

For the Historic Record

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by Dharmadas

"...the work of the Mother will not suffer; because it has been built and up to date maintained upon truth, sincerity, and purity."

Swami Vivekananda, in a letter to Josephine MacLeod

There has been an enormous amount of material written about Swami Vivekananda's appearance at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. It seems to me that some errors and mistakes have crept into that body of literature, which needs to be discussed, and acted upon. If, after reading this paper, you feel that I have attacked or criticized Swamiji, the editors, authors, or publishers that have produced the books that are referred to, then I have failed to communicate my concerns or you have misunderstood me. I am aware of the great pains that have been taken to ensure that the books are factually correct, and I hope that this article will be seen as an attempt to continue that rigorous work and dedication to truth. Unless we acknowledge the errors, fully address them and take steps to insure that they are not repeated in future publications, we could be subject to unfavorable scrutiny by researchers outside of Vedanta.

Through the invention of microfilm and computers, as well as the improved accessibility to inter-library loan materials and large reference libraries, we have an unprecedented amount of historical data available to us. From time to time it becomes necessary to review what has been written in the past in light of that new material. While gathering information for an article on another topic, I happened to gain access to the microfilm files of *The New York Times*. The *Times* has their entire history of publication on microfilm, including the period of the Parliament of Religions, September 11th through September 27th, 1893. I thought it would be interesting to copy all the coverage of the Parliament and any other reference to Vedanta, Sri Ramakrishna, or Swami Vivekananda. What I found was so different from what I was expecting that I started to collect all the contemporary newspaper accounts of the Parliament that I could find. Most large public libraries have microfilms of local newspapers and sometimes national or even international papers. The newspapers or magazines that I found which carried at least one report of the Parliament include: *The New York Times*, *New York World*, *New York Daily Tribune*, *New York Herald*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Herald*, *Chicago Inter Ocean*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *San Francisco Morning Call*, *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, *Washington D.C. Star*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Evening Transcript*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Sacramento Record Union*, *Sacramento Daily Evening News*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Jose Daily Mercury*, *Palo Alto Times*, *Stockton Daily Independent*, *The Los Gatos News*, *The Critic*, *Review of Reviews* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*. There were also some papers which did not have any mention at all of the Parliament. In reviewing the reports of Swamiji at the Parliament, it is important to distinguish between newspaper accounts written at the time of the Parliament and newspaper reports or reminiscences that were given later.

Some of the material that I found stands in stark contrast with some of the published and well known stories of Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament. This could be the result of well meaning hyperbole, faulty memories, mis-quotes, or even innocent mistakes. I thought it might be useful to briefly review the story of Swamiji at the Parliament and then compare it to what was reported at the time of the Parliament or what can be verified by independent sources (the following has been taken, almost word for word, from books published by various Vedanta Societies or books written by Vedantists):

In Chicago, in September of 1893, Swami Vivekananda attended the Parliament of Religions. On the opening day he rose and spoke those now famous words, "Sisters and brothers of America..." The whole audience, seven thousand people, stood up to a man in response and continued cheering and waving wildly for several minutes. When it was over, hundreds of women walked over benches to get near him. The next day, all the papers lionized him as the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions and declared in their columns that his speech was the best. A picture was taken of the assembled speakers on the

huge platform, Swamiji can be seen in the front row, just to the right of the president. On Tuesday, September 19th, the Swami was slated to speak last, to give his paper on Hinduism. Because of his enormous popularity with the audience during the sessions, Swamiji was always held to the last in order to insure that the crowd would stay to the end. The people would sit from ten in the morning to ten at night, with only a recess of half an hour for luncheon, and listen to paper after paper in which most of them were not interested, to hear their favorite. Swamiji's paper on Hinduism was the most unique and prophetic utterance in the history of religions. The Swami's boldness of spirit and self-confidence is illustrated by an incident when, in the midst of his talk, he asked all those in the audience who had read the sacred books of the Hindus to raise their hands. Only three or four hands were raised. Glancing benignly over the assembly, the Swami raised himself to his full height, and as a rebuke, pronounced these simple words, "And yet you dare to judge us?" The press rang with his fame. The best known and most conservative of the metropolitan newspapers proclaimed him as a Prophet and a Seer, and wrote eloquently about Swami Vivekananda.

Though this account sounds very familiar, the problem is that much of it is just not true. Some of the mistakes have been pointed out in Marie Louise Burke's books, but a great many books that were published later continue to reproduce the errors. Let's do a sentence-by-sentence review of this account. I will try to identify the source of each statement, as well as give details of what can be found in books, newspapers, and magazines published at the time.

