

## [Can We Stop Religious Conflict?](#)

Category : [November 1993](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 1993

# Can We Stop Religious Conflict?

In 1893, when Swami Vivekananda wandered the wide streets of Chicago, the raw frontier prairie town proudly called itself the world's hog butcher, having just outgrown its minor trading post status. But now it was to host the World's Columbian Exhibition celebrating the 400th year of Columbus' discovery of the Americas. It was also to become the home of the first-ever interfaith gathering. The Hindu holy man didn't know a single soul in Chicago. He had lost his hosts' address and found the newfangled telephone system beyond his ken. Sleeping in cold box cars, sitting like an impoverished sadhu on the roadside, praying to Mother Kali for guidance, finding all his money spent, seeking inner power to carry out his guru's directive, the orange-robed mendicant from India was one of a kind in the brawling, sprawling mid-American city. But Vivekananda held firm to his guru's orders to "carry Vedanta to the West." He was determined to succeed. And succeed he did, roaring like a lion at that first assembly of all faiths. He disarmed them with his knowledge, his love of Hinduism's tolerant ways and his eloquent depiction of a faith they knew dimly until they confronted its embodiment in this 30-year-old monk, wise beyond his years. One hundred years later, at the second Parliament of the World's Religions (PWR) held from August 28th to September 5th, Chicago had changed. Hog butchering had moved to Kansas City, and the city was now a multi-cultural, multi-racial sophisticate known for its medical, industrial and pharmaceutical empires-and its warm heart.

Something else was different at this second parliament, held in one of the venerable buildings of that earlier era, the posh Palmer House Hilton. That single saffron robe of 1893 had turned to hundreds in 1993. A few Eastern souls had turned to thousands. There in the crowded halls, mingling with the indigenous American Indians whose land this once was, jostling shoulder-to-shoulder with the Christian and Jewish leaders who came to the country later, there in that oh-

so-mid-American town were the new-comers.

The Jains were there in abundance, alongside the Sikhs and Buddhists and Hindus. The Hindu Host Committee, working tirelessly for two full years, had the finest booth in the exhibition hall, published the only souvenir and art poster and orchestrated the week's complex agenda. Hindu spiritual leaders they inspired to come included H.H. Chidananda Saraswati, Mata Amritanandamayi, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, Swami Satchidananda, Swami Chidananda (Muniji), Sri Chinmoy, Swami Gahananda, Sant Keshvadas, Chandra Swami Maharaj, Dada Vasvani, Sushree Meera Devi, Lakshmi Kumari, H.H. Balagangadharanatha Swami, Uma Bharati, Bala Shiva Yogeendra-

too many to even list. To that must be added academic luminaries: Dr. Karan Singh, Dr. Adwaita Ganguly, Dr. Madhusudhan Reddy, Dr. S.N. Subbha Rao, Dr. Shakuntala Pattivardhan, Prof. Rama Rao Pappu, Dr. Arvind Sharma, Sudputa Dasa and Dr. Vedavyas.

No one could ignore the Eastern presence. It was not understated, modest or subtle. This had become a kind of indoor Chicago Mela. White robes of the Sikhs, the Brahma Kumaris and Jains, red and yellow garments of Tibetan Buddhists, muted grey gowns of Zen Buddhists, ochre vestments of Indian yogis and saffron robes everywhere. Howard Darkin, a minister from Ohio, effused, "The Hindus made this parliament happen!"

The Emerging Pluralism: There was a third change in Chicago. Whereas the 1893 PWR had a decidedly Christian flavor and purpose (the Associated Press said Christians came to that event seeking converts), this one did not. There was a far more genuine sharing and a true tolerance that transcended the reluctant toleration of a century ago. Whereas the first Parliament resulted in the acceptance into mainstream American religiosity of the Catholics and Jews who had stood on the sidelines, this second parliament was a recognition of other traditions, especially the Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists. Until now, these have remained peripheral to the American experience. It was also a recognition of the Muslim presence in the US, which has grown to 4.5 million (6 million is the Islamic count), making it the third largest faith in the US, right behind the 6 million-strong Jewish community.

