivist rather than a truly pluralist position, as some of the parliament’s promoters and participants sought to use the event as a forum in which to demonstrate the supremacy of their own faith over others. Consequentially, the parliament failed to enact that imaginative or literary vision that had helped inspire its conception, a vision of genuine religious pluralism that anticipated various pluralist speculations proffered in our own century, including those of Frithjof Schuon (on “the transcendent unity of religions”), William Ernest Hocking (on the possibility of a “world faith”), and John Hick (on the “many names” of God or Ultimate Reality). That failure offers a monumental illustration of what the literary critic Northrop Frye had in mind when he spoke of the capacity of poetry and literature, as opposed to committed religious beliefs, to encourage tolerance:

What produces the tolerance is the power of detachment in the imagination, where things are removed just out of reach of belief and action. Experience is nearly always commonplace; the present is not romantic in the way that the past is, and ideals and great visions have a way of becoming shoddy and squalid in practical life. Literature reverses this process. When experience is removed from us a bit, as the experience of the Napoleonic war is in Tolstoy’s War and Peace, there’s a tremendous increase of dignity and exhilaration. . . . There is an element of illusion even in War and Peace, but the illusion gives us a reality that isn’t in the actual experience of the war itself: the reality of proportion and perspective, of seeing what it’s all about, that only detachment can give. Literature helps to give us that detachment.16

I shall return to this point in my conclusion.

14 Quoted by Barrows, “History of the Parliament,” in WPR, 1:20, 22.
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II

While the 1893 Parliament of Religions was truly unprecedented in its global breadth, the idea behind it was not wholly new; indeed, the “quest for human unity” appears to be an irrepressible human impulse whose evolving expressions can be traced through the “inner” as well as the “outer” meanings of the world’s religions.\(^{17}\) As Barrows acknowledged, the parliament committee began its planning under the impression that nothing like the parliament had ever been assembled, let alone dreamed of. Several of the invited speakers soon drew comparisons with the Buddhist council summoned at Pātaliputra by the Buddhist emperor Asoka in 242 B.C.E., and the meeting at Delhi of Muslims, Brahmans, Jains, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians sponsored by the sixteenth-century Mogul emperor Akbar, a figure whose life and accomplishments were still not well known in the West at the time of the parliament.\(^{18}\) However, as Müller and others would point out, neither of those two meetings, nor the “ecumenical” council of Christians at Nicaea in 325 C.E., was congruous with the 1893 parliament at Chicago; unlike the latter, where all the world religions were represented, the councils of Pātaliputra and Nicaea were exclusively Buddhist and Christian affairs, while the Delhi meeting lacked representatives of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, and was aimed at realizing Akbar’s idea of founding a new religion.

More provocative than the comparisons of the 1893 parliament with earlier religious councils is Müller’s passing suggestion about its literary pertinence: “If the Religious Parliament was not an entirely new idea, it was certainly the first realization of an idea which has lived silently in the hearts of prophets, or has been uttered now and then by poets only, who are free to dream dreams and to see visions.”\(^{19}\) Rather than pick up on this compelling hint, which anticipates Frye’s concept of literature as “man’s


\(^{18}\) The comparison with Asoka’s Pātaliputra congress was first drawn by Anagarika Dharmapāla in his welcoming address during the parliament’s opening session (*WPR* [n. 8 above], 1:8, 95). The comparison with Akbar’s convention of religious representatives was drawn by the Reverend E. L. Ruxford and the Reverend Joseph Cook, both of Boston, during meetings on the fourth day (*WPR*, 1:509, 536) and by Prof. J. Estlin Carpenter on the eighth day (*WPR*, 2:842). Compare the remark by Maya Das, a leading Christian of India (*WPR*, 1:30). Both comparisons were alluded to by Vivekānanda on the ninth day (*WPR*, 2:977). Regarding Akbar’s reputation in the West, Vincent Arthur Smith made the following claim the year the parliament was held: “The competent scholar who will undertake the exhaustive treatment of the life of Akbar will be in possession of, perhaps, the finest great historical subject as yet unappropriated” (in W. H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, ed. Vincent Arthur Smith, new ed., 2 vols. [Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1893], 1:391, n. 2). Smith later quotes that remark in his *Akbar: The Great Mogul*, 1542–1605, 2d ed. (1917; rev. ed, Oxford: Clarendon, 1919), p. v.

