Light's Fellowship with Twilight: The Religious Thought of John Henry Barrows and the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions

Allison Takahashi

Oberlin College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/fol_research_awards

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/fol_research_awards/24
Light’s Fellowship with Twilight:
The Religious Thought of John Henry Barrows and the
1893 World’s Parliament of Religions
John Henry Barrows’ contemporaries knew him as a “tall and genial man, with rhetorical gifts, a sense of humor, intelligence, ability, tact, skill, and courage.” As a pastor at Chicago’s First Presbyterian Church from 1881 to 1896, he “developed a reputation as one of the foremost preachers of his time,” and went on to deliver lectures in Asia and become the fifth President of Oberlin College. The achievement that garnered the most recognition for Barrows, however, was his position as Chairman and primary organizer of the World’s Parliament of Religion in 1893, held in conjunction with the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Barrows’ memoir depicts a captivating figure, whose life expressed of an enthusiastic and deep commitment to Christianity. Although an exploration of his life as an historic individual could certainly be of interest to scholars of history and religion, in this paper, I am primarily interested in examining his religious ideals—in terms of what they aspired towards, how they situated other religions, and the external forces which may have informed them.

By illuminating the contextual significance of Barrows’ religious thought, and embarking on an exploration of how the structure, goals, rhetoric, and ideals of the Parliament embodied his views, this paper will provide insight into the climate of religious thought at the turn of the 20th century. Not only is this study of particular relevance to understanding the legacy of the academic study of religion, but it will
demonstrate the way that processes informed by context shape religious discourse, and explore how these discourses are established as dominant and then subverted.

Several primary contextual elements are necessary to set the stage for Barrows’ religious thought, such as the prevalence of science and Darwinian thought, and the rapid industrialization and urbanization of America in the last half of the 19th century. Each of these factors necessitated a new mode of religious discourse in America, in order for religion to legitimize itself in the face of science and to address the new challenges that society was facing. In Barrows’ religious thought, it is apparent that these concerns were essential to his conceptualization of religion, and fundamental to the agenda of the World’s Parliament of Religions (WPR, as I will henceforth refer to it).

Of further relevance to Barrows’ religious context was the ‘scientific study of religion,’ which had developed during his life. This new academic field, founded by the Friedrich Max Muller, a scholar of religion, aspired to “find out what religion is, what foundation it has in the soul of man, and what laws it follows in its historical growth.” Muller understood humanity as essentially believing in one universal religion that shared a fundamental doctrine of love, trust, and practicality. Along these lines, some faiths had degenerated from this truth and others were evolving toward it.

Muller’s work made major contributions to the 19th century intellectual mainstream, and so it makes sense that Barrows’ articulation of Christianity is permeated by Muller’s universalistic rhetoric. In his promotion of the WPR, Barrows described the event as an “orderly school of comparative theology.” However,
Barrows was less interested in the ‘science’ of religion and more in the potential of comparative religion to teach spiritual and ethical lessons.\textsuperscript{vii} These lessons reflect an ideology that can generally be described as liberal Protestantism, which, simply put, espoused a love for God and a humanistic love of one’s neighbor.\textsuperscript{viii} This model abandons the finality of the scriptures, denounces ritual as “non-essential impediments to religious purity,” and exalts the individual’s search for truth.\textsuperscript{ix} These characteristics of Barrows’ religion represent a modern interpretation of Christianity that is in greater accordance with science and the individualistic mentality of modern American society.

By rejecting metaphysics, ritual, and myth, Barrows’ interpretation reconfigured Christianity into a system of practical truth that served the deepest needs of the human soul.\textsuperscript{x} As a frequent speaker at temperance meetings, he also legitimized Christianity in modern terms, which demonstrated his belief in the moral capacity of Christianity and its relevance in addressing the ills of modern society.\textsuperscript{xi}