The Parliament was dramatic proof of the emerging pluralism in America. Ten years ago a mid-Westerner's only encounter with Hinduism was at the O'Hare Airport where dancing devotees sold incense, chanting "Hare Rama, Hare Krishna." Now, it is more likely their heart surgeon is a Hindu, or the engineering student next door.

In terms of the proportions of college graduates, Hindus and Buddhists joined Jews, Episcopalians and Presbyterians as the five most highly educated religious groups in America, the survey showed. Some 300 Buddhist temples have been built in the Los Angeles area alone; in Chicago, Thai Buddhists outnumber Episcopalians. Like Catholic and Jewish groups before them, many of the new minority religions until recently devoted nearly all their attention to caring for new immigrants. They are now starting to form national organizations that will join public policy debates. The Muslim World Council, the Hindu Temple Association of North America and the American Buddhist Congress are all less than five years old.

Harmony: In essence, the Parliament revolved around 600 world spiritual leaders and dignitaries gathered to share their path with over 6,500 participants. The numbers alone were an incredible success, and could have surged to ten thousand had not the fire department put a stop to registrations. Clearly, this is a grassroots movement of profound interest to a broad spectrum of people. Despite heavy North American representation, participants came from every continent, and will carry the message back to their communities. Much was said of interfaith harmony and understanding. Indeed, if one could sum the entire week in a key concept it would be that conflict based on religion should and must cease, that religion should be a force of compassion and not destruction, of healing and not hurting. There were many voices giving expression to that thought and countless prayers for a more humane human future.

There was lots of talk, probably too much, about how religions are alike in their call for love and harmony, and too little discussion of why so many bitter engagements around the world are triggered by religious differences. There was also too much talk about the oneness at the heart of all religions, a concept that the Dalai Lama termed "hypocrisy." He preferred to speak of the value of the differences, even the necessity of differences, which he considers serve nations and peoples of different temperaments. Some of the strongest voices heard stressed the Dalai Lama's view-religions are different. The objective is not to make them similar, but to learn to work creatively and effectively with those differences.

There was a remarkable selection of high-level events (see sidebar below), but somehow the hallways proved the real meeting ground. Miles of ornate hallway along which seekers cruised-greeting, meeting, gawking, photographing, exchanging addresses. It all, at least the important part, seemed to happen in the halls: TV camera crews, radio interviews, promotion of ideas, sharing of experiences, encounters with old friends. Around any corner or waiting for the elevator you could meet spiritual leaders from any of 40 major faiths and 200 sects

and paths. There were healers, prophets, avatars, gurus and visionaries. Inside the chambers were the seminars, lectures, panels, inspirational readings and discourses on all the spiritual traditions. One could find every expression of the divine known to man-or so it seemed. A Spiritual United Nations: Everyone who attended the Parliament asked the same questions: Why are we here? Will it be another 100 years before the next one? Will it make any difference in our increasingly conflict-ridden world? Most seemed optimistic and determined to not wait another century for the next such gathering. There was talk of meeting every five or ten years.

One of the most significant achievements of the PWR was the nomination of a core group of the most influential religious leaders, a small assembly of twenty-five representatives called "presidents" [See list on page 13]. Each faith had one or more. This group met privately every afternoon for three days, getting to know one another personally, sharing problems, proposing solutions and discussing the emerging Global Ethic, the PWR legacy and key statement 90% eventually signed.

The three presidents representing Hinduism are Amritanandamayi Ma (the Kerala Holy Mother), H. H. Swami Chidananda Saraswati (president of the Divine Life Society) and Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami (our own publisher and spiritual leader of Saiva Siddhanta Church). Ms. Avanthi Gutta said of them, "These spiritual presidents all have very large followings both in India and internationally. They are accepted as truly self-realized souls and pragmatic instructors who will not only propagate interfaith dialog but also lead Hindus into a new era."

The core group of presidents expressed a hope to meet regularly in different parts of the world. The Rockefeller Foundation and the Hinduja Foundations (represented in Chicago by S.P. Hinduja and his brother Prakash who sponsored various Hindu gatherings, including a breakfast for 300) teamed up to explore financing on-going structures, perhaps even annual sessions for the top assembly leaders.

