RELIGIOUS CONFRONTATION, A CASE STUDY:
THE 1893 PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

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One of the questions a historian of religion asks is what happens when religions confront each other in a historical situation. What attitudes develop? What are they based on? What actions flow from them? The World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 is a case in point for, as Dr. D. J. Burrell, a delegate from New York pointed out, "Never before has Christianity been brought into such close, open and decisive contact with other religions of the world." 1)

The Parliament is a classical example of the attitudes a follower of one religion may take when he is confronted by other faiths. Three emerged at Chicago; they may be called exclusion, inclusion and pluralism. Exclusion is the attitude that there is only one true religion which is destined to become universal. It was the attitude or view expressed most often at the Congress; supporters of the assertion that "Christianity is to conquer and supplant all the other religions of the world... and this Parliament is one of the steps toward this ultimate triumph," 2) were many. Two types of Christian exclusionists were present. One was those who believed Christianity was the sole possessor of truth and goodness and there was no verity or good whatsoever in any other religions. Professor Wilkinson of Chicago exemplified that view by his comment on the "erring religions of mankind."

Those religions the Bible nowhere represents as pathetic and partly successful gropings after God. They are one and all represented as groping downward, not groping upward. According to the Christian they hinder, they do not help. Their adherents' hold on them is like the blind grasping of drowning men on roots or rocks, that only tend to keep them to the bottom of the river. 3)

The second type of exclusionist was the “good-but” one which admitted some veracity and merit in other religions but believed Christianity to have the greater truth and virtue. Reverend Dennis of New York declared

Its message is much more than Judaism; it is infinitely more than the revelation of nature; it is even more than best teachings of all other religions combined, for whatever is good and true in other religious systems is found in full and authoritative form in Christianity. 4)

Reverend Gordon, a missionary from Kyoto, in discussing Christianity in Japan, stated, “Despite all that might be said in its favor, and that is much, Buddhism possesses characteristics which clearly indicate it is not to be the final or permanent religion of Japan or any other country.” 5) The “good-but” attitude was espoused by Reverend Scott of St. Louis also in his statement, “While admitting much that is good in the best books of the ethnic religions, there is a transcendent superiority in the Bible over them, that in a unique sense constitutes it the oracle of God.” 6), and in Professor Valentine’s remarks that

The other historic faiths have grasped some of the great essential elements of theistic truth. We rejoice to trace and recognize them. But they all shine forth in Christian revelation. The other theistic beliefs have no elements of true theistic conception to give Christianity what it has not but Christianity has much to give others. It unites and consummates out of its own given light all the theistic truth that has been sought and seen in partial vision by sincere souls along the ages and around the world. 7)

Christian exclusionists presented a number of arguments for the superiority and final triumph of Christianity. One was that other religions are topographical and of one type while Christianity is universal and all-inclusive. “All other religious systems prior to the advent of Christ were national like Judaism, or state religions like Paganism. The Catholic religion alone is world-wide and cosmopolitan, embracing all races and nations, and people and tongues,” 8) asserted Cardinal Gibbon. Similarly Dr. Boardman of Philadelphia declared

5) Barrows, op. cit., p. 1293.
6) Barrows, op. cit., p. 924.
7) Barrows, op. cit., p. 289.