

## **A Brief History of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions and its Legacy**

**by the Reverend Lynnda White**

The period leading up to the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, its rarified guest list of the international religious elite and scholars of the day, its centennial resurrection, and its continued influence as the largest interfaith gathering in the world, is undervalued by the Unitarian Universalist Association, even unknown, by most Unitarian Universalists. This is particularly egregious because several prominent Unitarians and Universalists were instrumental as visionaries, organizers and contributors.

This paper will briefly touch on the social climate that prompted inclusion of a religious venue within a basically corporate pageant. It will examine the divergent paths of two Unitarians and a Universalist who were speakers and organizers of the Parliament: Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones (November 14, 1843 - September 12, 1918), leader of the Western Unitarian Conference; Rev. Augusta Jane Chapin, D.D. (July 16, 1836 - June 30, 1905), one of the first women in any denomination to be ordained; and Fannie (nee' Frances) Barrier Williams (February 12, 1855 - March 4, 1944), a prominent African American activist and member of Jones' All Souls Church in Chicago. Finally, it will argue for a participation of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the upcoming (2014) Parliament of World's Religions. The 1893 World's Columbian, also known as the Chicago World's Fair, was a commemoration of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus' discovery (sic) of America.

The 1890s were a time when Americans were undergoing the sometimes-painful shift from an agricultural to an industrial society, bombarded with images and the reality of technology, progress, and consumption. The Fair's official ideology was an

attempt in large part to assert a sense of America unity as a bulwark against the fear of change through pride in the country's accomplishments.<sup>1</sup>

Congress had appropriated ten million dollars to showcase America's technological and scientific marvels,<sup>2</sup> and there was concern about how the public would perceive spending:

As a response to fears that the Fair would unduly emphasize material advancements, a group of liberal Protestant clergymen headed by Charles C. Bonney, a Chicago educator and legal expert, developed plans for giving religion an “appropriate place” at the Exposition. Plans were established to promote a series of separate denominational religious conferences...These conferences would then culminate in a seventeen-day “World's Parliament of Religions”.<sup>3</sup>

Historian Charles H. Lyttle credits Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones and Rev. David Utter of First Unitarian Church in Chicago with expanding the paradigm of a Congress of the Christian denominations and to a Parliament that would invite religious leaders from across the globe. “They agreed that an exposition of the world’s material progress should be elevated by a presentation of the spiritual beliefs of the world's religions.”<sup>4</sup> Utter left Chicago before the Exposition, and Jones executed one of his crowning achievements:

Jones arranged to bring together a large representation of the world's religious leaders in a meeting that bespoke a brotherhood that could transcend theological and cultural differences. It was one of the most notable expressions of the growing hunger among Unitarians for international cooperation...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Julie K. Rose, *World's Columbian Exposition: Reactions to the Fair*. 2006.  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma96/wce/reactions.html>

<sup>2</sup> William Dinges, *Parliament of the World's Religions*, Chicago: Part I. Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. Bulletin 2. (Feb. 1978) <<http://mpnasticcialogue.com/a.phd?id=4&t=p>>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West, A History of the Western Unitarian Conference*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), P.205.

<sup>5</sup> David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985). P. 170.

Lyttle asserts, "... the magnitude of the conception, of its execution, and of its success made it the crowning event of the great Exposition.<sup>6</sup> Even though the original concept was Jones', and he was a known organizer, he was not appointed chair of the general committee. Perhaps his reputation as an activist and a radical precluded his appointment to the chair: In 1870, Jones became the full-time missionary secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference (WUC)<sup>7</sup> and was both a charismatic and an irritant in the Unitarian movement. "...[A]lthough Jones was the most powerful western figure in the denomination, he encountered friction from the American Unitarian Association (AUA) because of his independent course and friction with WUC because of his theological radicalism."<sup>8</sup>

The Exposition's top officials wanted "To avoid any possible boycott of the Parliament and its ancillary Congresses..."<sup>9</sup>, therefore the role of chairman of the general committee of the first World's Parliament of Religions was assigned to Rev. John Henry Barrows, pastor of Chicago's First Presbyterian Church, rather than to Jones, who was appointed its secretary.<sup>10</sup> Even though he did not have the prestigious position of chair, Jones is viewed as largely responsible for the success of that first international religious parliament;"... although to Jones' kindling enthusiasm the idea owed its realization, and to his executive ability was due

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<sup>6</sup> Charles H. Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West, A History of the Western Unitarian Conference*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952.) P.205.

