

**ANAGARIKA DHARMAPALA and THE 1893 PARLIAMENT OF THE
WORLD'S RELIGIONS**

By

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The organizers of the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions regarded the meeting as a "new dawn" in the religious history of both America and the World.¹ It was the first great council held in the Christian West in which the Christian delegates shared the stage with representatives from the Asian and non-Western religious traditions. And one of the most important and influential Asian delegates to the Parliament, was Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka.

This 1st Parliament of World Religions was held from Sept. 11 to Sept. 27, 1893 in the then newly-built Art Institute building in Chicago, Illinois. Thousands attended the sessions and some 400 delegates presented papers and gave speeches during the seventeen days of the Parliament.

Why 1893? and Why Chicago? The Parliament was convened in 1893 in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition or World's Fair held in Chicago to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the new world in 1492. Never mind that they missed it by one year, — they said that was intentional, "in order to give local communities time to complete their own celebrations." This Columbian Exposition was the last of a series of grand World's Fairs that were held in the second half of the 19th century to celebrate the "Progress" of civilization — especially Western civilization. The organizers of the Columbian Exposition saw the expansion of the West, symbolized by Columbus' voyages, as the culmination of the evolution of European civilization. The Europeans had triumphed over the various social and natural disasters that had threatened to eclipse Western civilization, and now with the development of science and technology, it seemed clear that Western civilization had great prospects for even further progress.

The World's Fairs that were held to celebrate this optimism and self-confidence about Western civilization included : in 1851 the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London; in 1876 the American Centennial exposition in Philadelphia, attended by over 8 million visitors; in 1889 the Paris Exhibition which celebrated all these triumphs of Western civilization by inaugurating the Eiffel Tower; and in 1893 the final and crowning event, the Columbian Exposition — with the theme, "A Century of Progress".

Chicago won the right to hold the Exposition through a competition among various cities in the U.S. Chicago claimed to be the youngest of the world's cities. It was located on what was considered at that time to be the Northwest margin of America, and it saw itself symbolizing the spirit of the age: youth, progress and potential. Its motto for the campaign to win the authorization to stage the exposition was, "Chicago—the city with 'go' in it".

The exposition was held in Jackson Park - in the area surrounding what is today the Museum of Science and Industry. For this exposition, the planners created an elaborately designed collection of buildings called the "White City". These ornate exhibition halls and pseudo-palaces were linked together by a series of Venetian canals and lagoons with gondolas and other water craft ferrying the visitors from one exhibit to another. The "White city" was a state-of-the-art electric city, and it was officially opened by President Grover Cleveland who turned on all the lights by pressing a single button. People came to the fair to see this electric marvel, and to see such other new technological wonders as the telephone, the typewriter, and the sewing machine. They also came to ride the Ferris Wheel, which was invented for this exposition.

The **Parliament of Religions** was one of a series of so called auxiliary congresses held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition. The organizers of the Columbian Exposition wanted to display not only the great materialistic achievements of the age, but also the intellectual achievements, so they planned congresses on law, education, medicine, music, women's progress, engineering and also religion — although there was considerable debate about whether a Parliament on religion would be too divisive.²

Purposes of the Parliament of 1893.

We can summarize the Purposes of the Parliament by saying that it was seen by the planners as a platform on which the leaders of Christianity could meet the leaders of the other major religious traditions of the world. The literature of the Parliament said that it was intended to accomplish the following aims :

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 men, in the most impressive way, what and how many important truths the various Religions hold and teach in commons.
3. To promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious people 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.

In its attitude toward religion, the late 19th century was a time of hope and optimism. A time when liberalism was flourishing, and people were interested in the religions of foreign lands that they had heard about from books and from travelers and missionaries. The liberal Christians saw this Parliament as an opportunity for honest dialogue and sharing of truth. Paul Carus, one of these liberal delegates to the Parliament expressed the hope that it signalled the "dawn of a new religious era, in which narrow Christianity will disappear."³

However, the more conservative and evangelical Christians viewed the meeting as an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to these other religions. This was a time when Protestant Christian missionary zeal was at its height, and missionaries were busy in many lands trying to make converts. These conservative Christians assumed that their religion was destined to save the whole world.