In Chicago in September of 1893 Swami Vivekananda attended the Parliament of Religions. On the opening day he rose and spoke those now famous words, "Sisters and brothers of America...". The whole audience, seven thousand people, stood up to a man in response and continued cheering and waving wildly for several minutes.¹

There are two sources for the figure of 7,000 people in the audience on opening day, one is Mrs. Blodgett, whose reminiscences were given long after the Parliament and who is quoted in many books; the other is Swamiji himself in a letter to Alasinga dated November 2, 1893 who wrote, "...a hall below and a huge gallery above packed with six or seven thousand men and women." It was reported in Barrow's *The World's Parliament of Religions* and the press, that the size of the audience was 4,000 on the opening day. Marie Louise Burke reports in *Swami Vivekananda in the West, Vol. 1*, on page 74 that the capacity of the Hall of Columbus "could accommodate some 3,000 people with standing room for at least a thousand more." There are two possible explanations for the discrepancy: one is that it is very difficult to estimate the size of an audience from the stage; the other is possible confusion with the audience size on those few days when both the Hall of Columbus and the Hall of Washington were in use after the third day of the Parliament. The combined audience was reported as up to 7,000 on those days.

Regarding the audience reaction, there are even inconsistencies within a single book. For instance, in *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, it is stated on page 417 that "hundreds rose to their feet with shouts of applause;" yet on page 418, the same book quotes Mrs. Blodgett, who recounted the story years later, as witnessing 7,000 people rising to their feet to give Swamiji the standing ovation. Barrow's *World's Parliament of Religions* does report that "there arose a peal of applause that lasted for several minutes" when Swamiji started his address. However, it is important to note, in the interest of balance, that other speakers were similarly acknowledged, including the Hon. Pung Kwang Yu of China. When he was introduced he "was greeted with such

¹AA pg 241, Hist pg 82, Life 5 pg 415 & 418, Swam pg 14.

manifestations of welcome, respect, and honor, as were surpassed in the case of no other speaker on the platform." The only references to the reaction of the audience I could find in newspapers, after searching many of the leading papers of the country, was in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Herald*, and the *Chicago Inter Ocean* which reported Swamiji's speech and mentioned that the applause lasted several minutes.

When it was over, hundreds of women walked over benches to get near him.²

The only mention of members of the audience walking over benches to greet a speaker that I could find, outside of Mrs. Blodgett's account, is reported in Barrow's *World* on page 116 that after Rev. Shibata's talk "Many rushed from the audience to the platform to extend their salutations..." This, of course, does not mean that it did not happen to Swamiji as well, but I am uncomfortable relying on one person's un-corroborated account, especially when that account can be shown to include other inaccuracies.

The next day, all the papers lionized him as the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions and declared in their columns that his speech was the best.³

To claim that all papers reported the same story is clearly exaggeration and is easily disproved. The source for this claim can be traced to a letter from Swamiji to Alasinga dated November 2nd, 1893. I have not been able to find a single paper (much less all the papers) that declares his speech the best. Swamiji spoke in the afternoon session of the first day, which is unfortunate because of the newspapers that did report on the Parliament, most only reported on the morning session, and therefore did not mention him at all. Out of the 30 papers I searched, including most of the leading papers of the nation at that time, I could only find three that had any mention of Swamiji's opening day speech. I can find no newspaper account, reported at the time of the Parliament, that can verify the claim that Swamiji was considered the most popular speaker or the "greatest figure in the Parliament." The only accounts that I could find, outside of Vedanta literature, that described Swamiji as "the most popular" or "the greatest favorite," were from newspaper clippings from the time of his lecture tours, as reported in New.