<sup>7</sup> David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. (West Port, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985,) P.170.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Charles H. Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West, A History of the Western Unitarian Conference*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952.) P. 205.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

the efficient performance of most of its administrative duties.”<sup>11</sup> In his farewell benediction to the Parliament participants, Jones acknowledged his contribution to the gathering’s success:

I had rather be a housekeeper in this open house of the Lord than to dwell in the tents of bigotry. I am sufficiently happy in the knowledge that I have been enabled to be to a certain extent the feet of this great triumph. I stand before you tonight with my brain addled, with my voice a good deal demoralized, with my heels somewhat blistered, but with my heart warm and loving and happy<sup>12</sup>.

Indeed, there was much for Jones and Parliament officials to celebrate. First of all, the Parliament had met some of the goals projected in the 1891 preliminary address by the General Committee. Briefly stated, the ten objectives were to:<sup>13</sup>

1. Bring the world religious leaders together for the first time in history.
2. Show the universal truths taught and held in common in the various religions.
3. Promote and deepen brotherhood (sic) among religious men (sic) of diverse faiths without trying to create a universal religion religious.
4. Declare the most important and distinctive truths held and taught by each religion and by the various Christian branches.
5. Indicate the “impregnable foundations of Theism”<sup>14</sup> and fight against materialistic philosophy.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jenkin Lloyd Jones, ed, *A Chorus of Faith, as Heard in the Parliament of Religions Held in Chicago*, Sept. 10-27, 1893. (Chicago: The Unity Publishing Company, 1893). P. 304.

<sup>13</sup> Joas Adiprasetya, *The 1893 World Parliament of Religions*, 2004  
<[http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt\\_themes?707\\_worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes?707_worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm)>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

6. Secure accurate statements of the spiritual effects of religion on literature, art, commerce, government, domestic and social life.
7. Inquire what inspiration each religion has to offer the other religions of the world
8. Create an accurate and authoritative account of the present condition and outlook of religion among the leading nations of the earth.
9. Discover what light religious religion sheds on the great problems of the present age: temperance, labor, education, wealth and poverty.
10. "...bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship, in the hope of securing permanent international peace."<sup>15</sup>

Some of the objectives are hyperbolic and cannot be measured, but it is clear that the 1893 World Parliament of Religions legacies continue to inform the religious landscape of the twenty-first century. Boston University Th.D Candidate Joas Adiprasetya purports that "the religious situation in America"<sup>16</sup> was transformed forever by the first Parliament in four ways. First and second are impetus towards study of comparative religions, especially in academia, and appreciation of religious pluralism.<sup>17</sup> Also, even though it failed to spawn immediate, large-scale interreligious dialogue, "the Parliament is usually considered the cradle of interfaith movement"<sup>18</sup> , and according to Diane Eck,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Joas Adiprasetya, *The 1893 World Parliament of Religions*, 2004  
[http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt\\_themes?707\\_worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes?707_worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Harvard Divinity School professor, it was the beginning of America's ecumenical movement:

It was not really a world event except in intention and vision. It was planned by American Christians, mostly Protestants and it could easily be seen as one of the opening events of the modern Christian ecumenical movement as the first act in the modern interreligious movement. Finally, the first Parliament is perceived to have modern respect for the non-Christian faith in a manner that influenced missionaries to be more respectful and appreciative of people in other traditions and cultures. In addition, the transcontinental sojourns to America burgeoned into a wave of missionary exchange from the east. What is fascinating is that the parliament has opened the gate widely for the leaders from other religions to do their own missions to the West, especially to America. Among the missionaries from the east were several important figures. Gates were opened also for others who would not normally have been welcomed to appear on the world stage. It is possible the gate keeper was Jenkin Lloyd Jones who was a pacifist, pro-feminist, anti-slavery and universal in his endeavors of inclusiveness.