\(^{19}\) Müller (n. 2 above), pp. 2–3.
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revelation to man,” scholars who have discussed the parliament after Müller have either overlooked, or been content to ignore, a distinct theme in Western literature that helped inspire its conception. Having emerged in a lineage of medieval European texts, recurred in some works by German and English romantics, and crystallized in English and American literature during the Victorian age, this theme expressed the envisagement of a reconciliation, or an underlying unity, of the world’s religions and became both a catalyst to and a symptom of the gradual opening up of Western consciousness toward “Oriental” cultures and religions during the nineteenth century.

Literary reflections on religious pluralism are traceable at least as far back as Judah ha Levi’s Kitab al Khazari (twelfth century), known also as the Kuzari, one of the most important texts of medieval Jewish literature. At the book’s opening, the King of the Khazars dreams that his way of thinking is agreeable to God, but not his way of acting, and he is commanded in this dream to seek the work that is pleasing to God. Inspired by the dream, he engages in a series of short dialogues on theological matters with a Hellenistic philosopher, a Christian scholastic, and a doctor of Islam, hearing out each of their arguments for their respective faiths but rejecting them all, before being won over by the contentions for Judaism set forth by a rabbinic sage.

While the bulk of the Kuzari—from the rabbi’s arrival to the end of the book—constitutes a sustained argument for the religion of Israel alone, the initial theme of the open-minded, truth-seeking king interviewing representatives of several different faiths seems but one step away from conveying a genuinely pluralist message. The same is true of the tale in the Gesta Romanorum of a dying man who has two duplicates made of his precious ring and then bequeaths one each to his three sons; the tale concludes with a demonstration of the authenticity of the real ring (symbolizing Christian faith, as opposed to Jewish or Islamic) through its power to effect a miracle. A Christian transformation of a Jewish anecdote found in the Scebet Jehuda, this frequently rehearsed story drops its exclusivist (some would say bigoted) message when it is retold in the Novellino or Cento novelle antiche (late thirteenth or early fourteenth cen-

23 Documentation of the various texts in which this story recurs from the thirteenth century on is provided by Peter Demetz in his section, “Traditionen der Mär von den drei Ringen,” in his Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Nathan der Weise (Berlin: Ullstein, 1966), pp. 200–216.

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tury; tale 73), in Boccaccio’s Decamerone (mid-fourteenth century; day 1, tale 3), and in G. E. Lessing’s verse drama Nathan der Weise (1779). In these later versions, a cautious Jew tells the story to avoid an awkward situation before the Sultan of the Saracens, and asserts that the real ring’s authenticity must remain undetermined in this world. Told this way, the parable implies that competing religious systems, or at least the three “revealed” monotheisms, have equal claims to truth. In the Novellino and the Decamerone, whose authors lived in the wake of the crusades, the parable conveys a daring lesson of religious tolerance, if not agnosticism as well.24 In Nathan der Weise, which was written in a much more tolerant time (despite the official silencing of Lessing shortly before for his having edited a historical-critical work on Jesus by the freethinker H. S. Reimarus), the same parable illustrates the play’s claim to a unified humanity transcending racial and creedal differences.

The theme of Lessing’s play, summed up by Paul Tillich as “the relativism of religions,”25 finds a striking variation in the earliest of William Blake’s illuminated prints, All Religions Are One. Engraved in England in 1789, a decade after Nathan der Weise appeared in Germany, this terse text comprises an “argument” and seven aphoristic “principles,” of which the last three read as follows:

PRINCIPLE 5. The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call’d the Spirit of Prophecy.