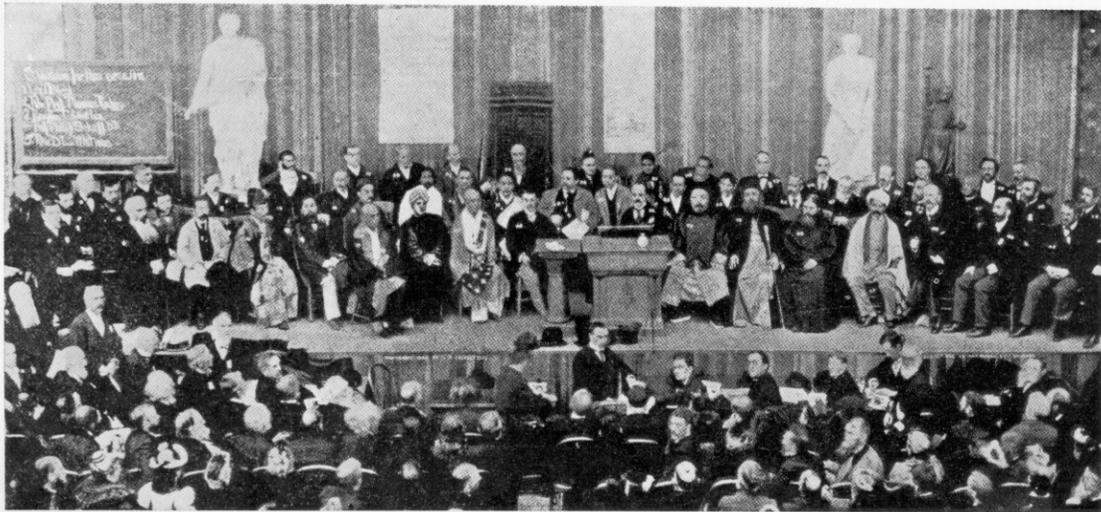
It is possible to conclude that the promoters of the tour had included this claim in their press releases. There is much material to suggest that Swamiji was considered one of the favorites, but only a few later references that single him out as the favorite. Judging by whose pictures were featured in the papers we can infer who the press focused on; the engraved likenesses of the speakers usually included Mr. Dharmapala, Cardinal Gibbons, or the Hon. Pung Kwang Yu. I could only find two likenesses of Swamiji that were published in newspapers at the time of the Parliament. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, for instance, pictured nine Oriental and Indian speakers but did not include Swamiji. This may have been due to Swamiji not being a pre-registered official delegate; the sponsors of the Parliament may have had engravings made up for the speakers prior to the beginning of the Parliament and sent them to the papers as part of a press release kit.

²Comp pg 462, Life5 pg 418, New pg 57, Rama pg 54, Teac pg xvi, What pg x. The only source for this statement that I could find is from the same devotee's account that claimed 7,000 people. Worl pg 116 reports that after Rev. Shibata's talk "Many rushed from the audience to the platform to extend their salutations..."

³Apos pg 44. Claims that Swamiji was the most popular include: Hist pg 84, New pg 68, Swam pg 37.

A picture was taken of the assembled speakers on the huge platform, Swamiji can be seen in the front row, just to the right of the president.⁴

The picture that is referred to can be found in the early editions of *Life of Swami Vivekananda Vol. 1*, and other places, but the picture does not, in fact, include Swamiji. Marie Louise Burke correctly points this out in her book *Swami Vivekananda in America New Discoveries* on page 83, but the picture has been used in Vedanta books even after that. There is, indeed, a man with a turban in the front row; but it is not Swamiji. In fact, upon magnification and comparison to the original photograph published in Barrow's *World*, it looks as though it has been touched up to look like Swamiji.



Session of the Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893

The fourth figure to the right of the President is Swami Vivekananda

From the *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2nd Edition, taken September 21, 1893



From *Life*



From Barrow's *History of the Parliament*

⁴Life pg 368, Rem photo on dust jacket. The photo was included on the dust jacket of Rem, published in 1964, even though New, published 6 years earlier in 1958, pointed out the problem. The photo was not included in Life5 which was published in 1979. Compare to photo in Worl next to the title page.

Narasimhacharya is identified by Marie Louise Burke in *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, Vol. 1 on page 134 as the figure in the photo on the right.

On Tuesday, September 19th, the Swami was slated to speak last, to give his paper on Hinduism. Because of his enormous popularity with the audience, Swamiji was always held to the last in order to insure that the crowd would stay to the end. The people would sit from ten in the morning to ten at night, with only a recess of half an hour for luncheon, and listen to paper after paper in which most of them were not interested, to hear their favorite.⁵

According to *Barrow's World*, which reported in detail on the sessions, the speakers, and sometimes the audience reaction Swamiji was actually the 10th out of 12 speakers on September 19th. He was the last speaker of the day only twice out of the 18 days of the Parliament: once to offer comments after the scheduled speaker, and again as a member of a panel discussion on Buddhism with 5 other speakers. Of the individual sessions held in the main hall (two or three were held each day), there were 42 opportunities to be the last speaker. Swamiji occupied that position two times beyond the talks mentioned above. It can be said that this was more often than any other speaker; Mr. Dharmapala was the last speaker only three times. Swamiji's speech at the closing day session was about in the middle of the group, 13th out of 24.