Some of the most conservative Christians opposed the Parliament even before it opened; for example, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican Church, refused to attend the Parliament, because he said, "the Christian religion is the one religion, and I do not understand how that religion can be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the equality of the other intended members and parity of their position and claims."⁴

The delegates to the Parliament came from America primarily — but there were also many foreign delegates. The largest foreign delegations came from India (18), Japan (17), England (12) and Europe (8). Delegates also came from places such as China, Siam, the Middle East and of course, Sri Lanka. Anagarika Dharmapala was apparently the only Sri Lankan delegate who attended. However, the Buddhist Nayake Thera, Venerable Hikkaduwe Sumangala was also invited to be a delegate but decided not to attend because he felt that since he did not have a command of English, he could not be an active member of the Parliament. He did write a paper, however, and Anagarika Dharmapala read Venerable Sumangala's paper to the Parliament.

About three-fourths of the delegates were Christians, and most of them were Protestants, but there were many Catholics, Jews and a significant number of representatives from other religions, especially from Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.

Most of the delegates were men, but women attended too, and this parliament really marked the first time that the women's leadership in religion was recognized in a significant way. The female delegates to the Parliament comprised some very distinguished women, such as Susan B. Anthony, Mary Baker Eddy, and Francis Willard.

Although the Parliament was heavily Christian in its membership as well as its agenda, the delegates who made the greatest impression were the Asian delegates.

Looking back on the Parliament from the perspective of 100 years, it seems clear that the most important legacy of this Parliament to American culture was that it enabled Americans to hear for the first time, articulate representatives from the Asian religions. Indeed this Parliament can be said to be the place where Asian religions first began to establish themselves on American soil.

There were three Asian delegates in particular who had a great impact on the Parliament and were instrumental in this process of beginning to establish Asian religions in America. They were: Swami Vivekananda from India who introduced Vedantic Hinduism to America; Rev. Shaku Soyen from Japan, who later returned to America with his young interpreter, D. T. Suzuki, and introduced Zen Buddhism to the West; and perhaps most importantly, Anagarika Dharmapala, who introduced the ideas of Theravada Buddhism to America.

It is interesting to observe that all 3 of these delegates of Buddhism and Hinduism were young — all were around 30 years old at the time. They represented reform movements in their own countries that were challenging the assumptions of the Colonial and Christian authorities. And they went on to become leaders in the movements that led to the end of the colonial period and the revival of Buddhism and Hinduism.

ANAGARIKA DHARMAPALA :

Anagarika Dharmapala was clearly the most significant and celebrated interpreter of Buddhism at the 1893 Parliament. He made several speeches during the two weeks plus of the meeting and greatly impressed the delegates with his eloquent and articulate explanations of the Buddha's teachings. One of the newspapers at the time carried this item about Dharmapala after his speech to the Parliament :

With his black curly locks thrown back from his broad brow, his keen clear eyes fixed on the audience, and his vibrant voice, He looked the very image of a propagandist... at the head of a movement to consolidate all the disciples of Buddha and to spread the "Light of Asia" throughout the civilized world."⁵

Another press report said : "Mr. Dharmapala was always one of the most interesting personages at the parliament. Always dressed in spotless white, his hair parted in the middle and curling in the back, his face gentle and refined, he seemed just like a familiar portrait of Jesus".⁶

Dharmapala delivered his longest speech to the Parliament on September 18, the day after his 29th birthday. His address, entitled "**The World's Debt to Buddha**" was a comprehensive account of the teachings of Lord Buddha. If you read that address today you will see why the delegates were so impressed with Dharmapala. Only a very exceptional being could have the wisdom and inspiration to summarize in one presentation the essence of the vast Dhamma of 84,000 suttas or sections. After this address, one newspaper report observed: "Thanks to Anagarika Dharmapala, Contempt and pity for the oriental religions have given way to respect and admiration."