PRINCIPLE 6. The Jewish & Christian Testaments are An original derivation from the Poetic Genius. This is necessary from the confined nature of bodily sensation.

PRINCIPLE 7. As all men are alike (tho’ infinitely various) So all Religions & as all similar have one source.

The true Man is the source he being the Poetic Genius.26

Consistent with the tendency to naturalize the supernatural that M. H. Abrams has shown to typify romantic literature,27 Blake’s idea that all


religions are one is inextricably related to his own theory of art. That idea, as Frye interprets it, "means that the material world provides a universal language of images and that each man’s imagination speaks that language with his own accent. Religions are grammars of this language."28

The groundwork that was being laid for a scientific study of comparative religion during the time of Lessing and Blake was directly pertinent to their notions of the relativism and the oneness of religions. Both authors were participants in the eighteenth-century debate over the concept of natural religion and in the growing discussion on the relationships between different types of religion. On the one hand, Lessing’s little treatise Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts (1780; The Education of the Human Race), which traces a development from polytheism, through the monotheism of Judaism and the ethic of Christianity, to an anticipated world of reason and peace governed by autonomous reason, is generally regarded as an important contribution to the Enlightenment discussion of natural religion that anticipated the emergence of a bona fide scientific study of religions during the nineteenth century.29 The consistency of Lessing’s progressivist philosophy of religious history with the antisectarian theme of Nathan der Weise speaks for itself. On the other hand, while Blake, as a staunch opponent of Enlightenment philosophy, could engrave together with All Religions Are One another aphoristic print entitled There Is No Natural Religion,30 he did not remain untouched by certain developments in the inchoate field of comparative religion which the Enlightenment helped promote. In one place he alludes to Jacob Bryant’s seminal but flawed A New System; or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology (1774–76) to support his own assertions that “the antiquities of every Nation under Heaven, is [sic] no less sacred than that of the Jews,” and that “all had originally one language, and one religion.”31 One thus suspects, with Ruth apRoberts, that such speculations by Blake had some connection with the then current school of pseudoscientific “Mythography” (satirized a century later in George Eliot’s depiction of Mr. Casaubon’s effort to establish “the key to all the mythologies”), which construed non-Judeo-Christian religions as corruptions of the one primal divine revela-
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tion and all languages as derivations from the original Hebrew abandoned at Babel.32

It is significant that the same poet-prophet who proclaimed the oneness of all religions was, as Frye points out, among the first European idealists able to connect his own tradition of thought with the Bhagavad Gita ("the Geeta").33 Charles Wilkens's recent English translation (1785) of that sacred Indian text had helped arouse interest in Hindu philosophy in the same way that Sir Edwin Arnold's poem The Light of Asia (1879) would later attract popular attention to Buddhism. Brought about by the contributions of such seminal translators and scholars of comparative philology and mythology as Sir William Jones toward the end of the eighteenth century and Max Müller a century later, the emergence of the history of religions as an independent discipline during the nineteenth century was matched by an increased interest in "Oriental" religions, whose influence on certain European romantics, the American transcendentalists, and numerous writers, poets, and thinkers of the Victorian period is well documented.34

One indirect offshoot of this developing attraction to Eastern religions was the recurrence of the theme of the ultimate unity of religions, bequeathed by Blake, in works by three of the most celebrated poets writing in English during the second half of the nineteenth century: Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning in England and Walt Whitman in America. Two key examples of this theme crop up in a pair of poems by Tennyson and Browning that appeared at midcentury. In Tennyson's elegy In Memoriam A.H.H., written between 1833 and 1850 and published anonymously the latter year (when he was named poet laureate), the opening section (dated 1849) addresses the "Son of God" as follows:

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

[Stanza 5]35

That same year Browning, a friend of Tennyson, published his own lengthy two-part poem Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850), whose first