Also central to Barrows’ religious thought was the understanding that the same Judeo-Christian God and liberal Protestant ideals were applicable to every other faith and that could unite all religions.\textsuperscript{xii} He saw no tension between his Christian identity and the search for universal truth, because he believed that Christianity embodied universal truth.\textsuperscript{xiii} Although other religions of the world might have varying degrees of insight, only Christianity fulfilled a complete expression of religious truth.\textsuperscript{xiv} As I will address later in the paper, the way that this framework subordinated non-Christian faiths was a strong influence in the interreligious dynamics of the World’s Parliament of Religion.
John Henry Barrows’ contextually marked religious perspective was emblematic of the spirit of the WPR. However, this is not entirely because he was one of its primary organizers. Although the organization of the event was largely a manifestation of his vision, Barrows’ religious mentality and the WPR’s objectives emerged from the same historical context, and an understanding of the relationship between the two is necessary to illuminate either. xv

As set forth by the WPR’s Central Committee, its primary goals were:

“1) To bring together in conference…the leading representatives of the great historic religions of the world. 2) To show...what and how many important truths the various religions hold and teach in common. 3) To promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among…diverse faiths…10) To bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship...” xvi

With this emphasis on togetherness, commonalities, brotherhood, and fellowship, the surface of these intentions indicates a strong sense of commitment to finding common ground. Superficially, these objectives were set forth in the spirit of a religious quest of hope, in order to promote unity and happiness. xvii Although these genuinely were elements of Barrows’ intentions, the implications of these aspirations and the aims that they were directed toward complicate the deeper significance of the Parliament.

As the world’s “Children of one God” came together under the pretense of harmony, it was certainly a Judeo-Christian God in relation to which Barrows situated every other religion. xviii The agenda beneath the surface of this rhetoric reveals that “the presentations of the religious realities of the world to the West” in fact derived from a primary goal, to present Christianity to the non-Western world. xix Revealing the Christocentric evangelical mission that the rhetoric of harmony and understanding was a
vehicle for, he claimed, “you can’t convert without a clear understanding of what you are converting people from.”

Barrows believed that “Though light has no fellowship with darkness, light does have fellowship with twilight… Those who have the full light of the cross should bear brotherly hearts toward all who grope in dimmer illumination,” and held that interreligious understanding, respect, and toleration would achieve the most successful missionary work. He so strongly trusted in this potential that he proposed, “let comparative religion become a study required of all candidates for mission fields.”

The missionary objectives of the WPR were two-fold: to facilitate the missionary impulse in America, and to convert non-Christian delegates. Barrows hoped that through its missionary work, the WPR would “have a large influence over the social and Christian developments of the twentieth century.” By inciting “missionary ardor,” he claimed that the WPR had the potential “to build a kingdom of Christendom in America.”

These missionary intentions were set forth in a manner representing Barrows’ specific religious beliefs. In light of the minimal success of missionaries overseas, Barrows held that the WPR had the potential to accomplish more than missionaries because it was under no ecclesiastical dictation, and could “appeal to the spirit of fraternity to high-minded individuals,” breaking from tradition in the progressive spirit of the event.

By “softening prejudice” and “removing ignorance” between religions, Barrows hoped to further interreligious understanding through the WPR as a means of broadening existing conceptions of Christianity. He sought to articulate Christianity in terms that would encompass what he deemed to be the essential truths of all religions, embracing...
“streamlined heathen faiths,” and abandoning “biblical exclusivity” and “creedal theology.” In the words of Dr. Lyman Abbott, an American theologian and peer of Barrows, doing so would make the worldwide acceptance of Christianity “a logical and spiritual necessity.”

His ambition to expand the notions of Christianity held by the audience and delegates was contingent upon establishing the commonalities of the world’s religions. Rather than asserting the equal validity of different religions as variations on a truth, this framework characterized non-Christian faiths as containing merely partial truths, which were only fully realized and completed in Christianity. By setting forth this definition of various religions in relation to Christianity, Barrows’ ambition was to transform Christianity into a new religious synthesis that would supplant all other religions. Barrows believed that his own liberal Protestant Christianity could become the new religious discourse for all.

