

Retrieving the Past? A Consideration of Texts

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF Shaku Sōen's participation in the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893, are well known. His paper "The Law of Cause and Effect as Taught by the Buddha" attracted the attention of Paul Carus and the subsequent friendship between Shaku Sōen and Carus led directly to D. T. Suzuki's presence in America and the introduction of Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism to the West. Less well known is that Shaku Sōen presented a second paper, "Arbitration Instead of War," which has received little attention beyond Robert Aitken's attempts to reconcile its pacifist message with its author's later involvement in Japan's war against Russia.¹ Aitken Rōshi's paper, like most other studies of the Parliament, is based on the official record published by the Parliament's chairman, the Reverend John Henry Barrows.² The Parliament generated a profusion of literature,³ but Barrows's account alone was to be considered authoritative. Each paper carried his copyright. The book, extensively edited and embellished with photographs—not artists' impressions but captured instances of "reality"—was to be the true record of the event. It was the organizers' stated plan that it would become a source of reference and debate.⁴ It was to be a record for the next century to judge and

¹ Robert Aitken, "Three Lessons from Shaku Sōen," in Fred Epstein and Dennis Maloney, eds., *The Path of Compassion: Contemporary Writings on Engaged Buddhism*, Buddhist Peace Press, Berkeley, 1985, pp. 155–158.

² John Henry Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, 2 vols., The Parliament Publishing Co., Chicago, 1893.

³ Rossiter Johnson, *A History of the World's Columbian Exposition*, vol. 4, pp. 502–505, lists 41 publications. There were also various foreign language sources. Barrows's history was translated into Japanese and no doubt other languages. The Japanese delegates produced their own accounts.

⁴ Barrows, *op. cit.*, p. 746.

indeed remains the authoritative source.

The Parliament must be judged by its official record, edited by its Chairman, the Rev. Dr. John Henry Barrows, and not by any nor all of the very numerous and fragmentary and distorted reports of it, which have misled portions of the public at home and abroad.⁵

Of the other publications available, the nearest challenger was *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*,⁶ the only other that claimed to offer a "complete" record of the papers presented. Neely's edition also claimed to be compiled from original manuscripts, but these were supplemented by notes of the proceedings taken by "an expert stenographer who attended every session." The stenographer's certification of accuracy, completeness and authenticity appears immediately behind the title page.

Comparison of the two works reveals that there are considerable discrepancies between them. Shaku Sōen's second paper, for example, was reduced by Barrows to about half the length of the paper published by Neely. A minor casualty of the desire to preserve the seriousness and harmony of the event was Shaku Sōen's opening quip on the sixteenth day, a Congress on Buddhism, about the joy of having none but Buddhists on the platform.⁷ Barrows's editorial policy was not to record the total proceedings as the Neely edition claimed to do. He had a higher purpose. He explained in a notice to readers in the front of the first volume that although it is rich with valuable materials "it would be even more valuable if parts of it had been rigorously condensed."⁸ The second volume therefore was to be carefully pruned "to furnish a book of 800 pages, in which the gold will be even more abundant than in the first volume." The selection and reduction of papers rested on what Barrows considered to be "gold," and this was clearly his vision of the triumph of future Christian universality to which he devoted his remaining years and he seems to

⁵ Charles C. Bonney, President of the Auxiliary Congresses, "The World's Parliament of Religions," *Monist* 5 (1895), p. 349.

⁶ Prof. Walter R. Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition*, Chicago and New York, F. Tennyson Neely, 1894, p. 11.

⁷ This is as it appears in Houghton, *ibid.*, whose version also missed the irony in Shaku Sōen's own account of the paper: "apart from the Buddhists there was not one heathen to be seen on the platform." The word he used was *ikyōsha*. *Ikyō* means heathen, pagan, heretic, a believer in a wrong teaching. See Shaku Sōen, *Bankoku shūkyō taikai ichiran* (An Outline of the World's Parliament of Religions), Tokyo, Komeisha, 1895, p. 65. Compiled in his Collected Works, SZ10:117-179.