33 See Blake, Descriptive Catalogue (1809), p. 59, and in Complete Poetry and Prose, p. 548.
part, composed in narrative form, acknowledges the fallibility of sectarian religion as a medium of divine truth. Discerning "A value for religion’s self, / A carelessness about the sects of it," the poet thinks to himself:

["]Let me enjoy my own conviction,
Not watch my neighbour’s faith with fretfulness,
Still spying there some dereliction
Of truth, perversity, forgetfulness!
Better a mild indifferentism,
Teaching that both our faiths (though duller
His shine through a dull spirit’s prism)
Originally had one colour!
Better pursue a pilgrimage
Through ancient and through modern times
To many peoples, various climes,
Where I may see saint, savage, sage
Fuse their respective creeds in one
Before the general Father’s throne!"

[Sec. 19, lines 1144–57]36

In accordance with each other, In Memoriam and Christmas-Eve conceive of a God who is “more” than religious “systems,” and before whom all “creeds” may be fused “in one.” During the year after these two poems appeared, Walt Whitman across the Atlantic began work on his monumental Leaves of Grass, which would contain yet another variation on the “all religions are one” theme. When its first edition appeared four years later (1855), consisting of twelve untitled poems, the first and longest of them—later entitled “Song of Myself”—issued the following proclamation: “Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion, / A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker, / Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest” (sec. 16).37 No less than Tennyson and Browning, Whitman looks beyond denominational distinctions to suggest that all religions are one; the difference is that, rather than imagine them as subordinate to God, or as being unified before God, Whitman subsumes them all (“every rank and religion”) within the “am I” of his singer, who, as an embodiment of the spirit of American democracy, combines all humanity, from the farmer to the priest, within himself.

Of these three poets, the one who later developed most fully his vision of the unity of faiths underlying sectarian differences was Tennyson, especially in his poem “Akbar’s Dream” (1892), composed the year of his

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death. From *In Memoriam* on, Tennyson had held that “the essential feel-
ings of religion subsist in the utmost diversity of forms,” that “different
language does not always imply different opinions, nor different opinions
any difference in *real* faith.” Finding now a remarkable paradigm for
religious tolerance in the great Mogul emperor, who, dissatisfied with his
own Muslim faith, concocted a new eclectic religion by which he aspired
to integrate all creeds, castes, and peoples, Tennyson has his Akbar yearn

To wreathe a crown not only for the king
But in due time for every Mussulmán,
Brahmin, and Buddhist, Christian, and Parsee,
Thro’ all the warring world of Hindustan.39

Regarding God, Akbar asserts:

He knows Himself, men nor themselves nor Him,
For every splinter’d fraction of a sect
Will clamour “I am on the Perfect Way,
All else is to perdition.”

Aware of “how the living pulse of Alla [sic] beats / Thro’ all His world,”
and how this assures that

There is light in all,
And light, with more or less of shade, in all
Man-modes of worship; . . .

Akbar pits himself against the narrow-minded Ulama, who “sitting on
green sofas contemplate / The torment of the damn’d” and “blurt / Their furious formalisms”:

I hate the rancour of their castes and creeds,
I let men worship as they will, I reap
No revenue from the field of unbelief.
I cull from every faith and race the best
And bravest soul for counsellor and friend.

The poem culminates with the emperor’s account of his recent dream of
realizing a religious reverence that would transcend all traditional sectar-
ian bounds:

I dream’d
That stone by stone I rear’d a sacred fane,
A temple, neither Pagod, Mosque, nor Church,

39 All quotations of this poem will be drawn from Tennyson, *Works*, 7:139–48, for which the poet’s notes appear on 7:149–53.
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But loftier, simpler, always open-door’d
To every breath from heaven, and Truth and Peace
And Love and Justice came and dwelt therein.