Barrows drives home this point with a metaphor, ironically quoted from the Buddhist delegate Dharmapala, who I will briefly address later. He stated, “religion…has been broken into many-colored fragments by the prisms of men. One of the objects of the WPR has been to change this many-colored radiance back into the white light of heavenly truth.” This characterization of religion as eventually evolving towards a single, perfected truth represents a re-articulation of Christianity in light of evolutionary theory. This can be understood as an attempt to legitimize Christianity and religion in terms of secular concepts that prevailed in the intellectual mainstream, by asserting its coherence with the notion of progress.
Similarly, the WPR was meant to glorify Christianity as an expression of America’s triumphs of progress. xxxiii Because the Columbian Exposition was a celebration of America’s material achievements, Barrows was motivated to demonstrate the significance of the “moral and spiritual agencies at the root of human progress.” xxxxiv In keeping with the Columbian theme of the ‘discovery of America,’ Barrows wanted to bring to light the “providential aspects of our history” and convey that America’s achievements had largely been wrought by God. xxxv This competitive tension between religion and science/material culture was a recurring theme in the religious climate of the late 1800s, and it came to the fore of the WPR in more than one way.

Barrows was also concerned with compensating for unflattering portrayals of American society in the media that were at odds with Christian values, including news of divorce, crimes, liquor, and the investigatory reports of corruption publicized by muckraking journalists. xxxvi He felt compelled to combat these depictions of the corruption and vices of industrial, urban culture by demonstrating that the core of American society was Christian. xxxvii Further, he believed that the WPR had the potential to impel the audience to engage in religion as a means of addressing the social ills of the time.

By asserting the importance of religion in America’s development and showing “the commanding influence of the Bible in shaping American civilization,” the WPR aimed to legitimate religion in terms that fit with the notion of progress. xxxviii Barrows sought to enhance the reputation of religion over and against the material culture of science and industry by uniting and promulgating the world’s religious assets on one stage. As quoted in a New York Times article published before the fair, Barrows...
claimed that “religion shall…in this age of materialistic pride, assert its kingship over human life.”

This articulation of Christianity as progress-oriented also provided support for Barrows’ belief in the superiority of Christianity. Employing a teleological model to justify its supremacy beyond non-Christian religions, he claimed that not only did Christianity exemplify the nature of progress, but also, as mentioned earlier, that other religions were aimed in progressing towards Christianity.

Barrows’ religious thought demonstrates the imperative to reconfigure Christianity, which is reasonable given the challenges religion was up against in the context of late 19th century cosmopolitan society. However, in order to understand the way his articulation played out in the actual Parliament, it is helpful to remember the framework of the Columbian Exposition that the event took place within. Just as the World’s Fair functioned as an expression of the hegemonic power of America’s capitalist classes, with its celebration of industry, extravagant displays of wealth, and its authoritative classification of races, ethnicities, and nations, the Parliament also established an explicit framework of dominance and marginalization.

It is not my intention to vilify Barrows, for his objectives for the WPR were certainly not malicious. Instead, by examining how the Parliament situated religious Others we can better understand the dynamics at work within the event, and shed light upon how delegates responded to the liberal Protestant discourse that framed their own presentations.

From its very inception, Barrows and the Christian organizers of the Parliament established a power dynamic that would set the tone of the entire event. By classifying
all the religions of the world into ten groups, they exercised an assertion of dominance by claiming the authority to define and categorize. This process of selection and the inevitable act of privileging some sects and neglecting others, which was informed by the organizers’ own biases, is just one element that shaped the power dynamic of the dialogue that would take place. For instance, within the scope of American religion, Barrows’ intention of presenting a single, specific Christian reality obscured and silenced those who were not included, such as the Church of the Latter Day Saints and Native American faiths.

The pedagogical significance of the Parliament, with its construction of categories and didactic framework, further solidified this power dynamic at the core of the event. Although each delegate exercised a degree of agency by speaking about their own religion, Barrows asked each speaker to address a specific set of topics: 1) God, 2) Man, 3) the relation between God and man, 4) the role of women, 5) education, and 6) social morality. These topics shaped the speeches in a very specific way, and made it appear that each religion held the same set of priorities. As for religions to which it was difficult to apply these questions onto, their representatives’ speeches came off as deficient. The presentations, though biased in this manner, were promulgated as factual representations, both during the Parliament and the proceedings of the event published by Barrows after the fact.