⁸ Barrows, *op. cit.*, p. x.

have had few qualms about editing contributions accordingly.⁹

The question is, to what extent do these cuts affect our understanding of the paper? As it appears in Barrows's edition, Shaku Sōen's paper is reduced to a rather woolly statement of brotherhood and peace. It is clear from the introductory passages, cut by Barrows, but preserved in the Neely version that the title, "Arbitration Instead of War," is a reference to the opening address of the Parliament. Here Shaku Sōen proposes that the various religions of the world follow the example of international law which recognizes existing differences and protects the weak against aggression. As I have discussed elsewhere, the desire to defend Japan against Western aggression was a core theme of the Japanese delegation to Chicago.¹⁰ This was most clearly articulated by Hirai Kinzō, a lay Buddhist member of the delegation who spoke very forcefully of the injustices imposed on Japan by "so-called Christians."¹¹ In his closing remarks to the Parliament Assembly Hirai returned to the issue, congratulating the hosts for being "the pioneers of human history." As he said, "You have achieved an assembly of the world's religions, and we believe your next step will be toward the ideal goal of this Parliament, the realization of international justice."¹² We can see the same theme in the longer version of Shaku Sōen's paper. He proposed that just as nations of the world settle their differences through international law—a law they all agree to although it is not the national law of any of them—there should be an agreed common belief, one which all could uphold though none need claim it as their own.

The theme for the day on which he presented the paper, the sixteenth day of the Parliament, was the attitude of Christianity towards other religions. With typical Japanese concern for the appropriateness of the occasion, Shaku Sōen put in a gentle plea that the attitude displayed at the World's Parliament of Religions be generally applied; that differences be put aside under the general law of truth. It was a call for co-existence rather than conversion, but also an implicit rejection of the Christian assumption that their religion was to be this international, common belief. A century later at the centennial commemoration of the Parliament, Abe Masao, with the great advantage of an impeccable command of English, "took the stance of negating both the affirmation and the negation of a common denominator or common essence for world

⁹ See Barrows's two later books, *Christianity: The World Religion*, Chicago, 1897, and *The Christian Conquest of Asia*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899.

¹⁰ The representation of Japanese Buddhism at the World's Parliament of Religions was the subject of my doctoral dissertation, University of Sydney, 1995.

¹¹ Hirai, in Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, op. cit., p. 447.

¹² Emphasis added.

religions.”¹³ This “positionless position” overthrows both the affirmative view of the presence of a common essence, and the negative view of its absence, opening a space for genuine religious pluralism where each religion is fully realized in its distinctiveness. This suggestion was, as Abe diplomatically described it, “accepted as a challenge by most of the audience.” One can only imagine how much more confronting Barrows would have found Shaku Sōen’s proposal.¹⁴ There was much rhetoric of religious unity and brotherhood at Chicago, but beneath it all were the comparative assumptions which too easily equate difference with inadequacy.

Shaku Sōen’s second paper was presented towards the end of the Parliament. It was an unscheduled opportunity to speak, an additional session on Buddhism funded by an expatriate Japanese businessman. It was an opportunity to respond to earlier events; an opportunity to point to an alternative to the Christian assumptions of the event that effectively reduced all other religions to inadequate attempts to express the Christian revelation. The Parliament was, for all its undoubtedly sincere rhetoric of fostering universal brotherhood and international goodwill, an arena of contest between Christians and the ‘heathen’, with all that that implied in terms of late nineteenth century presuppositions of evolution, civilization and the natural right of Western dominance. Shaku Sōen offered an alternative vision, a path to genuine tolerance in international pluralism.

Clearly there are problems in trying to establish just what was said at Chicago. The papers published in Barrows’ official copyright version have been heavily edited. Houghton’s edition, though generally offering longer papers, also shows signs of cutting. The reports of the Japanese delegates themselves are available but while these are frequently valuable in supporting one version over another, they are not necessarily more reliable. Most evident is their desire to convince the Japanese audience of the welcome Buddhism received in the West and the success of the mission. Discord and intolerance are largely suppressed. It seems to me that the Neely version of Shaku Sōen’s paper conforms more closely to Shaku Sōen’s own account of his presentation. However, in other research—a comparison of his Preface to *Budda no Fukuin*¹⁵

¹³ Abe Masao, “A Report on the 1993 Parliament of World’s Religions,” *Eastern Buddhist* XXVI:2 (Autumn 1993), pp. 73–75.

¹⁴ See Shaku Sōen, *Bankoku shūkyō taikai ichiran*, Tokyo, Komeisha, 1895. Yatsubuchi Banryū, *Shūkyō taikai hōdō*, Kyoto, Kokyo Shoin, 1894, however, does speak of Barrow’s attempt to prevent Hirai Kinzō from presenting his paper.

¹⁵ *Budda no fukuin* is D. T. Suzuki’s Japanese translation of Paul Carus’s book *The Gospel of Buddha*. My paper on this has been accepted for a forthcoming issue of *Journal of Japanese Religious Studies*.

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—I have found that as a skilled Buddhist teacher he adjusted his message to his audience. Each publication was an opportunity to be made the most of. Perhaps now is the time for a closer study.