Jones encouraged women of the West to go into ministry (one group became known as the Iowa Sisterhood") and he fought for women's right to vote, calling himself "America's aboriginal suffragist."<sup>19</sup> According to an article in *New Essays in Religious Naturalism*, some of the most influential women of the day assumed substantial participation and leadership roles:

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<sup>19</sup> Cathy Tauscher and Peter Hughes, *Jenkin Lloyd Jones. Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*. Unitarian Universalist Historical Society. <<http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/jekinlloydjones.html>>

Frances Willard and Julia Ward Howe were delegates; Elizabeth Cady Stanton contributed a paper which (sic) was read by Susan B. Anthony, Mary Baker Eddy sent a paper. Rev. Ida C. Hutlin, Lady Henry Somerset, Rev. Anna G. Spencer (Providence), Jeanne Sorabji (Bombay), Henrietta Szold, Rev. Olympia Brown, Alice C. Fletcher (Cambridge MA), Fannie Barrier Williams (Chicago), Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell (Elizabeth, NJ), Mrs. Celia Parker Wooley (Geneva, IL), Lydia Fuller Dickinson, Laura Ormiston Chant, Dr. Elizabeth P. Sunderland, Josephine Lazarus, Rev. Annis F.F. Eastman, Rev. Marion Murdock all appeared on the program.<sup>20</sup>

Although this list is not comprehensive (for instance, Augusta Jane Chapin is not mentioned), it is a testimony to Unitarian and Universalist women of the time that they were so well known as religious leaders. Of the eighteen prominent women listed, eleven were Unitarians or Universalist; Susan B. Anthony, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Olympia Brown, Annis F.F. Eastman, Julia Ward Howe, Ida C. Hutlin, Anna G. Spencer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Marian Spurdock, Celia Parker Wooley and Fannie Barrier Williams.<sup>21</sup>

### **Reverend Augusta Jane Chapin**

By virtue of her reputation and accomplishments on behalf of Universalism and women, Rev. Augusta Jane Chapin D.D., was charged with chairing the Parliament's Women's Committee of Organizations. She was one of the first women ordained in ministry, an educator, and the first woman to sit on the Council of the General Convention of Universalists.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> W. Creighton Peden, Larry E. Axel, ed, *New Essays in Religious Naturalism*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1994), P. 164. <<http://books.google.com/books?id=nOSNCwDO2sC&pg=PA164&10g-PA164&dq=eliza+p.+sunderland&source=bl&ots=c4QP31WjB>>

<sup>21</sup> *List of Prominent UU's* from UUA site at [www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/](http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/)<<http://pbisotopes.ess.sunysb.edu/UU-history/uua-list-personna.PDF>>

<sup>22</sup> Beverly Bumbaugh, *Augusta Jane Chapin. Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*. Unitarian Universalist Historical Society. <<http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/augustajanechapin.html>>

She was active in the Temperance movement, was a founding member of the Association for the Advancement of Women and was a lecturer in literature for extension programs for Lombard College and the University of Chicago...By her example of accomplishment, she helped to establish a female presence in Universalist leadership and to make that denomination well known for its hospitality to the women's movement.<sup>23</sup>

Chapin was invited to speak at the opening session of the Parliament to acknowledge the services of women who worked to organize the religious congresses and again in the closing ceremony. Speaking of the technological and theological trajectory that made the unprecedented meeting of minds possible, her opening salvo declared advances in women's rights and educational opportunities:

The world's first Parliament of Religions could not have been called sooner and have gathered the religionists of all these lands together. We had to wait for the hour to strike, until the steamship, the railway and the telegraph had brought men together, leveled their walls of separation made them acquainted with each other – until scholars had broken the way through the pathless wilderness of ignorance, superstition and falsehood, and compelled them to respect each other's honesty, devotion, and intelligence. A hundred years ago the world would not have been ready for this parliament. Fifty years ago it could not have been convened, and had it been called a single generation ago one half of the religious world could not have been directly represented...Woman could not have had a part in it of her own right for two reasons: one that her presence would not have been thought of or tolerated, and the other was that she herself was too weak, too timid and [too] unschooled to avail herself of such opportunity had it been offered.<sup>24</sup>

### **Fannie Barrier Williams**

Fannie Barrier Williams was extraordinary in her own right and a woman who knew how to garner opportunities out of meager circumstances. She was a teacher, social activist, clubwoman, lecturer and journalist, who worked for social justice, civil liberties, education,

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<sup>23</sup> David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. (West Port, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985,) P.231.