The disparity in the ratio of Christian representatives to non-Christian ones further maintained the Christian dominance. Most of the delegates were American Christians. Within the three circles of the Assembly of Delegates, including the Christian Assembly, the American Assembly, and the Religions of the World, the third
category consisted of the fewest representatives. These issues of selection and authoritative categorization established a clearly dominant religious framework that problematized distinctions, including differences in language and place.

Not only was the Parliament set in specifically Christian terms, but the characterization of many of the non-Christian delegates as “persons from far-off lands” framed their presentations as foreign, exotic spectacles. The English-speaking delegates received the best response from the audience, particularly those from countries that had been colonized by the British, where they had been familiarized with concepts from the 19th century intellectual mainstream. Those delegates whose speeches were translated into English and whose style of speech did not resemble the dominant rhetoric made the least impact on the audience. These differences in nation, ethnicity, and language highlight some of the interreligious obstacles experienced at the WPR, particularly as set within a framework that presented a serious bias.

The very structure of and programs within the Parliament were overtly Christian. In the earliest stages of planning, Barrows emphasized the ceremonial importance of Sunday in the Parliament, highlighting its Christian significance as central to the framework of the event. In addition to speeches by the Christian delegates, Christian missionaries preached the gospel, alongside presentations by various American Christian groups such as the YMCA, Sunday schools, churches, and Biblical societies. Each day featured the recitation of Christian prayers and singing of hymns.

Amidst these overt expressions of Christianity, the Parliament’s more surreptitious implications of a Christian agenda are perhaps of greater relevance to understanding the broader processes at work and the legacy of its religious framework.
Thinly veiled under the rhetoric of brotherhood and fellowship, differences were only welcomed on Christian terms, that is, to the extent that they fit with the ideals of the Parliament. By neglecting theological, mythological, and philosophical distinctions, and dismissing ritual and metaphysics as “nonsense,” commonalities were highlighted as “truths” and distinctions were identified as errors.\textsuperscript{lii} For instance, Barrows described the ritually oriented “ethnic faiths” which presented different worldviews from Christianity as “curiosities and moral monstrosities,” and considered non-Christian faiths to be heathen extensions of “roughly synonymous theological terms of modern Christianity in the West.”\textsuperscript{liii}

The fact that the Parliament convened under the pretense of meeting not as separate sects, but as “a unified entity bound by a single God,” made the very participation of non-Christian delegates an act of consensus to such a scheme, even as such a choice could appear at odds with their religious integrity.\textsuperscript{liv} Barrows viewed this implied sense of consensus as a confirmation of each delegate’s ultimate aspirations towards the truth of Christianity.\textsuperscript{lv}

Although Barrows’ expression of religious unity was covertly aimed towards the “extinction of difference as a prerequisite for (Christian) totalization,” the invited delegates were well aware of what was at stake.\textsuperscript{lvii} The Asian delegates in particular viewed the Parliament as an opportunity to ‘debut’ their religion in the United States, employing their own agendas, strategies of proselytization, and intentions to legitimize their faiths on the world stage, over and against other religions. They were highly invested in proving that their religions were worthy of making contributions to the modern world.\textsuperscript{lvii} Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this study to address these
delegates in detail. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to these representatives in a generalized sense in order to highlight the processes at work in response to and in appropriation or subversion of Barrows’ religious framework.

Many of the non-Christian Asian delegates employed the same mode of discourse that was used by Barrows and his liberal Protestant contemporaries, with its emphasis on “egalitarianism, the authority of science, the inspirational qualities of religion, universalistic ambitions and aspirations, and toleration.” Particularly those who were fluent in English and who had been familiarized with Western mainstream thought in a colonial context were “sensitive to the theological analogies and aspirations of Christianity,” and used this to their advantage. By utilizing the same “code terms” of fellowship, unity, and harmony to frame the ultimacy of their religion in universal pretenses, these delegates were equally invested in vying for the supremacy of their faith.

They were also concerned with proving the legitimacy of their religion in accordance with science, which expressed the modernist impulse that was developing across the globe, as well as an interest in appealing to American intellectual trends. Dharmapala, a delegate who presented a progressive form of Buddhism, articulated nirvana as “eternal peace in the vortex of evolution.” He also described Buddhism as “a system of ethics…embracing a sublime psychology,” and portrayed the Buddhist emphasis on change as coterminous with evolutionary theory. Barrow’s quotation of Dharmapala’s “fractured light” metaphor further illustrates their overlapping rhetoric.