Although Tennyson, Browning, and Whitman all died before the Parliament of Religions was held (Browning in 1889, Tennyson and Whitman both in 1892), the former two were recognized as poetic anticipators of the parliament’s ideal of interfaith harmony. Barrows closes his preface to the two-volume, 1,600-page proceedings from the parliament by remarking that Tennyson—“the English Laureate”—“had looked forward to the Parliament of Religions as the realization of a noble dream,” which Barrows sums up by quoting a stanza from Tennyson’s poem “The Golden Year.”40 Elsewhere, Barrows cites the passage quoted earlier from Tennyson’s In Memoriam to illustrate the parliament’s aim of changing “this many-colored radiance [of diverse religions] back into the white light of heavenly truth”; and later, after citing the last passage quoted above from “Akbar’s Dream,” which was evidently appended to the initial announcement the parliament committee had sent around the world to advertise the event, Barrows notes “how the Laureate, who regarded the proposal of a Parliament of Religions at Chicago as a noble idea, brooded much, in his last days, over the oneness of human need and spiritual aspiration after God.”41 Similarly, Max Müller, to illustrate his own remark about the parliament’s literary pertinence, cites the passage quoted above from Browning as prefiguring the parliament’s “vision” of the unity of the world’s religions.42

In addition to Tennyson and, as we shall see, presumably Julia Ward Howe, at least one other prominent poet of the time had written to Barrows before the parliament to express approval of such a meeting. As reported by Barrows, the American poet John Greenleaf Whittier felt “in full sympathy” with the idea, which struck him as “an inspiration”: “I can think of nothing more impressive than such an assemblage of the representatives of all the children of our Heavenly Father, convened to tell each other what witness he has given them of himself, what light he has

40 The following portion of “The Golden Year” (ibid., 2:22–25) is paraphrased (without a citation of its source) by John Henry Barrows, “Preface,” WPR (n. 8 above), 1:ix:

    “Ah! when shall all men’s good
    Be each man’s rule, and Universal Peace
    Lie like a shaft of light across the land,
    And like a lane of beams athwart the sea,
    Thro’ all the circle of the golden year.”

42 Müller (n. 2 above), p. 3.
afforded them in the awful mysteries of life and death."\textsuperscript{43} Such open-mindedness toward the thought of a truly "ecumenical" conference was not surprising, coming from a poet whose considerable body of religious poems, though mainly Christian in orientation, include a set of "Oriental Maxims" (paraphrases of Sanskrit translations) and "Hymns of the Brahmo Somaj."\textsuperscript{44} As it happened, Whittier, like Tennyson and Whitman, died the year before the Parliament.

We have now seen that the ideal of the unity of religions—"Akbar's Dream"—that was originally associated with the World's Parliament of Religions, had deep roots in Western literature. What remains to be considered is how that ideal actually fared at the parliament.

III

What is expressible in literature, by virtue of its "power of detachment," is not necessarily realizable in life. This truism, whose recognition is as old as Aristotle's distinction between poetry and history, was substantiated by the fate which the ideal of a rapprochement of religions met at the 1893 Parliament of Religions, an event that was drawn into explicit associations with such dreams of religious unity as those informing the legends of the councils of Asoka and Akbar, the Pentecost, and the parable of the rings. While Joseph Kitagawa rightly credits Barrows and his colleagues with "initiating what we call today the 'dialogue among various religions,' in which each religious claim for ultimacy is acknowledged,"\textsuperscript{45} one could hardly argue that the parliament's Christian promoters attributed equal weight to any of the non-Christian claims.

To be sure, in addition to quoting "Akbar's Dream," Barrows was capable of saying that "religion, like the white light of Heaven, has been broken into many-colored fragments by the prisms of men. One of the objects of the Parliament of Religions has been to change this many-colored radiance back into the white light of heavenly truth."\textsuperscript{46} Accordingly, over the parliament's duration, some twenty of its speakers voiced earnest hopes for the religious union of all mankind.\textsuperscript{47} On the opening day, one of these speakers, Anagarika Dharmapâla (David Hewivitarne, 1864–1933) of

\textsuperscript{43} Quoted by Barrows, "The History of the Parliament," in WPR, 1:11–12.