In this presentation and in his other speeches to the Parliament, the young champion of Buddhism proclaimed a significant truth. He declared to the largely American and Christian audience that although the west had material riches to offer the world, the East and Buddhism had spiritual riches that surpassed any material prize. He pointed out that this Buddhist spirituality represented the necessary counterbalance for the materialism that the West had generated.

To explain this Dharmapala made 3 important points in his addresses to the Parliament. Points which played a major role in establishing and correcting the understanding of Buddhism in the West.

1. First, he explained that Buddhism is a religion that is perfectly compatible with modern science. In fact, as Dharmapala said on another occasion, Buddhism is the ideal "religion of Science."

The harmony between the Lord Buddha's teachings and science was implied in the very attitude of the Buddha to the quest for truth. For the Buddha did not require blind faith or a sacrifice of the intellect, but asked his followers to test and examine his teachings for themselves. As Dharmapala stated it, "The strongest emphasis has been put by Buddha on the supreme importance of having an unprejudiced mind before we start on the road of investigation of truth."⁷

During the nineteenth century, of course, Western religions were having great confrontations with the emerging scientific ideas in fields such as biology, geology and psychology. The major stumbling block for Christianity was Darwin's theory of evolution which seemed to call into question the central beliefs of Christianity about God and creation. Dharmapala wrote in the **Maha Bodhi Journal** that, "When Darwin propounded the theory of evolution, the theologians were frightened, and they all shouted that Darwin had killed the creator."⁸

But, the **Buddha's** teachings, Dharmapala explained, were perfectly consistent with the theory of evolution. Dharmapala declared to the Parliament that Buddhism did not require the belief in a creator or a myth of creation. He said "Accepting the doctrine of evolution as the only true one, with its corollary, the law of cause and effect, the Buddha condemns the idea of a creator and strictly forbids inquiry into it as useless."⁹

Instead, the Buddha asks us to look upon the cosmos "As a continuous process unfolding itself in regular order in obedience to natural laws."

Dharmapala showed that Buddhism also agreed with the new findings of the science of psychology — for the Lord Buddha "applied the inexorable law of cause and effect to the soul."

"In the religion of Buddha is found a comprehensive system of ethics, and a transcendental metaphysics embracing a sublime psychology."¹⁰ Buddhism agreed with psychology by regarding humans as beings in process, rather than static essences or souls. The Buddha's teachings about the mind and the way that a person is driven by desires and mental formations, foreshadowed the findings of modern psychology. Long before western psychology was developed, the Buddha explained the workings of the mind and showed that human beings are only psycho-physical organisms composed of the five aggregates. Both mind and body are subject to the law of **Anicca**, the law of impermanence.

Paul Carus, an American writer who took Dharmapala as his teacher, expressed the advantages and superiority of Buddhism in this regard when he said, "a conflict between religion and science is impossible in Buddhism."¹¹

2. Dharmapala declared that not only was Buddhism more in tune with science than was Christianity, but also its ethical teachings were filled with more compassion and love than he saw being practiced by the Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka. He said that the Christian missionaries sent to Sri Lanka "do not have the tolerance we need."¹²

By contrast, he pointed to the Emperor Asoka, who sent Buddhist missionaries to all parts of the world. And "wherever Buddhism has gone, the nations have imbibed its spirit, and the people have become gentler and milder. The slaughter of animals ceased and . . . wars were almost abolished." But he added that Now "the influence of western civilization is undoing their work."

Dharmapala said that he saw the Parliament as something of a modern recapitulation of Asoka's council, and he expressed the hope that the Parliament of Religions might renew the programme of Asoka, and send out ambassadors to make the world tolerant and gentle. In this way people might again be able to hear and live by the Dhamma of truth, self-restraint, liberality and forbearance.

3. The Third point that Dharmapala stressed in his addresses to the Parliament and as he travelled across America after the Parliament, was that Buddhism is a religion of optimism and activism not one of negativism and passivism.¹³ One of the chief criticisms of Buddhism, often promoted by the Christian missionaries, was that it taught people to withdraw from life in order to seek their own welfare rather than that of the world. This misinterpretation of Buddhism was encouraged by the colonial authorities as a way of keeping the Buddhist Sangha and laity out of politics. But Dharmapala showed that Buddhism indeed stressed the religious importance of being involved in compassionate action in the world.