Still, the question remains whether real changes can be expected even from such an elite assemblage of souls-all of whom have the good of humanity in their hearts. One possibility is that assembly members might form a "spiritual United Nations." It might work something like this: whenever a conflict arose anywhere in the world fueled by religious intolerances, the group would gather and bring to bear their collective moral and ecclesiastical weight to seek peaceful resolution. They would draw upon the ideals contained in the Global Ethic. In effect, they would act as a

spiritual sheriff, working with religious authorities under them (a highly theoretical scenario to be sure) to stop fighting, thus demonstrating that religion can be a source of harmony and not harm.

A more certain result will come from the sharing, such as e-mail connections some leaders have established. Just seeing so many expressions of religion different from their own is itself therapeutic for those who have lived their entire life among their own members, understanding little of what others hold sacred. It's harder to call your neighbor a heathen once you see she is as devout and deeply knowledgeable in her faith as you are in yours.

Then, too, the watching world will see that leaders are more open to hearing one another than ever before, willing to travel long distances to meet in the name of unity in diversity. Such perceptions are powerful catalysts for change. If people feel their leaders are open, tolerant, loving and more interested in concord than conquest, then religion itself may regain the place of veneration and virtue it once held, long ago.

Not All Sweetness and Light: Almost from the start there were tensions. On Sunday, August 29th a shouting match delayed one session. It erupted when a Sikh from Punjab, India, spoke of the persecution of members of his faith. Several protesters were led out of the ballroom while many sought to preserve unity by singing the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome." On Monday, the Orthodox Christian Host Committee withdrew to protest the presence of neo-

pagan groups, including witches. "It would be inconceivable for Orthodox Christianity to establish a perceived relationship with groups which profess no belief in God or a supreme being," the Orthodox community said. Later, four Jewish organizations withdrew, protesting the appearance of Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan. Parliament officials portrayed the tensions as an almost unavoidable result of such a diverse gathering.

At a public closing ceremony on September 4th, each president offered a prayer and the Dalai Lama, exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader, urged that different religions must work together for the benefit of humanity. "Is it possible? My answer is definitely yes, yes, yes," he said to sustained applause from 20,000 people

gathered at Grant Park on Lake Michigan. n

With reports from S.S. Bhatt, ChicagoA Plethora of Parleys

Panels and Pow-Wows: Structurally, the conference was eight days of spiritually rich presentations: major events in grand ballrooms and minor encounters in conference chambers. The challenge for participants was deciding which sessions to attend. Imagine yourself in your hotel room trying to make choices between all these events happening at the same time:

"Human Unity and the Spiritual Religion of Humanity" Dr. R.L. Kashyap

"Loving God: The Real Foundation for Social Change" Baba Virsa Singh

"Cry of the Earth: Vision and Work of Sri Aurobindo" C.V. Devan Nair

"Renewal of the Covenant" Rabbi Greenberg

"Human Rights and Islam" Shaikh Kamel Al-Sharif

"Wiccan Wisdom and Environmental Crisis " Phillis Curott

"Spiritual Unity and Global Harmony" Swami Satchidananda

"Multi-Cultural Vision of the 21st Century" Dr. L.M. Svinghvi

"The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man" Sadhu Vasvani

"Byzantine Church History" Rev. James Jorgenson

Those are just half of the major options one morning. Add to that the more plentiful secondary seminars, lectures and happenings and you begin to sense the almost ridiculous richness of encounters available at the PWR.

"I fervently hope the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal."

Swami Vivekananda-Parliament of the World's Religions

Chicago, September 11, 1893 Speaking Out in Chicago

The message that all faiths brought to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago was one of harmony and mutual respect. Here we offer a report from the Hindu Host Committee, quotations from our attending leaders and an introduction to the three great souls appointed as Hindu "presidents."

The Hindu Host Committee represented our glorious Hinduism by organizing over fifty presentations and workshops by academic and spiritual leaders from India and elsewhere during the eight-day interfaith extravaganza. The cultural segment of the Parliament was also dramatically represented by most religions in India. Local artists and their students were joined by internationally renowned performers to enliven the event.

All Hindus can truly be proud of their representation at the Parliament and of the Hindu Host Committee. The principles espoused by Hinduism, or as it is also referred, Sanathana Dharma (Eternal Religion), were literally the cornerstone in preparing the Global Ethic statement (see page 16), signed by over two hundred spiritual leaders from over forty religions.