<sup>24</sup> John Henry Barrows, ed, *The World's Parliament of Religions, Vol I and Vol II*, (Chicago: Parliament Publishing House, 1893). P.82. <<http://books.google.com/books?id=rBiAsWWW5-QC&pg-PR6#v=onepage&q&f=false>>



and employment opportunities, especially for Black women.<sup>25</sup> Already a well-known activist, Barrier Williams won further recognition when she battled for African American representation at the Columbian Exposition. She was successful in garnering two staff positions for African Americans, and she was appointed “Clerk in charge of Colored Interests” in the Department of Publicity and Promotions.<sup>26</sup>

Fannie Barrier Williams was distinguished as the only African American of either gender to be asked to speak at “two of the most important of a myriad of International conferences at the fair.” For the first speech entitled, *What Can Religion Further Do to Advance the Condition of the American Negro?* Barrier Williams was introduced by the Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones who said, “The president has afforded me the privilege of presenting to you the next speaker, my friend, helper and parishioner; one whose heart is in sympathy with all that is helpful.” Barrier Williams attacked illiberal Christians and their bigotry:

Believing as we all do, that saving power of religion pure and simple transcends all other forces that make for righteousness in human life, it is not too much to believe that when such a religion becomes a part of the breath and life, not only of the colored people, but of all the people in the country, there will be no place or time for the reign of prejudice and injustice. More of religion and less of church may be accepted as a general answer to this question... the home of and social life of these people are in urgent need of purifying power of religion. In nothing was slavery so savage and so relentless as in its attempted destruction of family instinct of the Negro (sic) race in America. Individuals not families, shelters not homes, herding not marriage, were the cardinal sins in that system of horrors. Religion should not utter itself only once or twice a week through a minister from a pulpit, but should open every cabin door and get immediate contact with those who have not yet learned to translate into terms of conduct the promptings of religion...There is yet another important need of religion in behalf of our advancement. In nothing do the American

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<sup>25</sup> June Edwards, Fannie Barrier Williams, Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography. Unitarian Universalist Historical Society. <<http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/fanniebarrierwilliams.html>>

<sup>26</sup> Fannie Barrier Williams, Western New York Suffragists, Biographies and Images. (Rochester, New York: Rochester Regional Library Council, 2000). <<http://www.winningthevote.org/F-FBWilliams.html>>

people so contradict the spirit of their religion as they do in practically denying to our colored men and women the full rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is a monstrous thing that nearly one-half the so-called evangelical churches of this country, those situated in the South repudiate fellowship to every Christian man and woman who happens to be of African descent. The golden rule of fellowship taught in the Christian Bible becomes in practice the iron rule of hatred...What we need is such a reinforcement of gentle power of religion that all souls of whatever color shall be included within the blessed circle of influence.<sup>27</sup>

Fannie Barrier Williams' oration echoed through Parliament Hall on the thirteenth day of the World's Parliament of Religions, which had commenced September 11, 1893, and concluded on September 27, 1893. Rev. Augusta Jane Stanton's speeches were parenthetical, occurring on the first and the last days of the plenary sessions. Within those two dates, one hundred fifty-two (152) representatives, mostly English-speaking Christians, delivered one hundred ninety-four (194) papers.<sup>28</sup>

The opportunity for the leaders from other religious traditions was limited but significant; 12 speakers represented Buddhism, 11 Judaism, 8 Hinduism, 2 Islam, 2 Parsis religion, 2 Shintoism, 2 Confucianism, 1 Taoism, and one Jainism (Seager 1986, 876). Among them, Swami Vivekananda's three speeches undoubtedly drew most attention from the American public.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most memorable speakers from "the other religious traditions" was Swami Vivekananda. Barrows wrote that:

Swami Vivekananda, of Bombay, India was next introduced. When Swami Vivekananda addressed the audience as "sisters and brothers of America" they went into rapture with a peal of applause that lasted for several minutes. He spoke as follows:

...It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us... My thanks, also, to some of the speakers on this

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<sup>27</sup> John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions, an illustrated and popular story of the World's first parliament of religions, held in Chicago in connection with the Columbian exposition of 1893* (Google eBook). (Chicago: Parliament Publishing House, 1893.) P. 1114-15, <http://books.google.com/books?id=rBuAsWWW5-QC&pg=PR6#v=onepage&q&f=false>