\textsuperscript{46} Barrows, "The History of the Parliament," in WPR, 1:3.

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Ceylon, general secretary of the Mahâ-Bodhi Society of Calcutta, heralded the parliament as “the re-echo” of the Pātaliputra council twenty-four centuries earlier, predicting that “the name of Dr. Barrows will shine forth as the American Asoka”(!).48 Eight days later, the Indian Hindu Swami Vivekânanda (1863–1902), a disciple of the mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), cast the parliament in an even more inclusive light: “Asoka’s council was a council of the Buddhist faith. Akbar’s, though more to the purpose, was only a parlor-meeting. It was reserved for America to call, to proclaim to all quarters of the globe that the Lord is in every religion.”49 This sentiment might seem in keeping with the spirit in which the Reform rabbi Kaufman Kohler of New York City had invoked Lessing’s parable of the three rings on the parliament’s third day: “Either all the rings are genuine and have the magic power of love, or the father himself is a fraud.”50 However, in making that bid for toleration, Kaufman—like Lessing—had referred exclusively to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three monotheistic faiths “based on the bible.” Barrows, for his own part, had an even more exclusive concern. While he always kept in mind that the parliament’s scope encompassed the religions of the East as well as the West, he clearly meant to suggest Christianity’s completion of the other faiths when he compared the impression the parliament left on those who attended it to “what happened at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost,”51 the miraculous event that (as Christians view it) effectually reversed the dispersive consequence of Babel. Ironically, such hints at the notion of Christ’s “fulfillment” of other religions insured that the parliament would ultimately reinforce the condition of Babel’s aftermath; by the time the parliament ended, Vivekânanda and any of the other Eastern representatives who had attended the parliament in the hope of breaking down barriers between their own religions and Christianity must have heard enough from Barrows and his Christian colleagues to suffer a rude awakening from Akbar’s dream.52

Much has been written about the sensation caused at the religion parlia-

50 Kaufman Kohler, “Human Brotherhood as Taught by the Religions Based on the Bible,” in WPR, 1:366–73, quote on 373.
51 John Henry Barrows, “Review and Summary,” in WPR, 2:1566. Barrows goes on to cite Dr. Frederick A. Noble’s claim: “There were hours when it seemed as though the Divine Spirit was about to descend upon the people in a great Pentecostal outpouring. Never did Christ seem so large and precious to me, never did Christian faith seem so necessary to humanity and so sure to prevail as when the Parliament of Religions closed” (ibid.).
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ment by Vivekânanda, Dharmapâla, and Shaku Sôyen (1859–1919), the abbot of the Zen Temple of Engakuji. These three relatively young men were, in Kitagawa’s words, “modern Asian religious reformers” who came to Chicago “not only because they all subscribed to the principle of interreligious understanding and cooperation, but also because they saw in the parliament an opportunity which they had never had: a platform from which to address the whole world,” and thus a chance to realize “their audacious dream of reversing the tide of history and beginning the Easternization of the West.”

In their addresses to the parliament, each of these three “pious adventurers” in his own way pleaded for interreligious harmony, suggesting that a unifying truth lies behind all religions, despite their sectarian differences. Thus, on the parliament’s sixteenth day, Sôyen observed: “Not only Buddha alone, but Jesus Christ, as well as Confucius, taught about universal love and fraternity,” the implication being that “all beings on the universe are in the bosom of truth.”