For Dharmapala, the idea that Buddhism requires one to be engaged with the world, not disengaged, was central. That was the meaning of the title that he created for himself, Anagarika; the homeless one who is active in the world. He told his American audiences that "the Dharma of the Tathagata does not require a man to go into homelessness or to resign the world."¹⁴ Rather, "Activity is the cosmic law, and our Lord Buddha made it the principal teaching of his religion. Love, self-sacrifice for the welfare of others (and) compassion for the weak . . ."¹⁵ Dharmapala symbolized these ideals, and expressed them through his work with the Maha Bodhi Society in India and through his programme to revive Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

The role of the Anagarika represented a middle way; Dharmapala was in the world like the layman but he was not equally of the world. He taught that one could live in the world and still follow a strict code of personal discipline.

At the Parliament he declared that, "In place of rites and sacrifices," the Lord Buddha, prescribed a code of practical morality as the means of achieving wisdom.¹⁶ And in his longest address to the Parliament, Dharmapala discussed some of the Buddha's guidelines for living in the world as given in the **Sigalovada Sutta**

If one lives this kind of active, moral life, Dharmapala promised, one would find that "Nirvana is a state to be realized here on this earth."¹⁷ With this message, Anagarika Dharmapala challenged the delegates to the Parliament to learn more about the truths of Buddhism. At one session he asked the audience, "How many of you have read the scriptures of Buddhism?" Only 4 or 5 people in the audience of several hundred raised their hands. Dharmapala said, "Shame, and you call yourself a great nation and you do not know the truths that have sustained millions in Asia."

So in conclusion, we can note that more than anyone else, it was Anagarika Dharmapala who impressed the truths of Buddhism on the awareness of America. At that time, although many Americans had heard of Buddhism, few knew very much about its teachings. Only a little more than a decade earlier, Edwin Arnold had published his book "The Light of Asia" which alerted West to the significance of Buddhism. Now Anagarika Dharmapala appeared embodying this Dharma and proclaiming it in the Parliament and across the land in countless homes, churches and town halls. So, the lasting significance of Anagarika Dharmapala's travels to America was that it enabled him to plant the seeds of Buddhism in American life and culture, seeds that would grow and influence Western society in countless explicit and implicit ways (?). We should also note that Dharmapala's visit to the West and the Parliament of religions had great significance for his fellow Buddhists in Sri Lanka. He raised the consciousness and pride of the Buddhists by proclaiming that Buddhism was superior to any imported religion from the West. Not only did he proclaim this message, but he was received and accepted at the Parliament for doing so. This gave a big boost to the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan movement toward independence from colonialism.

On the closing day of the Parliament, Dharmapala offered this advice to the West: "By the patient and laborious researches of the men of science you are given to enjoy the fruits of material civilization to enjoy, but this civilization by itself finds no praise. . . (In addition) [you must] learn to think without prejudice, love all beings for love's sake lead a life of purity, and the sunlight of truth will illuminate you."¹⁸

1. Eck, Diana "Forward" to R. H. Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1993), p. xiv.
2. Barrows J. H. (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions*. (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), P. 5.
3. Carus, Paul cited in Harold Henderson, "Delegates of the Gods", *Reader*, Chicago, October 27, 1989, p. 1.
4. Barrows, p. 22.
5. *St. Louis Observer*, Sept. 21, 1893.
6. *New York World*, Sept. 91, 1893, cited in Guruge Ananda ed., *Return to Righteousness: A collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*. Colombo: The Government Press, 1965.
7. Dharmapala, cited in *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*.
8. Dharmapala, cited in Guruge, *Return to Righteousness*, p. 107.
9. Dharmapala cited in Guruge, p. 9.
10. Guruge, p. 8.
11. Carus cited in Tweed, Thomas *The American Encounter with Buddhism: 1844—1912*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) p. 105.
12. Barrows, p. 1093,
13. Tweed, p. 133ff.
14. *Ibid*,. p. 148.
15. Guruge, p. 444.
16. Barrows, p. 1289.
17. *Ibid*.
18. Barrows, p. 170.