The Hindu Host Committee has nineteen committees with over fifty active members. Ms. Avanthi Gutta, Executive Coordinator and Chairperson of the Cultural Committee, had this to say, "I cannot even begin to describe the monumental work that was undertaken. Raising funds has always been difficult, but human effort does not have a price tag. With so much global unrest and misery in the name of religion, it is our duty to work together. Our members and volunteers have come through with shining colors."

"We are the only committee of all the participating religions to release an art print and handsome souvenir booklet to commemorate this event," stated Dr. Krishna Reddy. "Our poster (right) was designed by renowned artist Lakshmi Narayan. And we were fortunate to have Ms. Sandya Nayudamma to chair the souvenir committee. The souvenir has over twenty original and previously unpublished articles by spiritual figures. It also contains the last writings of H.H. Swami Chinmayananda. We predict that the souvenir will become a collector's item."

The exhibit booth that represented the Hindu culture and religion was a prominent spot in the exhibit hall. The over eight-foot-tall gopuram structure was a highlight and perhaps the most photographed feature of the entire area. Dr. Krishna Reddy adds, "I urge our community to become more involved so that at the next Parliament we will have greater support and representation. I hope all interested people will contact myself or Ms. Avanthi Gutta for information or write us at P.O. Box 1007, Oak Brook, IL 60522."

## ART POSTER AND SOUVENIR BOOK

## ORDERING INFORMATION:

Souvenir: USA, \$10 plus shipping/handling \$1.50; Great Britain, \$7.00; India, \$9.00. Parliament art poster: At right is shown souvenir-book version of the poster. Poster version is almost identical, 2'X3,' with lavender hues of a spiraling lotus with earth emerging from an Aum symbol. US\$12.50 plus shipping/handling \$4.00; Great Britain, \$6.50; India, \$8.00 . For bulk orders, distribution discounts or further information, send written inquiry to the Hindu Host Committee, P.O. Box 1007, Oak Brook, IL 60521. Make checks payable to: Council for a Parliament of World's Religions. Mail to above address. Allow 4-5 weeks for delivery.

25 Men and Women

To Represent Our Many

Spiritual Paths

Here is the complete list of the special men and women selected in Chicago to represent the major traditions, with Eastern leaders followed by Western

Brahma Kumari Dadi Prakashmani

India \* Brahma Kumaris

Mata Amritanandamayi

India \* Hindu

Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne

Sri Lanka \* Buddhist (Theravada)

H.E. Dr. L.M. Singhvi

United Kingdom \* Jain (Shwetambar)

H.H. Swami Chidananda Saraswati

India \* Hindu

H.H. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

U.S.A. \* Hindu

H.H. The Dalai Lama

India \* Buddhist (Vajrayana)

Rev. Chung Ok Lee

U.S.A. \* Buddhist (Mahayana)

Singh Sahib Jathedar Manjit Singh

India \* Sikh

Madame Nana Apeadu

Ghana \* Indigenous

Mr. Alfred Yazzie

U.S.A. \* Native American (Navajo)

Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.

U.S.A. \* Christian (Roman Catholic)

Rabbi Herman Schaalman

U.S.A. \* Jewish (Reform)

Rev. Marcus Braybrooke

United Kingdom \* Christian (Anglican)

Hon. Syed Shahabuddin

India \* Muslim (Sunni)

Dr. Asad Husain

U.S.A. \* Muslim

Dr. Wilma Ellis

U.S.A. \* Bah[?]'[?]

Prof. Susannah Heschel

U.S.A. \* Jewish (Conservative)

Dastoor Dr. Kaikhusroo Minocher Jamaspa Asa

India \* Zoroastrian

Imam Warith Deen Mohammed

U.S.A. \* Muslim (Sunni)

Rev. Wesley Ariarajah

Switzerland \* Christian (Protestant)

Dr. Thelma Adair

U.S.A. \* Christian (Protestant)

The Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes Jr.

U.S.A. \* Christian (Protestant)

Shaikh Kamel al-Sharif

Jordan \* Muslim (Sunni)

His Grace Bishop Job

U.S.A. \* Christian (Orthodox)

Swami Chidananda Saraswati

This has been a good beginning. One thing impressed me-the desire of people to have open dialogues, Jain/ Christian, etc. Don't wait another 100 years. Every year locally, every 5 years as a large group. People must not just talk, but work where you are with whatever you have. If that spirit goes out from the PWR, in 10 years the spirit of living together, respecting all living things-not just human beings-will come.