This group of non-Christian Asian representatives, comprised of religious figures and scholars, willingly participated in the pretenses set forth by the WPR, particularly in
furthering the conceptualization of a “single, unified Orient.” However, they used this notion in favor of their own interests, by referring to the West as being spiritually indebted to “the Orient.”

By appropriating the rhetorical strategies and principles of the WPR’s central religious discourse, these delegates intended to appeal to liberal, Protestant Christian values as a means of subverting its dominance. They viewed the significance of their speeches at the WPR as the American debut of their religions, set forth in terms that would not only be easily grasped, but that would challenge preconceived notions and degrading stereotypes. The fact that the Asian delegates presented themselves as well spoken and intelligent challenged the perception of “ethnic” non-Christians as barbarous heathens, disproving the beliefs of Barrows and many of the Christian delegates and audience members.

Although their common rhetoric was used in an oppositional manner against Christianity, Barrows interpreted this “occidentalist strategy” as “evidence of the deeply pious, Protestant nature shared at the core of all religions.” Rather than recognizing that many of the Asian delegates had been familiarized with Western ideas through exchanges that took place before the WPR, Barrows interpreted these common threads as reification of the possibility of unity. Their subversive perspectives, though conveyed through dominant modes of language, were not entirely overlooked by Barrows. However, his interpretation certainly downplayed the dissident content of their speeches. He acknowledged that at the Parliament “many things were said against Christiandom,” but the fact that “no criticism was made against Jesus” indicated the prevailing, unifying spirit of Christ.
The disparity in perspectives between Barrows and the non-Christian delegates, particularly as demonstrated by representatives of the Asian religions, illustrates a complex confluence of agendas. While Barrows’ objectives for the Parliament may have superficially seemed in accordance with the aims of religious Others, many of the non-Christian representatives appropriated the dominant rhetoric and modes of legitimization in order to undermine the religious framework established by Barrows.

After the Parliament, the interpretive discrepancy persisted. Competing perspectives gauged the success of their aims through self-congratulatory subjectivity. Barrows lauded the event as a successful coming-together of Christianity, and in Asia, delegates returned as champions of their faith. Although Barrows envisioned that the event would be “a torch of truth and love which may prove the morning star of the twentieth century,” the onset of WWI two decades after quickly faded the WPR’s optimistic vision of worldwide Christian unity. The missionary objectives that Barrows had hoped for the Parliament to achieve were not ultimately realized.

However, an unforeseen consequence of the event that has had a long-term impact was the interest it spurred in comparative religions, both popular and scholarly. Another consequence that hadn’t been anticipated by Barrows, and which perhaps he never recognized, was the fact that many of the non-Christian Asian delegates learned the Christian formula of fulfillment, as exemplified in Barrows’ religious thought and propagated in the Parliament. After the WPR, these delegates went on to employ this strategy, reversing the Christian claim and asserting that the fragmented truths of all the world’s religions were completed in their own.\textsuperscript{xix}
Barrows’ religious understanding represents a specific context that the academic study of religion is both indebted to and burdened by. Although the WPR didn’t initiate the study of comparative religions, in America it certainly influenced the formation of the field. Barrows and the WPR provides a vantage point from which we can gain a better understanding of the forces that have shaped this historical legacy, which allows us to reflect on our own positionality as scholars. Further, Barrows’ religious thought can be used as a lens to elucidate the processes that shape various articulations of religion, including how dominant meanings are established and subverted, thus providing valuable insight into how our own scholarly perceptions are contextually situated.

8 This summary references a description given by James Dobbins in class.
10 Ibid.
12 Kitagawa, 183.
13 Ibid., 185.
Barrows “Words of Welcome,” 128.
Ketelaar, Of Heretics and Martyrs, 138, 140.
Ibid.
Seager, The East/West Encounter, 96
Ketelaar, Of Heretics and Martyrs, 140.
Seager The East/West Encounter, 100, 104.
Ibid.
Ibid., 108.
Ibid.
Ibid, 104.
Ibid.
Ibid., 117.
Ibid., 104.
Kitagawa, 187.