That same day Dharmapâla, who had already depicted Buddhism as a “synthetic religion” promulgated by its founder almost six hundred years before the birth of Christ, devoted a whole speech to “Points of Resemblance and Difference between Buddhism and Christianity,” quoting ten passages from the Gospels as “Buddhist teachings as given in the words of Jesus,” and citing R. C. Dutt’s observation that Buddhism and Christianity have so much in common in their moral teachings and precepts that “some connection between the two systems of religion has long been suspected.” But it had been Vivekânanda, in his speech “Hinduism” on the ninth day, who had elaborated most fully his own notion, derived from the teachings of Ramakrishna, that “the Lord is in every religion.” According to Vivekânanda, who would become internationally famous for his teaching of his “Universal Gospel” during the remaining nine years of his life after the parliament, “Every religion is only an evolving [of] a God out of the material man; and the same God is the inspirer of all of them.” He went on:

The Hindu might have failed to carry out all his plans, but if there is to be ever a universal religion, it must be one which would hold no location in place or time,


54 Joseph M. Kitagawa has introduced this phrase to describe a certain type of religious leader, specifically “those who left their familiar surroundings for uncharted foreign lands for the propagation of the faith or in search of truth” (“Kawaguchi Ekai: A Pious Adventurer and Tibet,” in Reflections on Tibetan Culture, ed. L. Epstein and R. Sherburne [Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1990], pp. 279–94, quote on 279).


57 Dharmapâla, “Points of Resemblance and Difference between Buddhism and Christianity,” in WPR, 2:1288–90, quotes on 1289, 1290.
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which would be infinite like the God it would preach, whose sun shines upon the followers of Krishna or Christ; saints or sinners alike; which would not be the Brahman or Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity would embrace in its infinite arms and formulate a place for every human being, from the lowest groveling man who is scarcely removed in intellectuality from the brute, to the highest mind, towering almost above humanity, and who makes society stand in awe and doubt his human nature.\(^{58}\)

How captivating these words were to many Americans in the audience, especially to those already influenced by the residual strains of early nineteenth-century New England transcendentalism (with its “Yankee Hindoo” dimension), is indicated by the reiteration of Vivekananda’s central idea of the divinity of the human being in the short speech of the American poet Julia Ward Howe, “What Is Religion?” which she presented at the parliament on its penultimate day. The only famous literary figure to speak there, Howe defined religion as “the aspiration, the pursuit of the divine in the human,” clearly echoing Vivekananda’s phrase, “an evolving [of] a God out of the material man.” In her conclusion, Howe comes close to repeating another of the Vedântist’s key notions, that of the emanation of the truths of all religions from one God: “From this Parliament let some valorous, new, strong, and courageous influence go forth, and let us have here an agreement of all faiths for one good end, for one good thing—really for the glory of God, really for the sake of humanity from all that is low and animal and unworthy and undivine.”\(^{59}\) (Compare this with Vivekananda’s phrase above, “from the lowest groveling man.”)

The overwhelmingly positive reception that the speeches of Sôyen, Dharmapâla, and especially Vivekananda met at the parliament unsettled its Christian promoters, whose stance toward other religions was best summed up by a statement by Lyman Abbott, the pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church—quoted favorably in Barrows’s own summary remarks—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 Saviour.”\(^{60}\) A man intensely interested in the study of comparative religion, particularly the work of Müller, Barrows conceived of the parliament’s meaning in terms of three concentric circles, with the Christian assembly embodying its center; the American religious assembly, including Jews, compris-

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\(^{58}\) Vivekananda, “Hinduism,” in WPR, 2:977.


\(^{60}\) WPR, 2:1574. Abbott elaborated on this point in his speech on the parliament’s fourth day, “Religion Essentially Characteristic of Humanity,” in WPR, 1:494–501; see 500–501.
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ing the next circle; and the religions of the world making up the outer circle, among which Christianity was one of a plurality of faiths “competing for the conquest of mankind.”61 While Barrows considered these three circles at the parliament to be united in a common spiritual quest, he wrongly assumed that most people would agree with the statement of Theodore Thornton Munger, pastor of the United Church of New Haven, that “the Parliament shows that the world moves, and on the whole moves Christward.”62 As Barrows made clear, “The idea of evolving a cosmic or universal faith out of the Parliament was not present in the minds of its chief promoters. They believe that the elements of such a religion are already contained in the Christian ideal and the Christian Scriptures.”63