Swamiji's paper on Hinduism was the most unique and prophetic utterance in the history of religions.⁶

This is opinion stated as fact. I think we would be better off allowing readers to assess their own reactions to Swamiji's writings and that editorial comments should be presented as such, with reference to a source.

The Swami's boldness of spirit and self-confidence is illustrated by an incident when, in the midst of his talk, asked all those in the audience who had read the sacred books of the Hindus to raise their hands. Only three or four hands were raised. Glancing benignly over the assembly, the Swami raised himself to his full height, and as a rebuke, pronounced these simple words, "And yet you dare to judge us?"⁷

This is perhaps the most blatant mis-statement of fact. The claims for this story trace back to an entry in *Historians' History of the World* which related the incident without naming who had said the words. The incident was reported in detail the day after it happened in the *New York World*, the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, and later in *Barrow's World*, with two major differences: the person who rose to question the audience was Mr. Dharmapala, and he was asking how many had read about the life of Buddha.

The press rang with his fame. The best known and most conservative of the metropolitan newspapers proclaimed him as a Prophet and a Seer, and wrote eloquently about Swami Vivekananda.⁸

⁵Comp pg 473, Life pg 378. There are many Vedanta books that report this in various ways, but the numbers that I quoted are from *World* which detailed each speaker, in sequence, together with comments.

⁶Life pg 374. The only problem I have with this statement is that a non-Vedantist reading it would recognize the self promotion.

⁷Comp pg 479, Life pg 382.

⁸Life pg 379

The facts reveal that most papers carried very little about the Parliament beyond the opening morning session. I could only find a few major newspapers that even mention Swamiji. I think a more accurate statement would be that some of the best known and most conservative of the metropolitan newspapers condemned the Parliament for attempting to compare and give equal voice to religions other than Christianity. The example of the *New York Times* painfully demonstrates the resistance Swamiji had to overcome in this country. I found the *New York Times* coverage, attitude, and point of view shocking but not unique. The day the Parliament opened they ran what was most probably the press release from the organizers: three short paragraphs describing the event, then listing many of the delegates, but with no mention of Swamiji (since he was a last minute addition to the scheduled delegates). Eleven days later they ran an article headlined "Does Harm Instead of Good" in which a Christian minister denounced the Parliament and anyone who tried to compare their religion with Christianity. On the 22nd of September, 1893, they reported that at the Parliament an organization called the Brotherhood of Christian Unity had pushed for ministers to sign a pledge "to serve God and their fellow-men under the inspiration of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ," under the headline "Agree on Christ as a Model." Using the *Times* annual subject cross reference, I found that the next mention of the Parliament was a pleasant and lengthy review of Neely's *History of the Parliament of Religions*, again with no mention of Swamiji. Using the biographical cross-reference of the *Times*, I found that the first mention of Swami Vivekananda was on April 8, 1896. It was a review of his just-published *Karma Yoga* and, in my opinion, was one of the most vicious book reviews I have ever read (I won't reproduce it here as it is too sarcastic, poisonous and hateful to repeat). This from the best-known and conservative metropolitan paper of the day.

The order must continue its tradition to take all necessary steps to insure that what is contained in our books is only verifiable fact. As new information is made available, it must be considered, weighed and, if necessary, publish a correction of any past errors. Maintaining or defending the errors will only give our critics justifiable targets for their views. Whatever is the true view of Swamiji's greatness, or his impact at the Parliament, it should not be measured by newspaper accounts, or exaggerated reminiscences. As an expression of why I think it is important for us to address these issues, I will quote Sri Ramakrishna from his *Gospel*:

"It is said that truthfulness alone constitutes the spiritual discipline of the Kaliyuga. If a man clings tenaciously to truth he ultimately realizes God. Without this regard for truth, one gradually loses everything. If by chance I say that I will go to the pine-grove, I must go there even if there is no further need of it, lest I lose my attachment to truth. After my vision of the Divine Mother, I prayed to Her, taking a flower in my hands: 'Mother, here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me pure love. Here is Thy holiness and here is Thy unholiness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love.' I mentioned all these, but I could not say: 'Mother, here is Thy truth and here is Thy falsehood. Take them both.' I gave up everything at Her feet but could not bring myself to give up truth."