## Balagangadharanathaswami

In Hinduism there is no place for disdain of other faiths. Its catholicity prevents this. It has place for full freedom of thought. All religions aim at similar goals—a better life and realization of God. They lead to a similar Divine, just as all rivers ultimately flow into the same ocean. What is now required is harmony among the various religions. Human service alone is the greatest religion, dharma. If we protect, then we are protected!

## Swami Satchidananda

It doesn't matter what practice you do. Just do it in His name. Hinduism allows you to do anything you want, just keep the goal in mind. Hinduism is not just another religion. It's an ocean. As with hunger, one purpose, many foods. Does that mean all those who love pizza go to one land, all the bread-and-butter people to another and then we need visas to meet each other? No. Religion is like food—one purpose, but many ways to fulfill it.

## Sant Keshavadas

It was my long, long desire that a Parliament of World Religions would happen where religious pastors from Tibet, China, India, Sri Lanka and America would come together. Now all should join in one effort of prayer and meditation so that there will be no more wars, greed and killing innocent children. I am positive God's blessing has come, for right now Israel and Palestine have signed the peace agreement. It should happen in big parks like this, so all can attend.

## Sadhu Vaswani

India today is passing through a difficult time. But it is only transitional. Religious harmony once inspired all in early India. Only in recent years has politics disturbed, to a small extent, the people. Turn the pages of the past and you will find that of all

the nations of the earth, India alone has welcomed foreign religions. Now, for a century, we have talked ourselves hoarse on fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, to no avail. We must practice it.

Dr. Karan Singh

The 1993 Parliament has been an event of considerable significance for the future of the worldwide interfaith movement. I had occasion to speak five times at the Parliament, and the unifying theme was to highlight the universal Vedantic principles of the all-pervasiveness of the divine, the divinity inherent in each human being, the essential unity of all religions, the concept of humanity as an extended family and the welfare of all beings.

goal. So, since 1893, I think the whole of humanity

### Three Saintly Souls Are Hindu "Presidents"

No religion, certainly not one as complex and decentralized as Hinduism, could be adequately represented by even a hundred spiritual leaders, so imagine being allotted just three. A Kerala holy woman, a Rishikesh sage and a satguru of Occidental origin will speak for us in future assemblies.

His Holiness Swami Chidananda Saraswathi

While still schooling, he disappeared and was found at the secluded ashram of a holy sage near Tirupati temple. At his family's insistence, he completed college. Then in 1943, he left home for good to be with his guru, Swami Sivananda. He took sannyasa in 1949 and eventually assumed full charge of his guru's institution, the Divine Life Society (DLS), when Swami Sivananda attained Mahasamadhi in 1963. He has initiated both men and women into sannyas and has many thousands of devotees. He has written many religious books and travels and lectures around the

world. The DLS now has a total of 333 international branches.

### Mata Amritanandamayi

The Holy Mother Mata Amritanandamayi was born in 1953 into a family of fisher-folk in Kerala, India. Vallickavu, her native village and place of up-bringing, is today the home of M.A. Math, headquarters of a worldwide organization with 10 ashrams and numerous hospices, clinics and schools in India, and three centers abroad. Amma, as the Mother is affectionately known, received no formal education beyond the fourth grade, but began attracting disciples at the age of 18, when she first revealed her oneness with the Divine in a series of mystical Krishna and Devi bhavas. She resides mostly at her Kerala ashram but also travels throughout India and abroad.

### Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami

Renouncing the world at 19, Subramuniaswami was initiated in Sri Lanka by his guru, Yogaswami at 21. He founded Hinduism Today newspaper in 1979 and has served as an advisor to Nepal's World Hindu Federation. He was named by New Delhi's World Religious Parliament as one of five Jagadacharyas, world teachers, who have helped nurture Hindu dharma outside India during recent decades. He has authored over 50 books on Hinduism. He has established 30 family missions and three monastery/temple complexes in Hawaii, California and Mauritius staffed by a monastic order of 11 swamis and dozens of yogis and sadhakas.