<sup>28</sup> Joas Adiprasetya. *The 1893 World Parliament of Religions*, 2004. [http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/coursesmwt/dictionary/mwt\\_themes\\_707\\_worldparliament\\_ofreligions1893.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/coursesmwt/dictionary/mwt_themes_707_worldparliament_ofreligions1893.htm)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

platform who have told you that these men from far-off nations may well claim the honor of bearing to the different lands the idea of toleration... We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions to be true. I am proud to tell you that I belong to a religion into whose sacred language, the Sanskrit, the word exclusion is untranslatable.<sup>30</sup>

The Parliament of the World's Religion reconvened in Chicago in 1993, one hundred years after the World's Fair Exposition, and has been mobilized every five years since then. A century ago, the phenomenon that brought together Swami Vivekananda's gracious words and presence, as well as Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Augusta Jane Chapin, Fannie Barrier Williams', and other Parliament participants', struck a chord that may not have been fully appreciated at its inception, but which reverberates with urgency into the twenty-first century.

### **Personal Reflection: Participation in the Next Parliament of the World Religions**

Where in the world can thousands of people of more than two hundred religions come together in harmony to express on a monumental scale, their wishes for peace, for fairness, and for interreligious dialogue: the Parliament of the World's Religions. The genesis of the Parliament movement was the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, which was home to the first World's Parliament of Religions. Unfortunately, most Unitarian Universalists have no knowledge of the Parliament of World Religions, nor do they realize how instrumental Unitarians and Universalists were in creating and planning the first event to bring together leading religious leaders from across the globe.

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<sup>30</sup> John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions, an illustrated and popular story of the World's first parliament of religions, held in Chicago in connection with the Columbian exposition of 1893* (Google eBook). (Chicago: Parliament Publishing House, 1893.) P. 101-102  
<http://books.google.com/books?id=rBuAsWWW5-QC&pg=PR6#v=onepage&q&f=false>>

Individuals from my home church, Universalist Unitarian Church of Peoria, have attended each of the four Parliaments organized after 1893. We believe that Unitarian Universalist participation in the next Parliament is important to our movement and that we have much to offer the world. I have attended two Parliaments of the World's Religions, first Barcelona, Spain, in 2004, then Melbourne, Australia in 2009, and I came home energized and ready to focus on issues within my community and to work for change; I believe that the Parliament is a means not an end. That is, the goal is not simply to attend, but is also to parlay the Parliament into a tool that subverts the tendency for liberal religion to speak peace and not to act. In fact, Unitarian Universalists are missing opportunities to be contributors on the world stage of religious activism.

In Melbourne the International Council of Unitarian and Universalists (ICUU) provided one seminar and sponsored a small booth, but there was no American presence. It is my contention that the Unitarian Universalist Association should contribute to making our religious philosophy more prominent in future Parliaments:

- We should be part of the decision-making regarding areas of concern to be addressed on a worldwide basis.
- We should be recognized as natural facilitators by virtue of our understanding and acceptance of other faiths.
- We should be talking about Universalism.
- We should know our history.
- We should advocate for religious and irreligious pluralism.

In a lecture of Liberal Theology, Dr. Michael Hoge, Assistant Professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, Illinois, said, "The most important moral task of our time is to

experiment with pluralism.” I remember thinking that this statement was another argument in support of efforts to convince the Unitarian Universalist Association to take an active role in promoting the Parliament of the World's Religions and participating in the next international event. The comment parallels of sentiment expressed by His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, in the closing ceremony of the 2009 Parliament. Several years prior to his appearance, the Dalai Lama had said that there shall be no peace on earth until there is peace among the religions. Subsequently, speaking before an audience of several thousand people at the Melbourne, Australia Parliament he expanded inclusivity. His Holiness said that any talk of peace must include the *religious and the irreligious too*. Then he bade us all to go back into the world and work to change it. In effect, his call for intervention is radicant; the stem is the Parliament and the organism sets its roots into motion through the heterogenous commitments of all those who foment change by interrupting oppression, not by insisting that the press needs to change their identities to match ours.

Participation in the Parliament of the World Religions is an opportunity that should be taken seriously and considered wisely.