There can be little doubt that Barrows intended this as a direct response to Vivekânanda’s Vedântic advocacy of a universal religion, which had attracted so much popular attention at the parliament. Elsewhere, after quoting the Hindu’s plea for “religious unity” on the basis of an assimilation of the truth claims of all religions, Barrows remarks somewhat nastily: “Swami Vivekananda was always heard with interest by the Parliament, but very little approval was shown to some of the sentiments expressed in his closing address”64—an assertion contradicted by the documented public reaction.65 The effort by Barrows and some of his Christian colleagues to use the parliament as a forum in which to demonstrate the supremacy of their own faith effectually disintegrated any illusions that Akbar’s dream might be realized there. Barrows’s expressed theory that all other religions would be “fulfilled” in Christianity backfired; as Kitagawa points out, Vivekânanda, Dharmâpala, and Shaku Sôyen promptly appropriated this formula for themselves and reversed the Christian claim, developing “fulfillment” theories from their own faith perspectives.66 Not surprisingly, Barrows’s associations with those three men were ridden with bitter tensions in the years following the parliament.67

62 Quoted by Barrows, “Review and Summary,” in WPR, 2:1575.
63 Barrows, “Review and Summary,” in WPR, 2:1572.
67 According to Sailendra Nath Dhar, Barrows sought actively to bring down Vivekânanda in public estimation following the parliament (A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda, 2 vols. [Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 1975], 2:939–47). Regarding the 1896 “controversy on Buddhism” that began with a disagreement between Barrows and Shaku Sôyen and later involved F. F. Ellinwood (who supported Barrows) and Dharmâpala (who supported Sôyen), see
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Notwithstanding Barrows’s opposition to the pursuit of a universal religion, Max Müller would later observe that many people of different faiths prior to the parliament “had been thinking about a universal religion, or at least about a union of the different religions, resting on a recognition of the truths shared in common by all of them,” so that “it would have been possible, even at Chicago, to draw up a small number of articles of faith ... to which all who were present could have honestly subscribed.”68 Interestingly, this speculation over the parliament’s missed opportunity by the most important late nineteenth-century pioneer of Religionswissenschaft would have struck one of that same century’s greatest literary artists and seekers of a universal religion as overly optimistic. When the French clergyman and professor Charles Bonet-Maury, who had spoken at the 1893 parliament, later invited Leo Tolstoy to participate in the Congress of Religions that was to convene in Paris in 1900, the celebrated novelist wrote back, arguing that such congresses were not only useless, but even detrimental:

The idea of the Congress is to unite the religions by external means—while according to the idea of Religion, that is, the one universal Religion, unification can only take place from within; that is to say that debates and talks by various representatives of different religions cannot in any way help in uniting men in their relationship with God (rather, they produce the opposite effect), and the only way this union can be achieved is by sincere study by every individual of his relationship with the world, the Infinite, God.69

The intuition expressed here encapsulates a crucial, paradoxical lesson of Chicago’s religion parliament: for all its justly applauded success at bringing together representatives of different faiths from around the world and providing them a congenial atmosphere in which to share their views and beliefs, the parliament ultimately failed to overcome their sectarian distinctions and thereby proved an inadequate forum in which to realize the truly pluralist vision bequeathed by “Akbar’s Dream.” It is appropriate that the inherent inadequacy of any congress to fulfill such a dream should be intuited by Tolstoy, whom, as we saw earlier, Frye singled out as his primary exemplar of the literary “power of detachment.” From Frye’s eminently humanist perspective, any literary text, not to mention literature as a whole, can afford readers opportunities to suspend

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68 Müller (n. 2 above), pp. 7, 13.
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beliefs as well as disbelief and to engage in the freedom of detachment (an ideal dramatically dishonored by today’s cursers of Salman Rushdie). Unlike literature thus understood, any congress or parliament worthy of the name, religious or otherwise, must be a bastion of commitments.