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Richard Hughes Seager. *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893.* Religion in North America Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. xli + 208 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22166-7.

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Parliament of Religions

For those of us who study the history of Hinduism, the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 is important as the event where Swami Vivekananda made his first dramatic appearance before an American audience and initiated his international mission on behalf of the Ramakrishna Order. For Buddhologists, the parliament is the place where Shaku Soen spoke, the first Zen master to travel to the United States. His young pupil D. T. Suzuki translated Soen's talk into English. The parliament also gave prominence to Anagarika Dharmapala, who would go on to become a leading figure in the reformation of Sinhalese Buddhism. For students of Jainism, the parliament is significant for the appearance of Virchand Gandhi, the first prominent Jain spokesman to appear in the United States. These men would all have profound effects on religious developments in their own countries and on the global reach of their Asian religions in the twentieth century.

The parliament was also a consequential event in the religious and cultural history of the United States. As an auxiliary of the great Columbian Exposition of 1893, it embodied many of the nationalist and imperialist themes of the exposition. In the exposition, America was represented as the new Greece or Rome, the most highly evolved and enlightened civilization in history, hosting the full panoply of the world's cultures. The World's Parliament of Religions likewise brought together, on a single platform, representative leaders of all the world's major faiths. But the platform distinctly favored the premises and values of the America Protestant organizers.

Richard Hughes Seager's valuable 1995 work, now available in paperback, aims to study the "East/West encounter" that occurred at the World's Parliament of Religions. Seager is an expert on American religious history, and the virtue of this work for students of Asian religion and history is that it enables us to locate figures like Vivekananda, Soen, Dharmapala, and Gandhi as actors in a social drama taking place in a cultural field where the most explicit issues were internal to the American religious scene. Seager surveys the various agendas that collided in Chicago, from the liberal and inclusivist to the conservative and xenophobic among the Christian denominations. The parliament organizers may have proclaimed the fundamental unity of all religions, but the foundation of this unity was laid on Christian theological ground. Seager demonstrates vividly the contradictory impulses within the parliament's plan. As Seager shows, the World's Parliament of Religions was a liberal American quest for religious unity that failed, due to underlying ethnocentrism and imperialism.

This was by no means a parliament based on proportional representation. The 12 speakers on Buddhism, 8 on Hinduism, and just 2 on Islam were overwhelmed by the 113 delegates representing various shades of Protestant Christianity, with another 18 speaking on Catholicism. Arriving as marginal figures, the Asian delegates were nevertheless able to get their messages across. Newspapers reported extraordinary responses among the audiences for several of the delegates from Asia. Their success points both to the individual rhetorical adeptness of the Asian speakers, and also to the theological and cultural receptivity of a segment of the audience in late nineteenth-century America. Yet it was a complicated encounter. How much of the enthusiasm was the result of genuine religious communication, and how much the titillation of the exotic? Vivekananda came to see himself as part of a "heathen show," uncomfortably similar to the ethnographic exhibitions of living savages he had observed on the midway of the Columbian Exposition.

The new scientific discipline, the comparative study of religion, put in an appearance at the parliament, rep-

resented by papers from distinguished scholars, like F. Max Muller of Oxford and Jean Reville of the Sorbonne. Their pronouncements, Seager shows, tended to echo the same premises as the Christian theologians. These early comparativists adopted an evolutionary model to comprehend the variety of world religious forms, and assumed that ethical monotheism, preferably in its liberal Protestant form, was the highest stage of human religiosity. Best known for assembling the fifty volumes of the *Sacred Books of the East*, Muller here did not address the religions of the world at all, but called for a revival of Christian religion based on its early forms.

Seager describes well the intellectual and theological context in which the Asian delegates spoke, and provides a good sense of the rhetoric that they deployed successfully at the parliament. They also became involved in one of the key controversies of the parliament. Among the Christian participants, the philosophy and methods of missionary work in the non-Western world was a topic of much debate. Many of the Asian delegates vigorously and heatedly challenged the fundamental purpose of missionary work. Christian mission was rooted, they argued, in assumptions of racism and imperialist politics of the Western nations that were incompatible with the liberal values proclaimed by the parliament organizers.

As a historian of American religion, Seager effectively demonstrates how the Asian participants helped unsettle the confident "Columbian" myth of Gilded Age America. This encounter did have profound effects, as he shows, on the subsequent directions of American religion. Historians of Asian religions can find much value in Seager's exploration of the American side of this dramatic East/West religious encounter.

But the parliament also had important consequences for developments within the Asian religions themselves, and for the worldwide spread of these religions. Seager recognizes these topics, but he does not follow out fully the implications of his theme of East/West encounter. How were the Asian delegates selected? How did this affect the internal hierarchies within their religious communities? How did they manage to get to Chicago? From whom and where did the necessary funds come? How did the experience of speaking at the parliament change the participants? How did their participation play back in their Asian homelands? Why did these speakers, in several key cases, become exemplars of modernizing or reformist versions of their religions? Seager gives only brief attention to these questions. It would take another book to explore properly and fully the Asian side of this encounter.

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