Abbreviations for books and periodicals referred to or researched for this paper:

His - Swami Vivekananda His Life and Legacy
Swami Tapasyananda
Third Impression
Published by Sri Ramakrishna Math 1988

Life - The Life of Swami Vivekananda
by His Eastern and Western Disciples Vol. 1
Second Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1933

New - Swami Vivekananda in America New Discoveries
Written by Marie Louise Burke
First Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1958

New1 - Swami Vivekananda in the West New Discoveries Vol. 1
Written by Marie Louise Burke
Third Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1983

Vivy - Vivekananda The Yogas and Other Works
Biography Written by Swami Nikhilananda
Revised First Edition
Published by Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York 1953

Shor - A Short Life of Swami Vivekananda
Swami Tejhasananda
16th Impression
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1993

Swam - Swami Vivekananda's Impact at the Parliament of Religions
Written by Swami Tathagatananda
First Edition
Published by Vedanta Society of New York 1993

Univ - The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel
Written by Romain Rolland Translated by E. F. Malcolm-Smith
12th Impression
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1992

AA - Abroad in America - Visitors to the New Nation 1776 - 1914
Chapter on Swami Vivekananda Written by C. B. Tripathi
First Edition
Published by the Smithsonian Institution 1976

Comp - A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda Part I
Written by Sailendra Nath Dhar
Published by Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra

Prop - Vivekananda Prophet of the New Age of India
First Edition
Written by T. Muttucumar
Published by the Ramakrishna Mission - Colombo

Neel - Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions
Written by F. T. Neely
Third Edition
Published by F. T. Neely 1893

Apos - The Apostles of Sri Ramakrishna
Compiled and Edited by Swami Gambhirananda
First Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1967

Hist - History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission
Written by Swami Gambhirananda
First Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1957

Life5 - The Life of Swami Vivekananda
by His Eastern and Western Disciples Vol. 1
Fifth Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1979

More - More About Ramakrishna
Written by Swami Prabhananda
First Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1993

Lett - Letters of Swami Vivekananda
Eighth Impression 1993
Published by Advaita Ashrama

Rem - Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda
by His Eastern and Western Admirers
Second Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1964

Teac - Teachings of Swami Vivekananda
Introduction by Christopher Isherwood
Seventh Edition
Published by Advaita Ashrama 1981

Vive - Vivekananda - A Biography
Written by Swami Nikhilananda
Paperback Edition
Published by Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of
New York 1989

Worl - The World's Parliament of Religions
Edited by Rev. John H. Barrows
First Edition
Published by The Parliament Publishing Co. 1893

Rama - Ramakrishna and His Disciples
Written by Christopher Isherwood
First Edition
Published by Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1965

Hisr - Swami Vivekananda A Historical Review
Written by R. C. Majumdar
Published by General Printers & Publishers 1965

Pnew - Prophets of the New India
Written by Romain Rolland
First Edition
Published by Albert & Charles Boni 1930

Cent - Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume
Editor R.C. Majumdar
Published by Swami Vivekananda Centenary 1963

Veda - Vedanta: Voice of Freedom
Edited by Swami Chetanananda
First Edition
Published by Philosophical Library, Inc. 1986

What - What Religion Is In The Words of Vivekananda
Edited by John Yale, Biographical Introduction by Christopher Isherwood
First Edition
Published by The Julian Press 1962

Newspapers and Periodicals

Trib - Chicago Tribune

Chicago Herald

Sgl - Saint Louis Daily Globe-Democrat

Sacu - Sacramento Daily Record Union

Dail - Sacramento Daily Evening News

Bee - Sacramento Bee

Nywo - New York World

Slo - Saint Louis Post Dispatch

Phil - The Philadelphia Inquirer

Sjmu - San Jose Daily Mercury

Crit - The Critic

Bost - Boston Evening Transcript

Atl - Atlanta Constitution

Wash - Washington Post

Balt - Baltimore Sun

Dawn - Dawn of Religious Pluralism
Edited by Richard H. Seager
First Edition
Published by Open Court 1993

Worc - The World's Congress of Religions
Edited by J. W. Hanson
First Edition
Published by International Publishing Co. 1894

Wash - Washington D.C. Star

Chicago Inter Ocean

Morn - San Francisco Morning Call

Lati - Los Angeles Times

Sfev - San Francisco Evening Bulletin

Sfex - San Francisco Examiner

Nyti - The New York Times

Fran - Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly

Lgne - Los Gatos News

Sfcr - San Francisco Chronical

Revi - Review of Reviews

Nytr - New York Daily Tribune

Palo - Palo Alto Time

Nyhe - New York Herald

Stockton Daily Independent